Visualizing the "stateless" state:
New anarcho-capitalist territorial imaginaries in the movement for private jurisdictions

Visualizando el Estado "sin estado": Nuevos imaginarios territoriales anarcocapitalistas en el movimiento por las jurisdicciones privadas

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Abstract

Este artículo presenta una investigación sobre las redes mundiales emergentes para el establecimiento de jurisdicciones privadas basadas en el capital riesgo, las criptomonedas y la Web3, y los nuevos proyectos territoriales y estatales que producen, incluidas las ciudades privadas libres, las ciudades charter, las seasteads y los estados red. Enraizados en una ideología autoproclamada anarcocapitalista, muchos de estos proyectos pretenden paradójicamente eliminar «el Estado» en favor de sociedades descentralizadas, autoorganizadas y "voluntarias", al tiempo que producen distintas formas de poder centralizado. El artículo ofrece un análisis crítico de la estatalidad tecnofuturista y anarcocapitalista, examinando las representaciones visuales y discursivas utilizadas para transmitir y oscurecer las ideas de Estado, gobernanza y poder. Me fijo principalmente en el uso de la metáfora (Semino 2008) y el espectáculo (Tsing, 2005) en las representaciones tecnolibertarias del territorio. Por último, el artículo utiliza la Zona de Desarrollo Económico y Empleo (ZEDE) de Próspera, situada en la isla hondureña de Roatán y en el Puerto de Satuyé, La Ceiba, como estudio de caso de la estatalidad privada. Además de analizar las estructuras creadas por Honduras Próspera Inc, el artículo explora las representaciones visuales que acompañan a las estructuras reales de gobernanza y poder estatal.

Keywords

Privatización, jurisdicciones especiales, estatalidad, territorio, representación.

Resumen

This article presents research on emerging global techno-libertarian networks for the establishment of venture-capital, crypto, and Web3-based jurisdictions and the new territorial and state projects they produce, including free private cities, charter cities, seasteads, and network states. Rooted in a self-professed anarcho-capitalist ideology, many of these projects paradoxically claim to eliminate "the state" in favor of decentralized and self-organized societies, while simultaneously proposing or producing different forms of centralized power. The article provides a critical analysis of techno-libertarian statecraft by examining the visual and discursive representations used to convey and obscure ideas of state, governance, and power. To do so, I look primarily at the use of metaphor (Semino 2008) and spectacle (Tsing, 2005) in techno-libertarian representations of territory. Finally, the article uses the Próspera Zone for Economic Development and Employment (ZEDE) located on the Honduran island of Roatán and in the Satuyé Port, La Ceiba as a case study in private statecraft. In addition to analyzing the structures created by Honduras Próspera Inc to govern the highly autonomous jurisdiction and the longevity biotech "network state" that it hosts, the article explores the visual representations that accompany actual structures of governance and state power.

Palabras claves

Private cities, libertarian exit, special jurisdiction, statecraft, territory, representation.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, Honduras passed the Organic ZEDE Law, creating Economic Development and Employment Zones (ZEDEs). The law opened Honduran territory to investors looking to form new, highly autonomous governments in special jurisdictions. The ZEDE framework allowed investors to adopt independent legal, judicial, fiscal, regulatory, and security systems on purchased or expropriated Honduran land and provoked opposition from anti-colonial and pro-democracy movements in the period following the 2009 military coup d'état. At the same time, a growing network of techno-libertarian and anarcho-capitalist investors imagineering new private sovereignties considered the 2013 Organic ZEDE Law to be groundbreaking legislation. Since 2008, this network's goal of creating a "startup sector" of private governments capable of challenging the existing nation-state model had merged with the techno-secessionist imaginaries of crypto, decentralized finance (DeFi) and web3 networks and gained traction. In December 2017, the Próspera ZEDE (PZ) charter was signed in the Honduran embassy in Washington DC, enabling NeWay Capital LLC (Wyoming-incorporated) and Honduras Próspera Inc. (Delaware-incorporated) to begin development of a 58 acre-lot of land purchased in Crawfish Rock on the island of Roatán. The ZEDE Law was later repealed in Congress in 2022 and ZEDEs were ruled unconstitutional by the Honduran Supreme Court in 2024, but to "private city" or "startup society" networks, ZEDEs presented an opportunity to experiment with a highly autonomous legal regime designed to embody free market principles and withstand host nation political reforms.

