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# Empowering Civil Society: The Theatricality of Protest in Malta

The recent barbaric murder of an investigative journalist in Malta who was looking into corruption at the top echelons of power sparked off a civil society movement, *Repubblika*, spurring ordinary citizens into participating in collective protest action. The movement also incorporated a loose grouping of women calling themselves 'Occupy Justice'. Different forms of protest against government corruption have resulted in the resignation of various senior politicians and high-ranking officials, including the Prime Minister. Taking as a point of departure the struggle against the unequal distribution of power as defined by Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière, the empowering force of civil protest is here examined in relation to how power is appropriated and how institutional power is resisted. Micromobilization and mesomobilization are seen as two means of staging protest and creating a common force with which to confront corrupt power structures. Protest, power, and resistance are viewed in the light of theatrical events; the creative means deployed to stage protests are discussed. The aesthetic qualities meant to transform perception and move people to action for bringing about political change are highlighted in relation to both sensory and symbolic dynamics. Vicki Ann Cremona is Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Malta and the author of *Carnival and Power: Play and Politics in a Crown Colony* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), as well as a co-editor of *Theatre Scandals: Social Dynamics of Turbulent Theatrical Events* (Brill-Rodopi, 2020).

*Key terms:* Daphne Caruana Galizia, *Repubblika*, protest, power, justice, theatrical event.

CORRUPTION, as sociologist Donatella della Porta claims, is considered to be a 'crime of calculation'.<sup>1</sup> In Malta, this led to the assassination of a journalist who was unveiling various instances of individual and collective political and economic corruption. Daphne Caruana Galizia's barbaric car-bomb assassination on 16 October 2017 triggered 'relational dynamics' among individuals who have come together and upheld her memory through empowering collective action.<sup>2</sup> They have taken up her fight to help bring into the open the corruption, conflicts of interest, and revolving-door policies that were surreptitiously practised (and probably still are). Civil protest action is here viewed in relation to power and resistance, in the light of what constitutes a theatrical event. The initiatives of *Repubblika*, one particular organization representing civil society, and its partner informal grouping *Occupy Justice* (OJ), are central to the discussion that follows. Whereas *Repubblika* is a not-for-profit organization,

registered officially with the Commissioner for Voluntary Organizations (CVO), OJ is a loose gathering created by women, many of whom are also members of *Repubblika*; a number are even part of its executive committee.<sup>3</sup> *Repubblika*'s statute clearly establishes its non-adherence to any political party.<sup>4</sup>

Since its official inception in January 2019, *Repubblika* has participated in social discourse by organizing and staging a large number of protests, publishing articles in leading newspapers and blogs, and holding a live discussion programme about emerging scandals on the organization's Facebook page – all this in order to combat the silence of the national media on political corruption. It has taken the government to court on various counts of corruption and has even gone as far as to taking one of its causes, which involved the partisan selection of the Maltese judiciary, to the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg. As a through-line of its political action, *Repubblika* continues to demand truth

and justice with regard to the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, claiming that justice has not only to be done, but it also has to be seen to be done in her regard. In a move to delist Repubblica, the CVO wrote to the organization on 26 February 2021, charging it with

overspending and financial impropriety and, worst of all, with including in its committee members who have publicly expressed opinions [he] found incompatible with [its] status as a voluntary organization which, in [his] view, renders Repubblica a political party or an organization that is controlled by, or acts in the interests of, a political party.<sup>5</sup>

De-listing would effectively cripple the organization, because it would remove all legal means to solicit funds (which are usually obtained through public collections during protests, and private donations) and disqualify it from any public funding, including European funds. Repubblica views this attempt as an underhanded means to effectively ban the organization, and has challenged these accusations.

The organization's actions are intended to create social awareness that would eventually lead to the overthrow of the forces generating corruption and re-establish equality by seeing that justice is delivered. The actual experience is an act of protest that, through ostentatious action, aims to develop a participant-spectator dynamic meant to transform perception so as also to move to action resulting in political change. The act may be framed in the context of a 'public stage',<sup>6</sup> a forum where actors present their reasons to an audience that assumes the role of their 'legitimate reference'.<sup>7</sup> The final intent of the action goes beyond the participant-spectators present in that it is intended for an audience which is the ultimate object of its protest – the corrupters and the corrupt.

One of the limitations of this study comes from the fact that I myself am part of this movement and was President of this organization during the street protests: the latter had to cease abruptly because of Covid restrictions. My writing does not try to dissimulate my political bias; on the contrary, I see it as a possibility for generating new knowledge and understanding the causes and manifestations

of protest by civil society in Malta as a form of activism and empowerment. As Michel Foucault has argued: 'There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.'<sup>8</sup>

## Protest as Power

Public protest may be seen as a direct confrontation of non-egalitarian power relations, where civil society reacts to the exertion of power that is seen as biased or unjust by affirming its own 'identity and resistance to the effects of power'.<sup>9</sup> The protests in Malta that have taken place since 2017 may be seen as falling under Foucault's definition of 'immediate struggles' that attack forms of power which generate and spread 'secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people'.<sup>10</sup> The representations of the truth that have been held up to the Maltese public have tried to cover up a long list of corrupt practices by members of the highest echelons of the police force, state institutions, and government, including ministers, the Chief of Staff of the Office of the Prime Minister, and, possibly, the Prime Minister himself. Foucault contends that power and resistance are mutually constitutive; contestation is closely linked to power through the forms it takes, and power is also shaped by given resistance to it.

