GEOGRAPHY, ISLANDS AND MIGRATION IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL MOBILITY

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Geographers and Islands

Five issues confront geographers (and others) studying islands:

- Islands = having a nice time, relaxing, holidays; rather than scholarship
- Smallness = insignificance, no ‘big questions’
- ‘Outsiders looking in’ – a kind of academic colonialism
- Trap of regarding islands as microcosms of the wider world
- Danger of exceptionalism – of regarding islands as too special, too unique

But: islands can be studied with rigour, both for themselves, as geographical entities, as parts of the earth deserving our attention (like cities, mountains, deserts...); and, as places where, under relatively controlled conditions, the interrelationships between the island environment, histories of development and underdevelopment, population and migration, can be studied in a particular way.
Islands, Migration, Geography

- Islands ♂: a geographic entity – (small) areas of land entirely surrounded by sea
- Migration ♀: a geographic process – human movement across space to live ‘elsewhere’
- Geography ♂♀: the subject which is best placed to capture the interdisciplinarity and relationality between these two relatively new fields of study

- Islands: 600 million people or 10% of the world’s population live on islands
- Migration: 200 million people or 3% of the world’s population are international migrants (if internal migration is included, this figure increases many-fold)

- Both island studies and migration studies have recently emerged as coherent interdisciplinary fields of study, e.g. with their own degree programmes, journals etc.
Baldacchino (2004) claims that ‘island studies have come of age’, but the essence of island studies remains both obvious and elusive. Some approaches:

- **nissology**: ‘the study of islands on their own terms’ (McCall 1994, 1996); favours an emic perspective which challenges the etic gaze of the ‘outside’ researcher; a contradiction in that ‘scientific study’ implies an etic perspective.

- ‘islandness’ (Baldacchino 2006): reflects the special geographic character of islands – their discreteness, insularity, smallness, peripherality; but maybe this projects a too-negative view; the term ‘insularity’ carries a baggage of negativity.

- **spatial laboratories** approach: islands as unique spaces within the world’s geography where human and ecological processes can be studied in a particularly clear-focused way (King 1993); but to regard them as miniature replicas of the mainland or semi-closed systems can be mistaken.

- **economic perspective**: stresses limited resources, small markets, vulnerability to world commodity prices, transport costs, danger of crop failure, natural disasters etc.; yet, globally island states have higher than average per capita GDP; contradiction is resolved by niche specialisation, flexibility and high connectivity to global economy (Bertram and Poirine 2007).

- **demographic perspective**: population pressure on fixed resource base – leads to balance or gradual ‘involution’ (e.g. Geertz on Bali, Galt on Pantellaria), or to ‘overshoot’; overpopulation → migration → depopulation.
Migration is usually defined as the movement of people from one country or place to another, for a significant period of time, such as more than one year. Some approaches:

- **Ravenstein’s ‘laws of migration’** (1885, 1889) showed migration to be essentially economically driven, both in terms of individual motivation and the levels of development of the places of origin (limited opportunities) and receiving areas (more opportunities).

- the distinction between the **act** of migration (why do people move? where to? etc.) and the **effects** of migration (formation of ethnic and communities, ‘integration’ etc.).

- **fragmentation** of the study of migration along **disciplinary lines** – sociology, geography, economics etc.; now this is being overcome by ‘migration studies’ (Castles 2000).

- also fragmented by various **typologies and binaries** of migration: internal vs. international; forced vs. voluntary; temporary vs. permanent; economic vs. lifestyle migration etc.; the boundaries between these types are often blurred (King 2002).

- two recent paradigms in migration studies:
  - ‘**transnational communities**’ approach (Basch et al. 1994), which has also rejuvenated the older tradition of **diaspora studies** (Vertovec and Cohen 1999)
  - the ‘**mobilities**’ turn (Urry 2000) which not only stresses the defining role of mobility in (post)modern societies but also frames migration as one of a continuum of mobility types, including travel, tourism, circulation, virtual mobilities
Migration and Islands

- Islands have always had an **intense engagement** with migration – settled by migration in the first place and often deeply affected (e.g. by colonial settlement, slave migration, emigration) thereafter.

- Subsequently islands’ migration profiles are often linked to their economic fortunes and to whether, historically, they have played a **nodal** or **marginal** role (King 1996). **Nodal** islands tend to attract and exchange population, leading to creation of cosmopolitan, hybrid or stratified societies; **marginal** islands tend to eventually become areas of outmigration, leading to MIRAB model.

