

LINGERING COLONIAL OUTLIER YET MINIATURE CONTINENT: NOTES FROM THE SICILIAN ARCHIPELAGO

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Abstract

The fortunes of the wider Mediterranean Sea, the world's largest, have never rested on Sicily, its largest island. A stubbornly peripheral region, and possibly the world's most bridgeable island, Sicily has been largely neglected within the field of Island Studies. The physically largest island with the largest population in the region, and housing Europe's most active volcano, Sicily has moved from being a hinterland for warring factions (Sparta/Athens, Carthage/Rome), to a more centrist stage befitting its location, although still remaining a political outlier in the modern era. Unlike many even smaller islands with smaller populations, however, Sicily has remained an appendage to a larger, and largely dysfunctional, state. The Maltese islands are part of 'the Sicilian archipelago', and it was a whim of Charles V of Spain that politically cut off Malta from this node in the 1520s, but not culturally. This article will review some of the multiple representations of this island, and its changing fortunes.

Keywords

Archipelago, heterotopias, Island Studies, Sicily, Italy, Malta, Mediterranean, periphery

Introduction

In both its physical and its human setting, the Mediterranean crossroads, the Mediterranean patchwork, leaves a coherent image in the mind as a system in which everything mingles and is then recast to form a new, original *unity* (Braudel, 1985: 5).

On a clear wintry day, one can easily see the snow-capped top of Mount Etna, Europe's largest active volcano, from various vantage points on the Maltese islands; and the lights along the southern Sicilian coast are also readily visible from the northern hills of Malta during clear nights (see Figure 1). Only 90 km (about 60 miles) separate the two island groups. But the historical record suggests stronger links than may be inferred from the diverse sovereign statehoods that the two island groups currently occupy. Malta was, for many years, part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies; and it was a poor and barren rock with some 12,000 inhabitants under the suzerainty of Charles V of

Spain when he decided on a whim to offer Malta (and the governorship of Tripoli) to the irksome Knights Hospitaller of St John, evicted in 1520 from Rhodes by the Turkish Sultan, and desperate for a new home (Garnier, 2003). Were it not for this magnanimous but shrewdly calculated donation, the Maltese archipelago would have continued on as a largely non-descript member of the Sicilian archipelago, another Lampedusa, Linosa or Pantelleria.

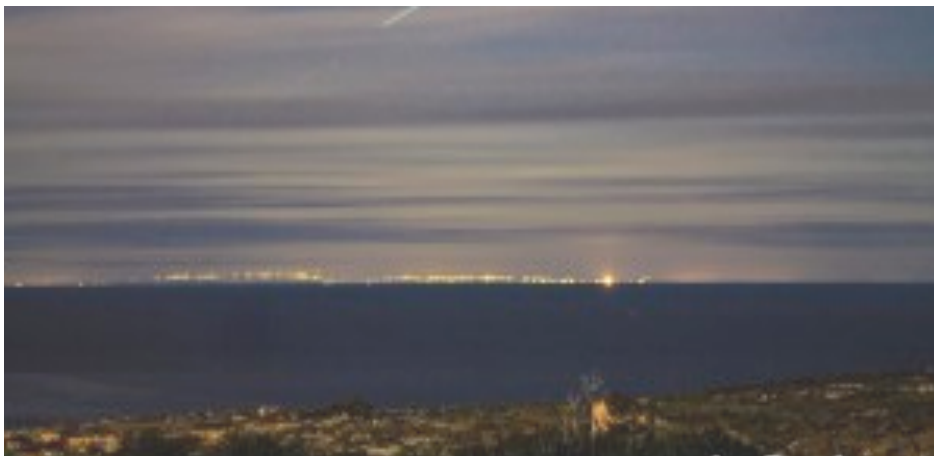


Figure 1 - Night Lights in Southern Sicily, visible from Northern Malta, January 8 2014
(© Jean Paul Gauci - retrieved from <http://blog.maltaweathersite.com/2014/01/sicily-seen-from-malta-earlier-on-this-evening/> - July 27th 2015)

Sicily, as Braudel (1972: 148) reminds us, is a miniature continent, apart from being the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. This paper contributes to the scant 'island studies' literature on Sicily, by proposing two interlocking yet apparently contradictory arguments. The first is that of examining this island's lingering legacy as a periphery and colonial outlier, in spite of its relatively large size, significant resident population and privileged central location. The second is that of illuminating this island's role as the hub of a trans-continental archipelago that finds itself cutting across economic, religious, political and cultural frontiers. In the former case, Sicily has traversed the paths of general and regional history; in the latter case, it shaped them (Dalli, 1998: 76).