In his definition of 'dissensus', Jacques Rancière provides another layer to the concept of power as analyzed by Foucault. Rancière tackles the institutions at the basis of a 'proper'<sup>11</sup> political order, which presupposes that everyone has a specific place in society that they should keep to. Democratic politics, he argues, disrupts this order; its very starting point lies in the presupposition of equality. The democratic process therefore implies equal possibilities for intervention into the regulation of society. Such a presupposition demands empowering participation in political life rather than passive reception of governments' distribution of power. Challenging political action reconfigures that which is aesthetic through the liminal '*partage du sensible*'<sup>12</sup>

– the tension between the perception of social elements, as not worthy of being sensed or noticed, and the challenges that they pose to the political order by demanding to be seen.

Political protest and its manifestations may be seen as one way of appropriating power, claiming equality through the very action that obliges the political order to perceive them. Through their very action, the people contest the subjugating political structure that marginalizes and excludes them by ‘re-figuring space’ from one of ordinary circulation to one in which ‘to be seen and to be named’, claiming, consequently, an equal right to negotiating power on their own terms.<sup>13</sup> Collective participation in a manifestation of protest involves its participants in an interrelationship that is not only a matter of aesthetic contemplation but is also one of conscious awareness of their individual here-and-now involvement in relation to that of others who take action through their very presence.

The multiple actions taken by *Repubblika* are performed so that civil society be seen as an equal partner to be consulted for formulating legislative measures, particularly those that affect the country’s constitution. They aim to *re-form* the aesthetics of power by openly confronting the state on corruption and the rule of law. The non-partisan organization defends the rule of law in a country, Malta, radically split into two opposing political factions, Labour and Nationalist,<sup>14</sup> and where no civil society movement had specifically dealt with matters of governance. In certain cases, politicians and party media have shifted from deliberately refusing to name the organization – using elliptical phrases in public speeches and press conferences – to publicly denouncing *Repubblika* for confronting the political order.<sup>15</sup>

### Triggers for Protest

Journalists across the world have become prime targets for attack and assassination when the stories they tell pinpoint political or social abuse of power and restriction of freedom and justice. Fifty-three-year-old investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was no exception (Figure 1). She was blown up in her car on 16 October 2017. The

bomb, placed under the driver’s seat, was detonated a few metres away from her house as she was on her way to the bank after her assets were frozen in a libel case instituted by the then Economy Minister Chris Cardona.<sup>16</sup> She has been described as ‘Malta’s most fearless journalist’ by her admirers,<sup>17</sup> but labelled a ‘witch’ by pro-Labour media and supporters.<sup>18</sup> A graduate in archaeology, with a minor in anthropology, Daphne, as everyone knew her, ran a blog called *Running Commentary*, through which she would attack and denounce corrupt politicians, businessmen, and anyone connected to their murky business.<sup>19</sup> During the last years of her life, her blog was the most widely read news source in Malta, as well as beyond, where she revealed scandal upon scandal concerning the links between Malta’s political and business worlds. As her youngest son Paul, himself a journalist, affirms:

In Malta, everyone read Daphne; our surname was redundant. In a country of 475,000 people her website received 400,000 unique visitors a day, more than a million during election campaigns and a greater number than the combined readership of all Malta’s dailies. She refused media appearances and resented the interest in her life over her work, saying that things in Malta were so depressing, so predictably rotten, that she had become what passed for a celebrity there.<sup>20</sup>

Her writing was direct, incisive, and vicious. At the time of her death, forty-two libel suits had been instituted against her. This meant that, according to Maltese law, which puts libel suits on a par with civil debt recovery, her family inherited the onus of having to appear in court to continue fighting to clear her name after her death.<sup>21</sup> Her main targets were the Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, and his direct entourage: his Chief of Staff, members of his cabinet, and his wife Michelle. Daphne also attacked members of the main party in Opposition for corrupt practices, in particular its former leader Adrian Delia, and officials of state institutions, including judges and magistrates. She wrote about Maltese and foreign businessmen who were involved in highly corrupt affairs, and about two banks suspected of money-laundering.<sup>22</sup> Events that



**Figure 1.** A photo of Daphne Caruana Galizia held up by a protester. Valletta, April 2018. Photo: Robert Agius.

have developed after her death have shown that, although she was accused of lying and unjustly tarnishing Malta's reputation, most of her revelations were true. Her writings opened up widespread public knowledge of the extent of political corruption in Malta. Her death, which was seen as the direct result of her relentless pursuit of this knowledge, created a knowledge vacuum, but also generated a collective will to take action against political abuse. People felt empowered to protest on the basis of what Daphne had exposed. The civil society groups *Repubblika* and *OJ* appeared after her murder in reaction to the state's efforts to play down her death.

