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## **ISLANDS OF THE WORLD AND THE EUROPEAN TOUCH**

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# ISLANDS OF THE WORLD AND THE EUROPEAN TOUCH

*Godfrey Baldacchino*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The notion of a European landscape goes beyond the geo-physical and architectural to encompass also the institutional and socio-cultural. The ‘European touch’ includes building codes, languages, educational systems, legal systems, religions, customs, even street furniture and highway codes. Islands have performed the role of prototype “contact zones” by design or default, serving as tentative and experimental spaces of contact and stepping stones between different organisms – flora, fauna, human - in a colonial situation, before they traipsed onto mainlands. They have done so also for the motley manifestations of the European touch. Only the insular Pacific, which was the last major region to experience the European contact, has escaped this ubiquity.

## Introduction

Walk down Republic Street, the main thoroughfare in Valletta, the capital city of Malta, a 55-hectare UNESCO World Heritage cultural site and European Capital of Culture for 2018. The city was constructed from scratch in 1568, with European finance and under the purview of the Sovereign Military Order of St John of Jerusalem, which ruled Malta at the time. Its uniform gridiron urban plan is inspired by neo-Platonic principles, and put in place by capable Maltese architects. Its massive limestone ramparts were designed by Spanish and Italian engineers. The lavish interior of the Co-Cathedral is pure Renaissance. The impressive, baroque-style palaces of the different *langues* of the Order that survived the Second World War are witness to its pan-European pedigree: Auberge de Castille (built 1774), Auberge de Provence (1571-75), Auberge d'Italie (1574), Auberge de Bavière (1696) and Auberge d'Aragon (end of 16th century). Additional buildings, churches and museums appear in a Rococo style; the Law Courts, built on a bombed location in the 1960s, come with a façade of Greek columns. The most recent changes, designed by Renzo Piano, include the modernist part-restoration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British-designed Opera House, the 5<sup>th</sup> revision to the city entrance, and a new House of Parliament (clad in 7,000 quarried and laser-cut angled blocks).

One may be excused for deciding that this extraordinarily lush European cityscape is to be expected in a capital city that - in spite of being located perilously close to North Africa, and housing a people that speak a language that has Semitic roots - has been governed by exclusively European powers for almost a thousand years. And yet, far from European shores, from Jamestown (St Helena) to Port Louis (Mauritius); from Bridgetown (Barbados) to St Denis (Réunion); and from Funchal (Madeira) to Nouméa (French Caledonia), the European touch, which is possibly less extravagant than Valletta's, is nevertheless just as ubiquitous, in its visual as well as cultural sense. In most of these, definitely non-geographically-European locations, the European touch – building codes, language, educational systems, legal systems, religions, customs, street furniture – is practically unchallenged. Only the insular Pacific, which was the

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last major region to experience the European contact, and where indigenous people have survived the (still fatal) encounter (Moorehead, 1987) is this pervasiveness least so.

### **Changed by Invasion**

Islands have often fulfilled the function of prototype “contact zones” by design or default, serving as tentative and experimental spaces of contact and stepping stones between different organisms – flora, fauna, humans - in a colonial situation, before they traipsed onto mainlands (Pratt, 1992: 6). As a general rule, the smaller and the flatter the island, the more extensive and more rapid have been the changes wrought to the landscape by invading waves of peoples and their retinue, whether planned (horses, goats, pigs, grains) or unplanned (diseases, rats). Within a few years following European contact, and starting with Barbados, Caribbean island ecosystems were completely transformed into sugar producing platforms, and their indigenous tribes (and ‘pre-Contact’ habitats) virtually destroyed or annihilated (Sheridan, 1974). In the Pacific, European encounters were driven by ambivalent perceptions: the myth of the disappearing noble savage in a pristine habitat that represented a bygone age of innocence; or the dystopia of the ‘ignoble savage’, that legitimated and justified redemption and missionary zeal from outside; both tropes have spawned representations of erotic and exotic beauty that today support the myths, representations and coastal landscapes at the basis of tropical island tourism (Connell, 2003; *also* Pattullo, 1996; Picard, 2011). In other islands not suitable for commercial agriculture – such as St Helena – acute environmental degradation and local species extinctions still followed the attempts by colonial rules to restore or rebuild ‘paradise’ in such island landscapes, which were happily misconstrued as potential botanical gardens (Grove, 1995: 153; Royle, 2001).