Próspera began developing the first ZEDE in Honduras with investment from San Francisco-based Pronomos Capital Fund (Delaware-incorporated), founded by surveillance tech mogul Peter Thiel and known libertarian activist Patri Friedman, eventually securing another USD150 million from popular crypto trading platform, Coinbase Ventures, among other investments. However, equally significant to the physical development of the greenfield sight in Roatán — including a fourteen-story condo building called Duna Residences, a coworking hub, a Bitcoin Education Center, a 3D printing factory, and a gene therapy testing site— was Próspera Inc.'s development of an internal governance system that would serve as a flagship model.

Techno-libertarian secessionist imaginaries are swiftly producing real political projects as tech capitalist networks and crypto interests enmesh with authoritarian governments in countries like the United States and Argentina. This paper draws from two phases of research. First, field research on Honduran ZEDE development carried out in Honduras and the U.S. between 2014 and 2017 used interviews, oral histories, archival research, and participant observation to interrogate the territorial ideologies and subjectivities deployed by different actors in conflicts surrounding Honduran ZEDE development in its preliminary stages. This research focused on the discourses of Honduran policymakers, rural communities in Honduras's southern municipality of Amapala, and global startup society/private city networks. A second phase of this research used data from Próspera ZEDE documents, virtual and in-person observation of international startup society, private city, and network state gatherings, interviews with actors within these networks, and analysis of publicly available text and imagery[1], to examine the evolution of the networks' projects and discourses.

[1] Conferences observed include the Disrupting Democracy: Choice for Governance in Honduras conference in San Francisco in 2015, the Startup Society Summit in San Francisco in 2017, the Liberty in Our Lifetime Conferences in 2022, 2023, and 2024 and the 2023 Network State Conference, held in Amsterdam. Additional research was conducted in Roatán during separate trips in 2022 and 2024.

In exploring the various territorial visions articulated in and through the networking practices of libertarian-leaning and anarcho-capitalist spaces, I interrogate the new state models and modes of statecraft emerging from startup society networks. This paper has a dual objective: first to review and identify how arguments and aspirations regarding state-less or decentralized spaces are reproduced in the discourses and visual representations of the startup society movement. At the same time, I explore how representations of territory are ideological, in that they obscure the political-economic theories and power relations embedded in the models themselves. Second, I use the Próspera ZEDE in Honduras as a case study of contemporary private statecraft. The Próspera ZEDE is a key site within this movement in which multiple anarcho-capitalist territorial (and de-territorial) projects have merged and materialized on land. Importantly, this paper does not claim that the Próspera ZEDE is a strictly private entity; instead, it highlights characteristics of exclusion and the dominant role of private companies in the founding, governance, administration, and control of the jurisdiction. In exploring both territorial discourses and the actual governance structures developed in Roatán and in relation to the Honduran nation-state, we see how an experimental private state model is represented on the one hand and implemented on the other. Finally, I propose understanding the forms of state power emerging in the Próspera ZEDE through the lens of the *contract state* —a governance form that supplants the concepts of popular sovereignty and democracy with contractual rules and relations between people, industry, and government. However, contrary to anarcho-capitalist thought, the use of voluntary contracts as a primary governance mechanism does not seem to negate the presence or practice of state power. Instead, such power is reproduced in new ways, providing insight into the articulation between state-practices and state-ideas (Abrams, 1988) in techno-libertarian exit projects.