Sicily as Italian Heterotopia

Sicily functions as Italy's heterotopia: it serves as the image of what is most problematic about Italy as a modern national state, as much as the basic condition against which the progress of the Italian state on the path towards European 'normalcy' can be measured (Agnew, 2000: 301).

Sicily has been, and perhaps remains, synonymous with the Mafia, a specific type of loose criminal organisation based on a code of silence and absolute loyalty, which thrives on the island's long history of absentee land ownership and popular resentment to state policing power. The long history of despoiling and exploitative mercantile colonialism, a tradition of self-help, and the absence of an industrial class, have rendered Sicily disinterested in self-governance, lingering instead with a neo-feudal

organisation that makes (invariably top-down) initiatives by a distant state feel alien and doomed to fail. The Mafia can be seen to occupy this political vacuum, acting as a quasi-state-like apparatus that extracts surplus in exchange for gifts, access, insurance, protection and other, non-rights based favours. In a society where trust has been in short supply and democracy fragile, the Mafia sells protection, a guarantee of safe conduct for parties to engage in commercial transactions (Gambetta, 1996). The Mafia has also attained political autonomy through the corruption, intimidation, and murder of public officials (Arlacci, 1986; Sabetti, 2002). A culmination of its power was the murder of Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, two judges who had been leading the state's fight against the Mafia, in 1992 (Seindal, 1998: 18).

Sicily, like Sardinia, works as Italy's boundary island: a physically and culturally distinctive space but claimed as part of the state's territory, it represents itself as a local territorial 'Other' in the context of national state formation.

The *problematique* of Sicily resides in a series of geographical facts: it is an island, the largest within the Mediterranean basin (with a land area of 25,710km), and the most populous one in that sea (with just over 5 million residents). This makes it one of the world's largest extant sub-national island jurisdictions. And yet, this island is only some three miles (5 kilometres) distant (at its narrowest) from mainland Italy, at the Straits of Messina: a mythical in-between space: inhabited in legend by Scylla and Charybdis, a whirlpool and a monster (See Figure 2). This lingering physical separation between Sicily and the Italian *terra firma* has been the subject of attempted bridging at various times in history (e.g. BBC News, 2006; BBC News, 2009; Brancaleoni, 2009; Masoni, 2013). And yet, it is precisely this combination of sheer size, physical proximity yet stubborn islandness that makes Sicily loom in the national imaginary as a boundary island. It is notionally within the nation-state, yet culturally distinct and politically subversive: a complex alterity that could also describe Taiwan in relation to mainland China, Ireland in relation to Britain, Rodrigues in relation to Mauritius; Tasmania in relation to Australia, or Cuba in relation to the USA (e.g. Gardella, 1983). Hence, it serves as a quintessential 'local Other', testing and teasing the construction of national identity (Wilson and Donnan, 1998). No surprise, therefore, that the fixed link between island and mainland has not (yet) materialised. Navigating the Straits of Messina, it seems, is treacherous in more ways than one.

Islandness, in and of itself, does not cause anything. However, islands come with a suite of features that allows them to 'work' quite effectively as 'others' in national-state formation, and generally as either *endotopias* (idealised spaces of contained wish-fulfilment) or their very opposite, *exotopias* (dark sites of incarceration and exclusion) (Cameron, 2012; Baldacchino, 2014). Their obvious material separation from the mainland (wherein the national capital typically resides) creates the optics for a close yet distinct island development trajectory and narrative. Second, island (and coastal) communities tend to have longer and deeper histories of trade and cultural exchange than mainlands, their relative hybridity and heterogeneity contributing to notions of (proto-)ethnic difference which exoticise. Third, and contradictory to the second point, is a gripping but equally fetishising narrative (spun nowadays by tourism marketing agencies) of islands as out of place and out of time, an insular people locked in cultures, rituals and traditions that have well nigh been lost elsewhere, and thus exotic curiosities well worth visiting (but only for a short while). Fourth and lastly, some islands can be seen as posing political threats to the mainland and its body politic; they risk transporting their particularly toxic brand of economic or political praxis across the

watery medium, infecting the mainland; thus justifying mainland invasions (which, however, are not always successful).



