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Southern thought, islandness and real-existing degrowth in the Mediterranean

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ABSTRACT

In thinking about alternatives to growth-based development, we draw attention to Mediterranean islands and the way they animate imaginaries and practices of a simple life. We follow Franco Cassano's thesis of 'Southern thought' – a critique of Western developmentalism, prioritizing instead values of slowness, moderation and conviviality. These values are central to what Serge Latouche and others call 'degrowth'. Drawing on fieldwork and ethnography from Ikaria and Gavdos, two remote islands in the Greek archipelago, we show how Southern thought, and forms of real-existing degrowth develop in relation to 'islandness' – a physical and cultural condition specific to small islands. Geography, historical contingency, and processes of myth-making combine to re-valorise what otherwise would be seen as 'undeveloped' places, thereby generating space for real-existing degrowth.

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1. Introduction

The monolithic Western model of linear progress and continuous economic growth, has colonised other worldviews with accompanying ecological and social ramifications (Escobar, 2011). Continued economic growth in high-income nations is socially and ecologically destructive (Alexander, 2012). New research agendas investigate the prospects of prosperity without growth (Jackson, 2009), of degrowth (Kallis et al., 2018), and of post-development (Escobar, 2015, Klein & Morreo, 2019), revaluing and seeking to make visible alternatives already existing in parts of the world (Acosta, 2013; Kothari et al., 2014, 2019).

Empirical studies of degrowth focus mostly on communities resisting against growth-based development or experiences of adaptation to the lack of growth (Demaria et al., 2019; Escobar, 2015). A recent collection of cases from 'postdevelopment in practice' considers alternative territorialized experiences that challenge dominant models of development (Klein & Morreo, 2019). Less attention has been given to theorizing territories which, through a mix of geographic, cultural or economic particularities, have been left on the periphery of growth-based development, and, as a result, offer lessons about what we call here 'real-existing degrowth'. In this paper, we focus on two such cases – two remote islands in the Greek archipelago and use them to think about degrowth, and the conditions under which it might be produced and sustained. We reap lessons from island studies contributing to the wider field of world development by exploring ways of improving standards of living by questioning the growth imperative and featuring other ways of enhancing human well-being.

Mediterranean islands have animated imaginaries of a simple, yet fulfilled life, embodying a set of alternative values and modes of existence likened to degrowth. In this paper we focus on two such remote islands in Greece, Ikaria and Gavdos, which are incubating, partly through accident, partly intentionally as we will show, alternative cultures that speak to broader debates about degrowth. We entertain the idea here that there is a seed in Mediterranean societies of alternative cultures – largely akin to 'degrowth' (Romano, 2012). This seed, called '*Southern thought*', is a cultural imaginary centred around values of slowness, moderation and conviviality found in the Mediterranean but widespread in the world's 'Souths' more generally (Cassano, 2012). We consider the co-production of the values of Southern thought and '*islandness*', an experiential identity linked to the condition of islands, shared by islanders and visitors alike (Conkling, 2007). We explore how alternative (degrowth-like) imaginaries and practices have been produced and transformed in these two islands, by

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asking: What are the main expressions of these imaginaries? How did they come into existence in these geographies, how did they (co)evolve over time, and to what effect? In Ikaria we show how, over time, a spirit of alterity akin to degrowth emerged and was embodied in local economic practices and institutions. In Gavdos, we focus on how the remoteness of an insular location is mobilized to animate imaginaries and practices of a frugal, communal living.

Section 2 introduces the term degrowth, and explains the concept '*real-existing degrowth*'. Section 3 presents two other core concepts used in this article: *Southern thought* and *islandness*. Section 4 presents the two case study locations and describes our methods. Sections 5 and 6 outline historical processes of real-existing degrowth in the two islands, and section 7 concludes with lessons for degrowth theory.

2. What is degrowth?

Degrowth is a diagnostic and prognostic frame that a community of activists and researchers mobilizes in response to questions of social and environmental justice (Demaria et al., 2013). The frame attributes the multi-dimensional crisis of the West (a crisis of ecological breakdown, of inequalities, and a crisis of cares) to the capitalist economic imperative of grow at all costs, or else collapse. Degrowth's prognosis articulates personal and communal action with political organizing, directed towards radically reforming states from within, and calling for changes in public investment, property, work, taxation and distribution (Kallis et al., 2020). The essence of degrowth is the notion of living well with less (Hickel, 2020), or what Serge Latouche has called 'frugal abundance' – forms of sharing and distribution that allow societies to prosper with little (Latouche, 2012). Other core principles include care, conviviality, autonomy, and 'depense' (a festive expenditure of surplus, instead of its accumulation) (Kallis, 2018). The 'de' in degrowth is then not only about less, but about politicizing the economic (Fournier, 2008), 'decolonizing the imaginary' (Latouche, 2012) – approaching wellbeing in non-economic terms, beyond a one-way future focussed only on growth. As we will illustrate with the two empirical cases developed here *degrowth marks a cultural or even ontological shift, not just a shift in economics or policy*.

In sustainability studies and ecological economics, the emphasis has been on how to degrow production and consumption equitably, given the dramatic reduction of energy and resource use necessary in high-income countries to keep the global economy within planetary boundaries (O'Neill et al., 2018). In the social sciences, there are efforts to learn from concrete experiences about what 'living without growth' could look like (various contributions in Gezon & Paulson, 2017). In a recent collection, Demaria et al. (2019) investigate 'geographies of degrowth' – territorial experiences of voluntary and involuntary slowing down. They point to three types of relevant experiences: 'nowtopian territories', such as transition towns or eco-villages, with organized processes of voluntary downshifting; 'insurgent' territories, such as the Chiapas and other 'temporary autonomous zones' (Bey, 2003) that coalesce around resource conflict areas, where people organize to stop extraction and enclosures, developing their own alternatives along the way; and 'liminal territories' (Varvarousis, 2022), such as crisis-hit Argentina or Greece, where tentative and temporal solidarity experimentations develop in the ruins of failed growth economies. We can think of such experiences as 'real-existing degrowth' – imperfect and incomplete processes of resisting growth or adapting to its end through tentative alternatives. We call these approaches 'real-existing' in juxtaposition to the plethora of idealised, normative ('utopian') models put forward in some degrowth literature.

We are particularly concerned with one type of real-existing degrowth alternative not covered by Demaria et al, namely territories at geographical margins that, for one or another reason, remain in a tenuous state of what Latouche (2004) calls 'a-development', that is, neither modernised and 'developed' nor underdeveloped. This resonates with Dhar and Chakrabarti (2019) 'world of the third' – formations that are neither capitalist nor pre-capitalist, but non-capitalist, constituting peoples that are neither fully within the circuits of global capital nor outside it. Whereas Dhar and Chakrabarti seek their 'world of the third' in the so-called third or developing world, we focus instead on the concept of a 'South within the North' – pockets of (relative) a-development within the core geographies of capitalism. By a-development we do not mean a lack of capitalist development, but specifically a strong presence of, and co-existence with pre- or non-capitalist forms of economic and social organizing. This 'turn to the North' has the advantage of positioning degrowth in locations where it is to be applied and not in some context of otherness that can be difficult to incorporate (Stavrides, 1998).

