

# Connectivity, Mobility and Island Life: Parallel Narratives from Malta and Lesvos

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**Abstract:** Modernity is increasingly about movement, with people navigating through different spaces and places throughout their lives and careers. Probably all the more so when we deal with islanders, who combine home and away in strategic ways: for adventure, education, work, career development. Islanders are not insular.

This paper offers a contrast between the dominant narratives of mobility and immobility of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At one end, there is the 'kinetic elite' which includes professionals who commute regularly between countries as part of their work and career development: university academics, corporate managers, software technicians, European Commission staff. Along with these is a select but growing number of HNWI's – high net worth individuals – those who exploit multiple residence and citizenship schemes (and various tax code loopholes) to park themselves, and their assets, temporarily in particular jurisdictions. Often with multiple passports, these persons face sophisticated marketeers and promoters keen to enlist them to their schemes. At the other end are the millions vying for a better life or seeking to escape famine, drought, civil war, and political persecution, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Often with no passports, these face multiple barriers to manage their movements. In between these two solitudes, are the lives and stories of the islanders themselves who may need to reconcile themselves with, but often disregard, these contradictory policies.

Islands (and islanders and their governments) face these contradictory pressures and often label and stereotype the subjects of these divergent mobility patterns in dramatically different ways. These labels are often corroborated by equally stereotypical notions of race, ethnicity, and religion. The paper fleshes out these ideas by reflecting largely on three parallel mobility narratives on two Mediterranean islands: Malta and Lesvos (Greece).

**Keywords:** Lesvos, Malta, migration, mobility, narratives

## The Scenario

Today, geography still matters; but it matters in a different way. The notions of distance, space, place, and time need to be radically reviewed and reconfigured in the context of the twenty-first century. Globalization has eased the navigation of products, services, money, and people across the planet.<sup>1</sup> Developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have shrunk (or even ‘killed’) distance and offer a new sense of immediacy and intimacy.<sup>2</sup> Neo-liberalism has supported these technical and economic initiatives with its own political thrust and agenda.<sup>3</sup>

The old ‘space-time’ dichotomies may appear thoroughly erased, and certainly problematized differently, for those who can afford regular physical visit-journeys that criss-cross boundaries, along with the modern-day electronic virtual communication paraphernalia of mobile phone, e-mail, whatsapp, web-cams, blogs, digital photography, and video streaming.<sup>4</sup>

The real costs associated with physical mobility have fallen sharply – consider mobile telephony, text messaging, and low-cost airline tickets – making people’s engagement and commitment to tasks underway in a number of diverse physical locations increasingly possible and attractive. The willingness and ability to travel is not just commonplace but increasingly expected: having and using a passport is a normal rather than an exceptional feature of various occupational contracts. The functional-spatial-temporal flexibility of knowledge-capital (as with any other factor of production) is required, to the extent that mobility (including multiple language) skills are sought after and recognized. Barriers of ethnicity, nationhood, and race have become more fluid in drives for specialist recruitment, just as much as barriers of occupational demarcation, trade, employer loyalty, or standard

1 W.E. Murray and J. Overton, *Geographies of Globalisation* (London, 2014).

2 K. Ohmae, *The End of the Nation-State: The Rise of Regional Economies* (New York, 1995); F. Cairncross, *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution will Change our Lives* (Cambridge MA, 1997); E. Tranos and P. Nijkamp, ‘The death of distance revisited: Cyber-place, physical and relational proximities’, *Journal of Regional Science*, 53, (2013), 855–73.

3 D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, 2007).

4 R. Cohen, ‘Diasporas and the nation-state: from victims to challengers’, *International Affairs*, 72 (1996), 507–20.

working time have been steadily melting away in the face of flexible specialization, workforce professionalization, self-employment, teleworking, Skyping, and the decline of traditional and protectionist trade unions. The long and short of all this is that it can no longer be assumed that people are physically available in a certain [read specific] place for a certain [read long and regular] time.

And yet, some would say that this techno-liberal push, as much as the nature and impact of globalization, which reached a climax in the Single European Act (signed in 1985) and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, has been greatly exaggerated.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this push may have been simply *too* successful and lethal in its far-reaching consequences.<sup>6</sup> We are now witnessing a backlash of and by States, governments, and populist political agendas, trying to reclaim some lost ground and recover or ringfence control over ‘market forces’ and domestic policy-making that have progressively eroded the influence of states on people in place. Consider the collapse of the Doha round of World Trade Organisation talks already back in 2009, the Trump phenomenon in the US, the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK, the temporary suspension of visa-free travel within the Schengen zone, and the attitudes of the Orban government in Hungary and the Law and Justice Party government in Poland with respect to the EU.<sup>7</sup> Race, nation, security, and identity are once again toxic topics in domestic politics. Physical borders have been on the rise as peoples have been seeking to better protect their own turf.

