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A Bourdieusian Interpretation of the University of the Third Age in Malta

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Abstract:

The objective of this research paper was to embed the study of older adult education in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction. Field research was carried out at the University of the Third Age in Valletta in Malta [U3E] with data indicating that the primary indicator for membership was being situated in the 'young-old' cohort', possessing relatively higher levels of educational attainment and qualifications, as well as previous experience in white collar and occupational occupations. Most members were unaware of the real aims and objectives of the phenomenon of the U3E, and seemed to identify cultural pursuits with high-brow culture. Similar to traditional educational systems older adult education came across as a political activity and part of a large macrocosm of symbolic institutions that reproduce existing power relations in a subtle manner. The study thus concluded that attending the U3E is less than an actual example of 'transformative education' but more like another euphemism for glorified occupation therapy.

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Introduction

In 1983 David Peterson published one of the first in-depth studies on older adult education titled *Facilitating Education for Older Learners*. After appraising the field, he declared "the future, then, is bright" (306). In many ways, Peterson was right since the past two decades all continents witnessed a huge expansion in the provision of older adult education (Jarvis, 2003). Indeed, the education of older persons is considered to be the fastest growing branch of adult education in post-industrial countries as well as one of the most crucial issues facing current educational planning (Findsen, 2005). Moreover, researchers penned positive reviews of programmes specialising in older adult education as they found them to foster a sense of creativity, decrease loneliness and isolation, and provide opportunities and stimulation for the structure of older persons' daily lives (Withnall and Percy, 1994; Swindell, 1997; Williamson, 2000; Hamil-Luker, and Uhlenberg, 2002; Chin-Shan, 2006).

This research paper is a continuation of my efforts to embed the field of older adult education in a critical perspective (Formosa, 2000a, 2002, 2005). Critical educational gerontology, as the critical branch of older adult education is called, argues that the moral goal of learning in later life is to develop alternative visions for democratic social change whereby older persons are empowered to resist and overcome various forms of discrimination. Herein, I conduct a Bourdieusian analysis of the University of the Third Age in Malta [U3E]. This analysis is represented in three basic parts. The first includes a brief review of the current state of older adult education and the role of education in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power. The second part reviews of the University of the Third Age [U3A] phenomenon[1]. The third and final circle interprets the fieldwork data in a Bourdieusian rationale where it is argued that the U3E fails to lead learners to transformative 'conscientisation'. Instead, it functions as a vehicle of symbolic violence whereby class inequalities are reproduced and reinforced over the retirement transition.

Older adult education

Recent years have witnessed a range of policy statements at international and national levels encouraging and highlighting the increasing numbers and percentages of older persons taking part in educational programmes. This is not surprising considering the coming of population ageing. Statistics from the United Nations indicated that, in 1997, on average, "one million people a month crossed the threshold of 60 years of age across the globe" (Brink, 1997 : 15) - a 20 percent increase from the 800,000 figure reported in 1991 (Kinsella and Taeuber, 1993). It is noteworthy that "in 1995, the 368 million persons aged 65 and over constituted 6.4% of the earth's total population…an increase of 48 million [in absolute terms] elderly since 1990" (Kinsella, 1997 : 18). Another key catalyst leading towards the increasing popularity of older adult education consisted in the 'feminisation of later life'. Indeed, the rising

1 The first U3A was founded in 1973 in Toulouse (France) by Pierre Vellas (1997) to enhance the quality of life of older persons through the participation of educational activities, socio-cultural activities, and multi-disciplinary research on later life. U3As may be defined loosely as socio-cultural centres where senior citizens may acquire new knowledge of significant issues, or validate the knowledge which they already possess, in an agreeable milieu and in accordance with easy and acceptable methods.

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number and proportion of women in later life due longer life expectancy can be considered as a key role in the development of older adult education since that women are more receptive to joining and attending educational classes. Other catalysts included the improved health status of older persons, the emergence of the third age as a 'normal' phase of life rather than simply for the better-off, smaller family circles which motivated older persons to seek social contacts outside the family circle, and the improving educational levels of older cohorts. Moreover, one cannot overlook the integration of older adults in the framework of lifelong education. Although the concept of lifelong education has been with us for many decades, it was only recently that education was connoted as extending beyond working life.

