

## Insularity: Representations and Constructions of Small Worlds, 2013- Conference Review

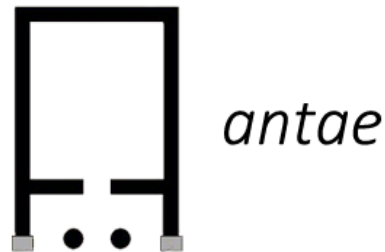
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## **Insularity: Representations and Constructions of Small Worlds, 2013 – Conference Review**

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In November 2013, the Department of German at the University of Malta held its first international interdisciplinary conference, titled ‘Insularity: Representations and Constructions of Small Worlds’. The three-day conference took place at Europe House and the Old University Building, both in Valletta, Malta. Except for the second day, which featured several parallel sessions, the conference panels were grouped on an alternating thematic basis making the panel system as dynamic as possible. Despite the relatively tight schedule, the conference moved along smoothly and showed all the signs of an extremely well-organised, efficient and professional event. This review will attend to some of the main recurring strands of thought that featured throughout the conference accordingly.

### **Linguistic and Socio-Anthropological Spaces of Insularity**

After the welcome address by Professor Dominic Fenech, the conference got under way with the first paper called ‘Insularity: A Blessing or a Curse’, given by the head of the Department of German of the University of Malta, Professor Mario Vassallo. This was a most apposite paper to start with, dealing as it did with the rudiments of insularity, thereby serving as a welcome introduction to the papers that followed. Moreover, Professor Vassallo’s paper flagged up the ambiguous nature of insularity, which turned out to be a salient feature of the discussion on insularity. From the start, Professor Vassallo said that he only sought to contribute to the analysis, rather than to answer any particular question. This undogmatic position set the tone for the rest of the conference since it was to be a mainstay in the approaches of the majority of the papers presented.

Some of the main approaches throughout the conference led to an exposition and discussion of a more or less straightforwardly framed insularity, that is, an insularity not bound by a more abstruse hinterland of thought, such as those that based their studies in linguistic and socio-anthropological discourse. To summarise these papers briefly would be to do them an injustice, but for our purposes it will serve to do so and to then expand on certain further aspects with accordant examples emerging from the conference.

In brief, most of these papers undertook a general examination of how various ethnic groups, or a more general and abstract representation of said ethnicities, coalesce and disconnect from a particular language(s) and/or language feature(s); how they adapt or decline, both in a stable or non-stable environment (be it native or diasporic), which adaptations and diminishment take multiple forms, from the purely linguistic to the cultural and symbolic; how, through their adaptations and diminishment, they become something separate or even unrecognizable from what they previously were, but always holding in that change visible or potentially demonstrable ties to their ancestral spaces; and finally, how they function and present themselves in surprising ways, in linguistic, social and even ideologically-charged manners in the present day, both in their native lands and elsewhere. Even the more specific papers managed to espouse a degree of interdisciplinary reach.

It is from such a general overview that we can come to examples of some specifics. The audience could delve into instances of insularity in action or insularity fossilized in various topics. In Professor Ralf Heimrath's paper, for example, the desolation of the Puhoi strand of German in New Zealand was revealed, so that in the present day only five speakers of the variant remain, four of whom are unaccounted for. On the other hand, a paper like Dr. Arndt Kremer's 'Lost Spaces, Lost in Space: Language Island(s) and Cultural Memory of German-Jewish Emigrants in Palestine/Israel 1935-1948' looked into why the German language spoken by the émigré Jews survived in language pockets in Israel. Despite the desolating context in which the German language found itself, it was maintained, up to a point, for various not purely pragmatic reasons. Language islands thus become testaments of a cultural identity that could not be uprooted despite its being spoken in a land where it could be considered the language of anathema. This of course was reflected in a wider politico-hegemonic struggle, sometimes affected with discriminatory policies within these language islands.