In doing so, we connect to broader debates about post-development in the Global North. Post-development has become a main source of degrowth theory (Demaria et al., 2013). What Hickel (2020), for example, describes as 'degrowth', others describe as 'un-developing' the North (Ziai, 2019) – stopping the unequal (ecological and labour) exchange and exploitation of the South by the North. Serge Latouche, an economic anthropologist working in Africa and Southeast Asia and a prominent member of the post-development school, constructed degrowth theory in the late 1990s by linking critiques of development with demands for 'degrowth' by green, anti-globalization activists back home in France. Ecological and energy concerns, downshifting, voluntary simplicity and post-growth economic policies feature in the degrowth literature, but not in that of post-development (Demaria et al., 2013). But when it comes to the actual social processes involved in the implied change, moving beyond growth means also moving beyond the prevalent model of capitalist and modernist development – so the line between degrowth and post-development is hard, and perhaps not so necessary, to draw (see Escobar, 2015).

3. Southern thought, islands and degrowth

3.1. Southern thought

Here we draw linkages between degrowth thinking, and Franco Cassano's thesis of 'Il pensiero Meridiano' or 'Southern thought', an autonomous Southern point of view, whereby the South is not an incomplete 'not-yet' North, nor thinks of its pathologies as a consequence of a lack of modernity. Cassano invites one 'not to think of the South in the light of modernity, but rather to think of modernity in the light of the South' (Cassano, 2012: 1). Central to this is reclaiming 'southern' values of slowness, moderation and conviviality. The South here is not a strict geographical demarcation (Greece for example is in southern Europe, but north of the equator), but a condition, a spirit and posture opposed to Occidental values of utility, perpetual advancement and growth.

Like degrowth scholars, Cassano defends slowness against the growing acceleration of life that destroys diverse forms of human experience (Rosa, 2013). Cassano's intention is not to 'replace the fundamentalism of speed with one of slowness, but to return humanity to its mastery over time' (Cassano, 2012: xxix). Moderation is 'a dialectic point of equilibrium against all kinds of fundamentalisms' (Cassano, 2012: xxv); not a banal middle ground, but an awareness of limits and contradictions. Following Camus, Cassano imagines an alternative project for Europe rooted in repressed values of the Mediterranean: 'the balance and equilib-

rium between extremes; the awareness of final limits and boundaries; ...; the respect for nature' (Cassano, 2012: xxi).

There is an affinity here with a degrowth discourse that proposes a planned slowdown to respect planetary boundaries, pursuing wellbeing by a convivial reclamation of the commons. The degrowth debate began in Mediterranean France and the resemblance of Southern thought to Latouche's theory of 'frugal abundance' is not accidental. Both Cassano and Latouche link their claims to Albert Camus's 'happy poverty' based on communal conviviality (Kallis, 2019). Cassano could be writing a degrowth manifesto when he calls for 'a [different] path that, by decommodifying at least in part the sun and the sea, makes them become again shared public properties and the centre of Southern identity; a path that removes the negative sign from all statistics of the South, because it stops comparing with that which is other than itself' (Cassano, 2012: 78). Instead of aspiring to become richer by enclosing and expanding private bounties, such a path would 'instead restore roads, beaches, and gardens to everyone, when we are cured of the obsessive search for separation and distinction' (Cassano, 2012: 15).

Cassano uses 'the South' as a metaphor for the Souths (and Southern spirited subjects) of the world, but sees the Mediterranean especially and its geography exemplifying this desired moderation. A lake-like sea, the Mediterranean's ever-present land and sea, in proximity to one another, serve as an antidote to territorial or Atlantic fundamentalisms, he argues. 'If land grounds identity, common belonging, and the social contract, the sea illustrates, by contrast, the idea of departure, the pointing of the bow on a freely chosen route, the adventure of individual freedom' (Cassano, 2012: Prologue, l). The Mediterranean, according to Cassano, is a sea that connects as much as divides; a sea of diversity and moderation where the 'other' is always present. Mediterranean values can then become antidotes to the crisis of Occidental economic paradigms of speed, excess and unlimited growth.

Cassano traces Southern thought to classical Greece, finding a 'structural homology between the geographic configuration of Greece (and the relationship between land and sea) and its culture' (p.16) ... with 'the fractal geography of the Aegean [being] crucial to the development of ancient Greek thought' (xix). The Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean, Cassano argues, separate lands and set a distance that is never the excess of the seemingly limitless ocean. Which brings us to islands.

3.2. Islandness

Islands have been conceptualised as microcosms or laboratories where their boundedness and usually small scale render processes easier to study (Grove, 1995; Royle, 2014). In social science as well as in popular culture, islands are often seen as enclaves of difference, enclosing 'the ideal'. Utopian thinkers such as Thomas More, contemporary radical scholars and even urban dwellers have used the metaphor of the liberated island stronghold to distinguish an 'unspoiled' inside from a hostile outside (Stavrides, 2013).

Island studies (Baldacchino, 2004, 2006) marked an important turn, studying islands *on their own terms* and through the lens of the condition of *islandness*. The formation of a shared identity based on geographical isolation is found in peripheral areas, mountain valleys or even metaphorical islands. Real islands though share a particular, largely common *experiential identity* (Baldacchino, 2006; Conkling, 2007; Stratford, 2008), widely felt, yet conspicuously hard to pin down. Key here is the effect of the sea (Hay, 2013). Conkling (2007: 191) describes *islandness* as 'a metaphysical sensation that derives from the heightened experience that accompanies physical isolation ... reinforced by boundaries of often frightening and occasionally impassable bodies of water'.

Others highlight the omnipresence of the coast in islands, creating a littoral zone (Pearson, 2006) or ecotone (Gillis, 2014), where two ecosystems connect creating a unique environment different from each. Recent island scholarship conceptualises islands as simultaneously open and closed systems, insular and embedded within complex multi-relational systems, emphasizing interactions rather than boundaries (Hayward, 2012; Pugh, 2016). The boundaries of an island are not a fence, but a 'filter' of flows – back and forth of the islanders, and of interactions with 'outsiders' who come and go or stay.

Islandness then is not just a 'sense of place' (Massey, 2013), but also the practice of human relations, the 'doing the island' (Vannini & Taggart, 2013). This process can encompass 'how distinctive island identities develop, how they are experienced and what effects they have on habits of thought and action, on socio-economic structures and political processes, and the way that these engage with the externally determined facts of geography and history' (Warrington & Milne, 2007: 381-2).

