Chapter 2

Italian small islands' timespace: routines, rhythm and everyday geographies. A spiral temporality*

Stefano Malatesta, Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

Abstract

Over the last decade, Italian small islands have been the subject of constant political attentions (Gallia and Malatesta, 2022; Agnoletto, De Michele, Tomei 2026). This body of policies, ranging from European-level measures to national strategies and plans, has shaped a 'developmental' vision for the future of small islands. This vision is based on infrastructure development, connectivity, tourism growth and circular economies. However, much less attention has been paid to the rhythm of social life in these places. Drawing on field notes, particularly in the Aeolian archipelago, this essay shows how the categories of temporality, inspired by Lefebvre's studies, can inform a more comprehensive political vision for the future of small Italian islands.

Keywords: Seasonality, Future, Temporality, Everyday Geographies.

Riassunto

Nell'ultimo decennio le piccole isole italiane sono state oggetto di costante attenzione politica (Gallia and Malatesta 2022, Agnoletto, De Michele, Tomei 2026). Questo corpus politico, dalla scala europea fino alle strategie e ai piani nazionali, ha contribuito all'affermazione di un'idea sviluppista del futuro delle piccole isole. O meglio, di un futuro fondato su sviluppo infrastrutturale, connettività, crescita del turismo ed economia circolare. Molta meno attenzione è stata prestata al ritmo della vita sociale in questi luoghi. Partendo da alcune note di campo (soprattutto nell'arcipelago delle Eolie), il contributo mostra come le categorie fondamentali della temporalità, in una prospettiva ispirata agli studi di Lefebvre, possano contribuire a costruire una visione politica più completa sul futuro delle piccole isole italiane.

Parole chiave: Stagionalità, Futuro, Temporalità, Geografie del quotidiano.

* The text is the result of reflections arising from the project "Islands 4 Future. Protecting next generations from marginalization: a field-based, multi-dimensional and participatory intervention on promoting cultural heritage, future opportunities and tourism on small islands" – PRIN 2022 (2022T4P5WP) Funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU.

The text is published as a Chapter in: Malatesta and Gallia 2026, *Seasonal Island Geographies: The Human Geography of Italian Small Islands Patterns, Challenges and Perspectives Springer Nature.*

Prelude(s)

A brief island story. I was conducting fieldwork in the Aegadian Islands on one of the last days of January 2023, accompanied by Antonio Politano: a friend and professional photographer. The itinerary included interviews and a series of photography sessions on Marettimo, the westernmost island of the archipelago, located over 12 miles from the main port at Favignana. By early afternoon, strong gusts of wind from the East – known as the *Levante* or *Grecale*, depending on the region – had picked up. In the middle of an interview, the shipping company's app issued an alert announcing the suspension of all connections to and from the port of Favignana. We were stranded on the island – nothing entirely unexpected or unusual. This would not have posed a serious logistical issue in spring or summer. But in the middle of winter, Marettimo is a challenging place to find accommodation. In January, most tour operators, bars and restaurant owners, and seasonal renters temporarily close their shops and leave the island. Staying overnight – or, as in this case, for more than one night – in the depths of winter, with eastern winds blasting and sundown before 6 p.m., meant having little time to seek out an arrangement. Luckily, a friendly local family hosted these two 'outsiders', sharing with them a can of tuna and half a kilo of pasta. Seasonality affects not only hotels, bed and breakfasts, and rentals, but also restaurants, bars, and even supermarkets. In January, the geography of islands like Marettimo clearly displays the rhythm and structure of Italian small islands 'timespace' (May and Thrift 2001).

This essay is published as a chapter in the book *Seasonal Island Geographies. The Human Geography of Italian Small Islands* (Malatesta and Gallia, 2025). The book offers an interpretation of insularity based on key political and geographical references shaping the present and future of Italian small islands. One such concept is the 'timescape', or rather the study of social time, and therefore of the rhythms, routines and seasonality that describe the lives of islanders. The second chapter of the book, published here as an extract, discusses the importance of this concept in the study of Italian islands geographies. Readers will find references to the field notes and interviews that were collected during two winter periods (2024 and 2025) we spent in Lipari, in the Aeolian archipelago. Furthermore, this text is part of a larger project on the future of the new gen-

erations of Italian islanders: *Islands4Future* granted by the program PRIN 2022.

2. Islands' timespace: seasonality, routines, and social life

Lefebvre (2004) reminded us that the rhythm of social life is always a relationship between linearity and repetition. The understanding of small islands' temporalities should start from this assumption. Over the last decade, both the scholarly literature (Malatesta and Gallia, 2026) and governance policies (Haase and Maier, 2021) have contributed to reinforcing and reproducing the opposition between a linear, developmentalist vision of the future of European island geographies and the awareness that everyday island geographies follow rhythms that integrate both linearity and circularity.

Ferry and hydrofoil timetables serve as a powerful metaphor for island timespace and a fitting example to introduce our line of reasoning. An illuminating case was presented by Vannini (2012), who used an ethnographic approach to tap into the rhythms of social life on the «ferry-dependent islands and coastal communities of Canada's West coast» (241). Ferry timetables dictate the pace of life, shaping the practices of those on the move by rationalising (to borrow Lefebvre's term) island timespace and regulating the speed and duration of travel and the corresponding waiting times.

Fig. 1 – Ferry timetable for the Aeolian Archipelago. Departures from Lipari on Winter 2025, on the left, and during Summer 2024, on the right (Source: Liberty Lines).

