Europe as Archipelago

Pamela Ballinger

As scholars debate the protracted crisis of modern European history and propose to revision it by means of strategies such as “decentring,” “off-centring,” “provincialising,” and “writing from the margins,” such critical conceptual categories nonetheless leave in place assumptions about Europe as a terrestrial space. In such imaginings, Europe remains implicitly a continent, albeit one now approached from both its geographical margins and its marginalised subjects, such as refugees and other migrants.¹ As a result, such critiques risk reproducing metageographical conventions that, as Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen put it, “have proved remarkably tenacious, even among those who are trying to shake them off.”² Does imagining Europe as an archipelago offer a possible solution, enabling scholars to dispense with both the continental and terrestrial biases that inhere not just in conventional European historical frames but also within most national historiographies defined by “European” geographies? In this short piece, I draw upon recent thinking on watery flows, seaside epistemologies, and oceanic and coastal histories as a means to address several of the key areas of debate highlighted by Sonja Levsen and Jörg Requate in their query, ‘Why Europe, Which Europe?’. In the foundational statement that animates the lively contributions of this EuropeDebate forum, Levsen and Requate call for ‘interlinking historiographies [to] boost innovative research’ and investigations into ‘the relevance and contours of transnational spaces,’ among many other key questions.³
Rethinking continental bias

Writing in 1997, Lewis and Wigen highlighted four interrelated forms of erroneous yet tenacious thinking: ‘the myth of continents, the myth of the nation-state, the myth of East and West, and the myth of geographical concordance (i.e., the idea that disparate phenomena exhibit the same variation in space).’⁴ Although acknowledging that by the 1950s professional geographers had largely abandoned the ‘seven continent’ division of the world in favor of one that recognizes Europe as inextricably connected with Asia, they contend ‘most geographers— and almost all nongeographers—continue to treat it, not only as a full-fledged continent, but as the archetypal continent.’⁵ For Lewis and Wigen, then, European priority and, by extension, Eurocentrism, remains the conceptual linchpin of continental thinking.

While Lewis and Wigen remain focused on the ideological implications of explicitly cartographic and geographical thinking, historians like John Gillis have offered a broader critique of continental thinking. Gillis contends that 19th and 20th century history typically ‘is presented as if it begins and ends at the edges of continents, and dwells almost exclusively on their interiors. All that which lies beyond the shores is either a prelude or aftermath of the grand continental narratives.’⁶ Such narratives obscure the earlier importance of maritime “empires of access” connected by water, viewing islands largely as sites of insularity and liminality in contrast to terrestrial(ised) centers.

An emergent blue humanities has offered an important corrective to these dual continental and terrestrial biases, which inhere not only in accounts of European history but many other regional historiographies. In 2006, historians Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell issued their influential call for a “new thalassology” to reinvigorate the aquacentric historiographic tradition pioneered by Fernand Braudel in his seminal work on the Mediterranean. An ever-growing body of work has variously explored actual seaspaces (perhaps most notably the Atlantic but also the Pacific and Indian Oceans) together with the metaphors and concepts they offer, such as flow, archipelagos, or tidemarks.⁷ What unites these approaches is the argument that a watery perspective – whether literal or figurative – proves useful for interrogating disciplinary theoretical and methodological frames. For historians of the modern era, oceanic/watery perspectives highlight spaces below, above and beyond those of the nation-state. Oceanic history, however, has given undue emphasis to the high seas to the neglect of the coastal realm. This despite the fact that, as Gillis puts it, the bulk of human history has taken
place 'alongshore rather than offshore, for the real home of humankind is where land and water meet.' In their dual qualities as spaces defined both by water and land, the islands that make up archipelagos bridge the gap between coastal and oceanic histories.

The literal/littoral

So what is gained by considering Europe as a constellation of islands or bits of land, rather than as a continent? First, reframing our understanding of Europe as a (metaphoric) chain of islands connected by water and European history as archipelagic draws attention to the dual etymological meaning of islands: as sites of insularity and alternatively as “water-land” spaces defined by connectivity and mobility. The degree of isolation or connectivity is situational, of course, and varies over time, offering a way to capture shifting historical tides and the complex interplay of local, national, regional, and ‘European’ scales. This offers a somewhat different framing than that of more conventional notions such as center and periphery or center/margin or even metropole/colony. In some studies, it has also served as a way to reconfigure the binary of unity and diversity, and to mark out constellations of desire, as in Boellstorff’s ethnographic explorations of what he deems a gay archipelago strung across Indonesia. Boellstorff contends that the archipelagic metaphor ‘permits understanding selfhood and sociality as not possessing sharp external boundaries, yet characterised by islands of difference.’