Revisiting Cassano and degrowth from the perspective of islandness, the issue is not so much the supposed structural homology between islands' physical geography and alternative modes of thought, but how special insular experiential identities form and contribute to a diversity of modes of existence. Could the emotional geography of islands, the condition of islandness, help us understand and collectively design alternative developmental pathways (Karampela et al., 2017; Petridis et al., 2017; Stratford, 2008)?

Hay (2006, 2013) argues in favor of a *phenomenological* approach to studying island identity through the critical reflection of lived experiences. We report here on such lived experiences from two remote Greek islands, Ikaria and Gavdos, showing how 'Southern thought' and 'islandness' play out in concrete geographical contexts in ways that produce tentative and incomplete alternatives that one can consider as real-existing degrowth. Southern thought, we argue is not an a-temporal quality, but a set of ideas and imaginaries continuously expressed and transformed through practice. We show how developing consciousness and a sense of pride around a 'Southern' difference is a crucial condition through which a project of degrowth can get established and become voluntary and desired, rather than involuntary or accidental.

Cassano (2012) points to continuous swings between representations of the Mediterranean as a tourist paradise and an archaic underdeveloped hell, calling for a balance where the pathologies of the Mediterranean are not essentialised but its wounds (sic) 'are discussed' (pp. 136). The challenge, he writes, is 'not archaeological but political' (pp. 53). He stops short of attending to the political production (and destruction) of Mediterranean's alterity and the social struggles involved in defending and renewing it. As Lawler (2016) notes, in the international press, one can find articles about longevity and living well on the Greek islands side by side with those celebrating policies of austerity that target precisely this 'lazy', 'underdeveloped' mode of living. Attributing alterity to an external fractal geography destroyed by an amorphous force of 'modernization' and 'development', Cassano, however, fails to distinguish the particular political economic-ecological processes through which difference is obliterated by capitalism. The work of geographer Eric Clark on 'island gentrification' is crucial in this respect.

Island gentrification refers to a marked shift upwards in the income and class of those who live (temporary or permanently) on an island, with increased investment in the built environment catering primarily to the needs of the incoming 'gentry', displacing lower class inhabitants and/or the practices and economies that sustain them (Clark et al., 2007). Gentrification is driven by rent-seeking, money invested to 'under-valorised' properties and land (Clark & Pissin, 2021) and by the socio-cultural processes that

increase the potential value of previously unvalued or undervalued land and property. A core contradiction emerges here. On the one hand, alternative projects of non-capitalist organization or degrowth stand against the tendency of capital for rent-seeking. On the other, these very projects of difference may create the cultural conditions for the re-valorization of an island environment (say by tourism attracted by an 'alternative', 'un-developed' feel) that subsequently attract capital. The role of tourism under capitalism in sucking difference out of difference has been widely documented (Urry, 2008). In this article, we do not explicitly study such processes of gentrification in relation to the political (land) economy of the islands, but, as we argue in the discussion, our findings may be relevant.

4. Methods

4.1. Case studies

The island of Ikaria is located 140 nautical miles to the east of Athens. Gavdos is the southernmost part of Greece and the European Union, 190 nautical miles from Athens and 140 nautical miles north of Africa (Fig. 1). Ikaria is an 8–10 h boat trip from Piraeus (or a 50-minute flight with a small passenger plane from Athens); strong winds prohibit access for about a third of the year. Gavdos is a 3 h boat trip from Sfakia, Crete, which is a 2 h drive from Chania's port and airport.

Ikaria is a mid-sized (255 km^2) island with some 164 km of coast. Gavdos is much smaller (32 km^2) with 30 km of coast. About 8,000 people live yearlong on Ikaria, a population that visitors double in summer. Ikaria has some 55–60 small townships, the three larger towns being the capital Aghios Kirikos in the south, and Evdilos and Raches in the north. Gavdos, in comparison, is sparsely populated with 152 permanent residents as of 2011, increasing to around 3000 in August.

Fig. 1. Location of islands of Ikaria and Gavdos within the Greek archipelago.

The topographies of the two islands are distinct. Ikaria is a rugged, mountainous island with lots of water, lush and green by Greek standards. The island is traversed by the Atheras range, whose summit is 1037 m, separating northern and southern Ikaria, connected now by an arduous, windy road often fogged-in even in the summer. There are beaches in the northern part of the island, exposed to open sea and strong currents, making swimming hard even in summer. Gavdos, in comparison, is a hilly, dry island, giving the impression of a continuous sand dune full of juniper. The temperature is hot. Rainfall is scarce and almost none from May to September. Gavdos's Libyan Sea waters are warm and calm.

Both Ikaria and Gavdos have been places of political exile, classified, by Athenians unfamiliar with the geography of their country, alongside other remote islands as 'kseronisia' (dry islands) or 'erimonisia' (deserted islands), part of the 'agoni grammi', literally translated as 'barren line', a name used to refer to unprofitable shipping routes that the government subsidizes. Gavdos is allegedly the mythical Ogygia, where the nymph Calypso held Ulysses as prisoner and lover for seven years. Ikaria is the island of Dionysus, and takes its name from the legend of Icarus, his hubris-fuelled technological flight crashing on the island of the god of partying.

Their relative remoteness has preserved elements of island life that attract, among others, counter-cultural youngsters in the summers. Ikaria made it to the global spotlight in 2012 as 'the island where people forget to die', the title of the second most emailed article by the New York Times magazine that year, reporting on the exceptional longevity of Ikaria's elders and their simple yet healthy lifestyle (Buettner, 2012). Among Greeks, Ikaria is known for its slow rhythm, its convivial 'paniyiria' (communal summer feasts), and for its far-left politics and rebellious inhabitants, including the notorious Xiros brothers, hitmen of the 17 N urban guerrilla group that operated clandestinely in Athens from 1975 to 2014. The leader of 17 N, Dimitris Koufontinas, spent his summers in Gavdos, 'the Mecca' of free camping in Greece, which attracts a rebellious young crowd from Athens every summer, willing to do the long trip to live days if not months under the clear sky.

4.2. Methodology

We studied the historical and contemporary lived experience of the two islands using two main methodologies – desk research of the archives, and qualitative methods of interviews, group discussion and direct observation. In the case of Ikaria, the emphasis was on the historical trajectory of the island. In the case of Gavdos, history takes a backseat, with the main material coming from participant observation of the beach communities of the island. As such, our project offers a two-sited, multi-method approach to a common question: how and why did these tenuous Mediterranean paths of real-existing degrowth emerge, and how are they reproduced over time?

Our research does not seek to compare the two cases. It illustrates and theorizes aspects similar to each of them, as well as the different dynamics playing out in the two distinct settings. Archival research worked best in the instance of Ikaria, and participant observation in Gavdos, though both projects mixed qualitative methods as fit for purpose and as driven by the research questions on which the research was based.