Figure 1 illustrates the routes connecting Sicily with the Aeolian archipelago. Liberty Lines, the case study in question, connects 26 destinations around Sicily and the Aeolian, Aegadian and Pelagian islands. Every year, the company carries almost 3.5 million passengers. On the left is the winter season timetable and on the right the summer season timetable. While frequency is undoubtedly a key aspect of any timetable, readers should focus on the actual possibilities of reaching the islands, which vary significantly depending on the season and the day of the week. The colours in the diagram correspond to the days when boat services are guaranteed. Notably, some islands, such as Lipari and Vulcano (see par. 1.4), benefit from a higher number of connections regardless of whether it is June (the tourist season) or January (the low-tourist season). In contrast, others, such as Alicudi, have far fewer connections. This disparity reflects the classic centre-periphery model often observed in the geography of Mediterranean archipelagos (Spilanis, Kizos and Petsioti, 2012; Tsiotas and Tselios, 2023). Lipari represents the centre, while Alicudi lies at the extreme periphery. Furthermore, the classification of seasons follows meteorological features, such as daylight hours, air temperatures, and precipitation, aligning with the peak of the summer tourist season. This categorisation, however, often disregards the rhythms of public-school timetables/calendars and the daily social practices of islanders. As a young interviewee in Lipari – who attended school in Milazzo (Sicily) during the week, returning home on the afternoon hydrofoil – noted, in the middle of winter:

> You don't risk going home if the next day they are likely to cancel the only hydrofoil you can take in the morning to get to school on time... I always carry a toothbrush and a mobile phone charger in my backpack and stay overnight at a friend's house.

The quantification of time, seasonality, and rhythm stand out as three essential dimensions for understanding the temporalities of small islands. In this essay, temporality is not just a recurring theme, but the central interpretative framework that informs the analysis.

In response to the «increasing prominence of space and spatiality» during the 1990s, May and Thrift (2001: 1) offered the social sciences – and geography in particular – with a groundbreaking synthesis of geographical

theorising on the role of temporality. Their work *Timespace* highlights the complex interplay between time management and social practices, illustrating how the rhythms of social action – whether daily, weekly, or seasonal – define and shape our understanding of the social life of places. More importantly, it reveals the inequalities and dissimilarities between those who manage and control social time and those who live within the everyday realities of these spaces. This control over time – or its rationalisation, as proposed by Lefebvre – reflects the geometries of power embedded in places. Time, in this sense, becomes a technology (Bear, 2016), a key lens through which spatial inequalities may be analysed and understood.

Employing timespace as a geographical descriptor allows us to scrutinise key dimensions of life on Italian small islands, seeking to move beyond simplistic and overused tropes of insularity.

The study of intra- and extra-archipelagic human mobility highlights the multifaceted dimensions of migration trajectories, the temporary presence of tourists and second-home owners, the routines of commuters, and the experiences of 'islanders by choice'. This analysis demonstrates that distance is not a fixed attribute – whether relative or absolute – of space (Bjelland *et al.*, 2013; Simandan, 2016). Rather, it is tightly bound up with transport policies, the location of transportation services, and the means of transport used to navigate maritime spaces. As previously mentioned, ferry and hydrofoil timetables function as a prominent dispositive in shaping everyday mobility experiences, constructing a shared sense of time, routine, and pace in the social lives of islanders (Vannini, 2012). The time spent waiting at the port becomes an integral part of the travel experience, while the frequency of ferries serves as a tool for regulating daily and weekly travel rhythms – not just for commuters and students but also for outsiders who need to access the islands. The pier, where ferries dock, serves a variety of users beyond those travelling on the hydrofoil. It spatially separates, for example, those arriving by car or bus from commuters waiting to take the first hydrofoil to work every morning. These spatial arrangements vary according to the frequency of the crossings. The port itself becomes a place of intermittent social activity, marked by peaks of bustling movement and intervals of quiet emptiness. This rhythm extends beyond daily cycles and is also evident on a weekly scale, as variations in transport schedules create noticeable contrasts between weekdays and weekends.

Fig. 2 – A ferry entering Lipari's main port at sundown on a winter's day (Photograph by Stefano Malatesta, February 2024).

According to Ho (2021), everyday interactions with living places, including the routines that produce and reproduce social practices, span three domains: intimate and individual space-time experiences, mobility trajectories, and socio-environmental relations. Vallés (2017) further argues that the daily scale is essential for 'holding together' the trajectories of people, places, and societies. When applied to the study of island temporalities, these theoretical perspectives highlight how the day-to-day experiences of islanders, tourists, and day visitors are related to specific components of everydayness. As a young nurse from Lipari hospital told me:

> Here in Lipari, everything you have to do depends on the boat timetables. Sometimes I give up on going to the city because of time constraints and because of bad weather disrupting the connections.

Not only transport timetables, as already mentioned, but also the daily and weekly school timetable and the opening hours of public services shape the rhythm of life on an island, where the provision of these services lacks the continuity enjoyed in urban or mainland areas. The rhythm thus created does not follow a straight line, nor does it divide the islanders' days into uniform segments of equal duration. The early morning hours 'accumulate', spatially and temporally clustering events that connect the island, the sea, and the mainland: the opening of the schools, the arrival of supply boats, ferry departures, and human traffic to and from the pier. This is fol-

lowed by a morning primarily dedicated to infra-island activities, as ferry frequency decreases and commuters (e.g., teachers) are at work on the island or on the mainland. In the afternoon, the concentration of events linking the island to the sea and mainland increases once again. Finally, there is a binary relationship between day and night, once more shaped by the frequency and temporality of services.