TECHNO-LIBERTARIAN RE-TERRITORIALIZATION

A discussion of contemporary techno-libertarian re-territorialization must be understood in conversation with literature on the neoliberal trends of entrepreneurial governance (Harvey, 1989, Brash, 2006, Brenner, 2004) and the "re-scaling" of statehood for neoliberal roll out projects (Harvey, 1989, Brash, 2006, Brenner, 2004). Special economic zones (SEZs), one form of re-scaling, have shifted in recent decades following the proliferation of manufacturing and export processing free zones of the 1980s and 1990's. Contemporary SEZs are increasingly administered by private entities and land-intensive, therefore contributing to land accumulation through new regimes of dispossession (Borras et al, 2011; Levien, 2011; 2012). Additionally, SEZ zoning technologies have enmeshed with modernist and futurist urban imaginaries that carry a discursive power in addition to their structural implications (Bach, 2011; Datta, 2015; Easterling, 2014; Jazeel, 2015).

The growth and diversification of various zones of exception has inevitably resulted in new state spatializing practices and fragmented sovereignties (Ong, 2006; 2007). In her work on global commercial infrastructure spaces, Keller Easterling argues that the replication of global SEZs constitutes a form of "extrastatecraft" (Easterling, 2014) in which powers traditionally attributed to state governments are enacted by zone administrators. At the 2017 Startup Society Summit held at the City College of San Francisco, libertarian activists discussed how SEZ models and cryptocurrencies could be repurposed to create new jurisdictions and new

nations.

Scholars have discussed today's startup society projects within the framework of "libertarian exit" (Craib, 2022; Lynch, 2017; Simpson & Sheller, 2022; Smith & Burrows, 2021). Drawing inspiration from Ayn Rand's Galt's Gulch, free market libertarians have attempted to form radically deregulated and privatized societies in what Casey Lynch (2017) also calls "libertarian enclave utopianism". Failed, fringe libertarian exit projects have a twentieth century history entangled with Cold War geopolitics (Craib, 2022) and the evolution of neoliberalism (Lynch 2017; Slobodian, 2023). Lynch (2017) focuses on how such projects re-emerged in response to the 2008 global economic crisis and new imperatives to overcome the obstacles of territory and geography to capital accumulation. Additional analysis has highlighted the ideological function of libertarian exit projects that have failed or, at best, produced messy results. Steinberg et al (2012) for instance, argue that the fanciful imaginaries of the Seasteading Institute, an organization promoting floating free market colonies in international waters founded by Peter Thiel and Patri Friedman in 2008, serve primarily to push the limits of neoliberal ideology and advance imaginaries of privatization in the real world. Other failed projects have been explored as "successful failures" (Simpson, 2021), or a form of ideological spectacle that spurs continued experimentation (Lynch & Muñoz-Viso, 2023). Such analyses call on us to interrogate the discursive and representational dimensions of re-territorialization projects in addition to their structural impacts in the real world.

This paper builds on such prior discussions of libertarian exit imaginaries. However, a fixation on "exit" as the primary goal of libertarian reterritorialization movements de-centers the network's emphasis on generative "disruption," that is, changes in global power configurations. Thus, this article takes as an object of study the forms of nationhood and statehood being *proposed* in startup society networks as well as the modes of private statecraft that promote territorial casualization and parallel governance infrastructures over simple "exit" from the nation-state.

Imagining the State

In its discussion, this paper engages with a broad conceptualization of "the state" as a grouping of political entities that exercise sovereignty over a defined territory, often including institutions, laws, and a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence (Weber, 1948). States police borders, control access to citizenship and participation in decision-making, serve as a legal and regulatory authority, collect taxes, and organize services for citizens. However, state authority can take different forms such as the "bureaucratic state," characterized by hierarchical administration, formalized rules, and procedures of standardization and legibility (Scott, 1998), and the "regulatory state," a system with specialized technocratic agencies overseeing and managing economic and social life (Majone, 1997). Scholars have argued that we should also conceive of the state not as a monolith, but as an apparatus, a web of institutions, actors, and relationships producing sometimes incoherent projects of governance (Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007; Ong, 2006; Thelen et al, 2017). Thelen et al, for example, promote an ethnographic study of the state, emphasizing everyday interactions and relationships between citizens and state actors as the sites where state power is produced, contested, and incorporated into subjectivities (Thelen et al, 2017).