But the notion of a European landscape goes beyond the geo-physical and architectural to encompass also the institutional and socio-cultural. One could argue that the physical manifestation and character of a landscape impacted upon by the ‘European touch’ is especially robust when supported and encouraged by a local “culturescape” (*after* Appadurai, 1996): a socio-cultural regime that is itself thoroughly and densely Europeanised. This paper argues that, by their very geo-physical nature, islands lend themselves to thorough doses of Europeanisation, even when physically distant from the European continent.

### **Colonialism is Good for You**

An interesting paper on how much of a difference the European influence can make for promoting economic activity was authored by James Feyrer and Bruce Sacerdote in 2006. Developing new data on 80 ocean islands, they argued that the date at which these islands were colonised was to some degree a historical accident; but they also noted that, the more years that island spent as a European colony, the higher its Gross Domestic Product (as a measure of economic prosperity) is today: “every additional century of history spent as a colony is associated with a 45% higher GDP per capita in 2000, and an infant mortality rate lower by 2.6 deaths per 1,000 (Feyrer & Sacerdote (2006: 34, Table 2). That correlation suggested to the authors that something about the institutions that accompanied European colonialism, such as laws protecting property rights and promoting capital markets, gave these islands an edge in economic development. (Another tenable hypothesis would be that those islands that were colonised first had the richest resources, and it is that inherently more favourable factor

endowment that continues to help them today; but the authors smartly control for this by considering prevailing wind velocity and using this to randomise their island population.)

Such comments fly in the face of implicit ‘Third World’ popular wisdom, as well as various development theories, that imperialism by and large helped to *underdevelop* colonial spaces, enslaving populations, extracting raw material, silencing or co-opting local elites, transforming agricultural and commercial practices to service the colonising power (e.g. Rodney, 1981; Beckford, 1999): hardly the recipe for contemporary prosperity. But, even if this was the case, could islands, especially small islands, have been treated differently?

Bertram (2007: 249) further observed that Feyrer and Sacerdote’s explanations of why longer colonial exposure should translate to higher modern incomes, all other things being equal, “remain only crudely articulated and little-developed, without clear transmission mechanisms to the present”. Just what is it about European colonialism that makes some islanders richer and other islanders poorer today continues to defy scholars. “The identification of specific institutional transfers is extremely difficult and limited by data availability”, admit the co-authors (Feyrer and Sacerdote, 2007: 257). Moreover, correlation is not causation. But this is not to say that we are short of suggestions.

### **A Deep and Thorough Integration**

Already back in 1980, scholars were perceptive as to how many non-European islands, most quite far from the European continental rump, exhibited clear evidence of a deep and thorough integration into European culture. Indeed, the smaller the island, the faster, deeper and more intimate was the colonial experience; and the more lasting and enduring its consequences, even after independence was secured. So many non-European islands were uninhabited when discovered and subsequently settled by Europeans; hence in these cases, there was no indigenous culture to resist the advance and inculcation into European values and practices. Indeed, the smallest islands of all have been so radically and irrevocably Europeanised by their European encounter during the so-called European Age of Discovery, that some continue to refuse or consider independence, preferring instead to remain within the European orbit. Since 1967, independence referenda have been held in Bermuda (1995), Bonaire (2004), the Cook Islands (1974), Curaçao (2005), Mayotte (1976), the Netherlands Antilles (1993 and 1994), Niue (1974 and 1999), Puerto Rico (1967, 1993, 1998, 2012), Saba (2004), Sint Maarten (2000), St Eustatius (2005) and the U.S. Virgin Islands (1993): in all these cases, the independence option was rejected, typically by large margins (Baldacchino, 2010a: 44). Only in Tokelau (2006, 2007) and in Nevis (1998) did the independence option secure over 50% of voter support, though not enough to clinch the required two-thirds threshold to pass. (For the sake of comparison, 115 new sovereign states have come into existence since 1967, the latest being South Sudan; of these, only 25 are islands, on islands, or are/are on archipelagos). To mainstream scholars of colonialism, such decisions not to sunder enduring - and obviously exploitative - colonial links present an “unusual situation” (Allahaar 2005: 132). They have been described as examples of “upside down decolonisation”, where it was the metropolis, and not the former colonies, which was pressing the latter for independence (Hoefte and Oostindie, 1991: 93). But: those who study islands closely should not be surprised by such outcomes. Other referenda beckon: Scotland had

