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## Island Studies: Some Critical Reflections

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## Island Studies: Some Critical Reflections

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### Introduction

Our planet is “a world of islands.” This may appear as a self-evident truth, but it seems as if we continuously need being reminded of this condition. Scholars, just like policy makers and artists, may need to better exploit the benefits of placing islands at the centre and heart of their analysis, looking at how island practices can be profitably informed by experiences from other islands, and never forgetting that the *focus* of our study is the *locus* of our study.

This is not a new discovery. Charles Darwin, Alfred Wallace, Robert H. MacArthur, and Edward O. Wilson realized long before me how powerful, useful, and distinct islands can be in the scrutiny of the evolution, endemism, and extinction of living things (e.g., Baldacchino, 2006). Dutch anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain (1974) has alerted us to the power and tenacity of social networks in island societies. Political scientist Barry Bartmann (1996) reminds us that the oldest democratic polities are islands, both in the Old World (Iceland, Isle of Man) and the New (Bermuda, Barbados). The science of anthropology cut its teeth with the study of island societies in the South Pacific by such pioneers as Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead. Richard Grove (1995) posits that the world’s first wholesale environmental experiments occurred on islands (such as Madeira and St. Helena), and today, other islands — like El Hierro in Spain or Samsø in Denmark — rush ahead with their embracing of a green energy agenda and the tantalizing promise of a sustainable future (e.g., Mitra, 2006).

### Lavish Metaphorical Representations

Even so, the reasons for which the studies referred to above are significant may not have much to do with the actual island or islands that they describe. “The island” hovers uneasily in the background, often just as a metaphor or idea, shorn of actuality, physicality, or situatedness. “So powerful is the metaphorical idea of the island that it can be

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deployed in the absence of even the slightest reference to the reality of islands” (Hay 2006, p. 30). “The island” is one natural environment that has “figured prominently in humanity’s dreams of the ideal world” (Tuan 1990, p. 247).

The subject of dreams, indeed. These metaphorical representations have assumed at least six key formats. First, islands have become, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the unwitting objects of what may be the most lavish, global, and consistent branding exercise in human history. They find themselves presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination, emotional offloading, or religious pilgrimage (Baldacchino 2010a, p. 374). The metaphoric deployment of “island,” with the associated attributes of small physical size and warm water, is possibly *the* central gripping metaphor within Western discourse (Hay 2006, p. 26, emphasis in original; *also* Connell 2003). These constructs remain at the heart of island tourist marketing and island branding initiatives.

Second, perhaps the most common current *island state* discourses in the global media are those about sinking and disappearing, driven by considerations of their economic and environmental vulnerability in the face of climate change and sea level rise, which help to reinforce victim and deficit paradigms (e.g., Farbotko, 2005). The significant number of small island developing states (SIDS) in the international community has made some impact on recent multilateral diplomacy by highlighting, through the lobbying of a cohesive coalition under the auspices of the Alliance of Small and Island States (AOSIS 2012), the serious plight of small, fragile, and very finite and material islands (e.g., Royle, 2010). Actual environmental disasters — such as the 2004 Boxing Day Indian Ocean tsunami, the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Northeast Honshu, Japan — have also led to considerable attention to climate change and disaster research and scholarship, with islands often at the forefront (e.g., Wisner et al., 2012).

Third is the widespread appreciation that islands are miniature worlds, spaces where evolution unfolds in specific and innovative ways (Young, 1999). Natural scientists are interested in island spaces because they afford departures from mainstream evolutionary trends. On islands, scientists discover endemic species, they observe the impact of invasive species, and they can even launch and successfully complete the eradication of such species, as in the case of goats from Aldabra atoll, concluded recently (Seychelles Nation On-Line 2012). In advancing zero carbon and green energy strategies, small islands taunt the rest of the world with the promises of sustainable development.