The exploration of several present day socio-linguistic trends and signs was even better represented in the conference, with papers shifting from a linguistic focus to a more politically-oriented one. Of particular interest to the local scene were papers that dealt with the Maltese linguistic landscape, including Professor Ray Fabri's well-tuned exposition of the coloniser versus native situation in the relationship between English and Maltese in the present day, with the paper giving an overarching view of both the positive and negative effects of linguistic borrowing, and the dynamics of the ever-changing Maltese English variant. Complementing this was Professors Lydia Sciriha and Mario Vassallo's paper 'Insular Malta: Self-Expression of Linguistic Identity through Public Signs', which explored whether or not Malta's physical isolation affected the language in public spheres of expression, from residential to commercial, and from governmental to non-governmental. Though some of the results, such as the relatively high number of Latin place or house names found in several local districts, were to be expected

due to Malta's historical association with an ecclesiastically empowered state, other findings, like the prominence of German, or even Dutch, house names in various districts of the island were indeed surprising and showed that insularity (to whatever degree it exists), at least outwardly, did not necessarily involve being cordoned off from other languages. Throughout the conference, the idea that insularity is actually, though paradoxically, relational was often investigated and reinforced.

Shifting focus to a more political realisation of such linguistic research were papers like Dr Alina Ganea's on 'Identity, Belonging and Insularity in the Representation of Romanians in the Diaspora Discourse', which focused on the emergence of Romanian diasporic communities, especially after the end of the Ceaușescu government, and how they both adapted to their host countries (Canada, for example) and managed to maintain their own identity whilst away from their native country, particularly through the use of media. In contrast to this, Gabriela Scripnic's paper 'Insularity within a Country: the Discourse Related to the Danube Delta's Inhabitants' expertly probed the political dimension of the language situation in Romania's Danube delta's inhabitants, providing a well-rounded and intriguing dissection through a discourse analysis of the place's written media, political talk, and that of the inhabitants themselves—all with the aim of exploring the isolation, perceived and not, of the delta community. This small selection of papers from the many presented in this field showcases not only the variety present, but also their interwoven and complementary nature.

## **Literary Spaces and Insularity**

As one would expect from a conference set on interdisciplinarity, the literary, in as many variegated forms imaginable, had a strong presence on all three days. These papers were not entirely disconnected from those that dealt with linguistic and socio-anthropological themes, in that they performed, in their own manner—be it literary, cultural, political, philosophical, etc.—an exposition of another hinterland of insularity, one that cannot be collated without recourse to more abstract insights.

Among the more socio-politically-oriented papers that dealt with an insularity based in literary texts or happenings, one could find several that revolved around postcolonial and imperialistic ambiguities. Harmut Burggrabe's paper, for example, dealt with the attitudes of German-speaking authors in their travels to Sicily in the twentieth century, in which Sicily served as an interstitial place, socially, culturally, politically, and even as a metaphysical plane of sorts

between life and death. A more direct engagement with (post-)colonial realities could be found in Professor Jutta Zimmermann's paper 'Sullivan's Island: An Exemplary Post-Colonial Site', dealing as it did with a small geographical space testament to past conflicts as a symbol of decolonisation (in the American Revolution) and of imperialism (Sullivan Island being a drop-off point for 40% of all African slaves in the period). The paper also dealt with present-day conflicts, since Sullivan's Island is equally the site for the contentions of memory, with the memorial for Fort Sullivan's famous commander omitting his involvement in the slave trade, and Toni Morrison's bench for unnamed slaves being omitted from the local pamphlet guides for tourists.

A conference on insularity happening in Malta must at some point treat Malta as the locus for not only linguistic, but also literary insularity, especially in view of its paradoxical exposure to such a variety of cultures. As such, the Maltese literary scene was represented in the form of Dr Adrian Grima and Professor Richard Spiteri's papers on Juan Mamo, and on Laurent Rapa and Paul Achard respectively. These again offered valuable insight into the sometimes uneasy, even combative, connection between insularity and its exposure to other cultures.