The first author conducted fieldwork on Ikaria for five months from July to September in both 2013 and 2014, interviewing 35 local residents and visitors, as part of a project on island gentrification. The research was complemented by in-situ observations and off-the-record daily conversations as well as an exhaustive review of material concerning Ikaria in the archives of the National Library of Greece. Interviews were purposefully unstructured and open-ended, but centred around consistent themes identified in the lit-

erature/archival material. Life in Ikaria moved on after completion of the research in 2015, but this does not affect so much the questions and claims defended here, which are of a historical–geographical nature concerning *the origin*, not the fate, of Ikaria's alterity. The second author conducted fieldwork in Gavdos from May to September in both 2008 and 2009 and in August 2019, recording 25 biographical (life-story) interviews and conducting one focus group. This author has been a seasonal visitor in the free-camping community of Gavdos for a total of over 20 months since 2002, conducting themed off-the-record discussions and in-situ observations, studying Gavdos as an example of alternative tourism that embodies principles of degrowth.

5. Ikaria

5.1. Real-existing degrowth: the island at present

Here we explain why we see Ikaria as a case of real-existing degrowth, before moving to explain how this links to its changing geography on the one hand, and its particular history on the other.

In July 2013, the first author presented on degrowth at a conference in Ikaria on 'Crisis and the New Mediterranean' (Kosmatopoulos et al., 2013). The audience assented when a local commented that "we've lived this way long before you invented degrowth". Indeed, in Ikaria, one finds a range of remnant and reinvigorated non-capitalist practices, a prevalent ethos akin to that of degrowth, locals who identify with degrowth when the idea is presented to them, active resistance to growth projects, and institutions, such as the paniyiri, dedicated to a festive and communal expenditure of surplus. Let's see each in turn, with material from our empirical research.

First, Ikaria has a diverse and low intensity economy oriented towards sufficiency. Our research observations and site visits for interview attest to a presence of many households combining incomes from tourism, public sector jobs or pensions, with practices of self-subsistence or informal production for local exchange networks. Subsistence practices include vegetable and fruit harvesting, vineyards, olive and almond trees, together with husbandry of pigs and chickens (see also Chrysochoos, 2010). There are extended networks of exchanging favours and goods or producing food directly for restaurants, festivals or grocery stores.

Second, there is a noticeable widespread rebellious 'anti-growth' mentality against big private investments in the island. A recent example are the on-going mobilizations against plans for a corporate wind-farm at mountain Atheras (Bareli, 2014).

Third, when we asked interviewees what is special about their island, in line with Conkling's thesis of islandness, they pointed to a distinct 'sensation'. This sensation was said to involve slower, more humane rhythms, conviviality, and an ethos of sufficiency and equality – all core significations of degrowth. Our interlocutors used anecdotes to explain what they referred to: describing people arriving to appointments in 'Ikarian time', that is, a 'few hours late' or shopkeepers telling bewildered tourists that 'the shop will open when it is time to open' or that they, the customer, 'shouldn't buy more because they don't really need it'; destination weddings by Athenians with Ikariot waiters refusing to serve and joining the party instead; stories of Ikariots shaming outsiders when they displayed their wealth.

This Southern spirit of simplicity and conviviality is condensed within Ikaria's summer festivals, the paniyiria. Villagers collectively organize these all-day all-night events. Meat and produce comes from the village and revenue stays local re-invested into public works: improving roads, public squares, schools and churches. For Bareli (2007) the paniyiri is an 'institutionalized exchange system', a Maussian gift-exchange/potlatch; a social commons sustained by the island's resource commons, where community is performed and renewed. The ecstatic shouts of joy at the crescendo of Ikariot tunes by the mass of people dancing arm in arm (Gerousis, 2014) best represent this spirit of commoning in the very form of the festivity.

We do not evaluate how close to a normative degrowth ideal Ikaria is, or whether this difference can resist inexorable forces of capital. Rather, we ask how this ethos and praxis came to be? We embarked on a historical–geographical approach to the question following clues from our interviewees, supported by archival research showing how physical geography, historical contingency, politics and local Southern thought combined (and combine) with 'islandness' in producing a path to degrowth. In the remaining of this section, we show how over time the historical geography of the island and the interactions with outsiders shaped the particular political economy and ethos described above. We emphasise the role played by a local folk thought akin to Southern thought that re-valued what from an Occidentalist perspective could be seen as a sign of backwardness, to a point of pride.

5.2. The geography of the island

Here we look at the physical environment of the island and its location and changing relation with respect to nodes and flows of economic activity. Like Cassano who attributes Southern-ness to the Mediterranean Sea, our interlocutors when prompted to explain Ikaria's different path compared to the mainland or even nearby islands, pointed to the island's physical geography; its remoteness, harshness and steep mountains cultivating attributes such as autarky, respect for nature, communalism and rebelliousness.

Physical geography does indeed bear upon the social and economic structures of the island. Pirates ravaged the Aegean until the 19th century and Ikaria's forested mountains offered hideouts for islanders (Chrysochoos, 2010). In other Greek islands, people settled in fortified castle towns typically around the only sizeable water source. Ikaria instead has a diffused availability of groundwater in the hinterland and a clustered network of mountain kinship-based townships emerged out of hideouts from the pirates. These, in turn, served to create strong communal bonds and autonomous, quasi-democratic decision-making structures, largely classless (Bareli, 2007). Features that today surprise the visitor, given their contrast to modern norms, including a pronounced lack of punctuality by the locals, can be traced to a not-so-distant past when people walked the mountain from village to village and 'arrived when they arrived' (Ikaria interview No. 3, hereafter I#3, see also Kapetanios, 2010).

By emphasising this alterity, we do not mean that capitalism has been absent. The transition to capitalism started in the 19th century, but it did not fully upend the classlessness of pre-capitalist Ikaria. This may possibly be because the lack of sufficient plains prevented large-scale agriculture and the emergence of propertied land elites, as occurred in nearby Samos (Papalas, 2005). Apart from a few merchants at the ports, Ikaria then did not witness the emergence of a strong bourgeoisie (Pamphilis, 1928). In the second half of the 20th century, Ikaria's distance from Athens kept it beyond the reach of state-driven modernization. More recently, the lack of calm sea waters prevented the mass tourist development seen in other Aegean islands (I#13). Thus, given this particular historical geography and political economy of the island non-capitalist practices and norms continued to co-exist alongside models of capitalist organization prevalent and imported from the mainland. But geography is not set in stone; next let us turn to how the position of Ikaria within the world has been changing as the world around it has been changing.

5.3. Geography in flux

The location of Ikaria may be fixed, but location attributes change as the world changes; and so do the advantages and disadvantages of the island's physical environment. Ikaria today is considered a remote island, in relation to the Greek capital of Athens, but in the 5th century BCE, Ikaria was the neighbour of the then banking and religious centre of Delos (50 nautical miles to the west), which it supplied with wine and timber. As a result, in classical times, Ikaria supported a population equally numerous to that at present (Chrysochoos, 2010). It became, however, almost uninhabited by 1st century BCE, following the loss of importance of the Aegean region generally, with a population in the low hundreds that continued that low for many centuries.

