

CALL FOR PAPERS

Finding Their Place: Islands in Social Theory

An International Conference organized by the Islands Commission of the International Geographical Union (IGU) in collaboration with the Department of Human Geography, Lund University, Sweden.

Venue – The island of Ven, Sweden, 27 – 30 August 2010.

Islands are well established as significant and relevant milieux in the biological sciences. The emergence of the basic principles of a theory of evolution, and the associated attributes of endemism and extinction, have made islands veritable 'hot spots' for research in such fields as conservation ecology and bio-geography. Studying and interpreting the Galápagos finches, the butterflies of the Aru Islands, and the honey creepers of Hawaii, or following the biotic trends in Rakata (Indonesia) or Surtsey (Iceland), are today basic features of any core biology text. Some island states - Maldives, Tuvalu, Marshalls - have been thrust unwittingly as the 'canaries in the coal mine' for such contemporary phenomena as sea level rise; while other island territories - Socotra, Macquarie, Aeloiian Islands, the Tasmanian Wilderness - have had their unique, and mainly natural, attributes recognized via their designation as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

But, strangely enough, **there does not appear to be any similar appreciation of the 'island effect' in the humanities and social sciences.** This absence of recognition is not so much an outcome of a failure of social scientists to engage with islandness, as a hesitation to identify so many interesting developments - in both the theorisation and conceptualisation of knowledge - with the island context that spawned them.... And yet, the island context, and its associated allures of a temptingly available microcosm within a framework of managed isolation, has been involved in the formative development of social science, and social scientists.

Take, for example, Erwin Goffman, pioneer of the dramaturgical perspective within the symbolic interactionist school of sociology. He chose to escape Chicago and study rural life in the Shetland Islands for his doctoral thesis. He arrived in Unst in December 1949 and stayed until May 1951, masquerading as a student of agricultural techniques, but actually studying social interaction among the islanders. (The islanders initially suspected that he was a spy.)

Or French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau who spent "the happiest days of his life", on St Peter's Island in Lake Biel, Switzerland, in 1756, and admitting the influence of the "idyllic environment".

Or Margaret Mead, who 'came of age' and revolutionized American anthropology with her pioneering research of teenage girls in Samoa in 1925, continuing on with more fieldwork in New Guinea in 1929.

Or Marshall Sahlins, who drew on studies of Hawaii, Fiji and New Zealand to critique Western (continental?) history and anthropology, in his *Islands of History* (1985).

Or Eric Arthur Blair (better known as George Orwell), whose last writing retreat was out on the wild isle of Jura, off Scotland's west coast, in 1946, where he wrote much of '1984'.

What was, from 1923 to 1939, one of the most feared gulags in the Soviet Union? Nobel Prize winner Alexandr Solzhenitsyn had much to say about the great isolation of the Solovetsky islands in the *Gulag Archipelago*: "This was the basic idea behind Solovki. It was a place with no connection to the rest of the world for half a year. A scream from here would never be heard."

A more recent Nobel Prize winner, J. M. G. Le Clézio, studies colonialism in *Raga. Approche du Continent Invisible* (2006). The history of colonialism is, after all, largely a history of islands, sites of the origins of environmentalism (Grove 1995).

Research in Bremnes, a remote Norwegian island parish, in 1954, led Joseph Barnes to advance social network theory; while Jeremy Boissevain, a Dutch anthropologist, mapped out the size, influence and transactional power of networks in the early 1960s in Hal-Farrug, the pseudonym for a small village in Malta, and documented in his book *Friends of Friends* (1974)

Research into the human history of the Pacific Islands by such scholars as John Terrell and Patrick V. Kirch has been highly influential in revising our understanding of human history in general.

The wealth of island settings in imagined places from fantasy to philosophy, from spiritual journeys to forays into imperialism, is abundantly exemplified in such texts as Homer's *Odyssey*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and the

subsequent Robinsonnade genre, and many others included in Alberto Manguel's and Gianni Guadalupi's remarkable *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (1999).

Some imaginary islands constitute the very foundation of theories on societal development, for instance Johann Heinrich von Thünen's *Der Isolierte Staat* (1842) and of course, that prototype ideal political state, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1614). More recently, Gilles Deleuze pries into issues of origins, gender, myth and creativity in *Desert Islands* (2004).

And, what of things to come? Research on and about Rapa Nui - as in *Easter Island, Earth Island* by Paul Bahn and John Flenley (2003) - suggests that we may need new understandings of development that do not assume endless resources and the possibility of permanent growth. The Planet Earth is after all an island in space, and this realization, in itself, has been revolutionary in humankind's self-conceptualisation, as argue cogently Dennis Cosgrove and John R. Gillis.

The purpose of this conference on Islands in Social Theory is to bring together a coherent set of papers highlighting the role that island studies have played in advancing key concepts and principles in social theory and suggesting ways in which island research may further contribute to development of social theory.

We welcome submissions of titles, along with approx. 150-word abstracts, for papers to be presented at this conference. It is planned to publish a book with the edited proceedings, following a peer review process.

We ask you to send us your abstract **by October 31, 2009**.

Thank You

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