More poetic considerations of insularity could be found elsewhere in the conference, as in Julia Vomhof's paper 'The Topos of Seduction in Rilke's *The Island of the Sirens*', which focused on the ambivalent and seductive nature of insularity—and in so doing invoked Professor Carola Hilmes's earlier paper on essay and aphorism—where we encounter an interpretation of island insularity and inaccessibility as possibility (which in turn brings to mind the 'productiveness' of reclusivity). Vomhof was particularly interested in the sirens' seduction through silence, a silence which shrouds so much of the poem in doubt, so that while silence thrives, language fails in Rilke's poem. This connected with Dr Mario Aquilina's paper, 'Shores, Cliffs and other Shifting Frames: the Island as a Trope of Non-Insularity', which took up this point of the insularity that puts one in a position of silence, through examining poetic texts by Donne, Arnold and Celan. The final lines of Donne's famous text suggest that there is hope in the tolling of the bell's echo, which can be read as being the voice hearing itself, so that such an ending shatters the possibility of even thinking of oneself as being completely isolated. In fact, as Dr Aquilina pointed out, to talk of islands is to talk of the sea. Though the sea separates, one can also speak of the relation between these two bodies. The paper also moved on to an 'insular' analysis of text, demonstrating how Arnold's 'we immortal millions live alone'—read aphoristically as an island of text, so to speak—is a paradox. Celan, on the other hand, whilst often being called hermetic, has also referred to poetry as a 'handshake'. In Celan's case, poetry seems to speak to the Other to name silence; it is the stone that speaks but does not talk. In poetry of this kind, Aquilina argued, we are obliged to be in constant motion between two poles.

Islands, which are associated but not necessarily commensurate with insularity, as Professor Godfrey Baldacchino's paper 'Smallness and Islandness: Whether the Twain Shall Meet'? pointed out, were another mainstay of the literary side of the conference. Many of these conceptions revolved around the island as a notion of a socio-politically/philosophically charged space for fluctuation. In Dr Peter Arnds' paper, Giorgio Agamben's theory on sovereignty and bare life was brought to bear on William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*. The insularity present in the work reveals some frightening aspects of human nature. Similarly, Johannes Riquet's presentation showed that the island is a figure of instability in the writing of Darwin, which is a worrying thought if, as Derrida says, 'there is no world, there are only islands'. Tackling similar issues of volatile space was Dr James Corby's paper 'An Island No Man Is: Insularity without Subjectivity in Coetzee's *Foe*'. Dr Corby started off with reference to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, explaining how this is a fundamental novel in more ways than one, it being a novel about intrinsic independence. In this sense, the long succession of novels written by individuals before Crusoe is important, especially when one takes into consideration the biographical, historical and travel book nature of the narrative in *Robinson Crusoe*. It is in view of this that Coetzee characterises *Robinson Crusoe* as a fake confession. Dr Corby argued that the literary form that follows realism cannot hope to bring Friday to speak and give accurate representation of his world; rather, we must get the silence to speak, though this is of course a tricky, if at all possible, task.

Thus, the question of how to represent insularity once again summons the problem of language and silence. A discussion of Judith Schalansky's somewhat eccentric work, *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln*, was also particularly interesting on this point of representation and the ever present threat of chimeras. Katrin Dautel considers cartography as a kind of literature that enables an imaginary world to emerge. The map is thus both a concrete object and a rhetorical figure that makes use of arbitrary signs and symbols that rely on the reader's interpretation, so that it ultimately interprets rather than represents the world. Insularity's resistance to a categorical understanding features once again in Dautel's references to Deleuze and Guattari's comments on the spaces that are not registered on a map, and to de Certeau's idea of non-mappable, spatial, everyday life practices. Schalansky's representation of islands in her book suggests the usual association with remoteness and autonomy, but the authorial investment in representation can also be seen to temper that very remoteness and autonomy. The island in Schalansky is made all the more elusive since her book lacks a cartographic key, while the texts accompanying the maps merge factual record with fictional projection—she uses the power of cartography to create the impression of an empirical disproof of island myths, but in so doing, Dautel argues, Schalansky places herself as sovereign over these islands, betraying a latent colonial arrogance. This interpretation was later challenged in the discussion by the suggestion

that Schalansky's book is subversive in its counter-travelling impulse because it exposes the colonial mechanism rather than succumbs to it. However, the nature of insularity and the problem of representation remained, appropriately, unresolved.