But marginal vs. nodal is too simplistic in the current global scenario. Warrington and Milne (2007) suggest a more complex typology, based on historical political economy and governance approaches; each can be connected to various histories and regimes of migration:

- **civilisation** (e.g. Britain) – global economic and cultural impact – imperial/colonial migration
- **settlement** (e.g. Australia) – recipients of colonial settlement migration
- **fortress** (e.g. Malta) – military migration, but then emigration when fortress function ends
- **fief** (e.g. Haiti) – rapacious external power, leading to impoverishment and emigration
- **plantation** (e.g. small Caribbean islands) – immigration of slaves and bonded labour, monocrop economy, mass emigration when economy collapses (labour becomes the ‘export monocrop’)
- **entrepôt** (e.g. Singapore) – trade and transactions – immigration and emigration
- **refuge** (e.g. Cuba) – bulwark against dominant mainland power – migrations of refuge
Islands, Migration & Globalisation

Two features characterise the world in the late 20th and early 21st century: **globalisation** and **mobility**. This is both the **global age** and the **age of migration** (Castles and Miller 2003). But there are also forces of resistance against globalisation: **individualisation** (Beck 2000).

**Mobility** – both mass and individualised – is a defining feature of global society, replacing the old sociological categories of class, residence, career, family etc. (Urry 2000).

Following Bourdieu (1986), we can think of **mobility capital**, to stand alongside the other forms of capital – financial, human, etc. How people deploy their mobility capital depends on:
- whether they are rich or poor
- where they were born and hence what ‘mobility rights’ they have in the world
- there is often a big gap between the **aspiration** to migrate, and the **ability** to do so (cf. Carling 2002 on Cape Verde)

**Two scenarios result for islands and migration in a global era:**
- For migrants who are rich and from a wealthy country, islands become ‘playground spaces’ to visit, buy second homes, even buy the whole island! **Island gentrification** – e.g. of Swedish islands (Clark *et al.* 2007) or Capri (Mazzetti 2007), or Mustique, Martha’s Vineyard, Panarea…
- For poor people wishing to migrate, driven by push pressures yet faced by global regimes of strict migration control, islands, especially those at the ‘borders’, become **critical locations in the geopolitics of irregular migration** – e.g. the Canaries, Malta, Lampedusa – staging-posts in migrants’ increasingly ‘fragmented journeys’ (Collyer 2007).
Malta

Epitomises the role of islands in the new spatial dynamics of irregular migration and migration control. But this is built on a long historical sequence of migrations affecting Malta.

- Function as a colonial fortress gave Malta a particular developmental and demographic history: externalised resource base led to population increase which proved unsustainable, especially when the fortress economy started to be wound down.
- Mass emigration: 1946-74 the ‘Great Exodus’, the highest rate of emigration in the world at the time → 3% per year, or 138,000 in total, equivalent to 44% of the population, leaving for Australia, UK, US and Canada (Jones 1973).
- Some immigration during the 1960s and 1970s – ‘sixpenny settlers’, many with military background; has continued since; also return migration.
- Malta’s location at the ‘crossroads of the Mediterranean’, a ‘stepping-stone between Europe and Africa’ gave the island an ambiguous geopolitics, especially during the Mintoff era when immigration from Libya took place.
- EU entry 2004 – ‘ambivalent Europeans’ (Mitchell 2002). Substantial inflows of ‘boat migrants’ from Libya (originally from North-East Africa), averaging 1500-2000 per year since 2002. Arrival in Malta ‘by mistake’. Challenges Maltese identity and migration policy in three ways:
  - Maltese society as homogenous, family-based, strongly Catholic, socially conservative; yet unsure about its true national identity (Baldacchino 2002).
  - numbers: ‘we can’t all live on this small island’ – rise of anti-immigration politics.
  - migration policy: Dublin Convention (1990) and EU-burden-sharing; Maltese relations with Libya strained; harsh treatment of immigrants in detention centres.
Malta’s Search and Rescue Region
Boat Migration
Safi, January 2005
Conclusions

- Does Malta need immigrants? Is there structural need for migrant workers in the labour market? Opinions and evidence on this are not clear. There is ‘soft’ evidence that foreign workers from various Middle Eastern, African and East European countries are employed in construction and hotel industries. In this Malta may be following the ‘Southern European Migration Model’ (King 2000).

- Can Malta avoid immigration? Given its location, and its membership of the EU, No. What it needs to do is to get other EU states to appreciate its special positionality (as small, as an island, and located at the ‘underbelly’ of the EU) in order to burden-share and increase EU resources to manage the issue.

- Maltese case illustrates the fundamental dilemma at the heart of the relationship between small islands and migration: islands tend to be ‘good’ at emigration, but ‘bad’ at coping with immigrants. Partly this has to do with the asymmetry in their migratory relationship with the rest of the world, and partly it is related to strategic location on new migration routes.

- Hence a new generation of island migration studies is required which no loner focuses on emigration, depopulation, island diasporas, islanders’ transnational lives, and return migration; but on islands’ new role in global international relations and on the changing geopolitics of international migration control.