Former Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, who had occupied the post since elections in 2013, was forced to resign in December 2019, following pressure by thousands of protesters who stood day after day in front of the parliament building because of revelations that linked his Chief of Staff Keith Schembri and at least one of his ministers, Konrad Mizzi, to

prominent business tycoon Yorgen Fenech.<sup>23</sup> Fenech was suspected of masterminding the murder and was charged with complicity. It was thought that the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, Chris Cardona – himself a former Minister – had possibly been tied up with Fenech. The whole affair brought Malta into the world spotlight, with newspapers and media such as the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Le Monde*, *El Pais*, *Al Jazeera*, CNN, the BBC, and so on, reporting the case. The *Al Jazeera* portal gave the news under the general heading of 'News/Corruption (2019)'. The corruption spread far and wide, involving government echelons, private business organizations, banks, and others whose involvement is still coming to light.<sup>24</sup>

Daphne had already denounced Mizzi and Schembri as having a secret account in Panama, which was revealed as part of the international scandal known as the 'Panama Papers'.<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek described the scandal in these terms: 'with the Panama Papers,

we are saddled with some of the dirty pictures of financial pornography of the world's rich, and we can no longer pretend we don't know.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, in Malta, neither the Minister nor the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff were removed or charged, despite the fact that investigative work by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, which led to the revelation of another scandal known as the 'Paradise Papers', showed that their Panama accounts were allegedly fed by kickbacks to the tune of €5,000 a day from a new company called Electrogas: the latter managed Malta's first LNG-to-Power plant.<sup>27</sup> Yorgen Fenech headed the company, and it involved a consortium of Maltese and foreign business companies that included the top echelons of power in Azerbaijan.<sup>28</sup> Other scandals included the sale of Maltese passports to Russian and Chinese oligarchs,<sup>29</sup> the sale of three public hospitals to a foreign private entity, brokering a similar deal with officials from Montenegro,<sup>30</sup> and making secret agreements to sell medical visas to Libyans wanting to enter Europe.<sup>31</sup> The list seems endless to anyone trying to make sense of what Malta and its reputation have been exposed to.

### Civil Society Protest as a Theatrical Event

An organized protest is a power-wielding strategy that holds attention, sets an example, diffuses knowledge, and rallies people to a cause. It may be seen as a stage action that involves multiple actors whose aim is to have targeted spectators observe and fear them. This type of civic involvement is integrated in the public sphere as a communicative engagement between actor and spectator that requires the protesters' rational consensus regarding a particular cause. Protesters denounce specific issues by their very participation physically in the protest. The protesters' strength and fearlessness is intended to inspire some degree of concern and anxiety in the spectators watching them; the goal is to push the latter into taking action that the protesters demand. Protesters also target spectators by trying to arouse their awareness of the issue at hand through their action, ultimately

in the hope that they will form a similar opinion and, possibly, take up a participatory role. Protest can therefore be seen as a form of dramatic theatre where 'action is taken to its conclusion by bodies in motion in front of living bodies that are to be mobilized'.<sup>32</sup>

What is of interest here is examining the performative means deployed in protest to oblige the forces of order to allow equal engagement in discourse about the rules by which citizens are to live and how they are to be determined. Protest, like other theatrical events, should be captured in its 'eventness', which, according to Bakhtin, is only characteristic of certain happenings that involve choices to determine what happens.<sup>33</sup> However, the event itself is open and uncertain. In a protest scenario, the fine line between participant and spectator is blurred.

Foucault maintains that resistance, which derives from power, is linked to strategy. The power-wielding strategies put in place by Repubblika and OJ to stage their protests highlight visibility so as to capture the attention of power structures, as well as to develop possible participant audiences. These strategies require an organizational structure, some financial resources, and much preparatory work that goes beyond the protest itself.

The staging of protest action manifests its counter-power through the appropriation of public space that is transformed into the space of contestation and marks the beginning of the action to be performed. The latter is intended to deliver a political message. The protesters' act of assembly provides meaning and intensity to the event; the actual gathering of people is a show of force where real time is subordinated to the extra-ordinary time of political action. Since the theatre of protest principally occurs in the streets, which are the core of everyday life and its happenings, the act of occupying this space creates a direct visual confrontation between the everyday and the exceptional time of protest. The gathering, whether large or small, challenges the everyday, routine occupation of space and, through this, it challenges citizen indifference or tacit submission to a state of affairs sustained by the apparent normality of things going on as usual. Spatial transformation is physical,

through the very act of occupation by the protesters, and at the same time performative, through the different ways in which collective assertion is foregrounded by means of this presence.