Drawing from Lefebvre's teaching on everydayness, this type of reading can be extended across all time scales. Each scale provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the theme and uncover new components of the temporalities of Italian small islands. Consider, for example, the concept of seasonality. As Baum and Hagen (1999: 299) aptly noted, «tackling seasonality is one of the most common aspirations and objectives of tourism development». Indeed, seasonality remains a central issue in Island and Tourism Studies (Chung, 2009; Corliuka, 2019; Duro and Turrión Prats, 2019). Within this broader debate, Baum and Hagen's reading is particularly relevant to our discussion here. The rhythm of island seasonality is related to a wide range of external structural and infrastructural factors operating at different scales: individual, local, and regional. These include public or private strategies and investments in transport networks, competition among operators, control of the tourism market by non-island operators and companies, regional and European development policies, and the supra-local organisation of public services. Seasonality, therefore, plays a pivotal role in shaping the lives of islanders: «November is really tough» is a complaint I heard many times during our long chats with Italian islanders. Yet, seasonality is also heavily influenced by factors that often lie beyond the control of those who live on or govern the islands. We can define this complex of norms, practices, and decisions as 'seasonal politics'. That is, a set of social, economic, and political rules that perpetuate the dialectical rhythm of the seasonal peaks of the tourism industry.

What ultimately unites the scales of island temporality is cyclicality. Days repeat on a weekly scale, weeks on a seasonal scale. The rhythm of both social practices and the lives of economic agents follows cyclical trajectories that recur daily, weekly, and annually. This is a fundamental consideration in understanding the geographies of Italian small islands.

From a classic human geography perspective, we can summarise the key characteristics of Italian island geography (excluding the largest islands,

Sicily and Sardinia, and the unique case of Venice, often considered the most archipelago-like archipelago in the world) as follows: Italian small islands comprise few dozen places forming a fragmented and precarious administrative geography. There is a striking demographic disparity: some islands host thousands of permanent residents, while others have only a few dozen inhabitants but accommodate thousands of temporary visitors during the summer peak. The islands range from those located far from urban ports, such as Lampedusa, to those that function as *de facto* suburbs of urban areas, like Procida. Almost 80% of the islands lack public hospitals, with some only offering health centres without emergency facilities, while nearly 66% of the islands do not provide secondary education, forcing young residents to travel elsewhere for schooling. Many islands depend on supply vessels for essentials like water and diesel fuel. Most of these islands' economies are heavily reliant on seasonal summer tourism, which often comes with significant environmental impacts.

Shifting from everyday insular life to broader political strategies and plans, EU *Cohesion Policy* (currently covering the 2021-2027 period) serves as a crucial European political and strategic framework, significantly shaping the Union's development strategies for its peripheral regions. The core objective of this policy is to address imbalances between countries and regions. Its lexicon is deeply geographical, if we read it as a timespace planning strategy. Key challenges include dependence on the mainland, limited opportunities for young people (particularly in shaping their life projects), the scarcity of public services, the need for basic infrastructure development, reliance on a narrow range of economic activities – especially tourism, which is highly seasonal – and the goal to integrate tourism with 'traditional maritime sectors'.

It can be asserted that these policies are driven by a 'developmentalist' approach to spatial planning, and a progressive and linear idea of island temporalities. They prioritise the enhancement of connectivity and emphasise the need for seasonal adjustments – to the extent that so-called deseasonalisation has almost become a 'mantra'.

Let us return to the example of one of the primary operators of temporality on Italian small islands: the ferry timetable. Here, the perspective just outlined is reaffirmed. The interplay between transport networks and leisure geographies reinforces the notion that what Lefebvre termed 'quan-

tified time' dictates an organised temporal linearity. This linearity, in turn, becomes integral to the organisation of social life in these places – an organisation that is imposed from the outside. As Baum and Hagen (1999) have pointed out (in reference to tourist destinations more broadly), these locations possess minimal agency when it comes to influencing the «structural external factors» that govern the «tourist machine[1]». Two other key aspects of the social geography of islands are currently framed through a linear perspective. The first concerns the mobility experiences of children and teenagers on their educational journeys. As discussed earlier, when considering both intra- and extra-archipelagic dynamics and broader patterns of human geography, it becomes evident that most students' personal trajectories lead them away from their islands to the mainland[2]. This movement often unfolds in a three-stage journey, driven by the lack of local educational opportunities[3]. The second key pattern relates to the portrayal of islands as particularly vulnerable to major environmental challenges – such as climate change and biodiversity loss – as well as cultural challenges, including the decline of traditional sectors. In response, the development of new economic sectors is often framed as the solution. Implicitly, the future is presented as a 'smart' response to a present that is perceived as underdeveloped, marginalised, and disadvantaged.

As geographers and lecturers in Island Studies, we[4] have been reflect-

[1] The expression 'tourism machine' is used to describe a sector that is structurally and metabolically capable of adapting to any context, mechanically absorbing potential competitors and opponents, and transforming them into opportunities.

[2] As previously stated, this essay is part of a multi-year reflection on the life trajectories of the Next Gen on the Italian small islands.