5 D. Harvey, ‘Neo-Liberalism as creative destruction’, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 88 (2006), 145–58.

6 W. Streeck and P.C. Schmitter, ‘From national corporatism to transnational pluralism: organised interests in the Single European Market’, *Politics & Society*, 19 (1991), 133–64.

7 A. Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham NC, 2006); S.C. Schwab, ‘After Doha: why the negotiations are doomed and what we should do about it’, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, 2011, 104–17; E. Farrelly, ‘Brexit and Trump, neoliberalism has reached its natural conclusion. What now’, *The Age*, 13 August 2016; available from <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/in-brexit-and-trump-neoliberalism-has-reached-its-natural-conclusion-what-now-20160811-gqq012>; R. Brubaker, ‘Between nationalism and Civilisationism: The European populist moment in comparative perspective’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40 (2017), 1191–226; *European Commission, Temporary reintroduction of border control* (Brussels, 2017); available from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen/reintroduction-border-control\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen/reintroduction-border-control_en)

## Have mobility skills, will travel

In this turbulent context, those most likely to conform to the description of a mobile class would be ‘professional knowledge workers’: freelance consultants, senior financial service executives, academics, and senior corporate managers. These are the cadres on which airline companies have reaped considerable profits from the sale of first-class and business class tickets and access to airport lounges. However, there are two additional, and very dissimilar, clusters of persons who are also identifiable by their willingness to travel in the modern age. One group consists in HNWI, or ‘high net worth individuals’:<sup>8</sup> these are the super rich, usually accompanied by family members, with considerable financial assets and who are most likely to shop around for the best places to live, park their money, practise their favourite sport, educate their children, and entertain their friends.<sup>9</sup> The second group consists of refugees, economic migrants, and asylum-seekers: individuals, usually accompanied by family members, fleeing civil wars, famine, droughts, unemployment and religious and/or political persecution, in search of a better, safer life.<sup>10</sup>

While similarly disposed towards mobility, these two groupings are very different from each other. Rather than focusing on just their qualities and behaviour, I wish to turn our sights in this paper to the ways in which States respond to the challenges, opportunities, and threats posed by the movements, actual and intended, of these two groups. The discrepancy and contrast in state practice speaks volumes about the absence of morality in mobility and about the readiness of and by governments to discriminate amongst the mobile, largely on the basis of the depth of their pockets.

Mobility poses an obvious challenge to the modern State whose authority and *raison d’être* is premised on the notion of territoriality.<sup>11</sup> A government seeks to exercise legitimate control over a citizenry – and will lay claim to a portion of its revenue via taxation – not so much via

8 I. Hay (ed.), *Geographies of the Super-rich* (Cheltenham, 2013).

9 M. Featherstone, ‘Super-rich lifestyles’, in T. Birchnell and J. Caletrio (eds.), *Elite Mobilities* (London, 2014), 99–135.

10 M.J. Gibney, *The Ethics and Politics of Asylum: Liberal Democracy and the Response to Refugees* (Cambridge, 2004).

11 S. Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago, 2013).

notions of birth and blood affinity, but by virtue of residence. Only two countries in the world charge tax on the *global* world income of their non-resident citizens: Eritrea and the United States.<sup>12</sup> Most ongoing public policy continues to assume a fixity of address: education policy, economic policy, labour policy, taxation policy, proprietary rights ... all assume that individuals have, or should have, *one* home, somewhere. And the enforcement of domicile – including via the closure of borders to the unqualified – is seen as part of the mandate of the state; a mandate that has become a priority with the rise of securitization in the West.