Figure 2: The Straits of Messina, showing location of Scylla and Charybdis, from a 1665 map. The Etna Volcano is also visible. Legend (in French) reads: Charybdis and Scylla in the Messina Straits (North is towards the bottom of the image.) (© 2014 .Retrieved from: <http://www.alinariarchives.it/en/search> - July 27th 2015)

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Being exactly on the edge, marginalised yet not remote, Sicily has remained a problem for Italy throughout this young country's existence, but with periods of heightened concern. Especially after the high-profile murder of two Mafia state prosecutors, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, in 1992 (Calvi, 1992), the island and its people was represented in ethno-criminal tones: Sicilians were portrayed as dangerous thugs, unrelentingly corrupt folk, welfare louts and wicked 'blacks'; disparaged as 'nothing but Africans in disguise' (eg 'Fugitive', 2012: online).

Sicily as an agonising archipelagic hub

But this is but one aspect to the multiple identity of Sicily, itself the towering mainland to a sprawling "outer ring of insular landmarks" (Dalli, 1998: 76), an island archipelago that controls the narrow straits at the centre of the Mediterranean sea. This island necklace starts from Stromboli in the Aeolian islands in the North-east, sweeping across Sicily and its contiguous Egadi islands on its west end, then down to the remote trio of Pantelleria, Linosa and Lampedusa; the latter is closer to Africa than Sicily. The Maltese Archipelago, a sovereign state, lies to the South of Sicily. Then on to the Kerkennah islands and Djerba, to Sicily's South-west, off the coast of modern-day Tunisia (See Figure 3). This necklace of islands, led by Sicily, has very rarely belonged to the same political or military power: Rome being the main exception, and the Normans very briefly thereafter. Thus, its fragmentation and division under different powers and sovereign states deflects from an appreciation that it is indeed one continuous and contiguous archipelago. It is in the circulation of people, traded goods and shared fishing practices that this dynamic island network comes into its own and defies the fission and borders thrust upon it (e.g. Bouchard and Lollini, 2006).

When adopting this perspective, Sicily becomes a key player in the history of the region; however, not so much as a leading protagonist, but often as an agonist, a hapless victim of the plans of others. Located right at the choke-point between Europe and Africa, North and South, Occident and Orient, the Moslem and Christian worlds, the European Union and the rest, the Sicilian archipelago has been a staging ground for conflict and imperial adventures for almost three millennia. The fault line between these dual ontologies has shifted and bent with time, but remains surprisingly anchored in the region. Already during the Peloponnesian War, the city states of Athens and Sparta fought over this terrain, with various Sicilian cities being allies with one Greek city state or another. The Athenians acted first, arriving in Sicily to assist an ally who was in turn being attacked by Syracuse, then Sicily's largest city; but the Athenians also envisaged the conquest of the whole island. The 'Sicilian campaign' (415-413BC) ended in the complete rout of the Athenian army and navy.

The feuding powers of Rome and Carthage did the same, using Sicily and the surrounding islands as a theatre of war over decades of conflict. The start of hostilities between these two powers started in Sicily. The start of the First Punic War (264BC) saw Sicily divided between Carthage (in the west, centered on Palermo), Syracuse (in the south and east) and a group of soldiers which had seized the city of Messana (modern day Messina). When these soldiers were besieged by Syracusan forces, they asked Rome to intervene. It duly did so, and quickly established its military superiority. Sicily was henceforth once again ravaged by a long series of military campaigns on land and sea, with most of the island falling into Roman hands by 241BC, becoming the first Roman province, or colonial possession. Syracuse fell in 211BC, ushering total Roman

rule on the island. The division between Palermo and the west of the island, and the cities of Messina, Syracuse and Catania on the east, already evident then, has persisted through the ages (Romano, 2008).