Initially, much of the theoretical literature focused on how education can increase older persons' levels of self-fulfilment and potential. Percy (1990a), for instance, proposed a liberal approach whereby the aims and purposes of education in later life are not different from those of people of any age group. He advocated an approach in which learning becomes a personal quest, where

> …learners begin from where they are; they follow the thrust of their own curiosities in order to make what is around them more meaningful; ideally they should be free of external constraints so that they can learn until they are satisfied, until they have achieved a potential that is within them
>
> Percy, 1990b : 236

Critical educational gerontology [CEG] runs counter to such a liberal framework. CEG emerged from the radical concern to overcome the oppressions which locked older adults into ignorance, poverty and powerlessness, and secondly, as a reaction to the uncritical acceptance of the language and the underlying ideological approach employed in older adult education. The rational underlying this perspective was firmly established in three key publications (Glendenning and Battersby, 1990; Glendenning, 1992; Battersby and Glendenning, 1992) in which it was stated that CEG relates to older persons "gaining power over their lives…and, above all, [that] it should be an important mechanism for individual and group empowerment" (Glendenning and Battersby, 1990 : 222-3). Glendenning and Battersby argued that older adult educational programmes are based upon erroneous taken-for-granted perceptions. These included (i) the tendency to consider elderly people as a relatively homogenous group, (ii) the use of the psychological "deficit" model of older adults' learning abilities, (iii) assuming that any type of education emancipates and improves the quality of life of older persons, (iv) deliberating about the aims and purposes of education in later life in a shallow manner, (v) disregarding that most older adult education is driven by middle-class notions of what constitutes education, (vi) overlooking the fact that older persons are marginalised to different degrees from society, and finally, (vii) assuming that older adult education is exercised in the interests of older people.

As a reaction, Glendenning and Battersby (1990 : 226-8) put forward four foundational principles for CEG. First, a shift away from a functionalist approach towards an exploration of the relationship between capitalism and ageing. Second, going beyond conventional 'educational gerontology' to contest that education for older persons is essentially a neutral enterprise. Thirdly, analysing older adult

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education through such concepts as emancipation, empowerment, transformation, social and hegemonical control. And finally, developing 'the notion of praxis' to establish a 'critical gerogogy' which enables older persons to achieve 'conscientisation'. Undoubtedly, CEG was a welcome addition to the sphere of adult education since if

> …we fail to establish 'empowerment' as a central and essentially contested concept within the field of educational gerontology, we jeopardise the most powerful aspect of older adult education - its use as a tool for transforming old age from a period of decline and dependency to one of challenge and productivity
>
> Cusack, 1999 : 35

CEG has been a key contributor to the development of educational gerontology. These included the embodiment of the field in a normative and ethical engagement (Cusack, 2000), highlighting the possible hegemonic effect that older educational programmes may entail (James, 2000), and injecting a critical twist in the analysis of why membership is closely linked to gender and class (Glendenning, 2000). My contributions in this respect to the development of CEG have been principally twofold (Formosa, 2002, 2005). Primarily, I expanded the analytical formulations underlying CEG in a number of down-to-earth practices for older adult educators. In an attempt to situate Shor and Freire's (1987 : 19) 20-year-old query "What type of teaching could make critical learning happen?" in critical educational gerontology, I argued that critical gerogogy (that is, the teaching of older persons) :

- must be directed by a political rationale so as to highlight its commitment to the transformation of ageist social structures.
- must employ a communal approach towards the transformation of the ageist world (even despite the diverse heterogeneity of older persons)
- refutes the myth that any type of education empowers older people, and is grounded on liberatory education.
- realizes that older adult educators are not just facilitators but that they must take sides with and are committed to the sufferings of older people.
- does not only occur within the walls of the older adult educational programme, but must reach out to all distinct segments of older persons.
- embraces a self-help culture towards a more decentralised and autonomous older adult education as power is shifted to older learners.

