



# The Lure of the island: A spatial analysis of power relations

Godfrey Baldacchino \*

University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

Received 27 August 2012; accepted 4 November 2012

Available online 27 December 2012

## KEYWORDS

Branding;  
Islands;  
Metaphor;  
Organisations;  
Representation;  
Space

**Abstract** Islands – especially small ones – are now, unwittingly, the objects of what may be the most lavish, global and consistent branding exercise in human history. This paper draws on a post-structuralist perspective to propose an understanding of “the island lure” by disentangling and unpacking four, inter-related, constituent components of ‘islandness’. These components are themselves borrowed and adapted from a spatial analysis of power and power relations, and especially from Henri Lefebvre’s treatise on spaces of production. In its ontological approach, the paper offers a different critique of the representation of islands and island life.

© 2012 Institution for Marine and Island Cultures, Mokpo National University. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

## The fascination with/of Islands

Islands have been branded long before the concept found its way into management schools and contemporary marketing discourse. Already in the 10th century, Eric the Red, an early settler on a large and remote island, is reported in the Icelandic sagas to have named that new territory *Greenland* in order to attract other settlers there. Five hundred years ago, it was claimed that one could harvest cod from Newfoundland waters simply by lowering a basket into the sea. Perhaps we can consider islands as prototypes, targets for some of the earliest systematic attempts at branding: advancing, and romancing, a meaningful and desirable difference in a world crowded by competitive categories (Martin, 1989: 201).

\* Address: University of Prince Edward Island, 36, Ash Drive, Charlottetown PE, Canada C1A 8X7. Tel.: +1 902 367 6191; fax: +1 902 566 0756.

E-mail address: [gbaldacchino@upei.ca](mailto:gbaldacchino@upei.ca).

URL: <http://staff.um.edu.mt/gball>.

Peer review under responsibility of Mokpo National University.



Production and hosting by Elsevier

Islands – especially small ones – are now, unwittingly, the objects of what may be the most lavish, global and consistent branding exercise in human history. It has been said that there is “little doubt” that islands have what has been described as a particular “lure” or “fascination” to visitors (Lockhart, 1993; 1997; King, 1993; Baum, 1997; Baum et al., 2000: 214). It speaks to a yearning for an island space and island life that is part myth, part marketing hype, part reality ... and not 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 exclusive investors buying up island lots and even whole islands as private properties. Islands thus find themselves presented, even constructed *de novo*, 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: 26, emphasis in original; also Connell, 2003). Tuan (1990: 247) claims that four natural environments have figured prominently in humanity’s enduring and endearing dreams of the ideal world. They are: the forest, the shore, the valley ... and the island.

A layering of at least five, mutually reinforcing influences can be proposed to explain this condition. First, there is a lingering 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: 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 TV blockbuster series *Lost* (e.g. Hymer, 1971; Loxley, 1990). Fourth, is the development of the notion of going on vacation as a regular activity by the world's burgeoning travelling classes: whether for relaxation, adventure or self-discovery, islands project themselves as ideal destinations (e.g. Baldacchino, 2006; Butler, 1993; Löfgren, 2002). 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 a beguilingly easy route to development (e.g. Apostolopoulos and Gayle, 2002; Briguglio et al., 1996a, 1996b; Conlin and Baum, 1995; De Kadt, 1979; Royle, 2001, Chapter 9). Other attractive 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: 21; Baum et al., 2000; Butler, 1993).

### This paper

And yet, in spite of all these *ex post facto* explanations, understanding what *exactly* is it about islands that attracts and appeals remain "speculative" (Baum et al., 2000: 215). "The essence of the deserted island", argues Deleuze (2004: 12), "is imaginary and not actual; mythological and not geographical". Islanders in particular may be justifiably confused, even resentful, by how their homes are seen and objectified as 'paradises' by mainlanders; by how their homes, as well as themselves, continue to be ritually "aestheticised, sanitised and anaesthetised" (Connell, 2003: 568).

This paper proposes to facilitate a better understanding of "the island lure" by disentangling and unpacking four, inter-related, constituent components of 'islandness'. These components are themselves borrowed and adapted from a spatial analysis of power and power relations (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991). In essentializing the discussion, the paper also offers some methodological strategies for coming to better terms with the different facets of island life.

### Enter space

The critical role of space and of the physico-material environment in articulating human consciousness, and thus in making meaning, has been the subject of increasing attention in contemporary social sciences. From Foucault (1977) and his anal-

ysis of buildings as capable of deploying power; to Massey et al. (1999) and her heuristic device of 'activity spaces' as porous and open locales that captures everyday life and its mobilities. From De Certeau (1984) and his examination of how people individualize the artifacts of mass culture, in order to make them their own; to Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) and his descriptions of the intimate experiences of place. From Amin and Thrift (2002) and their image of cities as formed by multiple use and history; to Shields (1991) and his explanation of the role of the spatial in making up culture. These diverse contributions represent a post-structuralist 'critical turn' in spatial – and increasingly political economic – geography, highlighting a cognitive and social constructivism that had been totally disregarded in those renditions of space driven by an unambiguous Cartesian positivism.

Given the applicability of her analysis to island studies, Doreen Massey's work is especially relevant here. She postulates that the social is constituted in the process of the production of the spatial. Space and social structures are thus mutually constitutive; and the outcome of this dialectic turbulence is always varied, fragmented, contested:

"Truly recognizing spatiality [...] necessitates acknowledging a genuinely co-existing multiplicity ... In the way in which I wish to imagine space there is no closure; on the contrary, there are always loose ends and disruptiveness." (Massey et al., 1999: 281; 290).

### Representations of space

Lefebvre contends that there is much more to space than meets the eye. Space starts from the very crude, natural space ("absolute space"), and moves up to more complex identities whose significance is socially produced ("social space"). Lefebvre's basic argument in *The Production of Space* – and one he shares with Massey – is that space is a social product; a complex social and ideological construction, based on values and the social production of meanings, which affects spatial practices and perceptions. As a Marxist philosopher (but highly critical of economic structuralism), Lefebvre argues that this social production of lived space is fundamental to the reproduction of society, hence an 'active moment' of capitalism itself (Harvey, 1982: 390). The social production of space is contentious but typically commanded by a hegemonic class or élite as a tool to reproduce its dominance. To change life is to change space: architecture is revolution (Merrifield, 2000: 173).

We are thus faced with at least three (but possibly four?) interpretations, or identities, of space: First, straddling the physical with the ideological, is represented space, that which includes maps, plans, roads, models, designs and similar forms, the space constructed by the practice of such professionals as architects, urban planners and civil engineers, which includes the built environment. These spaces are fleshed out interpretations of how space should be disciplined and designed for the sake of smooth communication but also surveillance (e.g. Ball and Webster, 2003). The second is representational space which also overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. It is at the periphery of mainstream culture and regulation, chaotic and elusive, the space where new and counter-hegemonic ideas and practices take shape: from graffiti to squatting, and includes the appropriation and use of (private

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1107091>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1107091>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)