Figure 3 - The Sicilian Archipelago. (© 2014. Wikipedia. Retrieved from: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/da/Strait_of_Sicily_map.png/250px-Strait_of_Sicily_map.png - July 27th 2015).

The seven Eolian islands (Lipari, Vulcano, Salina, Stromboli, Filicudi, Alicudi and Panarea) are strung parallel to Sicily's north-east coast. The Aegadian/Egadi islands, just off Sicily's western tip, consist of Favignana, Marettimo and Levanzo. The Pelagie/Pelagic Islands comprise Linosa and Lampedusa. The Kerkennah Islands lie due east of Sfax, while the island of Djerba lies just offshore in the South of the Gulf of Gabes, both in Tunisia. Pantelleria lies almost exactly halfway between Sicily and Tunisia. The Maltese Islands, directly to the South of Sicily and an independent sovereign state since 1964, consist of three inhabited islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino.

Roman rule in Sicily lasts for over six centuries (from 211BC to 440AD). During this time, the fertile island was an important source of food, growing grains, citrus, olives and grapes to feed the empire. By the 5th Century, the power of Rome had irrevocably waned, and – barring a Byzantine period – the political vacuum was replaced by invaders from the south and east: the Vandals, the Ostrogoths and eventually the Saracens, who conquered Palermo (832AD) and eventually Syracuse (878AD). Under the Arabs, the island was divided into three administrative districts, and whose names survive: Val di Mazara, Val di Noto and Val di Demone (Aziz, 1975; Epstein, 2003).

Thus, in the Dark and Middle Ages, Sicily and its surrounding islands became vassal possessions to various European potentates, but also centres of Arab civilisation. In 1071AD, the Normans take possession of Sicily, but are obliged to accept and integrate Arab administrative and justice systems. The racial, ethnic and cultural mix provokes a fusion of talent and leaves a rich artistic legacy. [The Normans go on to take control of Malta in 1090, then Djerba (1134-35) and the Kerkennah Islands (1145-46)]. Within a hundred years, Norman rule is in decline, and in 1190, Richard I of England (Richard the Lion-Heart) stops in Messina on his way to the Third Crusade, and sacks the city. The Hohenstaufen (Swabians) take over Sicily in 1194: under the rule of *stupor mundi* Frederick II, Sicily is run much like a modern, centrally governed kingdom with an efficient bureaucracy (Detwiler, 1999: 43); but his dynasty collapses soon after his death in 1250. A few years later, Pope Innocent IV sells Sicily to the English prince, Edmund of Lancaster (Malette, 2011). In 1266, Pope Clement IV deposes Edmund and gifts Sicily to Charles of Anjou (brother of Louis IX of France). The arrival of the Aragonese in 1282 heralds five centuries of Spanish domination. Sicily remains a fiefdom, essentially a source of taxes to fund Spain's imperial adventures in America. Repression and disease deepen Sicily's misery under decades of lingering Spanish (mis)rule (e.g. Koenigsburger, 1951; Ryder, 1990; Schneider & Schneider, 1976). A brief British administration (1806-1815) and the island is then handed over once again, this time to the Bourbon Family, which maintains control until defeated by Garibaldi in 1860, during the campaign for the unification of Italy. Reunified with Italy after a 500-year hiatus, Sicily is thus once again in the hands of a distant government; while the old aristocracy maintained most privileges: a historical epoch masterly captured in the novel *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard) (Di Lampedusa, 1958). Various revolts are met with brutal repression, which leads to frustration and mass out-migration of peasants (Gabaccia, 2010). During the Second World War, Italy is initially allied with Germany, but defects to the Allies after 1943 and the allied invasion of Sicily. (Sicily is wrested from the Germans in a lightning 39 day-campaign: testimony to the power of the Mafia, which collaborated with the Allies. The Mafia's authority on the island is firmly re-established after the War) (Maric, 2008: 36).