This changed in the 19th century, as the island came within the orbit of an economically-booming Asia Minor (Giagourtas, 2004; Papalas, 2005). Izmir, a Turkish metropolis, is 200 km to the east of Ikaria, and was the economic heartland for Greeks living under Ottoman rule. Thirteen thousand people came to live in Ikaria by the end of 19th century in an economy that exported currants, charcoal and charcoal workers to the Turkish mainland (Giagourtas, 2004). With the independence of Ikaria in 1912 and its unification with Greece, followed by the Greco-Turkish war of 1922, the expulsion of Greeks from Turkey and the sealing of the Greco-Turkish border, Ikaria's economy collapsed, the island becoming a backwater in an independent Greek state centred on distant Athens. But such remoteness should not also be seen as an absolute feature, but rather as a filter that shapes who comes in and who goes out, and in this way, produces the place and its particular politics. To these issues we next turn.

5.4. Interaction with outsiders and the political radicalization of Ikaria

Island identities are not shaped within island boundaries. They form through encounters. At the end of the Greek Civil War in 1945, Ikaria took in 13,000 political exiles, doubling its population (Chrysochoos, 2010). Radical communists were sent to concentration camps on uninhabited islands; Ikaria instead took in less hardline sympathizers from the anti-Nazi unity front – many of them intellectuals, professionals and artists. Exiles lived in the towns, renting rooms, renovating empty houses, teaching, offering medical care and organizing public works (Mamoulaki, 2011). Later, many of these exiles returned with their families, constituting the first 'tourists' to the island (Chrysochoos, 2010).

This intermingling of locals and exiles radicalized Ikariots' politics, giving ideological content to a pre-existing communalist spirit and classless experience (I#23). Ikariots were not only degrowthers before degrowth, but 'communists before communism', an interviewee told us (I#3). In fact the Greek government started sending exiles to Ikaria in the 1930s because the island was already considered irredeemably leftist (Chrysochoos, 2010). The economic crisis following unification in 1922 and the closure of markets in Turkey led many Ikariots to immigrate to the United States. Following the Depression, some returned, bringing back socialist ideas from trade union organizing, to which fellow islanders had already been exposed via the intellectual exiles, teachers or Greek refugees from Turkey (Chrysochoos, 2010). Communist ideals, crucially, found fertile ground on an island where communalism was its lived experience.

In the long run, 'real-existing degrowth' came about as the locals inadvertently defended communalism against a capitalist model of development, resisting, and often impeding modernizing projects. Today locals joke about 'Cuba, North Korea and Raches Ikaria' being the last bastions of communism. Significantly, 60 to 70% of Ikariots consistently vote left of centre (70% in the 2019 national election compared to 40% nation-wide). KKE, the Greek Communist Party, whose members still revere the Soviet Union, dominates politics in Ikaria, and has done since the end of the military junta in 1974. At the same time that Ikaria attracted international attention as a longevity Blue Zone, 'the red rock' island was visited by the Wall Street Journal searching for answers as to why Greeks were turning to the radical left (Angelos, 2012). KKE has built an organic economic network supporting its members in Ikaria. It is not 'anti-growth' (I#5, 12), but anti-capitalist, and prioritises low-profit agriculture over tourism (I#23). Communists and leftists have put up obstacles to developmental projects that would face little opposition elsewhere. Ikaria's leftism kept it also out of the (mostly right-wing until the 1980s) governments' clientele networks of subsidies and spending, further curbing growth. The intention therefore was not degrowth, but the result was, as growth-based development was stopped in its rails. As we will show next though, this particular radical politics of Ikaria were made hegemonic through the development of a particular indigenous thought that valorised this communal, 'anti-growth' spirit – a thought that shares many commonalities with Cassano's Southern thought.

5.5. Island Southern thought becoming common sense

Here we show how local intellectual production has shaped Ikaria's oral/folk tradition (Kapetanios, 2010), which has, in turn, reinforced the insistence – and pride – of locals in their own ways. Consider 'The Republic of the Humble', a 1921 utopian novel written by Athens-educated island-MP Charalambos Pamphilis. The hero wakes up in 1936 to find a classless society in Ikaria 'of Bolsheviks who live the same, simple life', working only four hours a day, rationally meeting their needs using a local, wheat-linked currency. The parallel to core degrowth principles today, such as working-hour reductions and community currencies cannot be missed, signalling the continuity between socialist-utopian ideals of the past with those of the present.

Pamphilis's novel echoes utopian literature popular at his time, especially Cabet's 1840 'Voyage to Icaria', that associates the name 'Icaria' with a communal utopia. Ikariots' (unfounded) speculations today that Cabet was inspired by travellers' accounts of real Ikaria and the publishing of the Greek translation of the novel by the Ikarian Studies Association, vividly illustrate how the fictional Icaria influences contemporary Ikaria. Pamphilis (1928) published newspapers and magazines and wrote Ikaria's first history. Seventeenth and eighteenth century travellers described a destitute Ikaria where everyone was poor. (This may have been an orientalist impression aggravated by islanders overplaying their poverty to visitors for fear of taxation, in the absence of Ottoman garrisons). Pamphilis instead revisioned the island's system as primitive communism and a blissful sufficiency economy; a prevalent view about the island's past that our interlocutors hold today. One sees here elements of the process Cassano notes as turning a negative sign of backwardness into a positive sign of Southern pride.

This pride is common sense today in the island. The island history written by conservative I. Melas in 1955 proudly describes Ikariots as predecessors of Gandhism (Melas, 1955). Ikarian-American Professor of History, Anthony Papalas (2005), laments the fact that Ikariots now dislike 'anyone who became financially successful and made large investments in Ikaria to bring about change' (p.140). But even he himself celebrates these 'rebels and radicals', the title of his book on the history of Ikaria.

Ikaria's alterity was fortified by its depiction by outsiders who were inspired by it. Lilika Nakou's (best-selling novel, for instance, 'The visionaries of Ikaria', written in 1982, fictionalized Ikaria's rebellious Southern, anti-growth mentality, in turn reinforcing local identification with such stances. The plot revolves around a group of locals impeding the efforts of an Ikariot-American to

invest in the revival of a spa hotel, with the heroes rejecting enrichment and defending their island ways.

5.6. Back to the present

What does this detour in Ikaria's history have to do with degrowth? Our thesis is that a particular historical-physical geography that nourished a communal spirit led to a communalist ethos, politics and thought, whose result was to keep the island out of processes of modernized development. Real-existing degrowth was an unintentional result, but one that can be explained. Such real-existing degrowth is now sustained, tentatively, through the reproduction, and renewal, of supporting beliefs, practices and institutions. Crucial here is the role of a new wave of incomers inspired by alternative imaginaries: counter-cultural summer visitors ('Exarchia moves to Ikaria in the summer', one interviewee told us, referring to the Athenian anarchist student neighbourhood, hotbed of anti-austerity revolts); and 'back to the (is)landers' lured by the promise of a more convivial and natural way of living (I#1, 3, 5).

