THE CHALLENGE OF MAINTAINING PARITY FOR OFFSHORE ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper discusses the challenge of integrating islands into mainland life. Discontinuity between the island and a mainland is a defining feature of islands. Many countries try to integrate small offshore islands into mainland institutions, reducing their sense of categoriality and separateness. Three typical strategies are subsidization, bridge-building, and depopulation. The first and second strategies create parity and comparability between the island and the mainland, subsidization by economic means and bridging by physically connecting them. The second and third strategies erase the discontinuity between island and mainland, bridging by merging the two categories and depopulation by eliminating the island from the system and moving residents to the mainland.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on exploring how societies integrate offshore, peripheral islands into mainland life. The first two sections of the paper discuss the definition of the term "island," show how the discontinuity between islands and the mainland is a crucial feature of islandness, and identify the phenomenon of "offshore islands." Offshore islands are naturally separate from the mainland. The task for society is to create a sense of continuity, connection, and parity with the mainland. The last half of the paper discusses three common responses to this challenge: subsidization, depopulation, and bridging.

This paper also tries to show how these three strategies affect an island's place in a country's system of geographical categorization. When we create townships, states, provinces, regions, countries, and other geographical categories, we draw (or at least imagine) boundaries on the landmass of the earth. These categories have practical consequences, since we often treat places differently solely on the basis of their category membership. They also figure cognitively in our mental maps of the world. As geographical entities go, islands usually have very clear boundaries. It is notoriously difficult to define the area referred to by the term "Midwest" (see MacEachren, 1995:165-166), and it is easy to recognize the artificiality of the borders between many American states, such as California and Nevada. In contrast, the discontinuity between what is on an island and what is not is natural and uncontested. While it is hard to say whether Poughkeepsie is part of "upstate" New York, it is crystal clear that Honolulu is part of the island of Oahu. Islands naturally present themselves as separate entities. But our treatment of offshore islands can change that categorical status.

DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN ISLANDS AND MAINLANDS

Defining the term "island" precisely is not easy. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines an island as "a tract of land surrounded by water and smaller than a continent." However, it is hard to decide whether something counts as an island if it is connected to the mainland at low tide, or if it is a sea stack or rocky skerry. Though

Australia is usually considered a continent, in some contexts one can think of it as an island. It probably makes best sense to use a definition of "island" which recognizes varying degrees of closeness to a prototype of the term instead of a set of essential criteria, following the same approach that Nunn (1994:2) used for the more limited category of "oceanic islands." This type of definition is rooted in the theory of linguistic prototypes and family resemblances (see Taylor, 1995).

With this caveat in mind, consider an alternative way of defining islands, which starts by taking into account the position of an imaginary observer. The most typical islands have a *mainland* from which one can look across at the island and think of the island as "off" the mainland, subordinate to the mainland, an outpost of the mainland, and more remote and isolated than the mainland. To call something as an island is to presuppose that there is such a mainland with potential observers on it.

One of the reasons that it is problematic to think of Australia as an island is that it is hard to keep this view in mind in the middle of the country, where the fact that Australia is surrounded by water is not very relevant. Australia's "islandness" becomes relatively more apparent from a point of view such as Los Angeles. In relation to North America, Australia is a small landmass, separated by a body of water, and reachable only by ship or plane. Its isolated flora and fauna, its history as a penal colony, and its remoteness from other continents all come to mind.

In this perspective, discontinuity with the mainland is the essence of islandness. On the mainland you can walk for a little ways, and then go a little ways further in the same direction, and keep on going for days or months without changing your routine. If you try this on an island, you will eventually have to get into a boat. As this illustration shows, the discontinuity is most evident in the context of transport and communications. An island and its mainland may be culturally and geologically identical, but surface transport between the two will always require abrupt changes of mode (from bus to boat and back to bus again, for example), and goods shippers must use categorically different strategies for island and mainland destinations.