So many decades of systematic exploitation of Sicily and its people, were met mainly with the resignation, accommodation, resistance and/or mass migration of the locals. An intricate system of patronage and obligation, shrouded in a culture of silence and opprobrium, remained stubbornly in place (Boissevain, 1966). Brigands and *mafiosi* provided crucial links between absentee landlords and the community-oriented peasants in controlling the main resources of the island's settlements: land, labour, and votes (Blok, 1969). The appetite for island sovereignty was never widely shared. A short-lived Sicilian Independence Movement (*Movimento Indipendentista Siciliano*, MIS) was active in Sicily from 1943 to 1951, and demanded independence for the island from the rest of Italy. 1947 saw the MIS' best electoral result in Sicily, when it won 8.8% of the vote and elected nine regional deputies (Finklestein, 1998).

Italy's constitution-makers did somehow seek to remedy insular peripherality and recognize distinct communities by proposing to grant limited legislative and executive jurisdiction to regions like Sicily, and Sardinia (Desideri, & Santantonio, 1996): both became semi-autonomous regions of Italy in 1946. Nevertheless, political patronage remains rife: no wonder that Sicily is described as the "archetypal fief" (Warrington, & Milne, 2007: 398), given its lingering despoliation at the hands of predatory elites (*also* Robb, 1999):

[A] *fief experiences to an extreme degree the peripherality, vulnerability and dependence commonly attributed to islands, compounded by neglect, repression and exploitation at the hands of a rapacious 'imperial' power or by the design of its own elites.* (Warrington, & Milne, 2007: 402).

Sicily as Subnational Jurisdiction and Frontier Zone

Thus, in spite of its self-evident large size (land area as well as resident population) and rich natural resources, the island of Sicily has failed to secure significant formal autonomy from its metropolitan power. Sicily is, by population – after Taiwan and Hainan – the world's largest sub-national island jurisdiction. Indeed, were it a sovereign state, it would be one of mean population size, and not a small state at all. It is also the world's most eminently bridgeable island. But, Sicily remains a territory with scant powers of self-determination (Baldacchino and Milne, 2006). This is both a function of internal Italian politics, as well as a general reticence in the Mediterranean basin towards the encouragement of political fission, possibly stoked by 20th century nationalism. On the other hand, perhaps Sicily already enjoys all the autonomy it needs, given that the central Italian state – with its own management issues – has practically despaired of reining in Sicilian political practices. Sicily remains "a portrait of Italian dysfunction" (Faris, 2012). Sicily's politicians are adroit dispensers of benevolence, handing out jobs and favours (*ibid.*) The island region has one of the highest levels of (direct and indirect) state employment in Europe: over 100,000 workers in 2012 (Donadio, 2012). While various other countries, islands or territories are known for, and branded around, specialty food or beverages or iconic animals, the *mafia* probably remains Sicily's best known export; and widely popularized through Mario Puzo's bestseller novels and Director Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* movie trilogy.

Of late, Sicily and its European island entourage (including Malta) have become a tense frontier zone of the European Union, the staging ground for perilous sea journeys of hope by thousands of undocumented migrants from North Africa who (if they survive the crossing) are landed and detained in Sicily, Lampedusa and/or Malta while their applications for asylum status are processed (Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll, 2014). In spite of nation-state and regional borders, the fluid aquatic boundaries which have characterized so much trade and traffic in the past have persisted into the present. Funnily enough, while the Italian media and politicians on the right (and particularly the regionalist *Lega Nord*, or Northern League) continue to demonise Sicily and its inhabitants for their wild and illicit practices, thousands of undocumented migrants from North Africa now annually target Sicily as their aspirational paradise, their entry point to Europe and the associated promises of a new life.

A Double Heritage

Mainland European and Arab kingdoms administered the islands of the Mediterranean as colonial spaces throughout most of the Middle Ages. These islands were desirable as much as for their strategic value as for their agricultural productivity. This peripheral political economy has not changed much with the passage of time: the Mediterranean has been “increasingly disadvantaged, its history compromised, its legacy beleaguered” since the fall of the Roman Empire (Lowenthal, 2008).