This visitors' romanticism reinforces in turn locals' practices and politics. Returning Ikariots have set up an independent movement/party with strong showings in local elections and local mobilizations. Returning Ikariots and Ikariots 'd'election' – young, midlife and pensioner – also renew traditions and their signification. One interviewee commented that the paniyiris' Dionysian turn began in the 1990s when his group of Athenian-Ikariots brought loudspeakers to a paniyiri, reintroducing traditional music and organs to younger audiences in a party set-up, echoing the revival of neo-folk music then infusing Greece (I#35). The paniyiri in this respect is as much an old, traditional institution, as well as a new institution marking Ikaria's alterity.

Unlike most other Greek islands, Ikaria has few spaces of commodified and privatized consumption. Ikaria's younger and older generations mingle with tourists in the paniyiri. The locally sourced supplies of the paniyiri, capture revenues from tourism that are circulated into the community (Bareli, 2007). There is a marked difference here with the model of tourism in other Greek islands, based on bars and restaurants owned by private entrepreneurs, revenue accumulating for private purposes. The panyiri offers then a tentative alternative to the dominant model of capitalist tourist development experienced almost without exception throughout Greece.

We say tentative because this real-existing degrowth that we described at the beginning of this section, and whose history we traced, is incomplete and vulnerable. Many interviewees feel old Ikarian values are disappearing as the generation of elders die (I#4). Some say that the orchards have become a hobby for pensioners; it costs more to maintain them than to buy food in the super-market (I#3, 22) (Others disagree, pointing to seasonal employment in tourism, leaving ample time for low-opportunity-cost agricultural activities for the rest of the year (I#19)). Rebelliousness is being commodified for tourism. As one hotel operator told us: 'all publicity is good publicity', even that of the Xiros brothers, who 'gave the brand name Ikaria a scent of adventure' (I#13). The biggest paniyri, the one in the forest of Lagada, looks now more like a rave festival, with thousands of youth from Athens camping there every August for days at a time. A few older locals told us they now avoid August paniyiria. Others lament the paniyria becoming cash-making machines for communities, funding unnecessary building in the villages and breeding for consumption excessive numbers of wild goats that ravage the forests (I#5). While the communalism of Ikaria is marketed by some for tourist consumption, real commons (such as hospitals, utilities, use of the mountains) are threatened by spending cuts and privatization (Bareli, 2014).

No island is an ideal cosmos. As Klein and Morreo (2019) note, an attention to post-development practice should not come at the expense of underplaying the dominating nature of capital. The revalorization of Ikaria as a place of difference and escape fosters tourism and gentrification, changing, slowly at present, the social composition of the island in the summer months of July and August, and orienting the local economy towards the needs of visitors. Yet, the stubborn persistence of alternative ways of being and doing in Ikaria merit attention. Opening shops late at evening at 10 pm, arriving late to appointments, eating from your own orchard, dressing like Fidel Castro and driving dilapidated cars are signs of difference that no longer correspond to the economic rationality that gave rise to them. Few shop-owners are forced to open late for example because they work in the fields till sunset as their parents did. Most Ikariots can afford new cars and clothes. An ethos of degrowth has taken root we showed here, through a combination of geographical and historical factors, and through the emergence of a folk thought that has valorised it and made it a sign of pride. Crucially, it has become also political to the extent that people organize also occasionally to defend it.

6. Gavdos

While our story of Ikaria emphasised the historical and contingent political processes that produced difference, in Gadvos myth and geographical remoteness come together in a vast repertoire of alternative socioeconomic and spiritual practices and imaginaries producing communities of real- existing degrowth.

6.1. An island 'at the end of the world'

Here we argue that Gavdos's location favoured certain processes of local myth-making. Gavdos is very remote – geographically and symbolically. As the southernmost point of Greece and Europe, the island is in a liminal zone between Global North and South, East and West. Its location and the absence of major infrastructure create a sense of isolation that evokes what Conkling (2007) describes as the heightened experience of 'islandness'. There is no bank or gas station on the island, no cash machines until 2018 and no credit cards accepted. The island is only partly powered by an electricity grid and its water supply system stops running in the summer. There are new groundwater boreholes, although many people still collect rainwater in the winter to drink in the summer. We can speak of real-existing degrowth here in terms of lifestyles based on very low monetary incomes and resource and energy use, compared to the mainland, and a lack of the modern infrastructure that one associates with developed economies.

At the southernmost tip of the continent, surrounded only by sea, Gavdos's insularity contributes to a sense of being 'at the edge of the world'. Remoteness propagates the creation of 'space-myths' (Bousiou, 2008). Tradition and historical memory are more easily preserved in islands, given their relative geographical seclusion (Pantzou, 2015). The myth of Calypso still inspires contemporary self-defined 'castaways' who narrate their relationship to Gavdos as being mesmerised, enamoured and 'trapped' on the island just like the mythical Ulysses.

6.2. History and folk thought

While the flows of exiles created a blending of outsiders and locals in Ikaria that further radicalized a pre-existing communalist spirit, Gavdos's history of exiles operates now more as an imaginary source for producing otherness. Unlike Ikaria, Gavdos received some of the most renowned communist leaders of the

1930s and '40s, including Aris Velouchiotis, leader of the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS) and Markos Vafiadis, the Prime Minister and Minister for War of the Provisional Democratic Government of Greece (1947–1949). Gavdos's extreme remoteness was exploited by right-wing governments to create one of the worst places of exile, 'the death island' as exiles called it (Gritzonas, 2000). Its harsh conditions and lack of infrastructure forced the exiles to self-organize into a 'collective' to manage everyday life, organize cooking, cleaning, education, work, and cultural events, establishing a libertarian school and introducing a community currency (Damaskinos, 2020).

Few Gavdiots remember this past. Yet the legacy of the exiles animates the island's counter-hegemonic identity, apparent in the webpage content of the municipal authority, in the island's toponyms, and in the stories of contemporary 'self-exiles' who have moved permanently to Gavdos. Connection to the radical past of the hard-line exiles meets self-exile and escape here. As one interviewee commented: 'it was the seeking of the traces of Aris, Markos and the other *kapetanioι* [partisan army leaders] that initially inspired me and other libertarian communists to come here as self-exiles' (G#11). The house of the political exiles, the so-called 'palace' at the edge of Sarakiniko beach, is a landmark.

6.3. Encounters and new social relations

Here we show how Gavdos has become over time a place of intense experimentation with new social relations. While Ikaria's tentative otherness is based on local 'rebels and radicals', fortified by interactions with newcomers, Gavdos's otherness was born of Gavdiots, Gavdiots 'd'election', seasonal residents and transient tourists. This plurality of new voices created a complex system of socialization connected through a set of shared values reminiscent of Southern thought and degrowth: incorporating a respect for nature, slowness, moderation, simplicity, solidarity, conviviality, and self-sufficiency.

