MOMENTS OF INSIGHT:

How I came to Island Studies

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ABSTRACT: Three specific moments helped form and frame my vocation to Island Studies. They occurred on a ship at sea, off Sicily (July 1978), in Malta (June 1990), and in Charlottetown, Canada (August 1999). This article adopts a reflexive sociology to chart and unpack these episodes that I perceive as seminal in establishing what emerged as an Island Studies career trajectory. Looking back, they served as moments of insight: they acted as tipping points in my ontological orientation and distilled my choice and direction of vocation.

KEYWORDS: Island Studies, Malta, Prince Edward Island, reflexive sociology, University of Warwick

Introduction: Three Episodes

Like other significant events in my life, probably in all our lives, my arrival at Island Studies was serendipitous. Perhaps I was already somehow primed and ready to take on the challenge when it arrived. Perhaps I was unsettled and unhinged enough at those specific points and times along my life's trajectory to grasp at the novel idea that was passing by. I don't know and never will.

In this article, I share three specific moments that have helped form and frame my vocation to Island Studies. They can be seen to build on each other, informing an evolution of thought, disposition and commitment to this exciting and burgeoning field. They correspond to what Thrash and Eliott (2004) have called "moments of insight", inspirational in both unsettling and repositioning world views (e.g. my Episode I) as well as in catalysing a particular plan of action (as in my Episodes II and III). The episodes span decades and, no doubt, would be accompanied by many other, possibly equally significant, events in my life course that I do not deem to recollect at this point. What I do know is that these three episodes somehow stand out because I have at various times reminisced on my unlikely career trajectory; it is not the first time that I have been asked "how did you get to 'Island Studies'"? And I have therefore asked myself this same question, and sought valuable markers, in time and place, to help craft a narrative. I have welcomed the encouragement of *Shima's* editorial team to consider how my "subjective perceptions, imagination and interpretation" have informed my ongoing research and writing practices in/of 'Island Studies' (Hayward & Evans, 2026), tentatively working my way 'upstream' to then engage with three, select "seminal encounters". These experiences-in-place, I believe, have occurred and led to their historical outcomes because they brought specific characters, places and/or technologies together around me while I was especially sensitive to their impact.

A Note on Method

Being a social scientist, I am quite aware of the tricks, dupes and guiles that memory and recollection tend to play on our minds despite our best intentions. Awareness, however, does not imply that I can somehow think 'clean' or 'outside' of these conditions: memory is "highly constructive" (Sutton, 2024, p. 593); and it is frankly impossible for us humans to operate externally to the complexity of ongoing memory assembly and modification. Then, there is the delicate topic of self-esteem and what Ervin Goffman (1959) referred to as "the presentation of self": the manner in which Godfrey Baldacchino wishes to present Godfrey Baldacchino. And not just for contemporary consumption: there is also the other business of how we would like posterity to remember us. At age 65 at the time of writing, this is a concern that I find myself thinking about.

In what follows, I resort here to a personal/auto-ethnography, or reflexive sociology (Bochner and Ellis, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 1997): a style of writing which I have resorted to in parts of my ongoing island studies scholarship (e.g. Baldacchino, 2007). Involving oneself as both participant *and* observer implies being a convoluted 'spect-actor' who is audience and actor to the same plot (Boal, 1992). This stance and genre can be seen to add layers of complexity to the research process (Jacobs, 1970; Foote Whyte, 1994); but it can also be presented as a manner of recognising the bias and self-centered ontologies that drive *all* research. Indeed, the genre challenges accepted views about (re)presentations of the world where the researcher's voice is suspiciously sanitised, camouflaged or stifled (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997). The approach also begets a style of and focus on writing one's story that may appear self-indulgent, self-serving, narcissistic and thoroughly unscholarly to orthodox research perspectives (Coffey, 1999). Critical self-reflexivity sits uncomfortably with such traditional criteria as credibility, dependability, rigour or trustworthiness, which lie at the basis of judging the merits of scholarly quantitative work (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998; Holt, 2003) and which can be applied to the qualitative realm. However, the approach has its own rewards, enabling powerfully introspective accounts. And so, I here seek to engage in a highly personalised account, tapping into my recollections of intimate experiences and (at times excruciating) deliberations.