Secondly and on a more literal level, an archipelagic perspective restores islands and other littoral spaces to our attention and thereby directly addresses both the continental and oceanic/high seas biases diagnosed by Gillis. It also proves in dialogue with environmental perspectives that emphasise different bordering processes beyond those of state sovereignty. Recently, for example, Alison Frank Johnson has asked, ‘In an era of global climate catastrophe, global pandemic and global economic crisis, where does the “European” environment end?’ While echoing Boellstorff’s interest in unboundedness, such a query simultaneously gestures toward rich bodies of work that situate a porous Europe within global currents of diseases, plants, and other non-human agents, as well as those of capital and labor.

Thirdly, such a move underscores the far-reaching tentacles of Europe via the kraken of colonialism. Drawing upon the work of Caribbean intellectuals and the historical experience of Caribbean actors, for example, sociologist Manuela Boatcă has sketched
out the possibility of ‘thinking Europe otherwise.’ In dialogue with work that treats Europe as a marked category, Boatcă proposes remapping Europe to include ‘continental and non-continental European territories as a single space and [to] locate Europe’s current Western borders in South America and the Caribbean Sea,’ as well as its other overseas territories. For Boatcă this entails a process of creolising Europe. In an analysis of Transylvania, a classic European “borderland” at the crossroads of conflicting and inter-imperial histories, Boatcă and Parvulescu evidence how understanding the region’s ‘land problem’ (a terrestrialised notion if there ever was one) demands a perspective ‘anchored in coloniality’ and, by extension, thinking otherwise.

Boatcă’s spatially destabilised notion of a creolised Europe has many important precedents and genealogies. We might consider, for example, the ways in which historians of the United Kingdom and its dominions have put island thinking to productive use. In his 2005 collection of essays, The Discovery of Islands, J. G. A. Pocock drew upon his own formation as an Antipodean subject to recast a narrative of interactions and mobilities across oceans. As Pocock contends, such an island history treats peoples in motion, histories traversing distance, and “identities” (the word is overworked) as never quite at home. Formed partly in an archipelago of the Southern Ocean, it presents the islands including Britain as another archipelago (hence the title of this book), not the promontory of a continent; it presupposes histories “not in narrow seas.” It questions identities, but waits to hear answers.

Here, Pocock explicitly locates himself and his historical consciousness among the settler colonial populations of formerly British controlled lands, part of an expansive European diaspora spread unevenly across the world. Lewis and Wigen have noted that within cultural geography, diasporas often figure as archipelagos or “exclaves” of populations. Indeed, they propose that a new understanding of “regions” that permits discontinuities ‘might take the spatial form of lattices, archipelagos, hollow rings, or patchworks.’ Yet even the literalness of an island or an archipelago requires examination.

As Sujit Sivasundaram has demonstrated for Ceylon/Sri Lanka, islands are made, not born. Sivasundaram denaturalises the seeming obviousness of Ceylon’s island status by detailing the considerable ideological labor required to establish the territory’s distance and distinctiveness from India. With simultaneous processes of partitioning and islanding came differentiations between Ceylon’s denizens: majority Buddhists (Sinhalese) and minority Hindu (Tamils). Over time, Hindu/Tamils came to appear as if
they belonged to an Indian sub-continent rather than Sri Lanka. In taking up a key scholarly question for Sri Lankan history — what are the origins of the Sinhalese/Tamil division and conflict? — Sivasundaram offers an answer that stresses the agency of both transcolonial powers (those of the Dutch and British) and islanders themselves in recasting Lanka in the ocean as an island. He thus highlights the role of state powers in islanding, an important point in light of the explicit use of archipelagic models in state-building projects in places like post-independence Indonesia.