Specific factors contribute to the malleability of its identity. Locals are few. Outsiders describe them as carefree, simple, tolerant, hospitable, and uninterested in making money (Damaskinos, 2020; Galanakis, 2009). New locals (Gavdiots 'd'election') arrived on the island in the 1980s, initially as an extreme destination for alternative, naturalist vacations, and gradually as permanent residents forming quasi-intentional free-camping communities on the beaches and other remote places on the island, usually away from settlements. During the warmer months of the year, March to October, more people join these diverse beach communities.

6.4. The real-existing degrowth of beach communities

Why do we see Gavdos as a case of real-existing degrowth? Gavdos has lately become an alternative tourist destination. Thousands of travellers visit the island during July and August for free camping, nudism, and enjoying its 'end-of-the-world' feel and remote landscape, creating a human geography unlike any other in the Greek archipelago. Tourism in Gavdos differs from other forms of institutionalized or budget travel (Andriotis, 2013). By investigating the profiles, forms of interaction, and stylistic choices of visitors to the island, Andriotis (2013: 40) found that they were 'antinomians' who emphasize 'independently organized, long-term and flexible travel schedules, non-mainstream activities, rejection of materialism and intense social interactions'. Our ethnographic research confirms and complements this description. To better understand the contribution of these 'antinomians' to the making of Gavdos's otherness, one should shift the focus from the individual to the temporary communities they create and the geographies they produce.

Beach communities developed in the northeastern part of Gavdos. In the 1980s, the first travellers camped at Sarakiniko, in the small forest around the remnants of the exiles' former settlement. At this period, Sarakiniko was not inhabited, used only for animal breeding and for its access to the sea (G#1). The first small shop selling vegetables and other goods opened as late as the mid-1990s, about the same time as travellers began moving further north towards the beaches of Aigiannis and Lavrakas. Despite their prolonged stays on the island, often lasting up to 6 months, generally people did not stay permanently on the beach until about 2000 (G#3). At around this time, a series of small but important infrastructural developments allowed the first free-campers to spend the entire year in these transient communities. Wells, *kavatzas* (huts), beach communal cafes, a small theatre, an improvised harbour, and both individual and community gardens started to spring up at Aigiannis and Lavrakas beaches, with a community of 20 to 30 people living on the beach throughout the year.

Aesthetically, the beach community is characterized by an intention to remain as invisible as possible and to not disturb 'the continuity of the natural landscape' (G#2). All building materials are collected in situ; the import of wood, plastic and other materials is highly discouraged, while the use of cement and other chemicals is not acceptable. As one interlocutor put it: 'we don't build, we just reshape nature' (G#4). Nudism adds to an aesthetically archaic image. During the 2000s, the community functioned without electricity, whereas now several kavatzas are equipped with small solar panels.

Communal life in the beach communities is organized along principles aligned with degrowth. Unnecessary fires are discouraged, and used only for cooking. People, especially those staying permanently on the beach, live very simply. Our research shows that the majority spends between 100 and 200€/month, and in extreme cases less than 500€/year. Their diet is extremely frugal, with little fish or meat, and meals are often shared. Slowness is a flagship trait among beach-dwellers. Comparisons between the speedy rhythms of city life and the slowness of the island are common. As one interviewee said: 'Life is not a sum of seconds but a sum of moments. It's not linear but it flows like a song. Sometimes quickly and sometimes almost in stillness' (G#5). Social life takes experimental forms. Otherness is expressed in everyday improvisation and spontaneous individual and collective performances. Respect for nature and care for the commons is imperative in the community and is often invested with spirituality or stories of sacredness. The most irrevocable rule on the beach is: do not cut junipers, not even the dry ones.

On the south side of the island, another idiosyncratic community has sprung up. Islanders call members 'the Russians', a group of 10 to 15 people, some from the Ukraine, taking their nickname from the first one to arrive, 'Andrei'. According to his own account, Andrei is a scientist who worked in the Chernobyl power station and was exposed to radioactivity during the explosion. He refused the therapy offered to exposed scientists and decided to live by nature, arriving in Gavdos in 1998 with a multi-ethnic group of scientists and artist friends. They formed an exploratory community dedicated, in their words, to 'the everyday practice of philosophy'. Similar to the beach community, 'the Russians' embrace a frugal lifestyle, deep spirituality, self-sufficiency, and communal living. They have left their mark on the island by erecting a huge totem-chair at the cave of Trypiti, the southernmost point of Gavdos and Europe. The chair hangs on one leg to symbolize the 'environmental instability and fragility of our times' (G#12).

Myths, histories, local traditions, and alternative practices, combined with the island's geography and lack of economic or infrastructural development, create in Gavdos a state of a-development or, what we call here, real-existing degrowth. By this we do not mean that the Gavdos beach communities offer an example of

degrowth that could, or should, be transposed elsewhere. They do show how, in line with Cassano's call to turn the negative sign of the South into a positive one, what from a 'Northern gaze', could be seen as the dire and backward or undeveloped state of the island, was turned into one with an identity of pride and possibility.

Compared to the majority of the Aegean islands where tourism development serves varied and often conflicting 'tourist gazes' (Urry, 2008), contemporary Gavdos has a relatively coherent socio-environmental and symbolic character: simple, frugal, slow, convivial, communal, and relaxing. The performativity of its otherness is reflected in the few new shops and restaurants opening to respond to increasing tourist flows. As one of our interlocutors remarked: 'Sarakiniko might differ from what I first encountered in the 1990s but it is still Gavdos and is different from anything else' (G#5).

6.5. Politicizing alterity

Interestingly, Gavdos's otherness also takes a political form. Whereas free-camping is discouraged or prosecuted by other local authorities around Greece, it is encouraged in Gavdos. In its official webpage, the municipal authority denounces the government's law that prohibits free-camping as 'pretentious'. The municipality's guidelines for camping are taken straight from the self-organizing rules that an older generation of free campers had established for the beach communities. The webpage discourse echoes Southern thought and the values imbued over the years by the counter-cultural visitors and Gavdiots 'd'election': a sense of freedom, respect for nature, moderation, peace and calmness, self-awareness and spirituality. One such Gavdiot 'd'election' who moved to the island in 2006 won the 2016 elections and became mayor. Her vision was explicitly against conventional development and growth, a rejection of tourist investment and a promise instead to create 'an alternative economy' based on 'cooperative production' and self-sufficiency.

Islandness has nourished this alternative spirit and Gavdos's own myth. As an interlocutor who lived six years on the beach community commented: 'what happens here could not be done on the mainland. It is the limit of the sea that feeds our desire for self-sufficiency and it's the bounded nature of the island that unfetters our experimental mood' (G#4). This boundedness awakens imaginaries of autonomy. As the mayor reiterated in a public interview: 'islands are adjacent only to the sea. And no one has the right to decide for them without them'.