So, I have composed and performed what are intended as what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls "thick descriptions" of each of three pivotal events. These stand out vividly in my mind as signposts in my life; and the passage of time seems to have reinforced their justification as such. The first occurred in July 1978, while on a ship at sea, close to Southern Sicily. The second unfolded in Malta in June 1990. The third took place in Charlottetown, Canada, in August 1999. In these discrete situations, locked forever in my mind "in time and space," I have gained an "awareness of new possibilities that transcend ordinary or mundane concerns" (Oleynick, Thrash, LeFlew et al., 2014, p. 1). I will try and capture their geo-spatial, surface-level observations but also go beyond these, seeking to provide rich, contextualised accounts of human behaviour (including my own). In so doing, and in explaining how and why the meanings, intentions, and cultural nuances of the thoughts, actions and decisions of the moment were significant, I allow others to grasp a sense of the power of each of these three moments.

A caveat before proceeding further. I am born and bred in the small island state of Malta. I am therefore, and have always been, an islander, at least via the accident of birth and genealogy. My family name, Baldacchino, can be traced to Sicily; and from these possibly to the Middle East: *Baldac* is a medieval Latin form for Baghdad. However, there have been

Baldacchinos in Malta for centuries – there are three such names from a 1419 Militia List - and it is the 20th most common family name in Malta today. So, the island pedigree is solid.

This is important in the context of this *Shima* special collection for one main reason: most of its contributors 'came to' island studies by coming to islands. They have had their 'eureka' moments by, perhaps, finding their way to a particular island (or archipelago) and subsequently being impacted by its small scale, sheer idiosyncrasy, beauty, and other aspects of 'islandness'. Like a few other island scholars – and including those who do not necessarily define themselves as such – I also 'came to' island studies, but not by acknowledging it as "a special focus of place studies" (Hay, 2006, p. 34). Rather, by turning around my gaze, and recognising Malta for what it was, and had been since my birth: my island home. The study of islands as unique places, yet bearing many lessons for us all, came later.

Episode I

I was born in April 1960, the elder of two sons. My father George was an electrician working at the Malta Dockyard, the only job he held in his life, from a 'yard boy' at age 14 to retirement at 61. He never made it past primary education. He came from a working-class family with 13 other siblings. My mother Agnes, one of five children, was (for her time) well educated, including a Diploma from the national Teacher's Training College. She was a primary school teacher for most of her life. She egged me and my brother Alex on to study and excel at school. My parents paid the bills and served meat for Sunday lunch, but they were not particularly rich. They also held different ideological political beliefs. One can imagine the colourful discussions in the house, especially during election cycles: a situation that probably made me question dogmatism.

I am also saying all this to press a point which may appear surprising today: I had never been out of Malta until the summer of 1978, at age 18. My holidays, our holidays, until then had been exclusively to Malta's sister island of Gozo, for up to a week in a rented apartment; and, at least once, to the even smaller island of Comino, for a day trip. Until past age eighteen, the Maltese islands were my world and, as far as I was concerned, they were *the* world. (Indeed, my father's *only* trip abroad during his 76 years of life was to Scotland, to attend my brother's wedding.) The 'island experience' meant going to Gozo or Comino: Malta was the inexorable mainland. (Even today, in my consciousness, Malta is primarily a country, albeit a very small one, not an island. There, I feel no regular sense of islandness except, say, when the only airport runway is closed; or the goods don't arrive on supermarket shelves from Italy because of bad weather.) Sure, there were these other places beyond Malta that we could glimpse on our black and white television set, and about which we could hear from the accounts of those few that had left Malta and come back. Such places as Italy, England, America, Australia. But I could not be *sure* that they existed. (Presumably, many 'islanders' around the world may recognise this description, especially if they live in similar, archipelagic geographies.)

That changed in July 1978. I had just completed my first academic year reading a bachelor's degree in English and Social Studies at the University of Malta (UM). In that summer, I joined some of my university friends to participate in a week-long convention taking place in Linguaglossa, on the foot of Mount Etna, in eastern Sicily. We took the ferry which departed from Valletta, Malta and landed in Pozzallo, Sicily. The trip was around five hours long, the seas were rough, and I was suffering from motion sickness for most of the journey. I remember being on the deck of the vessel while approaching Sicily. It was dark but I could

see the lights along the whole coast getting closer as the ship slowly made harbour. I was nauseated, gulping fresh air, clutching a bag, and trying to concentrate on looking at the oncoming horizon to stave my urge to vomit again (it gets more painful when the stomach is empty). I remember telling myself that here, finally is the incontrovertible proof that the Maltese Islands are not alone in the universe. There were, indeed, *other places*. I could now see them with my own eyes. And it is also at that point in time and space that I established a 'mainland' – Sicily – within my cognitive map. It is at that point in time and place that I dislodged and unsettled Malta from the centre of everything and relegated it for the first time to the status of an (eventually small) archipelago. It was a moment of reconfiguration and revelation that, to me, henceforth established islands as relational and interstitial geographies: there would not/ could not really be 'islands' without 'mainlands' (Pugh, 2016; Simpson & Sheller, 2022). Eventually acknowledging that Sicily itself – despite its size and population – was an island on the edge of Italy/Europe afforded depth and layering to my new, psycho-physical ontology.