Formosa, 2002 : *passim*

Recently, I strove to embed CEG in a feminist perspective. Following field research at the local U3E, five principles were proposed to aid older adult education become more of an actual example of 'transformative education' for older women. CEG will only succeed in holding a sensitivity to feminist concerns if it

- is directed by a rational that acknowledges older women as an oppressed population due to the 'double standard of aging'.
- acknowledges that the oppressive position of older women is also the result of lifelong cumulative disadvantages.

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- rejects that there is a universalized singular identity among women and emphasizes a 'politics of difference'.
- abandons traditional strategies of learning and embraces a feminist praxis in older adult education and related research; and finally, if it
- is driven towards the empowerment of older women as a distinct but collective effort.

Formosa, 2005 : *passim*

However, not everything is well within CEG. Some have even challenged this position with Findsen (2005) arguing for an improved integration of theory and practice in CEG and an exploration of its connections to the concept of lifelong learning. Withnall (2000; 2005) claimed that CEG is unsuitable considering that older people are a highly heterogeneous group to the extent that it falls in the trap of liberal education in that it imposed a new kind of ideological constraint. I also found CEG at fault for clinging to a traditional view of social power characterised by a zero-sum theory of collective movements, oscillating between structural and agentic perspectives of everyday life, and that it tends to link the notion of domination with the materiality of economic forces (Formosa, 2000b). Undoubtedly, the coming of late modernity demands a more fluid, dialectic, and symbolic approach to the critical analysis of older adult education. It is in view of such limitations that I believe that CEG has much to gain from its linkage with Pierre Bourdieu's sociology. Boudieu's major contribution is his development of a political economy of symbolic power that includes a theory of symbolic interests, a theory of power as capital, and an analytical outlines as how education serves as a key mechanism for the conduction of symbolic violence and transmission of class inequalities. This is the concern of the next section.

Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic power, and education

The analytical problems present in CEG necessitate a research programme which grapples with the intimate connections between older adult education on one hand amd class, culture, and power on the other. Bourdieu (1977) meets such an objective by premising the sociology of everyday life upon three 'thinking tools', namely habitus, field, and capital. The 'habitus' constitutes the crux of Bourdieu's sociology of practice through which the hostility between objective structures and subjective practices on one hand, and consciousness and unconsciousness on the other is surpassed. The habitus is defined as "a product of history ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliability than all formal rules and explicit norms" (Bourdieu, 1990 : 54). Thus, the habitus refers to a set of dispositions acquired through early socialisation that are, in turn, responsible for an individual's behaviour and the typical way he/she acts or interprets social reality. The 'field' is where the constituent effects of the habitus are actualised. Bourdieu (1993) sees the field as a configuration, of objective relations between positions whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants. Finally, 'capital' is not granted solely economic meaning but essentially signifies a resource that yields power. In addition to the cultural, social, and economic forms of capital, Bourdieu highlighted another form of capital - namely, symbolic capital. The latter is inherently different from the rest in

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that it is a form of power not perceived 'as such' but arising as a legitimate demand for recognition and deference :

> Symbolic capital, a transformed and thereby disguised form of physical 'economic' capital, produces its proper effect inasmuch as it conceals the fact that it originates in 'material' forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects.
>
> Bourdieu, 1977 : 183