[3] A clarification is needed to better define the current state of public schools in small Italian municipalities, both insular and inland: «With the 2023 Legge di Bilancio (L.197/22), the Government intervened on the existing legislation to implement the reorganisation of the school system envisaged in the PNRR and established a new discipline for the assignment of school heads, general and administrative directors to each comprehensive institute, establishing one head for every 900-1000 students. Starting from the school year 2024/2025, for the following seven years, the regions [are implementing] the downsizing gradually. With Interministerial Decree 127 of 20 June 2023, for the school year 2023/2024 a headmaster and a director of general and administrative services are assigned only to school institutions with at least 600 students, (400 in mountain municipalities) […] A further change is introduced by Law 159/23, which provides for a derogation from the minimum number of pupils per class set by Presidential Decree No. 81 of 2009 for schools located in small islands, mountain municipalities» (De Cunto 2024, p.156).

[4] The use of the plural refers to the work carried out with Arturo Gallia, mentioned at the beginning

ing on these dynamics for years, focusing on the potential that seasonal adjustment and the integration of tourism with traditional sectors hold for the future of Italian islands (Gallia and Malatesta 2022). However, we eventually recognised a gap, a need for a more rigorous theoretical framework. During a preliminary fieldwork in Lipari (February 2024), I began to discern the direction in which this theoretical reflection should evolve. Some of the informants with whom we spent our February evenings on Lipari shared illuminating narratives that deepened our understanding. One such account was that of a secondary school teacher who lives in Milazzo (Sicily) and commutes daily to Lipari on the first hydrofoil. Because of this, she is frequently late and remains disconnected from the school community, leaving immediately after lessons to return home. Another story was offered by a group of students who described themselves as 'nomads', telling in some sense of a diaspora that, following university (the only hope of leaving the island), nevertheless yearn to return home. Among 16-year-olds, there is a palpable awareness that their limited access to schooling translates into a restriction of their future choices: «If you make the wrong choice, it is more difficult to go back and start again». The latter statement recalls the earlier-evoked sense of uncertainty and distrust about future prospects.

Finally, several boys and girls shared their experiences of summer as a season marked by both work and social encounters. It is a time for seasonal employment but also for meeting 'people from the outside', reconnecting with friends – often the sons and daughters of second-home owners – and enjoying the exceptional opportunity to experience island life late into the night, with spaces like the local cinema remaining open throughout the week.

of the text.

3. The spiral of small island temporality

The stories we collected on Lipari, as on other small islands, clearly (and brusquely) revealed that any serious reflection on the future of small Italian islands must engage with the ongoing dialogue (and dialectic tensions) between the linearity imposed by national and EU policies and the locally embedded dimensions of timespace geographies. In parallel, our reading of the literature presented in the previous paragraphs raised critical questions for articulating this dialectic. Is May and Thrift's concept of social time – or rather the making of social time – and, consequently, the disruption of rational timelines through social practices, sufficient to counterbalance the external and internal forces shaping 'quantitative time' (such as public transport schedules and administrative geographies)? And, at an even more fundamental level, in a place like a small island, who actually constructs social time?

The emphasis on the everyday – particularly Valle's exploration of people's daily trajectories through places – provides an initial reference point for addressing these questions. Everyday geographies continuously challenge the linear perspective through rhythm, through the unceasing interplay of speed and stillness, day and night, waiting and frenzy. However, this dialectic should not be examined in isolation but rather in relation to the specific social practices at the centre of our inquiry. For instance, the social life of the school community operates within rhythms, seasons, and trajectories that are vastly different from those of mass tourism.

Moreover, in Lefebvre's concept of the 'series of presents', we have glimpsed an alternative to the pervasive anxiety about the future that defines island politics. As geographers, our aim is to structure these reflections within a spatial and scalar framework. What has emerged is a spiral: the spiral of small islands temporality.

Figure 3 describes the cyclical nature of time on the island, organised into three scales:

1. the *day*;
2. the *week*;
3. and the *season*.