Coming to Sicily by/from the sea is also a pivotal experience: most observers, tourists and other visitors 'come to' islands – and Island Studies – from/by the air. They arrive as temporary guests to a (small) island which they summarily, unwittingly, start to stereotype, sometimes with the very connivance of the locals: a tempting paradise, an offshore getaway, a tax haven, a quaint community, a last redoubt for endemic species and, of late, "geographies of hope" in the face of the climate challenge (Baldacchino, 2008; 2020; Turner, 2008). They tend to map and essentialise 'island spaces' in the same way mapping software does – adopting a top-down, Google-Maps-style perspective: little realising that this is an outcome of a culture grown accustomed to Western cartography and satellite technology (Baldacchino, 2005). And then they leave, in the same way they arrive.

Experiencing the size and diversity of Sicily during that week also made me start appreciating how small Malta is. But the feeling that stuck most is the sense of being 'out' of Malta finally, and thus being able to start seeing it differently, from outside. It was the first of many experiences in my life whereby I started feeling nostalgic and attracted, but also frustrated and disappointed, by things Maltese; I could sense and see that not everything that happened in Malta happened elsewhere; or that it happened exactly in the same way.

This episode was significant because I had to get to and develop a sense and consciousness of islandness before getting to Island Studies. Indeed, I can say now that I am one of a small band of Island Studies scholars who actually comes from a small island jurisdiction, which has also been a sovereign state since 1964. That Malta is indeed a sovereign state owes much to its islandness (Baldacchino, 2015). Malta is today the tenth smallest country in the world, by land area. I continue to be mesmerised by the sheer 'miracle' – as geographer David Lowenthal (2007) described it – of how a set of parched limestone rocks with a semi-arid climate and bereft of any noteworthy natural resources – "practically a desert"- can maintain a thriving and differentiated economy, a dense population of over 500,000, plus welcome around four million tourists annually (Debono and Baldacchino, 2021).

Episode II

Fast forward to 1990. I had completed my BA (first class) from the University of Malta (UM) in 1980; secured a postgraduate certificate in education, also at the UM, in 1982. I married Anna in 1985 and graduated with distinction with a Master of Arts in Development Studies from the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands, in December 1986. Since

November 1981, I had been working as a research assistant at the Workers' Participation Development Centre (WPDC), a labour studies outfit at UM. I enjoyed the academic world, and its opportunity for teaching but especially for doing research. After suitable discussions with my wife, we had decided that I should embark on doctoral studies. This was, already at that time, considered to be the gold standard for anyone aspiring to a university academic post. A suitable supervisor had to be identified for my thesis, and preferably from a reputable university in the United Kingdom.

But: *what thesis*? This was a life-defining moment: I was quite aware that the choice of a research hypothesis would need to be strategic; something that could hopefully land me in an academic niche where I could thrive and for which there would be some demand, possibly within the WPDC itself. In Spring 1990, I developed an abstract about labour relations, trade unions and economic development – nothing to do with islands! – and sent this off to a number of British universities. Four, if I remember correctly: Cambridge, Oxford, Sussex and Warwick. All these had what I considered to be suitable labour studies programmes and professors with specialisations in development studies (what was also referred to as a focus on the 'Third World'). Note: when I say 'sent this off', this meant a printed 'hard copy', via conventional mail. (There was no email or internet service at that time.)

Waiting for a reply was agonising. Cambridge and Oxford sent bad news: they could not identify suitable supervisors. Then Sussex came in with an offer; but the two scholars who expressed a potential interest in supervising me were in Urban Studies. With all respect to their expertise, I gambled and politely turned down the offer. It was now either Warwick or bust; and, if bust, then perhaps try again next year. Perhaps. So many things could go wrong in the meantime.

The University of Warwick (UW) *did* reply, with a letter, received in June 1990. It was written in freehand in red ink by Gibson Burrell, professor of organisational behaviour. The red suggested urgency. My suspicions were correct. The letter basically said: thank you for your interest. You have an interesting CV and we would be happy to have you and offer suitable supervision in the guise of none other than Richard Hyman, professor of industrial relations, with someone from sociology serving as co-supervisor. However, the thesis abstract you have submitted is rather stale, boring, unimaginative. Could I revise and resubmit with something more exciting, cutting edge and original? You can and should do better, Note one important detail: the PhD applications committee is meeting *this week*. If you agree to resubmit, fax us your revised abstract.