Through the triumvirate of habitus, field and capital it became possible for Bourdieu (1984, 1985, 1987) to construct an agonistic perception of everyday life is sensitive both to structuring structures and agentic action, as well as the fact that class structuring and action occur through modalities of symbolic power. Primarily, the 'social' is posited as a central dimension to the matrix of properties associated with class so that it engenders the substitution of a class structure based on economic relations of production by a multidimensional 'social space' where position is contingent upon the volume, composition, and trajectory of individuals' capital. Secondly, Bourdieu's model also includes a potential to conceive why class no longer leads to strong forms of class consciousness. The hierarchical and differentiated nature of tastes underlying class relations "owe their special efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control of the will" (1984 : 467). Finally, Bourdieu provides insight on the individualist and consumerist character of contemporary forms of class action. Bourdieu highlights the 'trickle-down effect' whereby a perpetual competition exists over the appropriation of the most "distinguished" objects or practices. Initially seized upon by those with the greatest economic and/or cultural capital - that is, by the dominant class - such objects or practices diffuse downward through social space over time. Lifestyles are therefore not "different…from classes, but are rather dominant classes denied as such, or, so to speak, sublimated and thereby legitimated" (ibid., : 214).

Bourdieu, however, was aware that class distinctions emanating from 'trickle-down' effects lack inherent durability since they are not institutionally secured, and thus, subject to continuous re-creation. For Bourdieu (and Wacquant, 1992), symbolic violence achieves 'permanency' only if class distinctions are subject to 'codification' - that is, the 'formalization' of arbitrary acts of distinction by establishing the explicit consensus of the whole group. The educational institution is, for Bourdieu (and Passeron, 1977), the key mechanism of 'codification' as it is specially contrived to conserve, transmit and inculcate the cultural canons of society through its function of 'conserving' and 'consecrating' an elite heritage (other important mechanisms include political mobilisation and the state) :

> …the educational system, an institutionalized classifier which is itself an objectified system of classification reproducing the hierarchies of the social world in a transformed form, with its cleavages by "level" corresponding to social strata and its divisions into specialities and disciplines which reflect social divisions ad infinitum, such as the opposition between theory and practice, conception and execution, transforms social classifications into academic classifications, with every appearance of neutrality…

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Bourdieu, 1984 : 387

Educational institutions possess the power to instate and regulate class-constitutive boundaries characterized by a high degree of solidity and permanence, and may do so in independence from the classificatory schemes of the actors who are subject to categorization by them. As long as educational institutions carry a somewhat universally recognised value in the social and symbolic markets, educational participation institute an objective frontier between holders and non-holder. At the same time, however, educational institutions also exerts a symbolic effect, since they entail the introduction of a qualitative discontinuity into the continuum of cultural competences: the difference between the persons perceived as holding the highest levels of knowledge in highbrow culture and persons with the lowest levels.

Of course Bourdieu's sociology is not problem-free. Two problems are especially relevant to this research piece. On one hand, extensive reproach has been levelled at the habitus for incorporating a strong form of structural bias (Alexander, 1995). However, I believe that this criticism is too harsh since an overall reading of his work finds that 'agency' and 'transformation' are both given a formal place[2] (Fowler, 1997). More directly relevant to education, Bourdieu has also been regarded as a 'cultural reductionist' since he projects cultural life as intrinsically related to process of class conflict (Jenkins, 1992). This criticism, however, is also unfair. Bourdieu's analysis of culture offers a way out of the problems found in neo-Marxist accounts where culture is deemed a product of class relations (Swartz, 1997). In Bourdieu's model, culture is itself a field in which class relations operate with culture battles being recursively involved in class formation rather than the other way round.

The University of the Third Age in Malta[3]

The local University of the Third Age, or as we call it in our native tongue, *L-Universita' Tat-Tielet Eta'* [U3E] operates from three locations, namely : Valletta, Sliema, and Rabat in Gozo (research was conducted at only the primary location). It is governed by a mission statement, written and developed by university academics, declaring specifically that the U3E aims to provide older persons with educational opportunities as an end in themselves. The U3E is controlled by two main committees. Whilst the academic matters are run by a board made up of university academics, the U3E's co-ordinator, and one representative from the U3E' learning body - on the other hand, the social undertakings are managed by an 'Association' which acts in liaison with the University of Malta (Schembri, 1997).