Repubblika has generally rendered space performative through the way it organizes its protest marches: placing people loosely behind banners held spread across the street, handing out banners and placards to the protesters, who also bring their own, and choosing specific sites of power to stage its protests – whether in front of the law courts, the Prime Minister's office, ministerial offices, the Police Headquarters, and so on (Figure 2). It also exploits existing raised areas in the capital, Valletta, to set its stages: the stairs placed before a large monument facing the national law courts, for example, or those leading to the building housing the Prime Minister's office. On certain occasions, a large stage or small platform is erected. The space of assembly becomes a focal point for any initiative expressing dissent and denunciation. Although most of the protests occur in Valletta,

other spaces were also used in the different events organized since that fateful October up to the present.

Like all other stage actions, a protest presents itself through what theatre studies theorist Willmar Sauter calls 'exhibitory actions', which are articulated on three levels: sensory, artistic, and symbolic.<sup>34</sup> The sensory level focuses on the type of presence staged by the protesters and the way it is perceived, both mentally and physically. The number of protesters involved is also an important factor because it appeals directly on an emotional and visual level; that is, the greater the number, the bigger the challenge is perceived to be, since 'performance brings questions of scale into play'.<sup>35</sup> The type of behaviour protesters adopt – violent or peaceful, loud or silent – adds to sensory perception.

Protests in Malta started the day after Daphne's murder, with crowds expressing anger and demanding justice in front of the law courts of Valletta. As protests became more intense, the numbers swelled, creating



Figure 2. Protesters occupying the main street of the capital, Valletta, April 2018. Photo: Robert Agius.

both a powerful political and aesthetic affirmation. The political order tried to downplay the protests by manipulating its media and state television, which pretended to ignore the protest or, at best, to give it scant attention.

The artistic level may be linked to the aesthetics of presence through the actions undertaken, the objects that the protesters carried, and the type of appearance that they assumed. A large mass protest was organized on Sunday, 22 October 2017, six days after the journalist's death. Apart from the placards and banners, many wore T-shirts bearing the last words Daphne had posted on her blog minutes before her assassination: 'There are crooks everywhere you look now. The situation is desperate.'<sup>36</sup> Protesters carried two huge banners with photos, larger than life, of the Police Commissioner and the Attorney General, calling for their resignation because no real investigation was seen to be under way and no protection had been given to the journalist. Some of the protesters then moved to the Police Headquarters, where they sat on the ground around the Police Commissioner's picture.<sup>37</sup>

The first action undertaken by OJ was to stage a protest by camping for four days in the large square just outside the Prime Minister's office. The women transformed the space from a centre of power to one of resistance, both on the aesthetic level, through the presence of their tents, and on the political level, by their different protest actions on the very steps of the building, denouncing impunity and calling for constitutional reform.<sup>38</sup> A core group, who slept in the tents, was joined at all times of day and night by other women, some with their babies and young children who played on the square and were fed and changed there. This created an alternative form of protest inscribed by a feminine expression that rejected overt leadership and underlined the fact that a woman and mother had been brutally murdered. Many men also showed solidarity to the cause through their presence.

Although spectator-protester gatherings do not follow any regimented order, particular elements in protest actions assume ritualistic characteristics, especially when the

protests occur more frequently. These ritualistic actions may be linked to the symbolic level: they may be used to create a framework for the protest, as well as a tool to show opposition to a dominant power. These rituals provide stable points within the more or less spontaneous development of the protest, creating structure for the immediacy of the evolving action.

The Maltese authorities' initial underplaying of the journalist's death contrasted with the forms of protest ritualized through the time and place of their staging. Ritual events in the form of monthly vigils began to be held on the anniversary of Daphne's assassination. These ritualized vigils became a regular manifestation of the public's right to active and equal participation in the political sphere because, as Rancière affirms, 'democracy is a form of rule that does not command'; there is no entitlement to power.<sup>39</sup>

The set time and space helped not only to create identification and unity among the social group, but also facilitated the growth of the movement itself through the spirit of 'communitas' generated by collective presence. This community spirit provided a collective outlet for the free expression of emotion and anger at the vilification of the journalist, even after her death, and the lack or slowness of investigation and judicial inquiries. It also enacted symbolic resistance to the still undefined powers that willed her murder. The place chosen was itself symbolic: a monument representing Faith, Fortitude, and Civilization, situated just across the street from the national law courts, which had been appropriated by Repubblika and OJ and transformed into a memorial, in order to remind everyone that justice for Daphne Caruana Galizia had still not been done (Figure 3).

The vigil itself was ritually structured: protesters gathered in the evening at a set time around the memorial and placed photos, candles, and flowers in front of it. This laying of objects should not only be considered as a collective manifestation, but also as an individual investment in the cause. The very decision to take action on an individual



**Figure 3.** The memorial to Daphne Caruana Galizia, across the street from the law courts. Valletta, February 2019. Photo: Vicki Ann Cremona.

level, also by one's ritualized actions in front of other presences, may be seen as a form of non-verbal deliberate participation dictated both by thought and emotion. The absence of debate in these circumstances highlights willingness to show personal support for a common cause.