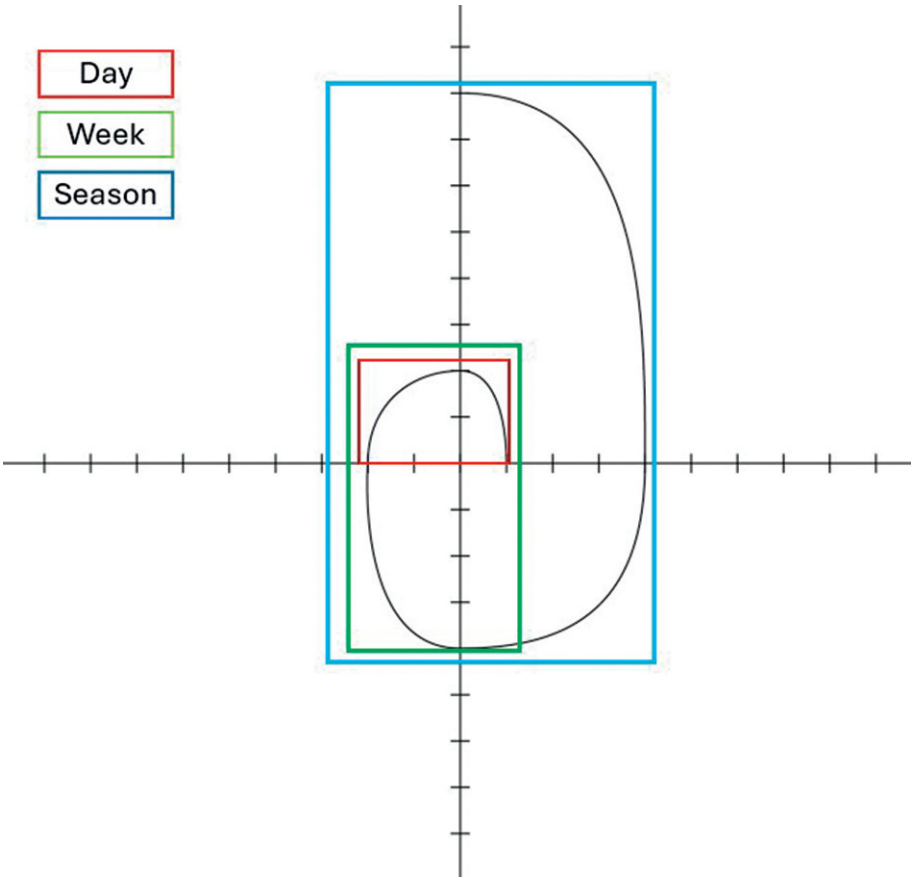

Fig. 3 – Small islands' spiral temporality: elaboration by Stefano Malatesta, credits to Lucia Carriera.

Each scale follows a rhythm and, to adopt Lefebvre's lexicon, acts as a theatre for agents and social practices.

As a heuristic tool, the spiral serves two key purposes. First, as earlier stated, it helps to counterbalance the dominant linear view that drives national and European policymaking by introducing a construct which, while adopting the same concepts and focusing on the same problems, nevertheless embraces a different perspective: the 'making of social time' in island life, through the agency of the groups that produce it. From a purely geographical perspective, combining McCall's well-known exhortation to study islands «on their own terms» with Cosgrove's (1998) insights, brings to the forefront the fundamental opposition between the perspectives and

lived experience of insiders – namely, islanders – and the actions and visions of external actors. Second, the spiral serves as a framework for scholars to identify and analyse shared patterns and features in the geographies of Italian small islands.

1. The scale of the *day* follows the rhythm of the different phases in the 24-hour temporal cycle, with fluctuations in the frequency of connections between the island, other islands and the mainland. In the early morning, as public offices, shops, the post office, and schools open, transportation links facilitate the movement of students, island residents, teachers, and others travelling to or from the island for various purposes. The early afternoon marks another peak in human activity, coinciding with the ebb and flow of arrivals and departures. However, just a few hours later, particularly during the low tourist season, this dynamism subsides, giving way to an evening lull as the island settles into anticipation of the next day's cycle. At this scale, the primary agents regulating these rhythms are the ferry and hydrofoil schedules, as well as the structuring of school days. This daily rhythm corresponds to a social practice of mobility that extends beyond students to include other mobile subjects such as commuters and day visitors.
2. At the second scale – the *week* – temporal patterns become almost binary, structured around the contrast between weekdays and weekends with their respective sets of social and individual practices. Again, these practices shape the mobility of commuters and short-term visitors, the use of public spaces, and traffic between islands. Some students return to the island at the weekend after spending the week on the mainland. Conversely, certain workers – such as teachers who live in rented apartments on the island during the week – depart for the mainland on Fridays. A wave of passengers boards the ferry on Friday afternoons, followed by an equal and opposite – Reynaud (1984) would say 'symmetrical' – return flow late on Sunday afternoon. These two moments of peak activity around the harbour are, once again, synchronised with transport timetables. The week also emerges as a key unit for understanding the islands' socio-geographical metabolism (Singh *et al.* 2020). During several months of the year, supply vessels carrying water, kerosene or food, arrive weekly (typically one per week

in winter, two or three in summer). Just as at the daily scale, social practices, and the broader process of 'timespace making' are concentrated at specific locations – such as the harbour, the school, the main road, the energy powerhouse, and storage areas – but slow down or come to a near standstill during less active phases of the week.

3. Finally, the scale of *season*: to fully understand seasonality on Italian small islands, it is necessary to move beyond rigid calendar divisions and instead acknowledge the plurality and alternating rhythm of Mediterranean seasonal dynamics and island social practices. Depending on the analytical framework used, the seasons can number either two or three. In this context, Tourism Studies offer a useful reference point, particularly the seasonality models proposed by Duro and Turrión-Prats (2019). Most Italian small islands are characterised by a single-peak pattern or, in some cases, by a 'shoulder' model. There is a stark imbalance between the low tourist season – stretching from November to April – and the peak (or peaks) of tourism, which typically occurs between July and August. Additionally, as observed in other countries where Catholic religious calendars influence tourist mobility (e.g., Croatia), a shoulder season emerges around Easter Week. At this scale, two primary forces shape island temporality: the tourism machine and the school year. The overwhelming dominance of tourism allows it to absorb, and even repurpose, any potential conflicts or disruptions to its advantage. For instance, in some islands, secondary schools adjust their daily schedules as early as May to enable students to work in hospitality or boat services in the afternoons. Seasonal fluctuations shape the social, economic, and cultural life of the tourism machine. The pervasiveness of tourism heightens the risk of monoeconomies – an issue acknowledged across all policies, strategies and development plans – but also actively reproduces a small island timespace tailored to its own demands (Baum and Hagen, 1999). Business activities, the labour market, public investment, and even the calendar of religious celebrations all conform to a binary cycle: the season of profit and the season of preparing for profit. Ironically, the tourism machine ultimately reinforces a cyclical temporality: *you work, you rest, you prepare, you work again*.