Anthropologists have also conceptualized the state as both a material and *imagined* entity.

Benedict Anderson (1983) highlighted how the state is imagined through shared cultural and symbolic practices that produce a sense of collective belonging. Abrams (1988) similarly challenged the tendency to reify the state, arguing that it is more an ideological construct than a concrete entity. "The state," according to Abrams, acts as a mask that conceals the contested nature of political authority in order to claim legitimacy. It also acts as a symbolic phenomenon —a collective myth that produces action relative to imagined state power. Also relevant here is Sarah Radcliffe's (2001) exploration of the state as a *spatial imaginary* that includes the collective ideas, representations, and narratives that people use to make sense of space and territory (see also Ferguson & Gupta, 2002). Radcliffe argues that the state is not merely a set of institutions in a fixed territory, but also an imaginary that is shaped by symbols and discourses which define the state's authority and legitimacy. These theories bring into question the congruence or disjuncture between state institutions as they act, state power as it is contested through practical encounters, and the state as it is imagined from above and from below. Here, I take as an object of study the ideological constructs of state (or no state) in libertarian movements for new jurisdictions and explore the possibility that imaginaries of state absence can similarly rest on a set of representations and narratives regarding space and territory.

Following anarcho-capitalist ideology, startup society advocates espouse explicitly anti-state discourses. In his book on startup societies, *Your Next Government: From the Nation State to the Stateless Nation*, legal scholar involved in establishing the Próspera ZEDE Tom W. Bell (2017) makes a clear claim to stateless-ness. Instead, startup society imaginaries claim to facilitate a radical decentralization of power that is theoretically achieved with blockchain technology, polycentric legal systems, and "opt-in" networks. However, this paper takes a critical look at claims of decentralization, seeking to understand how state power is imagined, represented visually, and obscured. In this analysis I rely on Semino's (2008) discussion of *metaphor* as "the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else" (p.1). Metaphor provides a form of orientation that provides a conceptual structure for understanding something within a systematized ideology, and that connects the cognitive domains of short-term representation with long-term conceptions and worldview (Semino, 2008). Additionally, the concept of "spectacle" (Tsing, 2005) refers to the dramatic or fantastical representations of global capitalist projects that serve to attract attention and investment. As Tsing argues, acts of spectacle in representation create not only visibility, but narratives that simplify and sanitize messy and complex realities. Insofar as they are legitimizing discourses for new state forms when applied to territorial representations, such metaphors and spectacles can be understood as repertoires of private statecraft. Finally, analyzing the case of the Próspera ZEDE, it argues first that the "contract state" is a useful framework for understanding how the state is re-imagined under libertarian re-territorialization and second, that various forms of state power are reproduced and centralized in new spheres and in private entities.

SEASTEADING: ISLANDS, ARCHIPELAGOS & MODULAR SOVEREIGNTY

While seastead advocates have dedicated resources towards realizing material seasteads, I build on Steinberg et al's (2012) discussion of seastead imaginaries as symbolic and discursive tools that inspire libertarian utopian thinking. The Seasteading Institute's discourses have helped