## Enter islands

Let me now bring ‘small islands’ into the discussion. Their self-evident delineated boundaries help to increase the disposition towards a proto-ethnic sense of self amongst the locals;<sup>13</sup> they also transform immigration control to the function of policing the coast (apart from any access points offered by airports and sea ports), with no land border to watch over.<sup>14</sup> However, one often forgets that most islands are anything but insular:<sup>15</sup> they have a natural and inevitable orientation towards openness and thrive on trade and commerce; their island inhabitants look to their respective metropole for inspiration, adventure, entertainment, shopping, education, and/or employment. Island literature is dominated by the migration theme.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, exile (or ex-isle),<sup>17</sup> is often the only effective antidote to a pervasive and stifling totality, monopoly, and

- 12 T. Durden, ‘An appalling practice used in only two nations, of which the US is one’, *Zero Hedge*, 17 September 2014; available from <http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2014-09-17/appalling-practice-used-only-two-nations-which-us-one?page=1>.
- 13 G. Baldacchino, ‘Islands: objects of representation’, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 87 (2005), 247–51.
- 14 Id., ‘Islands and the offshoring possibilities and strategies of contemporary states: insights on/for the migration phenomenon on Europe’s southern flank’, *Island Studies Journal*, 9 (2014), 57–68.
- 15 C. Gosden and C. Pavlides, ‘Are islands insular? Landscape versus seascape in the case of the Arawe Islands, Papua New Guinea’, *Archaeology in Oceania*, 1 (1994), 162–71.
- 16 For example, E.A. Markham (ed.), *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1989); R. King and J. Connell, *Small Worlds, Global Lives: Small Islands and Migration* (London, 1999).
- 17 C. Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/colonial Literature* (Staford CA, 1998).

intimacy of the local socio-cultural-political environment.<sup>18</sup> Islanders are well-known to have a higher propensity to migrate to developed countries:<sup>19</sup> international migration has, in fact, long been recognized as heaviest from the world's smallest territories, to the extent that there are, say, more Cook Island citizens living in New Zealand than in the Cook Islands themselves.<sup>20</sup> For various small-island households, migration is a powerful strategic resource, since children sent to live abroad can be expected to infuse remittances, in cash or in kind, to the home economy: in some instances (such as Samoa and Tonga), these are significant contributions to the gross national product.<sup>21</sup>

The life-histories of small islanders, where meticulously documented, reveal a complex juggling of the pros and cons of staying at home and going overseas. They constitute living examples of what are called 'transnationals', a specific pattern of de-territorialized and cross-boundary migration that challenges the concept of the temporality and spatiality of 'homeness'.<sup>22</sup> A series of human resource retention, development, or reclamation strategies have been and are being developed by enterprising individuals or families in order to nurture and exploit the advantages of a *glocal* citizenship.<sup>23</sup> Government policy has much to catch up with, and, in many cases, turns a blind eye and refuses to consider that individuals are behaving in these trans-territorial ways that lead to selective spatial and residential shopping. Moreover, they are also doing so in ways that do not necessarily translate as single and definitive acts of emigration from A and immigration into B. Rather, 'circular migration' is

- 18 G. Baldacchino, *Global Tourism and Informal Labour Relations: The Small Scale Syndrome at Work* (London, 1997).
- 19 J. Connell and R. King, 'Island migration in a changing world', in R. King & J. Connell (eds.) *Small Worlds*, 1–26.
- 20 Baldacchino, *Global Tourism*, 89; D. Lowenthal, 'Social issues', in C.G. Clarke & T. Payne (eds.), *Politics, Security and Development in Small States* (London, 1987), 41–3.
- 21 A. Ahlburg and R.P.C. Brown, 'Migrants' intentions to return home and capital transfers: a study of Tongans and Western Samoans in Australia', *Journal of Development Studies*, 35 (1998), 125–51.
- 22 D.T. Duval, 'Conceptualising return visits: a transnational perspective' in T. Coles and D. Timothy (eds.), *Tourism, Diasporas and Space: Travels to Promised Lands* (London, 2004), 50–61; P. Hatziprokopiou, 'Balkan immigrants in the Greek city of Thessaloniki', *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 11 (2004), 321–38; S. Vertovec, 'Transnationalism and Identity', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27 (2001), 573–82.
- 23 T.J. Courchene, 'Glocalisation: the regional/international interface', *Canadian Journal of Regional Science*, 18 (1995), 1–20.

increasingly common, facilitated by the increasing disposition to, and ease of, doing so.<sup>24</sup>