[2] In fact, Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2000 : 234ff) emphasised reiterated that "[i]t would be wrong to suppose that the circle of expectations and chances cannot be broken…The lack of a future…is an increasingly wide-spread, even a modal, experience. But there is the relative autonomy of the symbolic order which in all circumstances, especially in periods where expectations and chances fall out of line, can leave a margin for freedom for political action aimed at reopening the space of the possibles".

[3] Data for this research publication was collected in five year span (2000-2005). Whilst initially I held the roles of a student reading for a Masters' Degree in Arts (Sociology), eventually I also had the opportunity to contribute to the U3E programme of studies by facilitating a course titled *Elder Abuse : A Holistic and Preventive Approach*.

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The U3E is open to everybody over 60 years of age ready to pay a nominal fee. Most members were in the young-old age-bracket, female, married, and living in the vicinity of the U3E's premises. The majority of members had attained at least a 'secondary education', and consequently, very few had no qualifications - the majority holding secondary education certificates and/or teacher's college certificates and being previously employed in managerial or professional occupations. Considering the high majority of illiterate older persons in Malta (the 1995 census [Centre of Statistics, 1998] lists 26% of persons over 60 years of age as being illiterate), I queried U3E members as to whether there were any illiterate members amongst the U3E's body. The answer was always either negative or inconclusive. Most informers held that illiteracy and U3E membership are two variables that are not easily found together. Many male and female members expressed their disappointment at the fact that they were forced to retire when reaching the height of their intellectual abilities and after attaining extensive experience. The relinquishing of occupational roles was deemed by U3E members as decreasing their status, prestige, and consequently, self-esteem :

> Retirement was a big blow. At work I enjoyed the respect of my work mates… Attending the U3E made me feel a contributor again. Attending lectures and feeling accepted by fellow members gave me the prestige I had lost through retirement.
>
> John, 74 years

I perceived most U3E members to incorporate a middle-class culture. Many members arrived for the lectures at the Valletta centre with a copy of *The Times* (Malta) - a dominant symbol of middle-class status, and various members could be overheard flaunting the prestigious positions and significant roles they occupied before retirement, as well as the many honourable deeds performed during their adult life. Most members communicated on title-surname basis - especially in opposite-sex interaction, spoke with idealistic overtones, were cynical of the routine and pragmatical pattern of practice, and used various Italian and English words to express their ideas. During conversations various members (but especially females) expressed their condemnation of idle youth, drug addicts, and unemployed - describing them as 'social parasites'. Members regarded achievement and success in occupational structures as dominant acceptable yardsticks to measure one's accomplishments in life. In addition, the pronoun 'we' was used extensively when referring to the membership body. On asking for a clarification behind the use of pronoun, many members maintained that it signified cultured older persons 'who possessed a good level of education and cultured taste'. The belief that 'education is valuable for its own sake, rather than for utilitarian purposes' was also a popular motive. Yet, many stressed the U3E's social benefits :

> The U3E gives me an opportunity to meet people that have similar interests…to make new acquaintances…to help me wile away the time…to build a new life after the death of my husband…there is nothing much to do now that I had to retire and the children got married.
>
> Maria, 68 years

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Upon querying whether they attended other social clubs, almost all members replied in the negative. I also asked about perceived possible reasons why many old persons in Malta do not join the U3E. Many members expressed the view that the U3E's lectures are of a high standard and that many older persons do not have the educational background to comprehend the lecturers' presentations. A typical comment included :

> It is true that any older person can enrol in the U3E. But what's the use of attending university lectures if one does not have the necessary educational background. You have to remember that a large percentage of older persons are illiterate. A larger percentage are illiterate in the English language. It is impossible for such older persons to participate fully in the U3E. Non-educated older persons would find it very difficult to understand the lectures, and also that, they would find it similarly troublesome to converse with many of the present U3E members.
>
> Carmen, 70 years