I remember the adrenaline rush. I basically had to turn around a fresh thesis proposal in twenty-four hours. In that situation, I was desperate for inspiration, disappointed at my initial submission while thanking my lucky stars for this opportunity, possibly my last chance to get my PhD studies going. I sat down and, in my confused and unsettled state, I drafted a completely new proposal, introducing 'island' matters for the first time. The theme now was Labour Relations in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). At the WPDC, I remembered having come across an article by Guy Standing, a professor at the International Labour Organisation, dealing with workers' and class struggle in the developing world (Standing, 1986). While reading that article, I had asked myself: how would 'class struggle' look and pan out in places with hardly any manufacturing capacity at all? When a small brewery may be the main – perhaps *only* – locally owned manufacturing unit in a small island state (as I confirmed in my own research years later, Baldacchino [2010]) – how does one start to frame radical sociology, class consciousness and labour movements? I had not come across, but was aware of, a 1983 book chapter that had considered the sheer ridiculousness of setting up

an auto assembly factory in Seychelles, a SIDS (Kaplinsky, 1983). Would the *hotel* (icon of the service and hospitality sector) take the place of the *factory* (emblematic of the manufacturing sector) and serve as the hotbed for class and trade union consciousness in such small island countries?

The proposal was faxed the next morning. Within a couple of days, I received a faxed handwritten note from Prof. Burrell. I was accepted. I started my PhD at UW in September that same year. I met my supervisors, Prof. Hyman, joined by Dr Peter Fairbrother, an Australian labour sociologist, about twice a month, sharing drafts each time before we met. During my limited time based in the U.K., I scoured the UW Library, and milked the Interlibrary Loan Facility, for any document pertaining to any small island developing state, from Antigua and Barbuda to Vanuatu. The SIDS label was receiving its own scientific scrutiny, since the community of such states was becoming more vocal and better organised at the United Nations, and particularly through its Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS); so, I explored this literature too. My family and I – we had two boys by then: James (born 1985) and Luke (born 1991) – lived in a cold house on Peel Street, Coventry, for nine months before returning to Malta where I continued the programme on a part-time basis, finishing in 1993. (I had no scholarship and was supported by half my regular wages from UM: we simply could not cope with the university fees at UW, rent, heating, etc. in the UK). I am eternally grateful to my father-in-law and a dear family friend who lent us the money necessary to help cover the cost of one-year of full-time tuition at Warwick: around six thousand pounds sterling at the time. As it turned out, the editor of the 1983 book in which Kaplinsky had published his chapter was Professor Robin Cohen. He was also at UW and served as my internal examiner for my PhD, thesis. My *viva voce* exam in 1993 turned into a three-hour saga that got me writing an article in the first volume of a new publication, the *Journal of Graduate Education* (Baldacchino, 1995).

Episode III

Fast forward again, this time to summer 1999. My wife and I were again in Charlottetown, capital of Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada's smallest and only fully island province. The University of PEI had invited me to an international conference back in 1992 – when I was still a PhD student – and, apparently, they liked what they got. I ended up co-editing one of that conference's two volumes based on its main proceedings. (Baldacchino & Greenwood, 1998). The co-organisers of the 1992 conference were quite a contrast: a professor of political science from Ontario, really interested in sovereignty and small jurisdictions: Barry Bartmann; and an island history teacher, committed to developing an appreciation for everything to do with PEI, and realising that its place in 'our world of islands' was the path to do it: Harry Baglole. Harry set up the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at UPEI in 1985; and Barry gave it academic legitimacy.

I was in Charlottetown again, in Summer 1999. It was becoming a regular summer destination for me; and Anna started joining me as from 1996. We fell in love with the place, its people, its relatively carefree lifestyle, its open spaces, and the vision of the IIS. In 1999, I was teaching an intensive hybrid summer course on Island Studies, mainly to business students at UPEI. One evening that summer, Anna, the boys and I were invited to dinner by Barry at his Hutchinson Court flat in Charlottetown. His long-time friend, a political science professor, David Milne, was also there. Small talk soon drifted to something quite serious. Barry led the conversation. The Federal Government of Canada was financing 2,000 research chairs across all universities in the country (on the occasion of the Millennium Year, 2000).

UPEI was getting five of these 'Canada Research Chairs' (CRCs) and internal discussions at the university had led to a decision to allocate one of these chairs to Island Studies. Would I be interest in applying?