its own dramatic independence referendum experience in 2014. New Caledonia and Bougainville may be next.

The acceleration of island studies as a “new multidisciplinary subfield” (McElroy 2011: 245), owes much to the December 1980 publication of *World Development* journal’s special issue dedicated to islands (Dommen 1980); this has inspired subsequent writers to further explore the putatively unique behaviour of island populations. In that special collection, Caldwell et al. (1980: 960) conclude that: “on the whole, they [that is, micro-states, with populations of less than half a million, 80% of which are islands] retained colonial links longer”. This observation is also later affirmed by Doumenge (1989: 51), and specifically to small island states. Few such small island states struggled *for* independence; instead, most have waged intense diplomatic struggles to maintain or extend benign colonial links with their overseas hinterland; at times - in the cases of Malta and Mauritius - going so far as to press for integration, the very antithesis of sovereignty (Guillebaud, 1976; Winchester, 1985; Baldacchino, 1997: 176-7). Some places – and some smaller islands in particular – can perhaps be best conceptualised as permanent parts of empire (Drower, 1992: 114).

### **Last Colonies and Lingerin Colonies**

In that same article from the 1980 thematic issue, Caldwell et al. (1980: 953) note the stark and significant differences between micro-states and the rest of the Third World: small states have enjoyed lower death rates, lower birth rates, and a higher propensity to migrate to developed countries. In the case of small subnational and non-independent island jurisdictions, birth and death rates are even lower; health indicators stronger, sanitation and education indicators better; and net immigration stronger still. The residents of sub-national island jurisdictions enjoy a per capita income almost three times higher than those of small island developing states (McElroy and Sandborn, 2005). The proffered explanation: Westernisation. With some exceptions – the spice islands would top the list – small island territories were often not valued for their intrinsic economic or strategic value but prized for their location and re-victualling role as part of a far-flung European maritime system, at a time when the West did not have the economic strength to penetrate continental areas to the same extent (Caldwell et al., 1980: 953). They were not just the last colonies to gain independence (if, at all, as discussed above); but also amongst the very first to become colonies in the first place: Canary Islands (Spain, 1291); Azores (Portugal, 1351?); Bermuda (Britain, 1612); Svalbard (Netherlands, 1619); St Kitts (France, 1627); St Thomas (Denmark, 1671). Moreover, with limited land areas and just as limited potential for economic gain, commercial opportunities were limited: hence, it was much more critical to co-opt a sympathetic resident population into the colonial ethos: you would want them on your side should the enemy invade, rather than switch sides and fight against you. Acculturation of the local population into the colonial norm proceeded apace, and on various fronts: metropolitan education for large sections of the population, employment in public administration, paternalist government, tolerance of petty theft, wholesale adoption of the colonial master’s religious and linguistic practices, the institutionalisation of liberal democracy ... thus are the manifestations of a long, deep, total and perseverant relationship with the Western, often European, experience (e.g. Srebrnik, 2004: 333-4; Payne, 1993: 9). Small island spaces are particularly vulnerable to external events in three distinct yet related ways: in suddenness of impact, in the intensity of effect, and in the rapid speed of penetration (Baldacchino, 1998: 225). In those particular

locations where European colonialists could settle safely, argued Acemoglu et al. (2001: 1373), they created ‘good institutions’. In those cases where the European discoverers came across islands that were then uninhabited, these were subsequently peopled by settlers and forced migrants that were also, to some extent, European. Acculturation was also so much easier and smoother where there was no indigenous culture, religion or language to supplant; no local socio-cultural ‘hinterland’ to which the local population could retreat, and establish a base for possible military as much as psychological resistance (Baldacchino, 2006; Hintjens, 1991: 38).

