
Editorial: The island lure

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Biographical notes: Godfrey Baldacchino is Professor and Canada Research Chair in Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, and a Visiting Professor of Sociology, University of Malta, Malta. He is the Executive Editor of *Island Studies Journal*, a Director of the *Global Islands Network*, a founding member of the Islands Commission of the International Geographical Union, executive member of the International Small Islands Studies Association and a member of the international editorial/advisory boards of five scholarly journals. He has authored or edited 30 books and monographs, and has penned over 70 peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters. His latest books include *Extreme Tourism: Lessons from the World's Cold Water Islands* (2006), *Bridging Islands: The Impact of Fixed Links* (2007) and *A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader* (2007). He was the academic director of a European Union-funded project that examined the conditions for successful small-scale manufacturing in five European island regions. He has served as a Visiting Professor to tertiary education institutions in Barbados, Canada, Fiji, Iceland, Mauritius and the Seychelles.

There is something rather strange going about islands. A widely distributed, recent full-page advert lists 'Visit an Uninhabited Island' as one of 21 "[T]hings to do while you're alive".¹ Why should this be so? And why, for that matter, should one visit inhabited islands?

The stoic answer, and reminiscent of mountain climbers, would be 'because they are there'. Indeed, there are many islophiles (island lovers) out there; but there are also confirmed islomanes: those who are addicted to islands with an incorrigible enthusiasm.

The 'islomane' is a term coined by British novelist Durrell (1953). It speaks to a yearning for an island and island life that is part myth, part marketing hype, part reality ... and all continental or mainland driven. This yearning seems to be gathering momentum of late: with millions of tourists visiting islands every year; with waves of urban refugees escaping the rigour and stress of city life; and with few but more exclusive investors buying up island lots and even whole islands as private properties. With the escalating price of oil and gas, and so of transportation generally, islands have become even more elusive of late.

Like other contested, and contestable, border regions – the ocean depths, the high seas, outer space, and increasingly the Arctic – islands are treated as fair game for mainland subjugation and organisation. The smaller, poorer or less populated the

island gets, the more likely is it that its web, textual and literary content, its very (re)presentation, is dictated, penned or otherwise determined by ‘others’. All too often, one is faced with a situation where the subject matter – the island, the islander, the islanders – becomes object matter: a ‘looked at’ reference group; stages for the enactment of processes dictated from elsewhere; mere props of various *deus ex machina*, who would have been mainly explorers, missionaries and traders in the past, and replaced by other observers in more recent years.

But props for what? The answer is complex and millenary, and a layering of mutually reinforcing influences can be proposed. First, there is an enduring western tradition – dating back at least to the Odyssey – which has held islands in high esteem, assigning them a key role in the economic, political, and social dimensions of the Mediterranean and then Atlantic worlds, given the way that myth, icon and narratives of/from islands have functioned for mainland cultures (*e.g.*, Gillis, 2004). Second, building on the first, but starting at around the European age of discovery, is the construction of islands as outposts of aberrant exoticism, peopled by innocent and exuberant natives (*e.g.*, Lowenthal, 1972, p.14; Gillis and Lowenthal, 2007). Third, and still later, is the island as background for the enactment of a male and heroic paean to colonialism, the subject of Robinsonnades that extend up to the present in the likes of Tom Hanks’ movie *Castaway* or the TVB blockbuster series *Lost* (*e.g.*, Loxley, 1990). Fourth, is the development of the notion of going on vacation as a regular activity by the world’s burgeoning middle classes: whether for relaxation, adventure or self-discovery, islands project themselves as ideal destinations (*e.g.*, Butler, 1993). Fifth, is the realisation by many developing island states and territories that they can ‘sell’ their sea, sun and sand (and perhaps sex, but more hopefully their salt) to such visitors, by appealing to their constructed modern need for travel, and thus carve out for themselves an easy route to development (*e.g.*, Apostolopoulos and Gayle, 2002). Other attractive, physical and psychological characteristics can be added to the mix – physical separation, jurisdictional specificity, cultural difference, ‘getting away from it all’, the possibility of claiming an understanding of the totality of the locale as trophy (Baum, 1997, p.21).

The sum total of these forces at work is that islands are now, unwittingly, the 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. 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). Tuan (1990, p.247) claims that four natural environments have figured prominently in humanity’s (including non-Western) enduring and endearing dreams of the ideal world. They are: the forest, the shore, the valley ... and the island.

