

GUEST EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Thematic Section: Papers from Islands of the World XIV conference, May 2016

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Island studies have been growing in the past decades in diverse and sometimes completely opposite directions. In their ‘early’ stages they were dominated by approaches closer to social sciences and arts, although economic and geography were never too far away in the themes explored and questions asked, seeking to place islands as a legitimate object of academic investigations and inquiry. Not all these efforts were successful at first and the recollection of Stephen Royle (2015) of ‘island geography’ as an academic title, something totally new to the academic world is a revealing story.

Today, island studies seem to be on the verge of ‘normalization’ in the Kuhnian sense, with the establishment of a small number of ‘paradigms’ that have provided the foundation of an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary area of ‘studies’ or ‘discipline’. Many new areas of enquiry have gathered together within these paradigms, including tourism/travel/leisure studies, development economics, transport, natural resource management, terrestrial and marine biology, and others that have enriched and broadened island studies. The red line that binds together these diverse approaches is that islands do not serve as mere case studies, but that islandness is more and more part of the core conceptualization of the questions addressed. ‘Why on islands?’ and ‘How is this different *because* it is on island(s)?’ are some of the central questions driving island studies approaches.

Nowhere is this as visible than at island-related conferences and meetings of island studies scholars and professionals. Islands of the World conference, organized by ISISA (International Small Islands Studies Association), is probably the biggest and most important of these conference series, held biannually on different islands around the world. The Islands of the World XIV Conference 2016, titled ‘Niss(i)ology and Utopia: Back to the Roots of Island Studies’ was held from 23-27 of May in Mytilene, Lesvos Island, Greece and exemplifies these dynamics. No fewer than 23 different panels or thematic sessions were needed to make sense of the diversity of the 119 papers that were presented at the conference, with sessions ranging from ‘Islands in Art’ and ‘Island Identities’, to ‘Biodiversity of Islands’, ‘Climate Change and Islands’, and ‘Island Governance’. This richness of themes, methods, approaches and material is the best proof of the ‘health’ of island studies today.

This thematic section of *Island Studies Journal* presents a few selected papers from the conference. These papers represent this diversity and richness to a degree. Geographically, they tend to lean on Europe, more precisely the Mediterranean Sea and its islands. Thematically, they range from the construction of national identities to island sustainability, ‘ecomuseums’ and information systems. The contributions include landscape visibility and urban sprawl that

Derdemezi and Tsilimigkas (2017) discuss in the context of a popular tourism destination, Sifnos island. One of the most interesting aspects of their approach is that it provides a planning and public consultation tool which can be used to record opinions and attitudes of different stakeholders towards the image of island landscapes.

Petridis, Fischer-Kowalski, Singh, and Noll (2017) discuss their research experience on Samothraki island, which is sufficiently long term to avoid the prevailing hasty ‘case study’ work published in many cases today. On the contrary, these authors know the island, its people and their practices well enough to go into detail, without losing the overall goal, which is a transition into sustainability. They have an approach to sustainability that is practical and hands-on and is very well suited for islands. Malatesta and Schmidt di Friedberg (2017) also touch upon sustainability and vulnerability towards climate change for the iconically vulnerable archipelago of the Maldives, serving as a symbol of the risk for all islands posed by global warming and sea level rise. They discuss local responses to the risk and ‘adaptation’ strategies and the challenges they pose for this fragmented archipelago. Karampela et al. (2017) similarly present a meta-analysis of scientific literature on sustainable development for the Aegean Islands, an archipelago much studied from different viewpoints. This is the first such Aegean Island meta-analysis to appear in an academic journal. Tourism and energy-related research are obvious themes of high frequency for islands, but it is striking to see which topics have *not* been subjected to much study, for instance approaches that deal with the islands as an archipelago and not as mere case studies or as isolated, unconnected rocks in the Aegean Sea.

Pavlis (2017) employs the concept of ‘ecomuseum’ as an open, poly-thematic collection of collections of different types and forms: physical (e.g. geofoms), agricultural (e.g. landscapes of crops), cultural, symbolic, aesthetic, traditional, modern. This concept seems particularly well suited for the concrete spatial boundaries and wide symbolic and cultural spaces that islands inhabit in the ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ worlds. Farinelli (2017) discusses the construction of national identities in relation to two large neighboring Mediterranean islands, Sardinia and Corsica, parts of two different countries, Italy and France, but both also with a strong local identity, strong to the point of seeking independence or autonomy in the case of Corsica. These are emblematic cases of national identity formation, and the treatment of the topic by Farinelli highlights processes and results, providing a complete picture of the issues involved.

Vaitis et al. (2017) develop an information system infrastructure to facilitate spatial and non-spatial research for islands. Although following the different trends in digital infrastructures and interfaces is not always easy, it seems that ‘depositories’ (for storage, display and processing of data and information in different formats including video, but also maps) are tools that can assist access to research material that can be uploaded and used by individual researchers, institutions, administrations, etc.

What will the future of island studies as ‘normal’ science be? I will add a personal note here: Although I am not fully equipped to answer such a question, while I was writing this short introduction and re-reading the Islands of the World XIV material and contributions, I arrived at indications of a possible answer. Historical, social, economic, geographic, political, and environmental topics *of* islands or *for* islands will tend to accumulate in the future. They will also compete for the attention of the (new) editor of the mothership of the discipline, *Island Studies Journal*, and its editorial board. It is not just that the founding fathers (and mothers) of the discipline have educated a new generation of researchers and scholars that follow and build upon their conceptual and theoretical foundations, but at the same time that new scientists ‘discover’ (or stumble upon) island studies, enriching them with new and innovative theoretical and empirical

approaches. The selection of the papers in this thematic section represents a small part of this developments and hints towards what I hope will be an exciting time to practice island studies.

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