My world once again turned upside down. There would be an international call, and others were likely to apply. If successful, it would be a prestigious appointment, initially for five years, renewable. It would mean leaving UM and relocating with the family to UPEI, PEI and Canada. I could dedicate myself to shaping this 'new' discipline: publications, conferences, a new journal, a new Master's degree in Island Studies, building a community of scholars, a solid base from which to apply for research grants… I conferred with Anna. She approved. I applied. I later found out that 26 academics from around the world had officially expressed an interest in the position. Five of these were shortlisted, myself included. I was invited to an extensive series of interviews in 2001. I got the position and served as CRC in Island Studies for ten years: 2003-2013.

The lingering feeling from this dinner conversation was, first, a deep sense of humility that these Canadian scholars could see something valuable in me: energy, passion, strong inter-disciplinarity, proven ability to work with others and deliver quality scholarship. Second, a sense of adventure, being a trailblazer, a pioneer, with a prestigious appointment in tow. Third, some hesitation at the uplifting that any such appointment would cause: myself (and my employer, UM), my wife (and her work), my boys (their schools and friends), and our surviving parents.

Still today, to my mind, PEI is primarily an island; and its people are Islanders, as they are known. I spent most of my time as CRC at UPEI trying to alert these PEI Islanders that they are also a jurisdiction (because they are an island), and that comes with certain powers that, I felt, could have been better acknowledged and deployed (Baldacchino and Stuart, 2008). Political and geographical assemblages do not always align; but being an island certainly improves the odds for jurisdictional autonomy, even sovereign statehood (Baldacchino & Milne, 2000, Baldacchino, 2012). It has gradually dawned on me how, as in the case of PEI as well as Malta, being an island or archipelago explains why these places are and remain a Canadian province and a sovereign state respectively.

A seminally formative travel narrative

As explained by Hayward and Evans (2026) in their introduction to this special issue, the set of these three accounts above results from an endeavour in a dual sense: I have chosen to recognise them as seminally formative; and I have thus explained and elaborated why this is so; and, in the outcome, constructed "a useable past" (Sutton, 2024, p. 602). The locations of the troika of episodes, and the considerable time lapse in between, offers an idiosyncratic "travel narrative" (Hayward, 2026); one that, in my case, spans many decades, and – like Homer's *Odyssey* – is distinctly archipelagic, roping in multiple destinations, and mainly islands large (Sicily, Britain) and small (Prince Edward Island, Malta, Gozo, Comino). Sadly, I have no photos to capture any of these three moments. (Taking photos, and in those pre-mobile-phone-with-inbuilt-camera days, would have been the last thing on my mind in all these three scenarios.)

The journey described here is also one that explores the complex triangle between place, politics and identity. It does so at least in two ways: first, cognitively and heuristically, by establishing a clear relationship between the materiality of island geography; the love-hate

relationship that islanders endure with their essentialised mainland; and the strategic deployment of island-based sensibilities in island politics, possibly fanned by political parties, thriving on the obvious physical distance between island and mainland (or between islands themselves – Hepburn & Baldacchino, 2013). Second, in how I have navigated my own identity as a Maltese, and then as a Maltese Canadian social scientist; conscious and proud of my heritage and birth country and appreciative of the added value and strength afforded by my ability to work and live outside Malta – an experience that my wife and two boys have shared. No wonder my publications attest to both a global sense of curiosity, as well as to an appreciation of the beauty and potential of both my Mediterranean and Canadian Maritime 'island homes' (Baldacchino & Baldacchino, 2025).

Conclusion

Looking back, now at age 65, and close to retirement from UM, I must acknowledge the many who have helped to shape the trajectory that my life has taken. In a nod to Actor Network Theory, we form, and are formed by, the persons who we allow into our networks as significant others (Latour, 1996). They facilitate our 'actorness', leading us to surprising situations, and nudging us to take decisions which may have momentous consequences. They also help push further out what economists call the production-possibility frontier (Carson & Tsigaris, 2011). They nudge us beyond the brink. As German historian Max Weber put it in 1918: "man [*sic*] would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible" (Weber, in Gerth & Wright Mills, 1946). This is a favourite maxim of mine. Nowadays, 'islandness' is probably increasingly recognised as an intervening variable in island life. At least, I no longer find myself often in situations where I need to justify my craft to sceptics: unlike decades ago when, even at UPEI itself, my work was not always appreciated and valued. Being myself born in Malta, an islander, has probably made it easier for me to understand intuitively the monopolistic tendencies of small island economies, the ubiquitous nature of small island politics and the dense intimacy of small island communities. But not before having unlearnt and distanced myself from the paradigmatic and epistemic logic of 'mainland' thinking.

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