And yet, “the essence of the deserted island”, Deleuze (2004, p.12) argues, “is imaginary and not actual; mythological and not geographical”. Understanding what really attracts tourists to island destinations “remains speculative”, admits Baum *et al.* (2000, p.215). Islanders in particular may be justifiably confused, even resentful, by how they are seen and objectified as ‘paradises’ by mainlanders; by how they continue to be ritually “aestheticized, sanitized and anaesthetized” (Connell, 2003, p.568). After all, islanders, even in warm water locations, may be struggling at home against un-/under-employment, aid dependency, loss of talent, waste mountains, eutrophication of coasts and lagoons, sewage overflows, drug running, money laundering, HIV/AIDS,

soil erosion, potable water shortage, depopulation or overpopulation. Others, however, will accept the obsession to claim, objectify and render into beguiling metaphor as a necessary mythology to be endured, even refreshed and encouraged – perpetrated by their very own local branding organisations – since it bolsters the charm and mystique of their tourism industry, which may be their key foreign exchange generator. The branding of places has often been compared to the branding of cattle: "... applying an attractive logo, a catchy slogan, and marketing a place as if it were nothing more than a product in the global supermarket" (Anholt, 2006, p.4). And yet, this may be a price worth paying. 'Living the lie' has its own rewards since it numbs and distances islanders from facing their own demons. Indeed, islanders would develop and hone those skills that allow them to engage mainlanders, manipulating their resources, humouring their objectives, fanning their fantasies, managing the very figurations of islands and island life that seek to type them (Baldacchino, 2008).

How do islanders perform as conscripted actors in a play about 'island life' that they rarely control? How do they behave when they are targets of an incessant regimen of construction, which would have them – as 'happy natives willing to serve' – behave this way and that, in ways that fulfil the desires and dreams of all, for all seasons and for all tastes? These are some of the enticing research questions that now beckon in 'island studies'. Meanwhile, for this compilation, and now that we have sought to explain it, we will take the island 'lure' (e.g., Lockhart, 1997) for granted; we focus specifically on the dialectic between this embedded fascination of things enisled and those products and services that are produced from these locales. There are instances when the association is, even deliberately, not rigorously pursued. But, in other circumstances, it is simply too tempting an opportunity to miss riding on the marketing juggernaut: products and services from islands often do very well to position and differentiate themselves as *island brands*.

There is a limited literature that looks explicitly at the relationship between islands and entrepreneurship (e.g., Baldacchino, 2005a; Baldacchino, 2005b; Fairbairn, 1988; Baldacchino and Fairbairn, 2006). Part of the reason for this dearth is that islanders are more likely to embrace mercantilism than entrepreneurship, a characteristic accentuated by the perceived restrictive effects of smallness and islandness on the profitability of any commercial initiative that hopes to add value at home (e.g., Thorndike, 1987, p.98).

The six papers in this special issue are the latest offerings on this under-researched subject, extending current scholarly interest and inquiry in place branding to include considerations of *island branding*. The first paper (Baldacchino) adopts a rare global perspective in exploring the efficacy of specific island products in connecting, and reaping the benefits of an association, with the brand of 'the Island' on which they are based. The second (Pounder) takes us to that most heavily and longest hyped and branded island region of all, the Caribbean: using a mixed methodology, it explores the pivotal role of branding to the region's rum industry. The next (Zhang) takes us to Kinmen, a small but strategic outpost in the Taiwan Strait. The paper reviews the development of that island as a 'battlefield tourism' destination, noting that the 'Kinmen Brand' is a complex outcome of both top-down 'imagineering' efforts by the state, and bottom-up initiatives by the locals and tourists. The next two papers offer different insights into a product that could very well represent the stratospheric heights of marketing success: bottled water. The piece on King Island, Australia (Khamis) is a critical investigation of the 'goodness of fit' between the marketing of Cloud Juice Bottled Water as 'gourmet

and green' and the growing recognition of King Island itself as a site of environmental innovation. The following one on Fiji Water (Reddy and Singh), confirms how the branding of this and similar products has wisely connected with current consumer concerns about health, environment and life style, while coupling with the remote and exoticised island nature of Fiji. Finally, in a more analytic and comparative piece (Leseure), there is a confirmation of the impact that a strong and unique branding strategy, as deployed by some islands, could have on their economic development, also by reducing both ambiguity and confusion in the market.

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Note

- 1 Life Takes Visa © 2007 Visa USA Inc.