On the other hand, to demythologise the often unquestioned and overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the tourism machine, it is worth considering the perspective of some young people in Lipari. As they reminded us, summer is not only a time of seasonal employment contracts, overcrowded ports, soaring house rents and restaurant prices, or heavy traffic on roads that are otherwise little used. It is also a season of socializing and of forging new friendships with 'outsiders'. It is the time of off-island events and contacts. Once again, the rhythm of social life unfolds in a spiral. In autumn and winter, students focus on their studies or commute to the mainland five days a week. In spring, their time is divided between school and assisting in family businesses as they prepare for the tourist season. In summer, they take advantage of the opportunities provided by the tourism machine. As summer ends, the cycle resets, seamlessly flowing into a new iteration of the same seasonal rhythm.

The spiral offers an alternative to the linear interpretation of insular temporality. Beyond the three scales discussed here, additional temporal references and agents could be considered, further enriching this framework. However, what remains essential is the need to conceptualise the small island timescale in terms of the rhythms of social life and the structuring role played by both internal and external agents. On many islands – such as the Aeolian and Ponziane archipelagos in Italy – the dominance of external agents is particularly evident in their capacity to shape and regulate social life. Moreover, there is an increasingly tangible risk that tourism will become the primary – if not the sole – driver of social life on small islands. However, two key processes illustrate the variability of insular contexts, challenging the rigidity of this interpretative framework.

These are the socio-geographical dialectic between day and night and the gradual shift in seasonal patterns toward an extended spring-summer tourist plateau that absorbs what was once the shoulder season. The first example demonstrates how the rhythm of society is also the rhythm of places, as Vallée (2017) has pointed out. During the low season, the port – normally bustling with activity – empties out after the last boat departure, becoming a silent, almost deserted space. In summer, however, the tourism machine repurposes this same location, transforming it into an *agora* of restaurants, evening gatherings, and public life. The second example concerns the changing seasonal rhythms of island life on islands with only a

few hundred permanent residents and occasional visitors, where transport schedules are subject to unpredictable weather conditions. Families here are divided between those who migrate five days a week and those who remain, investing time and energy in preparing for the summer season. These intergenerational dynamics shape an insular temporality marked by *waiting* during the autumn and winter months.

Fig. 4 – Rare day visitors to Belvedere Quattrocchi (Lipari) in February. The bar has been closed for months, awaiting repair work waiting for the next summer season (Photograph by Stefano Malatesta, February 2024).

In its initial version, the construct of island temporality took the form (and name) of a fractal[5]. However, the infinite recursiveness, continuous repetition, and scale-independent nature of the fractal ultimately proved unsatisfactory. It failed to fully capture the constellation of diversity that characterises the Italian and Mediterranean archipelagos. For this reason, the spiral should not be seen as a rigid reference model but rather as a conceptual map – a guiding framework for reflection and study on the dialectics explored in this chapter. The focus remains on the role of key actors and agents in shaping island timescapes, as well as the tensions and conflicts that emerge among them. At the same time, the recursiveness – or rather, the rhythm – of social practices and structures remains a crucial explanatory factor in the geography of small islands. This applies to both internal

[5] During the Islands as Crossroads Reimagining mobilities in the Mediterranean Symposium, the original title of the contribution referred to 'a cyclical fractal'.

dynamics, such as the daily routines of port life, and external forces, such as public mobility strategies. This perspective also informs our reading in the next section, which examines another dialectic that is often oversimplified or misinterpreted in processual and discursive terms: the relationship between island futures and island vulnerability.

4. Future and Vulnerability

The overuse of universal attributes in the political and scientific framing of insularity and islandness as geographical concepts is one of the pitfalls that Island Studies, as a field, has long sought to avoid. Within this lexicon – alongside terms such as *sustainable*, *unique*, and *natural sanctuaries* – *vulnerability* holds a particularly significant place, shaping both political discourse and popular culture (Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008; Malatesta and Cavallo, 2019). Vulnerability can undoubtedly be counted among the attributes *tacked on* to the description of islands, often without the necessary critical reflection (Malatesta, 2021). Nearly a decade ago, in his examination of the present and future of Island Studies, Grydehøj underscored the importance of engaging in deeper analysis:

«It is also worth noting that, whereas the wider literature on islands per se has tended to focus on Small Island Developing States (SIDS), sometimes at the risk of reifying the association between islandness and vulnerability, the Island Studies community has broadened the conversation and enriched comparative potentials» (Grydehøj, 2017: 7).

To seek a definition that best serves this endeavour of intellectual honesty – drawing primarily on Alexander (1997) and, within Island Studies, Campbell (Campbell and Barnett, 2010) – vulnerability can be understood as the extent to which a socio-environmental system is exposed to risk, whether singular or recurrent, in an ongoing, cyclical, and reciprocal relationship with the system's capacity to respond.

In geographical terms, vulnerability is a context-dependent interpretive category. It functions not only as a place-based operator – in a purely spatial sense – but also, as argued throughout this essay, as a time-space operator. From a spatial perspective, the southern Mediterranean islands

are vulnerable to potable water scarcity due to their location within a macro-region characterised by low rainfall, their distance from stable water sources, and their predominantly low-lying morphology. However, when viewed as a time-space phenomenon, this vulnerability is not static but seasonal: the islands face a heightened risk of drought during the two driest periods of the macro-regional climate, in direct relation to the geographical conditions outlined above. Finally, this perspective must also account for the complex, multi-layered relationships between exposure factors and human responses. The southern Mediterranean islands experience cyclical summer droughts not only due to their inherent time-space characteristics but also as a result of human activity during one of these dry seasons. In summer, the water consumption patterns of the permanent population intersect with an often unsustainable (in the etymological sense of the term) demand for resources generated by the influx of non-permanent residents – tourists.