establish a series of metaphors that are endemic to today's startup society discourses across diverse project forms, primarily technology metaphors and corporate metaphors. The repeated recasting of politico-territorial forms (the city, the jurisdiction, the nation, the colony) as either a (disruptive) "technology" or a "startup firm" serves as metaphorical scaffolding for the concept of *competitive governance*—imagining governments not as complex socio-territorial processes but as private "governance service providers" competing for mobile citizens who "vote with their feet." The private jurisdiction is systematically cast as a technology, as an operating system, or as software to reflect the way a *product* might compete on a market. Alternatively, jurisdictions are cast as startup companies to represent how a *producer* or *vender* might compete on the market. Both metaphors frame the jurisdiction in explicitly non-territorial and apolitical terms.
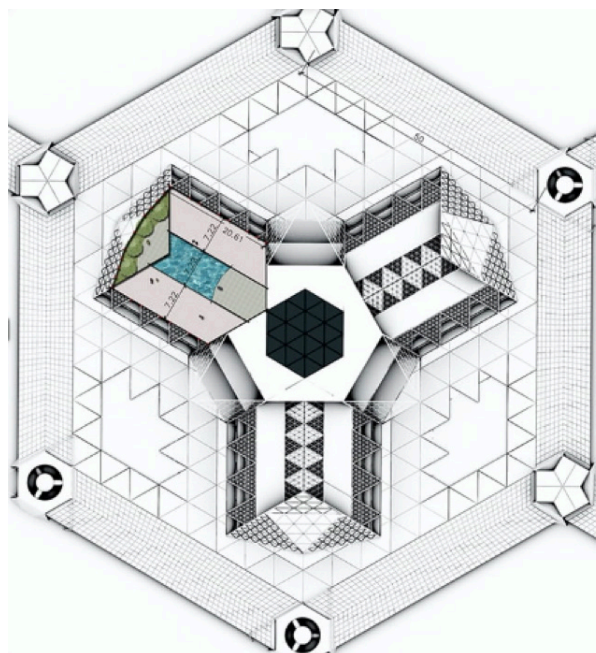
The concept of competitive governance —and the privatization of governance— is further naturalized through evolutionary biology metaphors that embed territory within a framework of natural selection. In a 2012 TED talk, Patri Friedman presented an example of the evolutionary biology metaphor:

> *Let's consider the evolution of today's dominant species of society that we live in—representative democracy. That evolution took a bloody revolution, and an open frontier where the new society could grow up far away from its parents that were... not so supportive. But we've run out of frontier [...] From a social sense, it's like we're back in the age of the dinosaurs. The world is full of these big blundering country creatures and there's no space, there's no place for new evolutionary leaps to better ways for us to live together. In some ways this stability is wonderful [...] but I don't trust 18th century societal DNA to handle the problems of the 20th century. (Friedman, 2012)*

Evolutionary biology metaphors can also be found in visual representations. The most prominent images of seasteads present clusters of islands linked together: the "archipelago."

Figure 1.1 | An Image of "Artisanopolis" Seastead[2]

[2] Sheare, Gabriel, Luke & Lourdes Crowley, and Patrick White. 1st Place Architectural Design Project. The Seasteading Institute. [Accessed March 3, 2025] https://www.seasteading.org/architectural-design-contest/. The image is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Figure 1.2 | Prismatic Island Module Unit[3]

The cluster territorial model represents a few theoretical concepts. First, the modular units in seastead imaginaries re-arrange themselves in such a way that resembles cell division. Seastead advocates have employed Stuart Kauffman's complexity theory of evolution (2017) to argue that private sovereignties will lead to progress if they are allowed to reproduce and self-organize like cells. Kauffman's theory argues that the slow process of natural selection through gene mutation over time was in fact accompanied by periods of more rapid diversification, or Cambrian explosions. Cellular autonomy allows cellular organization to move into the "adjacent possible," causing a burst of new forms. Startup society discourses deploy these concepts as metaphors to assert the importance of private autonomy, flexible citizenship, and competitive governance markets.