Like Ikaria, Gavdos's otherness is not static. It undergoes a continuous process of (re)identification. As tourist flows grow and the island receives attention from mainstream media, the pressure for commodification and tourist investment increases. (The election of a new mayor with a more conservative agenda in 2019 might be the sign of a shift). Yet, alternative practices and values in Gavdos have multiple sources and are rooted now in local society. Gavdos'ss identity may be resistant to change, with the unspoiled nature of the island and its simple life assuming a 'sacred' status. As a Gavdiot elder put it: 'I don't like things that come from the city, I haven't seen an apartment block in all my life because I am not travelling outside Gavdos. All these things look fake to me. What is real is only nature, our temple' (G#9).

7. Thinking about degrowth from the Mediterranean

Seen from the perspective of a unilinear model of development, Gavdos's economic and social conditions are problematic. Seen from another perspective, these conditions are being turned into the raw material for new imaginaries and new ways of living life. In dominant talk, a place like Gavdos is labelled as underdeveloped or undeveloped – waiting to be developed. The lived experience of the islanders tells a different story. Islanders and islanders d'élection no longer see themselves through the eyes of others - as being backward. Like Ikariots, Gavdiots too have a new-found self-respect based on Southern values of simplicity, slowness, communality. We define this as real existing degrowth, not because of a mode of living that is low in energy or resource use (which it is), but because we understand degrowth as a positive transition towards seeing and living differently what might otherwise be feared as a catastrophe (lack of growth).

As Hakim Bey (2003) claims, one cannot fight for something that one does not know. Here we charted a research agenda of 'knowing' degrowth, by studying authentic processes of lived relevance. We investigated the conditions under which enclaves of real-existing degrowth can emerge and be preserved. Dhar and Chakrabarti (2019, 85) emphasise the importance of praxis. There is no guarantee, they write "that the world of the third as (non-capitalist) space (unhooked from the circuits of global capital) shall transform into the world of the third as (postcapitalist) place; the transformation is birthed through (postdevelopmental) praxis'. What our stories add is a focus on the geographical, historical and myth-making occurrences that underlie, sustain and valorize alternative praxis over time.

We learn from our case-studies that remoteness and distance from the 'more developed' core (the capital, Athens) is important. So too is the ability of the islands to divert resources from the core, while staving off pressure to pay them back with 'development'. This resonates with Romano's (2012) observation of remote areas in southern Italy and Albania living parasitically off metropolitan centres, and avoiding thus a full assimilation by the development process. Nonetheless, while remoteness keeps Ikaria or Gavdos out of the main circuits of capital and modernising development, this alone does not explain their difference, given that neighbouring islands have suffered conventional fates, being drawn into accelerating tourist capital flows. Remoteness, after all, is relative - make a new airport, add daily flights and it vanishes. It is in the interaction between geography, historical contingency and the production and assimilation of a localized and 'indigenized' mode of thought, prevalent in the South and often in the form of myths about the island's past and its inhabitants, that productive possibilities emerge.

How did 'islandness' help in rooting this Southern thought, protecting delicate states of real-existing degrowth? The limits of the sea inspire thoughts of autonomy. This boundedness of islands, we saw, is important, not only as an environmental determinant, but as a set of conditions that catalyze and insulate the emergence of self-valorizing myths and folk thoughts anchored in a sense of islandness. The bounded but porous nature of the insular 'state of mind' enables island residents and visitors to conceptualise, embody and transmit alternative imaginaries. The 'sea effect' is omnipresent in Gavdos and Ikaria, limiting and liberating, protecting and reinforcing a specific, yet evolving, identity of place.

The limit of the sea and the boundedness of the islands is not an absolute. It is a porous filter. Remoteness selects for the type of 'foreigner' coming to the islands. Interactions between visitors and islanders create new possibilities and trajectories. Communist exiles ended up in the two islands because remoteness and boundedness made for natural prisons. These exiles left legacies of communality and self-organization that still reverberate. Counter-culture youth came next - wealthy in terms of time, not money, but willing to travel far and live simply - valuing the islands for their alternative spirit. This spirit was filtered and fortified through conditions of interaction between islanders

and newcomers, sedimented in turn through political expression - in the rebellious, radical left orientation of Ikaria or in the person of the mayor of Gavdos. These political expressions generate concrete resistances to conventional development and foster fledgling efforts to maintain difference, even if indirectly at times, or not even wholly consciously or successfully.

To be clear: we do not position the two islands as exemplars of degrowth. We regard them as springboards for thinking about such possibilities, more as living laboratories of Southern thought incorporating a different way of life. In thinking about degrowth, we argue here, one should look to enabling combinations of geography, human interaction, imaginaries and political expression able to revalue, protect and experiment with different ways of being and doing. By focussing on the possibility and performance of difference, we do not mean to underestimate the political economy of capitalism that profits from difference (Clark & Pissin, 2021). Processes of island gentrification are, as we noted, under way on both islands. The islands' fate under the onslaught of capitalist enclosure, rent-seeking tourism and real estate development in Greece is unknown (more so, given the uncertainty about tourism futures in the pandemic context). Whereas the push towards gentrification is always present and a latent possibility, what drew us to these two cases is precisely why gentrification has not yet taken off there. This does not mean that the two islands have successfully resisted once and for all assimilation under capitalism. Without favourable structural change at higher scales (e.g. a changing political economy in Greece as a whole), this would be impossible. What cannot be underestimated is that they *have* resisted, and that the reasons for their difference are not mere co-incidences.

An important point not explored here is the power of 'islands' to change 'the city' (so to speak), through the life-changing experiences of returning visitors. This merits further research, related as it is to the relevance of local experiences, such as those studied here, for broader structural change. Mikis Theodorakis, Greece's most prominent composer, for instance, wrote classical music before encountering Greek folk music and culture when exiled in Ikaria. His experience and interactions there changed Greek music and his anthems fuelled revolutionary passions for generations. Young people who free-camp in islands like Gavdos or Ikaria do so with the same tents used in Syntagma Square during the summer of 2011, where demands for radical political change and spearheading of solidarities transformed Athens (Varvarousis & Kallis, 2017). The slow and healthy lifestyle of Ikaria's elders animated the fantasies of New Yorkers through the pages of *the Times*, prompting them to think about how social and economic life would need to be reorganized there if it were to become healthy and liveable (Lawler, 2016).

Mediterranean imaginaries expressed in and about islands tell us as much about the islands as about the desires of the outsiders who do the imagining - desires of simple, slow, convivial, communal, meaningful lives. The political potential of pockets of degrowth, like Ikaria and Gavdos, is not that the islands themselves follow an alternative, more sustainable and equitable path (important as this is), but that their very existence and the experiences they offer to outsiders keeps alive the dream expressed eloquently in Paris in 1968: under the asphalt is the beach.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

GK, AV and PP did the conceptualization of the paper. GK led the writing of the paper and conducted the research in Ikaria. AV conducted the research in Gavdos and wrote the corresponding section.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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