Fourth, following the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, islands can command considerable exclusive economic zones. Island states are often stewards of swathes of ocean (and seabed mineral deposits) much larger than their land masses while continental states extend their reach to ocean resources through their ownership and control over offshore islands. There is much at stake, and confrontations over who controls specific islands or island groups — such as Senkaku/Diaoyu — can be sure to mobilize nationalist sentiments; they can escalate and lead to regional tensions if not wars (e.g., Tisdall, 2012).

Fifth are the specific interests of the United States as the world’s current default super-

power. The U.S. continues to maintain a presence in strategic locations, and island bases in various parts of the world — from Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, to Bahrain — help to ensure global surveillance. Meanwhile, more specifically, the island deployments of the U.S. in the Pacific Ocean — including Guam, Hawai‘i and Okinawa — appear meant to both reassure regional allies and contain Chinese expansionism; the deployment of 2,500 U.S. marines in Western Australia is a recent development in this vein (Calmes, 2011). Other powers have historically pioneered the use of islands in this way: notably Crete and Venice (in the Mediterranean), Japan (in the Western Pacific in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century), and Britain (in the world at large for almost two centuries).

Sixth, while the age of colonialism may be largely over, various colonizing powers maintain relationships with subnational jurisdictions — almost all of which are islands — that do not wish to secure independence, preferring instead to enjoy a fair degree of domestic autonomy but also the security of an overseeing metropolitan patron state. France is the only power (apart from the U.S.) that has no problem fulfilling this role, but other states — Denmark, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and New Zealand — must contend and co-exist with what are often small, autonomous units that wish to remain within their purview. The UK has no less than 14 such “overseas territories,” 13 of which are insular. Some of these islands are hot spots for regional conflict because of competing claims (Falklands/Malvinas) or because of abuse of human and resident rights (Diego Garcia, Ascension) (e.g., Baldacchino, 2010b).

In this way, islands come across as biological and geopolitical “hot-spots” and flashpoints — sites for Nature’s experiments but also for military bases, environmental disasters, strained international border relations, benign imperialism, and lingering post-colonialism. The islands’ importance in these contexts is not so much for how the events described above matter to themselves and their own people, but for how the islands act as canaries in a coal mine, manageable laboratories for larger processes, demonstrations of how things could unfold, for better or for worse, elsewhere in the world. “The Island” becomes a synecdoche: a figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole. It is as if we must continue to remind ourselves that, while *island matters* are important for what they suggest, *islands matter*, too (Hils, 1996).

Island Studies must take note of these developments because, even though the island is typically just the backdrop to the matter under investigation, islands still appear and persist on the international radar. It is these issues that make islands attractive subjects to the international community. The six concerns identified above are the main reasons why islands may be in the news or may attract attention and investment from states, corporations, foundations, or individuals. Better to feature in people’s attention than not at all, even if the subject that commands that attention is not necessarily driven by local island interests.

## Island Interests Come to the Fore

Meanwhile, much progress has been made in the representation of islander interests, by islanders, for islanders, with islanders. I can identify at least three fronts of such progress.

First, progress in the suite of “area studies” initiatives since the 1980s — whether as urban studies, regional studies, rural studies, or gender studies — all of which have started to acknowledge the specificity of local cultures. For islands, this is especially so in the Pacific, with its significant indigenous populations. Indeed, one could argue that the first proper island studies journal is *The Contemporary Pacific*, launched from the University of Hawai‘i in 1988. Area studies today consider issues of power, are theoretically sophisticated, and make a timely, valid, and critical foil to the often glib assumptions about the implied perversity of globalization and free market neo-liberalism (Szanton 2004, p. 5). Island studies (also known as nissology) is one component of this thrust, keen to appreciate and engage with its subject matter “on its own terms” (McCall, 1994).