Finally, seastead cluster imagery can also be understood as visual metaphor for the libertarian concepts of "modular sovereignty" and "governance without geography." In her work on international infrastructure spaces, Bakonyi (2022) discusses modular sovereignty, noting the polycentric nature of different rules, regulations, and security clearances applied to fragmented spaces and mobile units such as containers and container villages. The result is a type of fluid geography in which sovereignty is delinked from fixed territory and rendered flexible, "to be arranged, adapted, modified and moved elsewhere whenever necessary" (Bakonyi, 2022 p. 267). Seastead representations depict the concept of fluid geography in the form of floating island clusters where individual property owners can sail away to find a better seastead. The mobile unit that is "voting with its feet" is not only the individual, but the land itself, challenging the fixed nature of territory. However, creating such "modularity" and "fluidity" on land would require legal frameworks that would allow property owners to participate in different jurisdictions within a fragmented national space or change jurisdiction at will. As will be explained later, this materializes in partial ways in the structures and procedures presented in the 2013 Organic ZEDE Law in Honduras.

[3] Perez, Matias. 3rd Place Architectural Design Contest. The Seasteading Institute [Accessed March 3, 2025] https://www.seasteading.org/prismatic-module-island/ The image is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

"DECENTRALIZED NATIONS" & THE STATE AS A NETWORK

"When I say 'Network!' You say 'State!' Network!" "State!" "Network!" "State!" A large, blue-lit auditorium of conference-goers erupted into chant to the backdrop of a dramatic soundtrack. The black screen behind the MC showed a web of white lines connected by dots moving in constant realignment, creating new shapes and webs: a flexible network. On October 30, 2023, crypto entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan opened the first "Network State Conference" in Amsterdam by asking a simple question: "Are new countries even possible? We've created new companies, new communities, and new currencies, but is building a new country possible?" The conference followed the release of Srinivasan's *The Network State* (2022), which had introduced an evolution in libertarian territorial visions for networked, private sovereignties, followed by "The Network School," a three-month retreat for 150 attendees interested in the network state idea and who adhere to a core set of right-libertarian political positions such as believing in capitalism, viewing Bitcoin as the successor to the US Federal Reserve, and holding "Western" values (Haskins, 2024).

Lynch and Muñoz-Viso's (2023) distinction between libertarian "territorial exit," and libertarian "technological exit," also called "cryptosecession" or "non-territorial exit" (MacDonald, 2019) is useful here as the network state proposes a synergistic coupling of the two realms to advance mobile capitalist class power. Srinivasan describes the network state as a "decentralized country" that functions to produce a "parallel establishment" that will "pull away users" from existing nation-state governments (Srinivasan 2022). The network state is imagined as a socio-political arrangement that operates across and between different virtual and physical spaces, a mode of organization made possible by blockchain technology. The blockchain would theoretically allow groups to organize themselves virtually as decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs), while an integrated cryptocurrency can "manage internal digital assets, smart contracts, web3 citizen logins, birth and marriage certificates, the property registries, the public national statistics," and "can coordinate all the functions of a state" while transcending existing nation-state borders (Srinivasan 2022).

A tension begins to form between the ideology of decentralization and the reproduction of state power when the blockchain "state" is also imagined with the ability to discipline and punish through the "social smart contract" (Srinivasan, 2022). In this model, the concept of the consent of the governed is transformed into a binding voluntary contract implying the members' acceptance of the form of government the network state leaders, or owners, have established with little possibility for reform. Srinivasan (2022) explains this concept again using a market metaphor:

> *One way of thinking about this is that the typical Ford customer doesn't care about how Ford's internal affairs are managed. The buyer doesn't care whether Ford is organized by product or by function, whether they're run top-down by the CEO or in a consultative way with the board [...] So long as everyone has consented to be governed by the Ford CEO by signing an employee agreement, and can leave if that agreement is no longer congenial, Ford's internal arrangements are ethical.*