Although there is no doubt that in most of the world today water is a greater barrier to transportation than is land, this was not always true. The power of water as a creator of discontinuity is a modern phenomenon. Historically, land has been more of a barrier than sea. Today, road (and rail) networks and the availability of cars and buses mean that it is easy for people to cover long distances by land, even across natural barriers like forests and mountain ranges. In contrast, before the development of railroads in the mid-nineteenth century, traveling by river and ocean was at the least a viable alternative to going overland, and often faster (see, for example, Braudel, 1992:1:415-430).

If water transport were still easier than land transport, these generalizations would not hold. Instead, given two islands (A and B) separated by a narrow strait, facing villages on A and B might be practically closer than two villages at opposite ends of A. Similarly, bays, shores, sounds, straits, and other liquid units might become more salient geographical categories than solid ones like islands. But under current conditions, it makes sense to point to the discontinuity between island and mainland as one of the most characteristic features of islands.

ISOLATED ISLANDS AND OFFSHORE ISLANDS

There is an important distinction between those islands or island groups that are *isolated* and those that are located just *offshore* of some larger landmass (which may itself be an island). Isolated islands and island groups are far from other land and clearly "stand alone" as units of their own. Classic examples are Easter Island, Iceland, Mauritius, or Bermuda. While a distinct language, culture, or history may contribute to the perception of isolated islands as separate entities, what is most important is simply their geographical distance from other landmasses.

Offshore islands are on the periphery of a larger landmass, can be considered culturally or geographically or geologically part of that landmass, are usually somehow subordinate or dependent to it,

and collapse into that landmass on a map which is highly generalized. Good examples are Newfoundland, Tasmania, and islands like Ouessant (off Brittany) or Santa Catalina (off Los Angeles). It is important to remember that to define something as an offshore island presupposes a mainland and an island which stand in a hierarchical relationship to each other, and that an offshore island may itself have smaller offshore islets as satellites, for which the offshore island serves as a sort of mainland.

Whether a given island group is isolated or offshore is sometimes ambiguous. The Falklands War can be thought of as a battle about whether the Falkland archipelago should be seen as an isolated island group which just happens to be affiliated with Britain, or as an offshore island group belonging to Argentina's sphere of influence.

Within island groups there are also offshore islands, which are subordinate to some larger island in the group and which fade into that larger island when viewed on a more general scale. Consider that when people count the islands in an island group, quite often only the larger ones count towards the total number of islands. When there is a difference of opinion about the number of islands in an island group, usually the debate boils down to deciding which islands "count" and which are simply offshore islands subordinate to a "real" island. For example, in the Faroe Islands the tiny offshore islet of Kirkjubøhólmur and the larger, higher, but uninhabited mini-island of Tindhólmur are considered to "belong" to the full-fledged islands of Streymoy and Vágar respectively—which, geographically and geologically speaking, they do. On less detailed, more schematic maps the outlines of these two islets are either omitted, or collapsed into their "parent" island. The problem of whether to include these and other offshore islands is responsible for the many differing published counts of the number of islands in the Faroes. Some encyclopedias and reference books count only the 18 "basic" islands, while others include a varying number of marginal cases, pushing the total up to 22 or even 25. The same issue affects other archipelagic nations, such as Japan, with its four "main" islands, and Indonesia.

INTEGRATING OFFSHORE ISLANDS INTO MAINLAND SOCIETY

Offshore islands are physically cut off from the mainland, but are tied to the mainland politically and bureaucratically. Many modern governments place an official priority on equal access, by all citizens, to various guaranteed services. The U.S. requires local telephone companies to provide universal access, at the same flat rate, to anyone in their service area. The National Health Service in Britain at least theoretically commits to serving small islands as well as the mainland. Postal services, tax forms, transport connections, and so forth are supposed to be available to all citizens. When a government neglects a small region, there is rarely a shortage of community activists to point this out.