Second, progress through the inclusion of a “sense of place” in the holistic understanding of quality of life. In this way, rural and otherwise small and peripheral locations — like small islands — develop a unique attraction for potential new residents, many of whom might be deliberate urban or lifestyle refugees, reacting to the global trend in favour of urbanization (e.g., Baldacchino et al., 2009). There is also a growing interest in “place-based development,” which is a “holistic and targeted intervention that seeks to utilize, enhance or reveal the unique natural, physical, or human capacity endowments present within a particular location” for community and/or for economic development purposes (e.g., Markey et al., 2012). The current age of globalization has inspired a fresh appreciation for the local, and many are those that wish to live in small communities that are connected to, yet safely separated from, big cities and their cosmopolitanism.

Third, modern technology, the democratization of publishing, and the accessibility of the World Wide Web have made it increasingly possible for small islands and their people to state and publicize their own concerns and thus make their voices heard. This development has generated an explosion of plurality, with so many new ways of framing difference and diversity and in so many different languages and formats. It has given a badly needed voice and presence to even the world’s smallest jurisdictions and their hitherto invisible and/or silenced populations, including aboriginal peoples. With the Empire “writing back” (e.g., Ashcroft et al., 2002), the world’s many Lilliputians can now speak with their own voice, rather than have alien (even if well-meaning) Gullivers acting as their interlocutors and gatekeepers. We are now getting glimpses of islands, islanders, and island lives. There is considerable literature, also in and about indigenous languages, that falls within the field of post-colonialism and sub-altern studies.

## So Many Initiatives

All these encouraging developments are mirrored in the academic world. *The Contemporary Pacific* has been joined by other island journals. These include *Insula: the International Journal of Island Affairs* (published irregularly by UNESCO since 1992), *Island Studies Journal* (since 2006), *Shima: the International Journal of Island Cultures* (since 2007), and the *Journal of Island and Maritime Cultures* (since 2011). There are also well-established region-specific journals, like *Caribbean Studies*, *Journal of Pacific Studies*, and *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*. Then there are various journal initiatives specific to island territories, such as the *International Journal of Bahamian Studies* (since 1980) and the *International Journal of Okinawan Studies* (since 2010).

Meanwhile, many prestigious scholarly journals have dedicated special issues to island topics, or just to islands, in recent decades. These include: *World Development* [with their pioneering Vol. 8(12) issue in December 1980, followed by Vol. 21(2), 1993, and sub-section in Vol. 32(2), 2004]; *Prospects* [Vol. 21(4), 1991]; *Convergence* [Vol. 29(2), 1996]; *Health and Place* [Vol. 1(4), 1995]; *Journal of Historical Geography* [Vol. 29(4), 2003]; *International Journal of Educational Development* [Vol. 21(3), 2001]; *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* [Vol. 28(1–2), 2001]; *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* [Vol. 32(1), 2001]; *Geografiska Annaler* [Vol. 85B(4), 2003 & Vol. 87B(4), 2005]; *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* [Vol. 95(3), 2004]; *Geographical Review* [Vol. 97(2), 2007]; *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship* [Vol. 9(4), 2010]; *Space and Culture* [Vol. 13(2), 2010]; *New Literatures Review* (Nos. 47–48, 2011); and coming out soon as *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* [Vol. 50(4), 2012] and as *Cultural Geographies* [Vol. 20(2), 2013].

The *Commission on Islands* was approved by the International Geographical Union in 2006 and has held various conferences and workshops since; it last met in the Penghu Archipelago of Taiwan in September 2013. The *Small Island Cultures Research Initiative* (SICRI) organizes annual conferences and had its inaugural event in Kagoshima, Japan, in 2004. I was installed as Canada Research Chair in Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island in 2003, and Stephen Royle was appointed Professor of Island Geography at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, in 2010.

What eventually became the *International Small Islands Studies Association* (ISISA) met for the first time in Vancouver, Canada, in 1986. The 1994 ISISA Conference was held in Okinawa, Japan. Topics discussed at this meeting included global networking of island communities, non-nuclearization of island territories, gender relations in solving socio-economic problems of small islands, island microstates and their prospects, sustainable and environmentally sound agro-ecosystems, the effective utilization of traditional resources and food-production systems, and various other issues concerning the nature of island life, problems, and prospects. Even after almost 20 years, some of these issues

remain significant.