Speeches during these events foregrounded state corruption and impunity. Speakers, mainly Maltese from different walks of life, included foreign journalists, politicians, and political activists. These were 'speech-rituals [that] assign roles to participants'.<sup>40</sup> As such, the gatherings indicated a history of prior relations between the audience and the subject matter, and often with the speaker. Not only did the speeches show the speakers' competence or authority, but, in this case, they served to affirm ideological

identifications.<sup>41</sup> All protests ended with singing the national anthem, which, apart from the sensory function of a chorus of voices in unison, assumed the symbolic function of solidarity together with affirmation of a collective identity with which to confront those in power.

The line of action that transformed the space into a site of contestation encountered strong counter-resistance from the government, especially with regard to the ritual space itself around the monument: the aim was to stop all resistance. For sixteen months, from September 2018 to January 2020, the photos, candles, and flowers placed by protesters in front of the memorial were removed by order of the then Minister of Justice, Owen Bonnici. This gave rise to another ritual of defiance, that of replacing the candles and



flowers every single day, only for them to be cleared away every night.

The confrontation of power and resistance was reciprocal, with different contrasting strategies being deployed. The Minister forced the National Heritage department to declare that the monument, which had recently been restored, needed fresh restoration, as a pretext to put up a hoarding around it. The protesters first exploited the hoarding to increase the visual impact of their protests, by fixing photos and messages to it, and eventually brought down the hoarding – which was repeatedly replaced – and invaded the space of the monument in a show of force (Figure 4). One of the members of *Repubblika*, Manuel Delia, who is also the writer of a very popular blog,<sup>42</sup> went so far as to challenge the Minister over the violation of his right to protest in the constitutional court, and fourteen months later, he won his case.<sup>43</sup>

## Protest, Creativity, and Emotion

Protest, like any theatrical event, is of the here and now, but its effects are intended to raise awareness, create visibility, and bring about change. Creative action helps to transmit more effectively critical considerations that develop knowledge, which, as Foucault argues, is the key to power. It may help deploy knowledge in forms that are easily apprehended, and generate curiosity, interest, and participation in the experience, as well as a memory of the event.

To be effective, performance must ‘somehow connect with that audience’s ideology or ideologies’.<sup>44</sup> In Malta’s environment, where ideology is often formed by unwavering familial affiliation to political parties from one generation to the next, it is difficult to overcome partisan conviction, even when confronted by deducible proof. Moreover, corruption requires complex stratification to



**Figure 4.** Streamers and messages adorn the hoarding covering the boarded-up monument serving as a temporary memorial to Daphne Caruana Galizia. Valletta, September 2018. Photo: Robert Agius.

dissimulate itself behind respectable appearances, making it more difficult to detect.

The type of protest staged by OJ functions through ‘micromobilization’, which relies less on collective presence than on individuals or small groupings.<sup>45</sup> A good number of the core members come from the world of theatre or the visual arts, and have chosen to transmit their message of resistance by what they have called ‘actions’. The creative process focuses on spectacular action relying on aesthetical qualities, often aimed to name and shame, which depends on surprise, irony, and humour. These actions are performed rapidly at unexpected times, and are intended mainly for the camera. The daring, creative aspect of the actions is used to attract friendly newspapers to publish photographs of the actions, accompanied by a statement. Through this tactic, the group transmits its confrontational messages in respect of corrupt political power to a wide public.

In one of their actions, women wearing dark clothes and hoodies stormed all the main monuments across Malta and covered them with T-shirts bearing a picture of Daphne and the last words on her blog. In another action, they put up posters closely resembling well-known films but with the faces changed to those of the politicians whom they denounced as politically corrupt; captions underneath clearly stated their message. The protesters have also demonstrated on the steps of the Prime Minister’s office, in one case wearing masks in the form of pigs’ heads and holding up placards with the names of the politicians, officials, and businessmen whose names emerge in every corruption scandal (Figure 5).

It is, however, repeated mass mobilization, especially in front of Parliament, that has contributed most effectively to capturing international press attention and has brought about political change in Malta, albeit in a limited way. Most notably, it has led to the



Figure 5. Occupy Justice protesters wearing pig-masks outside the Prime Minister’s office, Valletta, February 2020. Photo: Robert Agius.

resignation of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat. These mass gatherings were fuelled by the corruption scandals emerging from the trial of suspected murder mastermind Yorgen Fenech, and which involved the highest echelons of power in money-laundering, misappropriation of funds, and many other instances of the abuse of power. Paulo Gerbaudo's reference to corruption in Spain denounced by the grass-roots movement *Democracia Real Ya!* can well apply to the Maltese context: 'Some of us have clearly defined ideologies, others are apolitical, but we are all concerned and angry about the political, economic, and social outlook which we see around us: corruption among politicians, businessmen, bankers, leaving us helpless, without a voice.'<sup>46</sup>