In fact, members believed that the U3E suits best older persons who have an adequate level of education, that is, who understand English and Maltese that is, who have a secondary level of education or better. Most members were against the idea of providing low standard education since this would demean the institutions' role (sic). Some members stressed older persons' 'lack of confidence and fears' about 'formal education' as other potential barriers to membership. Very few members pointed towards transport and health problems as the primary reasons why many elders do not join the U3E. When I inquired whether the title 'university' might be another potential factor preventing people from participating, many members appeared perplexed at this suggestion since most of them had joined the U3E precisely because they were attracted by the term in question. Many members were certain that the word 'university' was not the reason for the high level of absenteeism. On the contrary, they were against its removal and believed that if such an action would be carried out, the U3E would lose both its overall meaning and status. One member, albeit acknowledging the fact that the title 'university' may denote a high standard of educational practice and that it could discourage older persons with low levels of formal education from seeking membership in the U3E, was quick to add

> But what can one do? If it is removed, it can function the other way round, that is, deterring people like me who would like to dedicate their free time in retirement to pursuing educational activities as ends in themselves…at least it functions to give older persons a sense of identity, something which they, that is we, have lost due to mandatory discriminatory policies…politicians never retire…why do they condemn other persons to idle time in their old age…if they tampered even with the U3E's status, now that we have something in our favour, I would be very angry.
>
> Roger, 75 years

The U3E follows the liberal tradition and offers courses which are not intended to lead their participants to obtain economic and other maternal benefits although. Well-attended lectures included *History and Appreciation of Art*, *Religions of the*

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Mediterranean, *Malta's Middle Ages : Culture Switching*, *Europe and the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages*, *The Rise of Islam in the Mediterranean*, and *Malta Under British Rule*. The tutors are non-U3E members and are either full-time or part-time university lecturers. They are engaged by the University and are paid university rates. The dominant pedagogical style used in U3E lectures is didactic in format without allowing any possibility for any free discussion on the subject.

Discussion

Undoubtedly, the U3E serves as a major catalyst for the enhancement of the quality of its members' lives. My fieldwork experience indicated that the U3E injects a sense of creativity, aids lonely older persons to resocialise themselves in society, develops amongst learners a lofty and progressive delight of life, and increases the level of social solidarity and integration between older persons.

When investigating the major forces responsible for motivating older persons to enrol in the U3E, current members highlighted a combination of cognitive and social reasons. Experiencing an ample volume of leisure time, older persons may feel that they have nothing to lose by joining the institution. Yet, it is also clear this is not the whole picture regarding U3E participation. Indeed, a critical study of older educational practice must move beyond the conviction that older persons' decision to join up is solely influenced by rational factors, since one cannot negate the immense symbolic significance that arises from obtaining membership in clubs and organisations. If rational factors were the only reasons why older persons sought membership in the U3E, then the learning body would have been characterised by a high level of heterogeneity. Even though there were no official requirements for enrolment, except having surpassed one's sixtieth birthday, fieldwork data detected that the typical U3E member holds a middle class position and dispositions.

- First, members' life-course projection equipped them with a high level of cultural and social capital but moderate economic capital when compared to lower and upper class older persons.

- Secondly, many perceived themselves to be relatively better educated and 'cultured' when compared to the rest of the elderly population, and consequently, utilized the pronoun "we" to refer to the U3E learning body in a consistent manner.

The middle-classness of typical U3E members was also evident by their continuous pursuit of aristocratic qualities, expressive lifestyles, an eagerness to instruct themselves in the bourgeois ethos of freedom, as well as a close affinity with traditional intellectuals (since the latter were perceived as members of the dominant class). They also held a conventionalist and traditionalist attitude towards leisure, dress, politics, values, humanist studies, and linguistic usage; and demonstrated a dominant preference for expressive learning - a 'taste for pretension' that is detached from the mundane necessities of everyday life. The high level of homogeneity amongst the U3E's learning body, leads invariably to the logical deduction that membership proceeds from other irrational factors rather than from a conscious deliberation to enrol oneself in an organisation that provides educational, cultural and social activities. In fact, U3E members inhabited a culture of reflexivity (compared to