Working within the framework of Indian Ocean studies, Sivasundaram nonetheless disagrees with the tendency to treat that body of water as an analytically coherent arena characterised by economic and social networks. Sivasundaram instead insists,

*Only by deep investigation of particular places set in a wider seascape can claims of connectivity be borne. Discussions of connectivity in turn may lead to observations of how Lanka could become dislodged — or partitioned from the mainland — even as it looked to a new horizon and took a new place upon this great sea. After all, a connection is a disconnection, when viewed from another direction.*

Like islands, seas must also be made and remain subject to processes of partitioning or connecting. They thus prove no more natural or obvious than terrestrial regions. Certainly, examining “Europe” through sub-regions defined by contiguous water or seas – the Adriatic, the Ionian, the Danubian, or the Mediterranean, for instance – reconceives transnational processes in ways that usefully complicate the problematic symbolic geographies (notably the North/South, West/East axes) inherent in area studies and regional designations such as the Balkans, Western Europe, Southern Europe, the Middle East, and so on. Sivasundaram’s insights, however, caution us against attributing any sort of natural givenness to watery regions. Within a greater European archipelago, cultural and political “islands” and their attendant seas have continually been made, remade, and umade over time and it is these processes that demand scholars’ attention.

**Decolonising modern European history**

As noted previously, authors like Pocock and Boatcă make explicit their subject positions, in Pocock’s case as a member of the settler colonial population of New Zealand and the latter as an intellectual hailing from Europe’s Eastern “margins.” Yet the formulation of an archipelagic imaginary owes as much or more to thinkers from former...
European colonies, underlining how casting Europe as archipelago can advance the multi-pronged project of decolonising European history.

Boatcă, for instance, builds explicitly on Martinique philosopher Édouard Glissant’s pioneering work on creolisation. While offering an epistemological critique, Glissant simultaneously intervened into contemporary European political debates. He found hope in ongoing processes of archipelagisation he identified in Europe. He saw the making of archipelagic Europe, for instance, as distinct from and in opposition to a ‘Balkanized Europe’. Glissant wrote an open letter to this effect to Nicolas Sarkozy in 2005 and, until his death in 2011, continued to promote a notion of archipelagic Europe that took inspiration from the Antilles.

Embracing the archipelagic thus opens scholars up to ways of conceptualising Europe – past, present and future – that take inspiration from other traditions and epistemologies. Consider, for example, how Fijian and Tongan scholar Epeli Hau‘ofa powerfully recasts continental thinking by reconceiving the Pacific as a ‘sea of islands’ rather than made up ‘islands in a far sea.’ If Pocock’s antipodean perspective quite literally looks at the world upside down, Hau‘ofa instead turns Eurocentric tropes inside out. In analysing the nomenclature of “Pacific islanders,” Hau‘ofa rejected a notion of this world as one of remoteness and smallness. In its place, he saw an Oceania designating ‘a sea of islands with their inhabitants.’ As he put it, ‘The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves.’ Rather, it was modern colonialism that transformed ‘a once boundless world into the Pacific islands states and territories that we know today. People were confined to their tiny spaces, isolated from each other.’ Hau‘ofa aimed his critique not only at European colonisers but at indigenous scholars (himself included) who had perpetuated the fallacies of terrestrialised thinking.

How might considering Europe not just as an archipelago but as “our sea of islands begin to put the views of (former) colonisers and colonised in dialogue? How might it not only rethink the past but prospectively offer new ways of being European or of doing European history? While prompting different questions and offering an alternative framework, the archipelagic cannot and should not be taken as the definitive solution to the crisis of European history. Rather, the archipelagic cautions humility while embracing multiplicity, that is, plural genealogies and ways of knowing. It means bringing to the study of Europe’s past an oceanic literacy, what Karin Amimoto Ingersoll deems ‘an approach to knowing through a visual, spiritual, intellectual, and embodied literacy of the ‘āina (land) and kai (sea) [...] as an interconnected system that
allows for successful navigation through them. Such a perspective contributes to the urgent work of simultaneously provincialising and decolonising European history.

1. In my “critique” of this critique, I include myself amongst the many who have proposed a new understanding of European history from the margins.


4. Lewis / Wigen 1997, p. xii.

5. Ibid., p. 36. The notion of Eurasia, of course, has proved central to many post-Cold War reconfigurations of area studies, particularly in the institutional realm of area studies programs.


18. Ibid., p. 336.

19. One particularly productive example can be found with the notion of a Black Adriatic articulated by Catherine Baker that engages with the critical thinking of Paul Gilroy and Maria Todorova, among others. See Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-conflict, Postcolonial?*, Manchester 2018.
23. Ibid., p. 155.
24. On this see also the work of Amimoto Ingersoll, who builds upon Hau'ofa’s critique when she argues, ‘There has been a predisposition of cultural and indigenous studies to connect indigeneity with territory, a ‘territory’ that has been predominantly, although not entirely, land-based.’ Amimoto Ingersoll 2016, p. 15.
25. Ibid., pp. 5-6.