The mass protests organized by *Republika* gave a voice to a public that had few means of manifesting its condemnation. The spectacle of the sheer size of the crowd provided colour and noise, with its banners, flags, placards, whistles, and beating of pots and pans, but it also created visible mass dissent. A certain degree of mesomobilization that involved other groups joining forces in the demonstrations helped to increase crowd numbers, ages, social provenance, and the representation of different political beliefs.<sup>47</sup> Grouping together created a sense of connection, as well as that of common claims and values shared with the murdered journalist and her fight against corrupt authorities. The spatial dynamics were very important when the crowd functioned as a moving cortège,



**Figure 6.** Barriers put up in front of the Parliament building in readiness for protesters, who later pushed them aside. Valletta, December 2019. Photo: Vicki Ann Cremona.

but even more when it occupied proximity to institutional spaces such as the square in front of the Police Headquarters, the Prime Minister's office, or that in front of Parliament. In the latter case, collective power was pitted against institutional power, each resisting the other, the former through its rowdy presence, the latter through the way it protected these spaces. The most impressive spatial contrast was due to the sheer amount of crash barriers placed in front of Parliament to divide protesters and stop them from approaching the parliament building too closely (Figure 6).

The overwhelming spatial configuration of the barriers may be seen as a spectacular strategic move on the part of the authorities to discourage the crowd. It had the opposite effect of fuelling the crowd's anger, adding to the energy and intensity of the demonstrators' presence and nurturing emotional empathy within the crowd. Moreover, on one occasion, it led the demonstrators to use non-violent tactics to disarm the powerful, trapping them for hours within the limited space of the square and the parliament building itself. Every entrance to the square was blocked by large numbers of protesters who would sit down in a tight mass every time a politician tried to exit. Very few were allowed to cross from the site of power to the space of the people. Collective resistance created a sense of empowerment within the crowd, and strong emotions of anger and frustration on the political side.

### Theatricality and New Watchers

As the magisterial and public inquiries into the murder progressed, more and more stories of corruption and cover-up unfolded. However, it is the gruesome spectacle of Daphne's assassination and the constant performance of protest that have captured the attention of the world beyond Malta's shores. Protests provide visual spectacle for newsreels. Shots of protests, especially those in front of parliament, have been shown across the world. The theatricality of protest, therefore, has proved to be an effective way of bringing Malta to the attention of the man and woman in the street in Europe and beyond.

For a small island like Malta, which normally passes unnoticed by the spotlight of world news, capturing international attention on matters of power is of vital importance. It is certainly a major form of resistance to corrupt power, which prefers to operate in the shadows. Being subjected to the limelight places the country under international scrutiny. Daphne's death has led to the examination of the Maltese Constitution by the European Commission for Democracy through Law, better known as the Venice Commission, an advisory body of the Council of Europe. Even though the government continues to drag its feet with regard to public consultation, the Venice Commission is discussing constitutional reform not only with government bodies, but also with civil society.<sup>48</sup> Another organ of the Council of Europe, the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money-Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism, better known as Moneyval, has called upon the Maltese authorities to strengthen measures to combat and prosecute money-laundering and reinforce their supervisory system. The authorities scrambled to comply, fearful of the country being grey-listed.

Focus on Malta, both through the dramatic murder and the staging of protest, has attracted international journalists' attention to political corruption in Malta. This has made people realize that political dishonesty, even in a tiny country, has complex international ripple effects that cannot be disregarded. It has also made political leaders more conscious of the fact that protesters are not alone in resisting their distortion of the democratic process. International attention has also begun to provide positive consequences: as more knowledge about the country is diffused, more resistance is mustered.

Covid restrictions have halted public gatherings and have obliged Repubblika to find new means of protest through a greater use of social media, online discussions, and limited 'actions' that can be quickly mounted, filmed, and photographed. Nonetheless, the struggle continues.