The uncritical and non-geographical use of broad attributes like *vulnerability* becomes widespread – even within scientific literature – precisely when this type of geographical reflection is absent. Such a neutral and decontextualised application of spatial categories is not only intellectually flawed and dishonest but also serves as a mechanism for constructing narratives of fragility, underdevelopment, and dependency. These narratives, in turn, deeply shape political choices and influence both present realities and future visions for these places.

«the narrow and frequently negative conceptualisations of small island states as environmentally vulnerable and economically dependent are problematic […] for economic development, generally. Scenarios presented to date are often incomplete. Narratives suggesting that island peoples are unskilled and lack resources, and that their islands are 'tiny' and 'fragile', can undermine their pride and stifle their initiative, reducing their ability to act with autonomy to determine and achieve their own developmental goal (Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008: 491)».

Scheyvens and Momsen's timely and still relevant reading of the impact of these narratives on the development of sustainable tourism in small islands can be extended to virtually any discussion concerning the future trajectories of these places. A particularly virtuous example of this approach is the work carried out in 2009 by the JRC, Eurostat, and the EU's

DG REGIO in developing a comprehensive set of indicators for the *European Climate Change Vulnerability Index*. This initiative effectively correlated climatic factors with anthropogenic patterns, including the human impact of tourism. The tools derived from this effort, particularly cartographic representations, made it evident that the Mediterranean islands – and, consequently, all Italian archipelagos – face substantial risks in the future.

Rather than reinforcing a discourse of fragility, these examples support the idea that the most effective response to vulnerability is the empowerment and promotion of island agency. This shift would mean overturning a vision that relegates islanders to a passive role, accepting decisions on transport, education policy, mobility, energy investment, and service provision that are made by external actors and merely implemented in their areas. As previously noted, many Italian small islands lack hospital services, and on some, no children have been born for years or even decades, given that obstetric emergency care is unavailable – even where hospitals exist.

On Lipari, a sixteen-year-old girl summed up this reality with a single, laconic remark:

«They take urgent cases by helicopter to Messina, but wouldn't it be cheaper to invest in a hospital department here instead of paying for the helicopter? »

While a teacher sadly remarked:

«This island used to have a hospital, a court, and public services. It had places that people could identify with».

In Italy, experts have recently begun developing tools to assess the impact of integrating small island communities into the *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne* (SNAI). Additionally, the outcomes of Action 3.1 of the *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* (PNRR) (Gallia and Malatesta, 2022), are shaping discussions on the present and future economy of these municipalities.

The *EU State of Play 2021* (Haase, and Maier, 2021) has outlined the key priorities for local, national, and European strategies concerning island regions, setting a policy framework for the next decade. Undoubtedly, these

policies – formalised through documents, strategies, and plans at the macro-regional level – are central to shaping both the present and future of island regions. However, as experts, we must also remain vigilant in safeguarding the space, opportunities, and tools of agency available to island institutions, schools, informal citizen groups, associations, and small businesses operating in sectors that are too often marginalized. In short, we must ensure that island societies themselves retain the capacity to shape their own futures.

In this view, agency is the counterweight to vulnerability. It is a vision in which key choices for planning – and, still sooner, imagining – the future are rooted in a deep understanding of island routines, the social role of key public spaces and school leaders, and the everyday challenges faced by local workers, students, and politicians – including outside of the peak tourist season. It acknowledges the rhythms of island life and the tensions between those who currently inhabit the island and those who will shape its future. Sitting in front of a coffee, a girl from Salina (a minor island in the Aeolian archipelago) reminded me that: «You can see the island's problems best from the outside, when you are away. The risk is never wanting to return».

In this sense, the confrontation between generations cannot be dismissed as a mere accident or a byproduct of development processes, especially within a dynamic that is so heavily influenced by external factors including service provision, labour supply, and mobility policies. On the contrary, it is a constitutive component of island life. A family of fishers or farmers, a small-scale hotel business, a school board, or a town council on a small island, all face an ongoing, fundamental challenge: striking a balance between externally driven, linear, developmentalist, mono-economy-oriented pressures and the dialogue with local desires, visions, and needs. At this moment in the history of Italian small islands, this dialogue is, first and foremost, intergenerational – between those who have built and invested in local businesses, policies, and services and those who, in a few years, will inherit a landscape already undergoing significant transformation. Some of these changes are already visible; others remain difficult to predict. Yet all will impact the structure of the island's timespace – its rituals, rhythms, and future prospects, the mobility of individuals, and the shifting temporal trajectories of places at the scales of the day, the week, and the season.

In this perspective, paradoxically, deseasonalisation, the mantra or, as previously described, the 'obsession' of Mediterranean tourism management, could end up reinforcing the dominance of the tourism machine. It risks further entrenching the supremacy of a single sector, dictating islanders' lifestyles, attracting investments that prioritise tourism over other industries, and reinforcing land use and mobility policies that are already all-encompassing and all-consuming.