There are also a considerable number of centres, schools, and institutes — mainly located at universities — that seek to advance an understanding of the histories, cultures, and challenges of their peoples as islanders. Some adopt a single island or territory focus, but others have gone beyond, appreciating that a comparative island approach can be very useful, creating a “like-with-like” situation that is so much more valuable than the classic and traditional “small island- large mainland” comparison. These would include the Institute of Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, set up in 1985 ([www.upei.ca](http://www.upei.ca)); the Islands and Small State Institute at the University of Malta, set up in 1989 ([www.um.edu.mt/islands/](http://www.um.edu.mt/islands/)); Kagoshima University Research Center for the South Pacific, set up in 1988; the Centre for Regional and Tourism Research in Bornholm, Denmark ([www.crt.dk](http://www.crt.dk)), set up in 1994; the Research School for Pacific Studies at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, set up as early as 1946. The first two of these were pioneers in launching the only two island studies graduate programs in the world today, both leading to Master of Arts degrees: one in island studies in Canada ([www.upei.ca/mais](http://www.upei.ca/mais)) and the other in island and small state studies in Malta ([www.um.edu.mt/registrar/regulations/faculties/islands/ma-iss-web](http://www.um.edu.mt/registrar/regulations/faculties/islands/ma-iss-web)).

Moreover, RETI (*Reseau d'excellence des territoires insulaires*) is a network of mainly French-speaking island universities that was set up following the initiative of the University of Corsica, France, in 2009 ([www.univ-corse.fr/international-reseau-d'excellence-des-territoires-insulaires-r.e.t.i-presentation-reti-presentation-reti\\_2764.html](http://www.univ-corse.fr/international-reseau-d'excellence-des-territoires-insulaires-r.e.t.i-presentation-reti-presentation-reti_2764.html)) and now runs symposia and summer schools. There is also a Virtual University of Small States (many of which are islands), which is a Commonwealth initiative that is moving ahead into the promising field of online learning ([www.vusss.info/about-vusss](http://www.vusss.info/about-vusss)).

### **What is Island Studies For?**

The terms of reference of the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, provide us with a useful example of what this and similar “island studies” institutes set out to do and how they have evolved through time. The IIS was set up to undertake a four-point mandate, namely:

- To encourage a deep knowledge, understanding, and expression of Prince Edward Island;
  - To serve as a bridge between the University and Island communities;
  - To contribute to the formulation of public policy in Prince Edward Island;
  - To undertake comparative studies of Prince Edward Island and other islands.
- ([www.upei.ca/iis/](http://www.upei.ca/iis/))

There are many interesting aspects to such a mandate, and some might appear contradictory. The first objective is the typical mandate of a cultural studies centre: celebrating all

things local, facilitating a critical appreciation for the history, literature, and customs of Prince Edward Island, Canada's smallest and only 100% island province. The second is to improve the often strained relationship between academic work and the real world outside the university. The IIS does this by working with specific local communities to identify concerns and explore solutions, by translating academic knowledge into locally relevant concepts, and by engaging non-academics in the Advisory Board of the IIS, which sets overall policy. The third is the link with the world of politics and governance: the IIS is committed to translating scholarly knowledge into policy advice and just as committed to evaluating the implications of policy decisions on island life. Finally, the IIS has come to appreciate that it can do a far better job with the first three objectives by embracing a fourth: that which obliges a comparative dimension to its work. For, really, how can one deliver quality advice to communities or policymakers on island matters without being aware and knowledgeable of how other islands may have tackled similar issues and with what results? One needs to be able to look at one's island, its problems, and its achievements, not just from a home perspective but from a more detached, comparative, and archipelagic outlook. We are, after all, living in a very rich "world of islands" (Baldacchino, 2007).