### **The Curious Case of Europe**

Thus, the politico-economic dynamics of modern history that have shaped the contemporary map of Europe have islands written all over them. Europe is the anomalous case: a cursory look at the geophysical map of the world suggests that Europe has no natural credentials for being considered a continent. It is much closer to being a sub-continent, as is India or Indo-China. No oceanic stretch divides it from other continents. The claim of Eurasia to continental status would have made more sense. (Of course, it was Europeans who invented continents, so the choice of Europe is a blatant outcome of the power of naming, mapping and Eurocentrism, rather than of science, geology or geography [Blaut, 2012]). Moreover, politically, Europe is also the only continent that has territories located ‘ultra-peripherally’: Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Réunion and Mayotte (as integral parts of France); the Azores and Madeira (as integral parts of Portugal); Bonaire, Eustatius and Saba (as integral parts and ‘special municipalities’ of the Netherlands); and the Canaries (as integral parts of Spain). Note that all of these are islands, or island chains, except French Guiana.

Beyond these, sit the lingering overseas territories of the former colonial powers, and once again located in every region of the globe. Even here, almost all of these are islands (Gibraltar being the most notable exception). And still beyond these are those sovereign island states that maintain strong loyalty and sympathy, significant commercial and trade links, as well as political connections, with their former colonial administrators. This is most notable with the British Commonwealth, with its 54 members (Fiji is currently suspended), of which 32 are officially recognised as ‘small states’ (all of these are islands or archipelagos, except Belize in the Caribbean; along with Botswana, Gambia, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland, all in Africa). Queen Elizabeth II is the official head of state of 16 independent countries, all members of the Commonwealth (of which all except Belize are island states) (e.g. Fitzwilliams, 2012). In 2012, English was an/the official language or language of government in 88 jurisdictions around the world (60 sovereign states and 28 other territories); of these, 30 sovereign states and 27 other territories – all except Gibraltar – are islands. From these 88 jurisdictions, only six are in Europe: the British Crown Dependencies (Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man); and three sovereign states (Ireland, Malta and the United Kingdom). Back to Caldwell et al. (1980: 954): amongst microstates, 85% are predominantly Christian; 91% have a European language as an official language; 87% have a population able to speak either a European or Creole language. (The exceptions tend to be island states in Arab-speaking areas, such as Bahrain, Comoros and Maldives). These island jurisdictions “are products of a European maritime culture of the last five centuries” (*ibid.*)

## Conclusion

The very idea of “European landscapes” goes beyond the architectural and geo-physical to encompass also the institutional and socio-cultural. Moreover, we are not talking about societies that are reproducing European styles and genres for their association with glory, beauty or classical aesthetics. For extreme examples, think of the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, in Yamassoukro, Cote D’Ivoire, Africa, a replica of St Peter’s in Rome; or the Renaissance-style Opera House in Manaus, Brazil, in the middle of the Amazon rainforest.

The ‘European touch’ comes much more naturally to many island societies around the world; these islescapes have been assiduously sculpted and engineered in this way through centuries of stubborn and lingering colonial affiliation. The European touch also provides some precious common ground where a multiplicity of assorted ethnic minorities and competing linguistic identities seriously threaten the national fabric: consider Mauritius and East Timor. For many of these islands, their people and their settlements, like Valletta, a European history is what they have always largely known.

This argument contrasts with mainstream neo-colonial theory, where the implicit project is to vilify the colonial experience and condemn its practices and consequences. While such a criticism has its place, it needs to be tempered by the island experience, where the very notions of social and cultural distinctiveness are stubbornly and quintessentially European. Here, colonialism is less of an alien invasion or grafted imposition; and more of a core feature of identity and being (Baldacchino and Royle 2010; Baldacchino 2010b).

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