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# Palma: The oscillating core of a suspended periphery. An imagologic approach to an island city and its discourse of pleasure



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**Abstract** In the first decades of the twentieth century Palma emerged as a city worth visiting with a promising network of hotels and organised tours. Palma became an urban playground for British bohemians, artists, expatriates, and socialites. Their notion of leisure and pleasure (on a faraway island) provided the leitmotiv for the years to come. The purpose of this paper is to inspect the extent of which the different discourses adopted by British travel writers in the beginning of the twentieth century (coinciding with the birth of modern tourism on the island) worked to conform a contemporary vision of Palma and its coastal suburban areas (such as Magaluf or El Arenal) as opposed to the (rural and allegedly ‘authentic’) island. Firstly, the paper examines the different stages through which both Palma and the island are discursively constructed as opposed entities in the travel accounts in Mallorca’s first stages of tourism. A special focus is given to the discursive and ideological tools deployed to embellish upon or belittle the city and the island. Finally, I suggest that the images proposed by travellers in their accounts a hundred years ago evolve in today’s imagotypes of the island and its city.

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### Introduction

In February 2014, socialist ex-mayor of Palma, Ramon Aguiló, criticised the current governing party’s defence of Mallorca’s identity (“lo nostro”) as something allegedly rural, practical, traditional and attached to the countryside ([diariodemallorca.com](http://diariodemallorca.com), [Aguiló, 2014](#)). The discursive clash between Palma (as modern, cosmopolitan, progressive) opposed to the countryside (traditional, local, conservative) is not a new one.

Nor just local. This ongoing opposition is all-too blatantly present in the travel accounts of British travellers in the first half of the twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century, Mallorca had appeared as the “Forgotten Island” of the Mediterranean. Its defining traits, in the eyes of travel writers, had consisted of ancient modes of living and pastoral settings. Mallorca and its capital city Palma were essentially pre-industrial and quaint. In the first decades of the twentieth century, however, Palma emerged as a city worth visiting with a promising network of hotels and organised tours. The capital city that had adopted the quiet winter life of cosmopolitan expatriates and artists soon became an urban playground for

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British bohemians and socialites. Their notion of leisure and pleasure (on a faraway island) provided the leitmotiv for the years to come (Moyà, 2013). Escaping from this loud urban and touristic scenario, the allegedly ‘true’ traveller tried to find the ‘authentic’ Mallorcan traits in the countryside and in rural towns like Deià, Fornalutx and Pollença. The tension between the urban/suburban (as cosmopolitan, not authentic-enough, and touristic) and the countryside (as truly Mallorcan, authentic and prone to inspire) created in the British travel narratives of the time two clear and opposed representations of the city, on the one hand, and the island, on the other.

This article reflects upon the discourses of representation of both the city of Palma and the island of Mallorca as two different entities embedded in separate and somewhat conflicting discourses subjected to the ideological prism of the travel writer. In this paper, I use the case of the city of Palma in the early twentieth century to contest the notions of centrality and periphery as constructs subjected to the standpoint of visitors (Grydehøj, 2014). The paper considers the tools of imagology to examine the varied images of the city and the island proposed by such travellers and their weight in the eventual consolidation of fixed imagotypes and real social practices today. The purpose of this paper, consequently, is to inspect the extent of which the different discourses adopted by British travel writers in the beginning of the twentieth century (coinciding with the birth of modern tourism on the island) have worked to conform a contemporary vision of Palma and its coastal suburban areas (such as Magaluf or El Arenal) as opposed to the (rural and allegedly ‘authentic’) rest of the island.

In the first section of this study I highlight the necessity of inspecting the notion of urban and island development from the point of view of discourse. The construction of the city and the island through different discourses is at stake here. Secondly, after examining the development of tourism and travel writing on the islands, this paper examines the evolution of the images of the “city” and the “island” understanding their ideological and, in cases, utopian nature. Finally, I suggest two contemporary imagotypes of the island as a produce of the images proposed by travel writers a hundred years ago.