## Notes and References

1. Donatella della Porta, 'Anti-Corruption from Below: Social Movements against Corruption in Late Neoliberalism', *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, X, No. 3 (2017), p. 661–92 (p. 664).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 670.
3. Repubblika is structured as a voluntary core group or committee composed of thirteen members on the basis of egalitarian principles, but it has an informal hierarchy with a President who changes annually, a President-elect who is also Vice-President, Treasurer, and Secretary General. The different members are responsible for various tasks that help raise awareness of their confrontational initiatives against corrupt power.
4. Article 2 of Repubblika's statute states that it is autonomous from government; Article 5 reiterates that 'it is composed of individuals who act independently of government and other interests'; Article 7 affirms that 'The Association shall not participate in any political campaign or endorse any political party or any political candidate for public office': <<https://repubblika.org/statute/>>, accessed 30 May 2021.
5. Robert Aquilina, 'Reply to the Commissioner for Voluntary Organizations' remarks to the press', 16 March 2021, <<https://repubblika.org/press-release/reply-commissioner-voluntary-organisations-remarks-press/>>, accessed 30 May 2021. The organization has demonstrated that the Commissioner vetted and approved its statute and its annual audited accounts. In its reply it stated defiantly that 'Repubblika is here to stay'.
6. Jeffrey Alexander, quoted in Alan Finlayson, 'Becoming a Democratic Audience', in Shirin M. Rai and Janelle Reinelt, eds., *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 102.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 27.
9. Sergiu Bălan, 'M. Foucault's View on Power Relations', *Cogito*, II, No. 2 (2010), p. 55–61 (p. 56).
10. Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry*, VIII, No. 4 (Summer 1982), p. 777–95 (p. 781).
11. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Steve Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p. 213.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
14. Since independence in 1964, Malta has had two major political parties in power: the Labour Party (Partit Laburista), founded in 1921, and the Nationalist Party (Partit Nazzjonalista), founded in 1883 as the Anti-Reform Party, originally created to resist taxation and the imposition of the English language as the language of education and administration.
15. One of Repubblika's recent actions was to protest against the abuse of human rights involving illegal immigrants left to perish at sea or pushed back into the Libyan war zone. The organization requested a police inquiry to evaluate whether there had been a case of wilful homicide, for which the current Prime Minister, Robert Abela, and the Armed Forces of Malta could be held responsible. On 17 April 2020, Abela appeared on national television at prime time during the 8 pm news, with the whole cabinet sitting behind him, to rebut the accusation: see *The Shift News*, 17 April 2020, <<https://theshiftnews.com/2020/04/17/repubblika-calls-out-prime-minister-for-putting-a-gun-to-their-head/>>, accessed 29 May 2021. He accused the organization of wanting to create mayhem during times that were difficult because of Covid-19: see Ivan Martin, "'We are not traitors", say Repubblika over legal action on migrant deaths', *Times of Malta*, 18 April 2020, <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/we-are-not-traitors-say-repubblika-over-legal-action-on-migrant-deaths.786401>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
16. The Deputy Leader and Economy Minister of the governing Labour Party, Chris Cardona, had frozen all of Daphne's assets after being granted a garnishee order by the courts, having opened four libel suits against her because of an article in which she accused him of visiting a German brothel while on government business: see the Council of Europe Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists, 'Malta Economy Minister Issues Four Libel Suits and Warrants Against Blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia', 21 April 2021, <<https://go.coe.int/27hV8>>, accessed 28 May 2021.
17. Carlo Bonini, Manuel Delia, and John Sweeney, *Murder on the Malta Express: Who Killed Daphne Caruana Galizia?* (Malta: Midsea Press, 2019), p. 17.
18. See Vicki Ann Cremona, 'Of Bitches and Witches', *Times of Malta*, 27 April 2018, <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/Of-bitches-and-witches-Vicki-Ann-Cremona.677522>>, accessed 28 May 2021.
19. Daphne Caruana Galizia, *Running Commentary: Daphne Caruana Galizia's Notebook*, <[daphnecaruana.galizia.com](http://daphnecaruana.galizia.com)>, accessed 29 May 2021.
20. Paul Caruana Galizia, 'Daphne's Sons', *Tortoise*, 6 April 2019, <<https://members.tortoisemedia.com/2019/04/06/daphnes-sons/content.html>>, accessed 30 May 2021.
21. Bonini *et al.*, p. 85.
22. Pilatus Bank started operations in 2014. It was owned and chaired by Seyed Ali Sadr Hashemi Nejadin, known as Ali Sadr, and was closed down four years later after its licence was withdrawn on the advice of the European Investment Bank, following inquiries undertaken by the European Banking Authority. See Hilary Osborne, 'Malta's Pilatus Bank has European Licence Withdrawn', *Guardian*, 5 November 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/05/pilatus-bank-malta-european-banking-licence-withdrawn>>, accessed 29 May 2021. The Iranian-born banker, and holder of a St Kitts and Nevis passport, was prosecuted in the US for bank fraud but, surprisingly, all charges were dropped after 'prosecutors in New York said that they did not have the resources to continue to prosecute the case on appeal': see Stephanie Kirchgaessner, 'US drops charges against banker investigated by Daphne Caruana Galizia', *Guardian*, 6 June 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/us-drops-charges-against-banker-investigated-by-daphne-caruana-galizia-case>>, accessed 29 May 2021. Satabank, also suspected of money-laundering, saw the withdrawal of its credit institution authorization in June 2020: see Matthew Vella, 'Satabank Licence withdrawn after Bank placed under control', *Maltatoday*, 1 July 2020, <[https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/business/business\\_news/103303/satabank\\_licence\\_withdrawn\\_after\\_bank\\_placed\\_under\\_control#.XwMgIBNLjdc](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/business/business_news/103303/satabank_licence_withdrawn_after_bank_placed_under_control#.XwMgIBNLjdc)>, accessed 28 May 2021.
23. A third secret account, under a company known as Egrant, was suspected of belonging to the Prime Minister or his wife. A judicial investigation concluded that there was not enough evidence to support this claim. The owners' identity remains uncertain.