It is important to emphasize that not just *any* comparison will do. The point is that any useful comparison needs to include an *island driven* one. We have done much to glorify and celebrate the particular features and resources of individual island states and territories, but whenever most of us have sought to compare, the typical reference point has been a neighbouring continent or mainland with which the island we are interested in may have long-standing historical, cultural, or political ties. Such an approach, though, tends to be a very unequal one, even neo-imperialist and neo-colonialist, and so our island becomes caught and locked in a dependency situation, with aid, investment, and imports flowing one way and a brain and skill drain flowing in the opposite direction. This is why it is important to move away from this unequal paradigm and instead canvas for an island-island comparison, one that secures a privileged position for other islands that share characteristics with the local island situation. In the discourse of development studies, what is being encouraged here is a "south-south" dialogue, a space where small islands and their people can meet, converse, and learn from each other in peer-to-peer interactions that steer clear of the interventions and interjections of a meddling and domineering mainland. It can be done, and it is about time that we did this more often and with more passion and conviction.

A centre dedicated to the study of islands, therefore, ought to perform a neat balancing act, and this balancing needs to be managed in relation to at least the following four points of tension.

First, it must highlight the attributes of indigeneity and localism, at the same time that these features are threatened but also re-defined, re-valued, and re-presented in the context of globalization. The glamour and attraction of global culture has its merits, but it has also created a new allure and rationale for experiencing a past and a heritage that suggests

how difference can still exist, even thrive, in a world increasingly driven towards sameness. Many small island cultures find themselves in this predicament. The more we end up adopting the same global language, global dress codes, and global definitions of beauty and appropriate behaviour, the greater the fascination with departures from this norm. It may sound paradoxical but is nevertheless true: island studies involves a sharing of diversity, a globalization of difference.

Second, and on a related note, there is a keen need to appreciate that there cannot be a full and rich appreciation of the local without a global turn, moving out of the comfort zone of local history, local culture, and local environmental issues and looking at these from outside, more dispassionately, more critically, from the powerful vantage point afforded by comparative island studies. Otherwise, we end up celebrating a false essentialism, one based on the symbolic specifics of place, when that very island culture owes its origins and transformations to the influences and imports that have come from other places beyond the horizon. This is a common trap in island studies, suggested by their deceiving self-evident geography: the misunderstanding that islands are complete worlds and are therefore insular. One must be very careful in talking about, for example, “sustainable islands,” when islands are by their very nature dependent on flows and exchanges of materials and resources from beyond their shores.

Third is the need to embrace the mission of island studies as one that impacts on three fronts: academe, policy making, and community development. We need to continue to build the credibility and respectability that allows us to get published, get cited, get quoted; we need to continue to connect with a growing island studies scholarly community, but also to continue to engage and converse with scholars in other fields; there are many interesting insights waiting to be discovered when an “island studies” perspective is deployed. We also need to show concretely how the sensitivity to what other islands are doing can provide lessons in what to do and what *not* to do, or how to do it, for island-based policy makers, who are often too busy and too mesmerized by prestigious continental models. Furthermore, we must support and enrich our local communities by celebrating their resources but also by contextualizing them in a broader framework, one of an overarching “world of islands.” This approach can also have important implications for socio-economic development, as in matters relating to place branding, the survival of rural communities, immigration, cultural tourism, and niche manufacturing.

Fourth, let us not be afraid of suggesting how our work can be relevant to other interest groups, even though we academics may be suspicious of or even mistrust some of them. “Island studies” is a powerful methodological, conceptual, and analytical tool; like all science, as we develop it, we cannot be held responsible for the ends to which this tool can be deployed and utilized by others. In many cases, it could spell benefits for humankind and other species; in some other cases, it may be abused. Politicians, business persons, even non-governmental organizations can — and will — twist and turn our work in many distorted ways. We should appreciate their interest in our scholarship and calmly seek opportunities to explain, critically yet gracefully, our ideas and interpretations of

policy decisions. Overall, though, encouraging an island approach to the world-as-archipelago affords a new and fresh interpretation of the problems and challenges of this planet, itself an island in space, especially so to islanders themselves, many of whom we meet daily in our work and in our classrooms. Are we making these people aware of their island identity and what it means? Just this reason should be a strong and valuable enough one to have us proceed with our work.