Since offshore islands are small and remote, and difficult and cost-ineffective to serve compared with more "central" mainland areas, how does a government maintain service standards on islands at a level equal those on the mainland? How does it preserve a sense of parity?

There are three typical strategies, discussed in greater detail below. One strategy is to preserve the island's physical separateness, but use subsidies to support a level of services equal to that on the mainland. A second strategy is to eliminate the problem by removing the island's population. A third strategy is to eliminate the island's isolation by connecting it to the mainland with a bridge.

Of course, it is also always possible to ignore an island, abandon any attempt at parity, and leave its residents to fend for themselves. Denmark's treatment of Iceland and the Faroes in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was an example of this policy.

Subsidization

In this strategy, a government maintains parity through an active and ongoing commitment to pay the cost of preserving an island's separate status. That may mean subsidizing transport and

communications, or simply absorbing the higher cost of providing postal, highway, and utility services to an isolated island community. For example, until tourism on the Estonian islands began to grow, the government subsidized plane flights from Tallinn to Saaremaa and Hiiumaa, making it easier for residents to come into the capital to take care of shopping and business. In the summer of 1993, a round-trip ticket to Saaremaa still cost only 50 Estonian crowns (five U.S. dollars). In Scotland, the European Union has funded expensive ro-ro ferry jetties for many small islands—even for ones with less than a hundred inhabitants where construction expenses dwarf the island's yearly economic output.

The other key step in this strategy is to *symbolically* manipulate island life so that it appears to be the same as life on the mainland, and so that the island location is transparent to users of any given system. Transport planning is an important part of this. Timetables in Shetland and the Faroes detail seamless connections from the mainland to the outer islands, barely noting that the trip may involve taking a bus to a ferry to another bus to another ferry. Ferries wait to leave until the connecting bus arrives. In fact, in the Faroes the entire through route may have a single route number. Integrating an island into standard nationwide numbering systems brings the island official status and equality. Giving island hamlets their own postal codes and island roads their own road numbers creates a sense of parity, even if small-scale local familiarity means that they are rarely used. The same effect results when an island has its own direct-dial telephone code, instead of being accessible only through a noisy operator-controlled underwater cable (as was the case until recently in Scotland's Small Isles of Rum, Eigg, and Muck).

The higher shipping rates to Hawaii (and Alaska) charged by many mainland American retailers show parity *not* being maintained. Higher costs put Hawaiians at a practical disadvantage and symbolically reaffirm their separateness.

Subsidization allows islanders (and outside island appreciators) to have the best of both separateness and equality. Islanders enjoy their own community and identity, but suffer few of the inconveniences that island living can entail. The down side is that this strategy costs a lot of money which some people may consider unwisely spent.

Depopulation

One of the ways of dealing with inconvenient geographical entities is to simply wipe them out. If no one lives on an island, official attention need no longer be paid. Governments frustrated by the cost and bother of maintaining a small island community may be tempted to close down the island entirely. In some cases, the opportunity to use an island for military purposes has been an extra incentive. Diego Garcia and Bikini Atoll are two classic examples. The nuclear tests on Amchitka in Alaska (Coates, 1996) and the anthrax tests on Gruinard Island in Scotland (Szasz, 1995) are similar cases, though neither Amchitka nor Gruinard had a permanent population at the time of its appropriation.

People are always sentimentally opposed to the depopulation of an island—witness the elegiac literature on Scotland's St. Kilda or Ireland's Great Blasket (e.g. Maclean, 1977; Steel, 1988; Sayers, 1962; Stagles and Stagles, 1980). There are two possible views of such situations. One is that settlement on an island is part of the boundary conditions of life and that a government must do whatever is necessary to maintain the settlement, either through outright subsidy or building a bridge. Another—more consistent with the idea of islands as parts of an open system of human settlement rather than fragile isolated units—is that island communities are not naturally ordained, and that island depopulation is permissible, sometimes sensible, and not necessarily permanent.