Place-based public policy will find it hard to manage, let alone contain, these practices. The allegiance of citizens or organizations to single countries has been dented with the emergence of trans-national corporations, multi-passporting, ‘circular migration’ strategies, and a glocal elite with dual or multiple nationalities. Firms have been exploiting different tax regimes to park funds and profits where they are safe yet are likely to be taxed least. High net worth individuals now do the same, arguing that, while tax avoidance is a crime, tax minimization is not.<sup>25</sup> Investment migration, understood as the acquisition of legal residence and eventually citizenship in exchange for a donation or investment into the economy of the jurisdiction concerned, is now a strategy practised by individuals – directly and/or through their companies – as much as by those governments keen on luring them for their financial assets, talent, and/or simply brand power<sup>26</sup>. Some 50 countries today allow dual citizenship.<sup>27</sup> These include various EU member states: Malta introduced a citizenship by investment scheme in 2014, following local domestic controversy;<sup>28</sup> while Greece introduced a residency by investment scheme in 2013, but is changing this to a citizenship by investment scheme ‘compatible with those of Cyprus and Malta’.<sup>29</sup>

Here, I turn to two Mediterranean island cases where I can admit some familiarity and where I wish to critique mobility policy in practice

- 24 G.J. Abel and N. Sander, ‘Quantifying global international migration flows’, *Science*, 343 (2014), 1520–2.
- 25 P. Alldridge, ‘Tax avoidance, tax evasion, money laundering and the problem of “offshore”’, in P. Lagunes (ed.) *Greed, Corruption and the Modern State* (Cheltenham, 2015), 317–35.
- 26 O. Parker, ‘Commercialising citizenship in Crisis EU: The case of immigrant investor programmes’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55 (2017), 332–48; K. Surak, ‘Global Citizenship 2.0: The Growth of Citizenship by Investment Programmes’, Occasional Paper. Investment Migration Council, 2016, Available at <http://investmentmigration.org/download/global-citizenship-2-0-growth-citizenship-investment-programs/>.
- 27 A. Henderson, ‘Which countries allow dual citizenship and which don’t?’, *Nomad Capitalist*, 2014; available from <http://nomadcapitalist.com/2014/04/25/countries-allow-dual-citizenship/>.
- 28 G. Baldacchino, ‘Malta Transformed by Multi-Level Governance: More Than Just an Outcome of Europeanisation’, *Occasional Papers Series*, 3 (2014), Institute of European Studies, University of Malta.
- 29 ‘2<sup>nd</sup> Passports.com, Greece: Citizenship by Investment’, 2017; available from ‘<https://2ndpassports.com/greece-citizenship-by-investment/>’.

and to question its morality. The first is Malta (resident population: 420,000), a sovereign archipelagic state that straddles the passage from Libya to Italy being followed by many undocumented migrants.<sup>30</sup> It has a contemporary labour market with a large and still growing number of immigrant workers (around 30,000), while some 3,000 Maltese work with the European Commission and in other EU member states, benefiting from the bloc's freedom of movement. Lesvos (population: 86,000), meanwhile, is a Greek island located just six kilometres away from the Turkish mainland and the transit point of up to a million immigrants that have entered the EU in recent years.<sup>31</sup> It is also the new home of some expatriates who have applied for Greek residence (and eventual citizenship after seven years) and is increasingly tolerant of Turkish tourists and investors to boost the local island economy, which is still recovering from the effects of a major financial crisis.

### **A triple mobility narrative**

Thus, there unfolds on these islands a triple mobility narrative. The first concerns local citizens, who are keen travellers. With only Gozo as the local hinterland, the Maltese gravitate internationally, where practically every trip involves a flight out of the country; the citizens of Lesvos travel to mainland Greece, often by ferry, but also to Turkey, a short hop away, and elsewhere, though not so much to other Greek islands. Here, mobility is extensive and unrestricted, particularly within the Schengen zone, of which both Malta and Greece are members. Being members of the 20-country euro-zone avoids the inconvenience of currency conversion; however, the citizens of Greece have had to tolerate capital controls for some time, restricting the amount of foreign currency they could purchase.

The second narrative relates to undocumented migrants. Pending those who have drowned in the perilous sea journey, these have been arriving by boat and dinghy from Turkey to Lesvos; or saved at sea by the Maltese coast guard (but now increasingly landing as 'tourists' at

30 D. Lutterbeck, 'Small frontier island: Malta and the challenge of irregular immigration', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 20 (2009), 119–44.