### Constructing islands with words

In recent years new fields of study such as Island Studies and Imagology have emerged and consolidated in the world of research and academia. Island Studies have tried to examine the notion of islands and archipelagos in their insular context breaking assumed notions of dependence to grander structures such as the mainland or the continent (McCall, 1994; Baldacchino, 2006, 2008; Stradford et al., 2011). Also, the study of Imagology has recently focused on the importance of analysing national stereotypes as social and discursive constructs subjected to relations of power (Beller and Leerssen, 2007; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; De Cillia et al., 1999). With regards islands, and in the case of this paper, those in the Mediterranean, there has been a need to examine the stress of many historical discourses that describe the islands as exotic and unique abodes onto which visitors project their fantasies (Baum, 1996; Baldacchino, 2006; King, 1993; Long, 2014; Trauer and Ryan, 2005). Unique spaces—lands, in this case—“are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense

pleasures” (Urry, 2002, p. 3). Tourism seeks to preserve the fantasy through the commodification of that gaze. It is of paramount importance, nonetheless, to inspect the extent of which these fantasies have eventually shaped the imagery of the spaces visited. In words of Pèrcopo, “this overpowering narrative of uniqueness fails to elaborate on how such uniqueness has been achieved” (Pèrcopo, 2011, p. 92). It is the intention of this paper to implement and strengthen the scope of Island Studies deploying the analytic tools of imagology. Critic Moll (2002) defines imagology as the study of images, prejudices, clichés, stereotypes and, in general, of whatever opinions literature transmits from other peoples and cultures. This stems from the belief that these ‘images’, as they are commonly defined, have an importance that goes beyond the mere literary fact, the study of ideas and the author’s imagination. The number of persistent images creates a set of patterns of thought, giving voice to a particular discourse. Examination of the travel texts reveals several discourses in play. As much as imagology studies notions of ‘nation’, ‘national identities’, and stereotypes, it has been seldom applied to the case of the islands as such, within their context of ‘islandness’. This article engages in the examining of the construction of the island and its city, Palma, with words.

Additionally, to examine the discursive construction Palma and the island, this article examines the discourse of binaries proposed by Gibson-Graham (1998) where the continent equals sufficiency, positivity and completeness, while the island entices insufficiency, negativity and need. In the particular case of Mallorca, a hundred years ago, Edwardians seem to revert this discourse due to an acute disbelief towards the values of the Empire and an ideological move towards Nature (Alcorn, 1977). Travellers at the beginning of the twentieth century find the necessity to compensate the insufficiency of certain values of the continent: it is the birth of the Mediterranean islands as heterotopias (places *other*) of compensation. Geographer Richard J. Buswell describes Mallorca as a ‘place apart’: “a microcosmic world where a different life could be experienced by the visitor [...], where perhaps the normal rules of behaviour did not apply, a perception built upon, manufactured by the early travel writers” (2011, p. 7). Isolation and transgression make a promising formula for the discursive construction of the island.

Some research has been performed on Mallorca within the academic framework of the Island Studies. Royle (2009), for instance, studies tourism development and heritage management policies on the island. Other recent articles map the development of tourist accommodation in the Balearics in the times of mass tourism on the islands (Pons et al., 2014), which proves particularly useful here since it understands tourism as the driving force for the urbanisation of Mallorca and the rest of the archipelago. My current research proposes the discourses of the first travellers to Mallorca as the driving force for the touristisation of Mallorca in the following decades of the twentieth century. This article also shares with Ribera Llopis (2002) and Picornell (2014) an interest in the representation of the symbolic opposition between Palma and the rest of the island. In the case of this article, however, emphasis is given not to locally-constructed images nor to contemporary representations, but to their discursive seeds: the specific proto-images of the city and the island given by British travellers in the particular context of the birth of tourism on Mallorca. Thus, the viewpoint of the first visitors, rather than

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