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a culture of necessity experienced by their working-class peers) so that they interpreted the social environment in scholastic and academic ways. This culture of reflexivity arose from two major factors. First, their relatively high levels of cultural capital inclined them with the ability to manipulate their ideas to their advantage. Secondly, their relative low level of economic capital left middle class subjects no alternative but to emphasise their cultural capital in constructing their social and personal identity. U3E members can be described - to use Bauman's (1992) metaphor - 'elderly tourists' - that is, older persons who turned their backs on traditional ways of ageing to adopt 'successful' and 'active' lives In this way, U3E members can be contrasted to working-class peers whose lives revolve around experiences of material, residential, and psychological exclusion since they conceive retirement as an opportunity for optimising opportunities for health, cognitive and physical capacities, and active engagement.

Historically, the middle classes were particularly vulnerable to cyclical movements in their economic position when compared to working and upper class citizens since the former would have spent their life accumulating and holding 'cultural capital' and 'symbolic power' to hold the edge over their adult contemporaries. Their status and class position was derived particularly from their high level of educational attainment and qualifications that in turn granted them access to 'prestigious' occupation positions. The latter served as a major symbolic strategy to solve this concern throughout their middle years. On retirement, their class condition became disconnected from their class position. Whilst their class position occupied a higher level with in the social space, their class condition sent contradicting messages, leading to an individual 'status inconsistency'. Retirement forces older persons to an arena of role ambiguity, to become dependent on the state welfare system, and strips them of their 'social worth' in society. This occurs primarily, because in modern societies, income and status derive predominantly from productive employment. Once retirement age is reached, one's position in the 'social space' changes from that of 'achievement' to one of 'ascription' - that of 'pensioners' or 'dependants'. Previous identities and statuses associated with one's occupational position are erased and become meaningless. Yet, it is also true that such structural pressures are experienced differently by social classes. Throughout their lives, working class persons have never occupied a high position in the 'social space' and perceive retirement as a kind of liberation from their exploitative situation. More upper class persons, however, would still own a sufficient volume of 'economic' capital to retain their class position.

It is therefore not surprising that the middle classes attempt to enrol in new arenas for moral and practical support as well as to reassert their previous and intended position in the social space. Like social classes, same generation individuals have a common location in the social and historic process, and which thereby limits them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience and a characteristic type of historically relevant action. One common strategy is joining organisations since it incorporates several benefits – such as an opportunity for self-expression, a sense of security, a supportive network, and a chance to confront some of the ambiguity and losses of retirement. However, the most important function of enrolment in organisations, consists in the recovering of forfeited or new identities. Of all the available social clubs, it is those which are intimately associated with 'legitimate capital' that bestow the greatest amount of status (Bocock, 1993). These include historical associations, political organisations,

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and above all, educational institutions. This occurs because educational institutions act as cultural arbitraries whose unacknowledged aim is the imposing of legitimate cultural predispositions. Therefore, the drive towards the attainment of membership at the U3E must not be perceived as a mere coincidence, but as a symbolic strategy in the class struggle. Membership provides learners to acquire the label of 'cultured' or 'cultivated' with respect to the rest of the older adult population. In the same way that books and paintings are used to impress neighbours, friends and other social viewers, membership in the U3E is employed as a strategy to obtain and compete for social honour.