## **Conclusion**

If we exclude Eurasia, America, Africa, and Australia, islands cover about 7% of the earth's land area, are home to about 10% of the world's population, and comprise about 25% of the world's sovereign states. Islands are the locations of some 75% of known species extinctions and are currently home to about 90% of the world's most endangered species. There is absolutely no need to justify why "island studies" should exist. The rationale is self-evident. Rather, one wonders why island studies initiatives are not more numerous, and not more vigorously pursued, than they actually are.

There are some answers to these important questions. Some have to do with the very particular career progression of academics. As happens with those working within areas of inquiry that (still) do not curry international recognition, scholars engaged in the study of islands need to continually justify their work, not just casually to colleagues but to peers, to publishers, to reviewers, and eventually to promotion evaluators. How would they reply to the questions, "What do you do?" or "What is your discipline?" When it comes to publishing their manuscripts, to which journals do they pitch their work, and how hard is it to get their work accepted? Even more seriously, how do they present themselves when it comes to career progression? We all claim to support interdisciplinary work, but the practice of living as an inter-disciplinarian is tough and at times confusing. That is perhaps why there are many "closet nissologists" out there: many who practise island studies, and perhaps even see themselves as island scholars, dare not say so or dare not label themselves as such publically, preferring to operate under the rubric of a familiar discipline and designation or just doing their "island stuff" on the side, almost as a hobby.

Another set of reasons that explains the relative marginalization of island studies has to do with the linguistic islands in which we all find ourselves. Through no fault of ours, most of us are gifted with one or a few languages at best; we use these in our everyday lives, in speech and writing. But we need to acknowledge that we are all missing so much simply by inhabiting specific (and themselves quite insular) language paradigms, not just in terms of knowledge and information *per se*, but in the many diverse ways in which the world, and its islands, is understood, reflected upon, and represented. For those of us who are multilingual, we can appreciate this point, and some of us can get really wonderful insights when we read a text without translation. For those of us who are not linguistically gifted, we really need to make a special effort to communicate and understand across languages, and as a second best option, to solicit and encourage works in translation.

Island comparisons cannot simply be restricted to material or data that is available in one's own language. That would be a poor comparison indeed.

Finally, readers may have noticed that I have not referred so much in this paper to the so-called structural handicaps that are supposed to impact islands and islanders. Islands are meant to be small, weak, powerless, marginal, peripheral, vulnerable, and fragile, and now also disappearing and sinking because of sea level rise. How often do we come across these adjectives and appellations, and do we not move on, accepting them as fact? I beg to differ. Something inside me rebels against these stereotypical concepts; they are often pitched by islanders themselves and others to secure sympathy and support in international affairs, but they also belittle islanders, causing them to accept "conditions" that may, after all, be thwarting them from realizing that they can believe in the impossible because only in that way does the possible become true.

Islands are creative spaces, and not just in a strict bio-geographical sense: they can teach humankind a few tricks. But I must echo Oceania scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (1993) here: islanders need, above all, to acknowledge and usurp the colonization of their minds, one that is ironically often cultivated by their own educational systems and pedagogies, these privilege ideas and models that may work in larger, continental spaces but not necessarily in smaller, island ones. Do, therefore, keep open the option of questioning the applicability of "standard practices" in island spaces.

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## 「島嶼研究」に関する批評的考察

ゴドフリー・バルダッキーノ

本論文では、ここ10年の間、継続的に島嶼研究に専門的に取り組んで来た研究者という立場から、島嶼研究の現状について振り返る。現代という時代における対話や学術的興味、そして議論の中で、「島嶼」がもつ意義を呈示し、島嶼の研究者自身による島嶼研究の発展のプロセスを検証しつつ、島嶼研究を行う拠点や機関の存在意義の根拠についても議論する。そのうえで、島嶼研究への関心を継続的に拡充するうえで認識されるべきいくつかの課題についても提言する。

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