In an attempt to explain the poignancy of island depopulation by reference to some formal principle, we could say that it results from the existence of spots to which no resident of a country could walk without crossing water. Anyone who wants to get to the island is left gazing across at it from the mainland, and the island becomes symbolic of unreachable goals and never-to-be-visited countries. The primacy of water as a modern creator of discontinuity is again evident in the fact that, if all the shores of a lake with no navigable outlet were

depopulated, it would not be nearly as heart-wrenching. Note though that in Iceland─where coastal steamers were the main means of travel and goods transport until very recently─the depopulation of remote and thinly populated fjords such as Mjóifjörður has just as much poignancy as that of abandoned islands.

Bridging

The other way of eliminating an island is to build a bridge to it. This is a paradoxical act: bridges preserve the island by making it no longer an island. That is why opponents typically argue that bridges will "alter the essential character" of places like Skye and Prince Edward Island. In Skye, for example, a bridge replaced the five-minute ferry crossing between Kyle of Lochalsh (on the mainland) and Kyleakin (on Skye). Bridge opponents worried that a physical connection to the mainland might disrupt the island's sense of identity, make it too easy (both physically and mentally) for tourists to visit on a day trip rather than a longer stay, and depress the economy of the ferryport towns, where travelers would now have less incentive to stop.

Bridges can sometimes be the only way of preserving the residential viability of the homes on an island, and thus the only viable alternative to depopulation. Some small islands are in danger of being abandoned not by government decree but through all of the inhabitants packing up and leaving. In these cases, residents may welcome a bridge that lets them commute to work, school, or shopping on a larger island or on the mainland while preserving their island homes. The causeways between the small island of Vatersay and the larger island of Barra in the Outer Hebrides, and between the island of Kunoy and the town of Klaksvík in the Faroes, are examples of bridges which saved very small islands from total depopulation in highly modernized societies whose citizens are no longer very tolerant of isolation and material deprivation.

Looked at formally, building a bridge to an island removes the discontinuity that is characteristic of islands in the first place. It means that an island, viewed from the mainland, no longer appears mysterious and inaccessible. Travelers no longer

need to change transport modes. You can even walk from the island to the mainland without getting your feet wet. The rituals of passage to an island─waiting for the ferry, checking the weather, drinking coffee in the terminal cafeteria, walking up the ramp into the ship, pitching and tossing in the waves, tying up at the pier with thick rope─are reduced to an unremarkable car journey with perhaps a stop at a tollbooth.

CONCLUSION

The term "island" is used to refer to a diverse group of geographical features. A distinct type of island within this group is the "offshore" island. Offshore islands typically exist on the periphery of a larger political unit based on a nearby "mainland." The water barrier between the island and the mainland creates a sharp discontinuity, and means that the island must be treated in a categorically different way in areas such as transport and governmental services. This paper has outlined three different responses to this fact: maintaining parity by bridging or subsidization, or giving up the attempt and removing the island's population.

Returning to the theme of island as geographical categories, each of the strategies outlined above affects the larger categorical system which the water barrier between the island and the mainland forms part of. There are many areas of social life in which an exaggerated sense of discontinuity is created and maintained, sometimes at great cost, between two spatial or temporal categories which are not naturally distinct (such as "Montana" and "North Dakota" or "January" and "February"; see Zerubavel, 1991:74-80; 1985:121-129). For islands, whose separateness is given, the issue is whether and how to *lessen* the force of a *natural* boundary. Subsidization preserves the categorical division between island and mainland,

while simultaneously promoting a sense of equality between the two categories. Building a bridge also promotes a sense of equality between the island and the mainland, but accomplishes this by erasing the boundary between them and making both effectively part of the same category. Depopulation, like bridging, eliminates the categorical division between island and mainland. But it does so by removing the island from the system and relocating its residents to the mainland.

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