To counter this risk, seasonal adjustments must be accompanied by a broader set of strategies aimed at securing the future of local workers on an annual basis within the cyclical framework outlined above. This could include economic subsidies or social protections to support workers between temporary jobs, targeted training programs for young islanders, the integration of economic policies with heritage conservation, and a multiscalar approach to public service provision. More broadly, it requires strengthening the economic, instrumental, and de facto power of local social actors and governance. On the contrary, many proposed solutions for deseasonalization risk reinforcing a mono- or bi-temporality in which the tourism machine remains the sole driving force, while the other three scales described by the spiral continue to oscillate between waiting and activity, preparation and profit.

Once again, during the winter of 2024, young islanders on Lipari reminded of the challenges of maintaining a meaningful relationship with their teachers. As noted in the previous section, at the end of the school day, many teachers rush to the port to catch the last hydrofoil to Sicily. The potential role of schools as community actors depends on the work of these educators, who are unable to invest additional time and energy in the island. Such workers may be viewed as seasonal or, following the spiral of temporality, as largely weekly.

References

Alexander, D. (1997). The Study of Natural Disasters, 1977-97: Some Reflections on a Changing Field of Knowledge. *Disasters*, 21(4), 284-304. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00064>.

Agnoletto, P., De Michele, A., and Tomei, N. (2026). *Italian Small Islands. Polcies and Governance*. In Malatesta, S., and Gallia, A. (2026). *Seasonal Island Geographies. The Human Geography of Italian Small Islands*. Springer, Key Challenges in Geography series, pp. 67-97.

Baum, T., and Hagen, L. (1999). Responses to seasonality: The experiences of peripheral destinations. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 1(5), 299-312. <https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1522-1970(199909/10)>.

Bear, L. (2016). Time as Technique. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 45, 487-502. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-030159>.

Bjelland, M., Montell, D., Fellmann, J., Getis, A., and Getis, J. (2013). *Human Geography*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Campbell, J., and Barnett, J. (2010). *Climate Change and Small Island States: Power, Knowledge and the South Pacific*. Oxon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781849774895>.

Chung, J.Y. (2009). Seasonality in Tourism: A Review. *E-Review of Tourism Research*, 7(73), 82-96.

Ćorluka, G. (2019). Tourism Seasonality - A Review. *Journal of Business Paradigms*, 4(1), 21-43.

Cosgrove, D.E. (1998), *Social formation and symbolic landscape*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

De Cunto, G. (2024). *Dwelling Schools. Cultivating the relationship between people and territory in the Middle Mountains*. PhD Dissertation, International Doctoral Programme URBEUR, University of Milano-Bicocca.

Duro, J. A., and Turrión-Prats, J. (2019). Tourism seasonality worldwide. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 31, 38-53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2019.03.010>.

Gallia, A., and Malatesta, S. (2022). Le isole minori italiane nelle missioni del PNRR. Una visione sul futuro. *Documenti geografici*, 1, 161-174. <https://doi.org/10.19246/DOCUGEO2281-7549/202201_11>.

Grydehøj, A. (2017). A future of island studies. *Island Studies Journal*, 12(1), 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.1>.

Haase, D., and Maier, A. (2021). *Research for REGI Committee - ISLANDS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: State of play and future challenges*. <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1434512/research-for-regi-committee-islands-of-the-european-union/2055635/>.

Ho, E.L.-E. (2021). Social geography I: Time and temporality. *Progress in Human Geography*, 45(6), 1668-1677. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325211009304>.

Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time, and everyday life*. London: Continuum.

Malatesta, S., and Gallia, A. (2026). *Seasonal Island Geographies. The Human Geography of Italian Small Islands*. Springer, Key Challenges in Geography Series (forthcoming).

Malatesta, S. (2021). Uniche, remote e vulnerabili: Il «bisogno di natura» nella geo-grafia delle regioni insulari. *Rivista geografica italiana*. 128(2), 37-52. <https://doi.org/10.3280/rgioa2-2021oa12031>.

Malatesta, S., and Cavallo, F. (2019). Studi insulari in geografia. Oltre l'isolamento e la vulnerabilità. Introduzione. In Salvatori, F. (ed). *L'apporto della geografia tra rivoluzioni e riforme*. Atti del XXXII Congresso Geografico Italiano. A.Ge.I., 2893-2895.

May, J., and Thrift, N. (2003). *Timespace: Geographies of Temporality*. London and New York: Routledge.

Reynaud, A. (1984). *Disuguaglianze regionali e giustizia socio-spaziale*. Milano: Unicopli.

Scheyvens, R., and Momsen, J. (2008). Tourism in Small Island States: From Vulnerability to Strengths. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 16(5), 491-510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580802159586>.

Simandan, D. (2016). Proximity, subjectivity, and space: Rethinking distance in human geography. *Geoforum*, 75, 249-252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.07.018>.

Singh, S.J., Fischer-Kowalski, M., and Chertow, M. (2020). Introduction: The Metabolism of Islands. *Sustainability*, 12(22). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12229516>.

Spilanis, I., Kizos, T., and Petsioti, P. (2012). Accessibility of Peripheral Regions: Evidence from Aegean Islands (Greece). *Island Studies Journal*,

7(2), 199-214.
Tsiotas, D., and Tselios, V. (2023). Understanding peripherality in a multi-dimensional geographical, socioeconomic, and institutional context: Evidence from Greece. *Regional Science Policy and Practice*, 15(7), 1424-1457. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsp3.12712>.
Vallée, J. (2017). The daycourse of place. *Social Science and Medicine*, 194, 177-181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.09.033>.
Vannini, P. (2012). *Ferry Tales: Mobility, Place, and Time on Canada's West Coast*. New York and Oxon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203136102>.