But there is another, just-as-important, story to be told. Sicily’s impact on, and from, its patchwork archipelago has been long, considerable and sustained. Sicily played a significant role in shaping local dynamics in its island entourage; and the latter extend beyond the seven-island Aeolian archipelago, to its north, which is often misconstrued, by itself, to constitute *the* Sicilian archipelago (e.g. Teachers Travel, 2010). The islands around Sicily, stretching from Lipari to Djerba, were landmarks and intermittent ports of call for sea-routes to and from Sicily itself (Arnaud, 2008: 27). For example, in 1239, a colony of Jews from the island of Djerba settled in Sicily, where they obtained concessions to cultivate henna, indigo, and the royal palm, probably for use in the dyeing industry (Loud & Metcalfe, 2002: 335; Matthew, 1992: 340). Focusing on Malta:

Malta’s ancient history, including its prehistory, is intricately linked with that of its closest neighbour, the island of Sicily. Sicily was the land of origin of its first colonisers. Sicily was the source from which these early farmers brought the first domesticated animals and seeds to help them set up a new agricultural economy on the archipelago. From Sicily, they brought the first raw materials for their lithic instruments as well as their whole cultural baggage. Throughout the Neolithic (5000-4100 BC), the inhabitants of the Maltese islands maintained a steady flow of imported hard stone from Sicily (flint) or via Sicily (Lipari and Pantelleria obsidian) (Bonanno, 2011: 145).

The earliest known inhabitants of Malta probably arrived from Sicily some time before 5,200 BC, and there they laid the foundations of a sophisticated culture that erected impressive free-standing stone structures that survive to this very day (Trabia, 2009). Many Sicilian family and place names are now household family names in Malta, including Catania, Messina, Siracusa and Trapani. My own family name, Baldacchino, is of Sicilian origin; and there have been Maltese residents with that same name in Malta at least since 1419, as evidenced from a militia list drawn up at that time (Wettinger, 1969). Maltese, the Semitic language spoken in Malta, is descended from Siculo Arabic. If, like many small islands, Malta’s history has been determined by the sea, then Sicily would have been the geographical origin of most of those sea-borne expeditions and inspirations. For better or for worse: the relief force that lifted the Great Siege of Malta by the Ottoman army and navy in 1565 was outfitted in Sicily; but so were the Italian (and then German) aircraft that bombed Malta relentlessly during the Second World War (1940-1943). A variety of air and sea transport links now connect the two islands: there have been regular flights connecting Malta to Catania for many years, with more recent connections now available to Comiso and Palermo (Grima, 2014); and a fleet of five fast catamarans makes the sea crossing from Malta to Pozzallo in under two hours (Virtu Ferries, 2015). Experts have also called for “an integration of Maltese and Sicilian local transport networks and for better links between the two islands to take advantage of their unique geographical position” (Leone-Ganado, 2015: online).

Amongst rather more anticipated arrivals, one should add, is a new 100-km subsea cable, with a capacity of 200 MW, which now equips Malta – the largest and most

populated island after Sicily within its sprawling archipelago – with its first power interconnection with mainland Europe (via Sicily), reducing the island’s reliance on local energy generation and increasing its security of electrical power supply (Nexans, 2010). In a twist of fate, the ‘Malta-Sicily interconnector’, inaugurated in April 2014 by the country’s two Prime Ministers, provides the first human-made fixed link between Malta and Sicily, sealing a millenary relationship (Enemalta, 2014; Cordina, 2015).

Conclusion

This brief, exploratory paper has attempted to frame the Mediterranean’s largest island in at least two ways: the more obvious one, that of being a bothersome periphery of the Italian state; and a more subtle approach, that of being the dominant player in, and mainland to, a daunting archipelago that controls and – with its 3,350-metre high Etna volcano – literally towers over the central Mediterranean which has acted as a fluid, in-between space for at least two millennia. In both these guises, and in spite of its size and natural endowments, Sicily has been subjected to violence, exploitation and repression at worst; benign neglect and neo-colonial despotism at best. In persisting today as the archetypal fief, Sicily suggests that its *status quo* is deeply rooted: it is likely to remain unbridged to its mainland for some time to come.

In spite of the alluringly self-evident, protective isolation resulting from their geography, the islands of the Mediterranean have been bedevilled by a “promiscuous connectivity” (Mallette, 2007: 29). Although an island and periphery with its tortuous history, Sicily offers an opportunity for a glimpse of how it has served as the inspirational mainland to its surrounding archipelago, now politically fragmented across three countries (Italy, Malta, Tunisia), two continents (Africa, Europe) but one great sea (Abulafia, 2011).

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