24. Vicki Ann Cremona, 'In Through the Back Door?', *Times of Malta*, 9 May 2020, <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/in-through-the-back-door-vicki-ann-cremona.790571>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
25. Daphne Caruana Galizia, 'PANAMAGATE: This is how it started – with two posts in the afternoon of 22nd February', *Running Commentary: Daphne Caruana Galizia's Notebook*, 3 March 2016, <<https://daphnecaruanaGalizia.com/2016/03/this-is-how-it-started-with-two-posts-in-the-afternoon-of-22nd-february/>>, accessed 14 June 2021.
26. Slavoj Žižek, 'Explaining the Panama Papers, or, Why Does a Dog Lick Himself?', *Newsweek*, 4 July 2016, <<https://www.newsweek.com/panama-papers-dogs-themselves-north-korea-vladimir-putin-444791>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
27. International Federation of Journalists, <<https://www.ifj.org/what/press-freedom.html>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
28. See Manuel Delia, 'How Muscat and Mizzi made Enemalta the SPV for Corruption', *Truth be Told*, 25 June 2020, <<https://manueldelia.com/2020/06/listen-how-muscat-and-mizzi-made-enemalta-the-spv-for-corruption/>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
29. Harry Cooper, 'Malta slammed for cash-for-passport program', *Politico*, 17 August 2016, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/malta-cash-for-passports-program-individual-investor-programme/>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
30. Caroline Muscat, ed., 'The Vitals Hospitals Deal', *The Shift*, 2020, <<https://theshiftnews.com/category/investigations/hospital-deal/>>, accessed 29 June 2020.
31. Manuel Delia, 'Neville Gafa's idea of a holiday', *Truth be Told*, 26 November 2018, <<https://manueldelia.com/2018/11/neville-gafas-idea-of-a-holiday/>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
32. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York; London: Verso, 2009), p. 3.
33. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), p. 17–18.
34. Willmar Sauter, *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p. 7–8.
35. Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 55.
36. Chris Scicluna, 'Protesters call for Justice after Journalist's killing', *Reuters*, 22 October 2017, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malta-carbomb-demonstration/protesters-call-for-justice-after-maltese-journalists-killing-idUSKBN1CR0T4>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
37. Massimo Costa, 'Demonstrators block street in front of police HQ in Floriana. Protesters holding signs calling on police commissioner to resign', *Malta Today*, 22 October 2017, <[https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/81522/demonstrators\\_block\\_street\\_in\\_front\\_of\\_police\\_hq\\_in\\_floriana#.XxFkxpNLg6g](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/81522/demonstrators_block_street_in_front_of_police_hq_in_floriana#.XxFkxpNLg6g)>, accessed 17 July 2020.
38. Helena Grech, 'Updated (2): Daphne's murder – Women camp outside Castille demand good governance', *Malta Independent*, 26 October 2017, <<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2017-10-26/local-news/ Occupy-Justice-pressure-group-camp-outside-Castille-after-proposals-fail-to-be-discussed-in-Parliament-6736180724>>, accessed 29 May 2021.
39. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 31.
40. Finlayson, 'Becoming a Democratic Audience', p. 96.
41. Ibid.
42. Delia's blog, *Truth be Told*, together with online newspaper *The Shift*, edited by Caroline Muscat, was launched following Daphne's death, to continue her fight.
43. Karl Azzopardi, 'Manuel Delia wins case against government over clearing of Caruana Galizia memorial', *Malta Today*, 30 January 2020, <[https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court\\_and\\_police/100075/manuel\\_delia\\_wins\\_case\\_against\\_government\\_over\\_clearing\\_of\\_caruana\\_galizia\\_memorial#.XvpGJxNLhRo](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court_and_police/100075/manuel_delia_wins_case_against_government_over_clearing_of_caruana_galizia_memorial#.XvpGJxNLhRo)>, accessed 29 May 2021.
44. Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 21.
45. Matthew Ward, 'Rethinking Social Movement Micromobilization: Multi-stage Theory and the Role of Social Ties', *Current Sociology Review*, LXIV, No. 6 (2015), p. 853–74 (p. 854).
46. Paulo Gerbaudo, quoted in della Porta, 'Anti-Corruption from Below', p. 678.
47. Jürgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht, 'Mesomobilization: Organizing and Framing Two Protest Campaigns in West Germany', *American Journal of Sociology*, XCVIII, No. 3 (November 1992), p. 555–95 (p. 558).
48. Repubblica sent a 24-page response to the Venice Commission with regard to the Government's reform proposals, and the Commission's reply to the Government shows that these were read very carefully, and some taken into account.