31 A. Afouxenidis, M. Petrou, G. Kandyliis, A. Tramountanis, and D. Giannaki, 'Dealing with a humanitarian crisis: Refugees on the eastern EU border of the island of Lesvos', *Journal of Applied Security Research*, 12 (2007), 7–39.



the Malta International Airport and then overstaying their tourist visa). These are subjected to mobility restrictions: locked in detention centres – Safi Barracks and Lyster Barracks in Malta (until 2015) and Moria in Lesvos, their movement reduced or curtailed, while refugee status claims are processed. Such spaces are transitional spaces where inmates are often treated like criminals and human rights are progressively eroded in the world of modern biopolitics.<sup>32</sup> They are eventually moved to ‘open centres’ or repatriated back home, often against their will. Many will continue their journey: the island was always meant as a transit point. Often with the connivance of the locals, they head out of Malta and to Continental Europe via Sicily and Italy, or out of Lesvos via ferry to Athens or Thessaloniki and then onwards to the continental heartlands of Germany, France, Sweden. Throughout, these immigrants are treated as illegal personas – *klandestini*, in Maltese, *μετανάστες χωρίς έγγραφα* in Greek – and held under harsh and demeaning conditions. They are deemed burdens on the State, even though many would work, and work hard, if and when given the opportunity. Processing asylum claims may take many months; at one point it took 18 months in Malta: a measure, many locals agreed, that would help dissuade still more migrants from considering coming over there. To a segment of the local population, the ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds of most immigrants – many are dark-skinned Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa – raises imagined notions of their own Christian, European, and ‘white-skinned’ credentials and identities.<sup>33</sup> (By the way, the sun-baked Maltese and Greeks are hardly white-skinned: sorry.) The long history of the Mediterranean as a polyglot region and a tolerant churn of peoples united by the desire to trade has, alas, been conveniently forgotten.<sup>34</sup>

The third narrative relates to those applying for what will eventually be an attractive dual passport which grants visa free access to all EU countries (and in the case of Malta, as a Commonwealth member state, access to even more countries, and including the UK, even if and when

32 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford CA, 1998); Lesvos Legal Centre, ‘Moria Community Leaders Demand Respect for Refugee Rights in Lesvos’ 10 January 2017; available from <https://legalcentresbos.wordpress.com/>

33 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006); G. Baldacchino, ‘Pangs of nascent nationalism from the nationless state? Euro coins and undocumented migrants in Malta since 2004’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 15 (2009), 148–65.

34 D. Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2011).

it leaves the EU). The targets here are high net worth individuals and their families, often owning more than €5 million as assets. Here, smartly dressed executives engaged with reputable consultancy firms (such as Henley and Partners, Knight Frank and Monarch & Co) as well as staff at the respective ministries and government agencies, will facilitate access and help in the processing of applications, most taking just a few months. The mechanisms of the State are deployed to screen but then to lubricate the transition towards the acquisition of property, corporate investment, and other requirements. Tellingly, the residence condition attached to the scheme in Malta has been legally defined to mean buying and owning (and not necessarily taking up) residence in Malta. After all, while HNWIs are often likely to purchase property and make the necessary financial investments to secure their second passports, they are just as unlikely to actually take up residence in their newly adopted country (other than for short periods). The second passport is typically an insurance policy, potentially useful in the longer term.

### **Concluding reflections**

Today's mobility politics are selective, driven by the State's pursuit of talent and investment; as much as by its ambiguity in the face of asylum seekers. A machinery of control and processing comes into play and accompanies both high-end and low-end considerations: there are applications to filled in, interviews to be scheduled, processing times to be respected. But the approaches are very different: the treatment of one set of clientele verges on that reserved for criminals; the treatment of the other set is accompanied by the accoutrements of etiquette and civility.

Disasters demobilize and remobilize individuals.<sup>35</sup> Wealth creates manifold opportunities for the mobility of persons and personal assets, and, while States practise closure and selection at their borders, they can also not just accept but even fast-track applicants who meet specific endowment criteria, for both residency and citizenship. Mobility

35 M. Sheller, 'The islanding effect: post-disaster mobility systems and humanitarian logistics in Haiti', *Cultural Geographies*, 20 (2013), 185–204.

justice is troubled by these double standards, where they exist. They become all the more glaring when these dissimilar groups of residence-seekers perchance meet and interact in the same space. The relatively small populations and land areas of Malta and Lesvos should facilitate such encounters, including those with the locals. However, while the identity of refugees and asylum seekers is visibly marked by their dress, language, skin colour, and/or physical confinement in detention, the identity of the HNWIs is more heterogenous and their location and movements on the islands tends to be more discrete. Indeed, so discrete that these may be nowhere to be seen.

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