Through the U3E, middle-class older persons can sustain or even augment their values of achievement and independence, and combat the incurred symbolic losses resulting from retirement. To clarify this position, it is opportune to refer to a television interview where Bourdieu used the metaphor of a casino (Alheit, 1999). In everyday life, according to Bourdieu, we are equipped with three types of chips : black, blue and red. Bourdieu matched black chips with economic capital, blue chips with cultural capital, and red chips with social capital. To Bourdieu's comparisons, one may add the existence of white chips as referring to symbolic capital. In old age, retirement depletes the middle classes of their lifelong accumulation of black and red chips, despite their retaining a high volume of blue chips. Yet, it is evident that such a type of capital is not self-evident, and therefore, does not enable them to retain their previously high level in the social space. The only strategy left to such middle-class older persons, in order to elevate their position in the social space, is through the manipulation of white chips in the hope that a successful deployment will result in an upwardly mobile stride in society's social ladder. It can be argued that membership in the U3E arises as a strategy to symbolise their relative higher quantities of 'blue chips'. In this respect, the U3E becomes a strategy of peer grouping that engages in collective rituals to ameliorate their situation. Referring again to Bourdieu's casino metaphor, not every older person can procure 'blue chips' easily. In its extreme form, U3E membership is co-ordinated as a system of 'social closure', admitting only particular kinds of social groups, depending on their volume of cultural and social capital. At the same time, Bourdieu's concept of habitus exposes why the strategic potential of the U3E is not usurped by entrepreneurial and working class older persons. The habitus, as highlighted previously, refers to transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions*. Therefore, only older persons equipped with an educational disposition that influences them to pursue methodical reasoning, analytical language, cultural awareness, and aesthetic theorising, will perceive the strategic potential of the U3E and feel at ease within its *ethos*.

As the continuity paradigm in social gerontology asserts, older persons select alternatives consonant with who they have been and what they have done in the past. External continuity is maintained by being and doing in familiar environments, practising familiar skills and interacting with familiar people. This also explains why older persons tended not to join other local clubs since the latter reflect a different cultural arbitrary, one predicated on 'popular culture'. Confronted with such an incompatibility between their intellectual habitus and the popular temperament found in local clubs, new petite older persons felt uneasy since these environments were not consistent with their life-long dispositions. Surely, the U3E in Malta, with its emphasis on liberal subjects, middle-class values and distinct geographical position,

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provided an alternative and more congenial atmosphere. Undoubtedly, persons who would have been continually socialised in formal educational environments are prone to romanticising their past role and to looking forward to a return to any available conventionally educational field. Furthermore, with their successful period of education in the past still lingering in their memory, it is not surprising that they embrace so readily the U3E's aesthetic and intellectual values. To them it meant going back to an arena in which they feel confident and self-assured of its outcome and development.

Conclusion

The U3E in Valletta represents yet another commendable effort to enhance the quality of older persons' lives by dealing with the increasing longevity, as well as contesting the erroneous suppositions that associate ageing with predestined physical and mental decline. However, a critical interpretation of the field research affirms three major conclusions.

- First, despite the invisibility of older persons in class analysis, old age is not devoid of class distinctions. Rather, older persons are located in structural and subjective class locations which condition them to struggle constantly for improved positions.

- Secondly, class formation and action in later life is distinguished by cultural textures and processes that take the form of social investments in and display of symbolic distinctions.

- Finally, older adult education is essentially a political activity, and if siding with a dominant class fraction, will form part of a large macrocosm of symbolic institutions that reproduce subtly existing power relations.

Moreover, I believe that the term 'university' was an unfortunate choice and hinders the democratisation process of older adult education programmes. The term 'university' is a class-infused term and is unlikely to be adopted by any society whose membership is predominately working-class since it has elitist connotations. The choice of such a term is unfortunate for two major reasons : first, because U3As were primarily founded to improve the quality of life of all older persons and not solely one particular ingroup of elders (this is even more lamentable when one considers that the U3E derived its funds from the University of Malta which in turn is financed by the Maltese government); and secondly, for losing track of Vellas's mediaeval interpretation of the term *universitas* - as a corporation of persons devoted to a particular activity and not in any way referring to the awarding of degrees, diplomas, or any certification. To conclude, the U3E acted as an institutionalised classifier that reproduced the existing social hierarchies since its pedagogical work acted in favour of the interests of middle class older persons as well as *against* their working class peers. This occurred through the U3E giving legitimacy to the middle-class culture and through its perpetration of 'symbolic violence' by subjugating lower class learners to alien tastes and values. Such a strategy is surely a strategy for demonstrating intellectual fitness, which, in turn, is rewarded by a sense of *distinction* within the peer group. Publicly, it demonstrates one's position in the social strata against the commercial and the working classes.

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