## **Theoretical Frissons, Insular Straits**

Some of the most direct approaches to the problem of insularity were to be found in the papers which approached the question of insularity from a more theoretical perspective. In a move away from treating examples of physical or figurative islands, the theoretical approach examined the concept of insularity in its abstract and in a sense ungrounded form, so that its remoteness and insularity became all the more defined. Professor Ivan Callus' paper 'In Praise of Insularity: Autonomy, Tone and Critical Distance' was an example of one such approach. He reminds us that the 'in praise of' tradition is characterised by the problem of determining tone, with irony and earnestness being at the respective ends of the spectrum. The title of Callus's paper thus recalls the indeterminacy inherent in the topic of insularity. Indeed, judging by how frequently the notion of ambivalence recurred in the conference, one can state that the one definitive quality of insularity is in fact its indeterminacy. There is something about the nature of insularity, according to Callus, that demands such an ambivalence. The idea of the island's non-insularity also reemerges here in an emphasis on the island's relationality, which resists the pull of its own insularity and autonomy—as in the island of Utopia. The paper then moved on to discuss the insular nature of criticism itself. If criticism must be deracinated and distant in order to ensure an extensive and authentic reach, there still remains the threat of an ivory tower existence and an insularity that turns criticism into 'unfulfilled, dry as dust scholarship', to quote Prof Callus's paper. So how can insularity be made to serve critique in and out of contemporary academia (which is sometimes disdained for its scholarly preferences)? It is worth mentioning here Dr Katrin Schödel's paper 'Forms of Insularity: Private Circles and Utopian Isles', which explored, albeit in a more political manner, similar concerns, referring to, amongst other things, the idea of utopian space as 'fortified space'. Schödel also touched upon the exploration of spaces of non-utopian insularity or the freedom that is found in narcissistic private circles, as with liberal ideology, which was then linked with Žižek's biting thoughts on the liberal capitalist world being perceived as the only possible one. But should one, perhaps, be more concerned with the inevitably insular reach of the conference itself? And could the same be said of the current status of academia, even more so with the humanities? These questions are as difficult to resolve as those probing the nature of insularity, but they may be, however, even more pressing.

Although these papers approached the theme from different theoretical perspectives, they somehow managed to elicit the same tone of concern, and Stavros Assimakopoulos' paper

rounded up this theoretical space of concern with a less abstract line of thought and a more direct confrontation of the concern outlined above, that of insularity in academia itself. He discussed the insular nature of theories—with many academics, he claimed, finding other theories not their own to be either uninteresting or futile, rendering the researcher an island of knowledge unto himself—and also the interdisciplinary work that has become so appealing nowadays, which he says can sometimes be disruptive. That being said, Assimakopoulos continued probing at why something as theoretically positive as interdisciplinarity should have researchers scared of other people's fields; why science progresses in such a slow rate given all the intellectual effort and input. After going over some of the possible reasons for these lacks and others—all sadly bound by human nature and personal human misgivings—it stands out that we are left none the wiser as to what should be done in this regard. A pertinent question from the audience pointed out the strenuous effort, at any postgraduate level, put into defining and distinguishing things, saying what one does not intend to go into, etc. instead of focusing on the research questions at hand—a practical problem which reflects a wider theoretical hold on definitional agnosticism, perhaps. Although categorical definitions have been advantageously challenged and should keep on being challenged, one might still suspect that such a ubiquitous irresoluteness is occasionally theoretically convenient without being intellectually fruitful, leading to a dead-end insularity of the worst kind. One might well ask, what happens after we have investigated the concept of insularity and unearthed its paradoxes? And there are other concerns too that should come out of this conference.

For despite the conference's interdisciplinary approach, one must still press the matter regarding the possible insularity of academia and the humanities, especially in a socio-economical climate that forces the humanities to justify themselves. Is such an insularity even slightly alleviated by the interdisciplinary effort of the conference? Any academic conference, as a critical platform, naturally risks remaining insular since it forms part of the intellectual community. The issue is perhaps far more urgent than we realise. Is criticism irreparably insular, or is it actually doing something? If Auden maintains that poetry makes nothing happen, what can we say about criticism? One might think that insularity is now an irrelevant concept due to economic and cultural globalisation, but this would be to conflate a superficial ability to access information and knowledge and the time, space and even intellectual rigour required to move from a passive inclination to an active one.

This review only offers a glimpse of the wealth of knowledge and the stimulating nature of the event held in Valletta—especially with regard to the papers that regrettably could not be mentioned. The event, it can be claimed with some confidence, was a showcase of true interdisciplinary scholarship, which perhaps is part of what is needed as a counter-balance to academic insularity. After each paper there was a critical audience which instigated a challenging



post-paper discussion—only limited by time—that was certainly merited by the intriguing and stimulating range of papers. One hopes that this will be the first of many such events, and that perhaps, the discussion will spill over the borders of its academic setting, in academia's own attempt at resisting its insularity.