In this text, centralized power is analogized with a corporate CEO, whereas the members of the nation are consenting *consumers* of the government. In turn, the contract would involve relinquishing a certain amount of control over one's digital assets in exchange for access to the
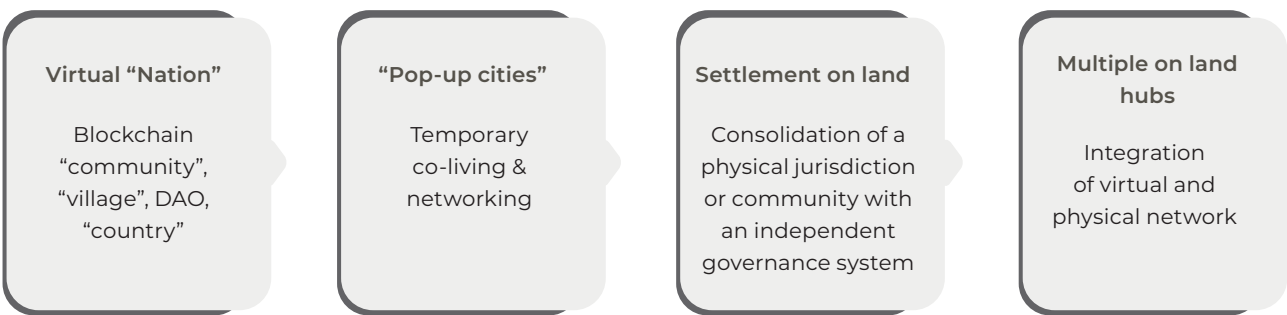
network state's digital ecosystem. For example, Srinivasan explains, "if someone misbehaves within a given startup-society-owned jurisdiction, after a Kleros-style digital trial, their deposits could be frozen and their ENS locked out of all doors for a time period as a punishment" (Srinivasan, 2022). In other words, upon signing the contract, a citizen consents to forms of enforcement and punishment that could become coercive.

At the 2024 conference, the strategy to build network states was divided into the categories of "vertical" and horizontal[4]." Vertically, the network must create parallel societies in the physical world (free cities, private cities, startup cities, co-living communities, etc.). Horizontally, the movement must build parallel institutions operable through different jurisdictions across both virtual and physical space, including parallel media, education, laws/legal code, medicine, scientific research, conflict resolution, contract enforcement, banking, and currencies. Finally, a "nation" of members, or "citizens" must be built, representing the overall power of the online and offline network. The nation allows individuals to organize virtually around a policy platform based on shared interests and offer their aggregated capital to potential host states in exchange for political concessions. In other words, the network state is envisioned as the following: 1) the node: physical settlements with a degree of jurisdictional autonomy; 2) the platform: a system of autonomous, parallel, and *mobile* institutions and governance structures; and finally, 3) the network: a dispersed group of individuals able to exercise increasing global influence as the network (and its "GDP") grows.

In the network state imaginary, the virtual "community" comes *before* the state and seeks to settle, as reflected in mantras such as "turning online communities into real life communities" and "materializing cloud communities onto the land[5]" "Pop-up cities" are short-term gatherings –an intermediary step between virtual and in-person organization, allowing investor groups to begin building relationships with one another and with local governments. The envisioned process for developing a network state can be summarized as follows:

Figure 2 | The Stages of the Network State. Created by the Author.

Reflecting this trajectory, Dryden Brown, CEO of private city company, Praxis, explained at the 2024 gathering that his company was discovering ways to "build a city from your apartment[6]." Like Próspera, Praxis has investment from Pronomos Capital and is a self-proclaimed "network

[4] Srinivasan, Balaji. The Network State Conference, October 30, 2023. Author's Notes.

[5] Author's notes. The Network State Conference, October 30, 2023.

[6] Brown, Dryden (2023, October 30) The Network State Conference. Accessed May 30, 2025 on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLjkWjurKdE

empire"[7] with chauvinist goals of "saving Western civilization" (Praxis, 2024). Brown reported that Praxis had 12,000 members, called "Praxians" or "Nomads" holding a "Steel Visa" in the virtual nation, 250 of which were ready to move to a new location immediately. Another company, Nomad, showcased the conceptual slippage between a network state and a real estate company, identifying as an online community promoting "decentralized living," and building real estate for "the modern nomad." On stage, Nomad announced having signed an agreement to build a co-living village inside the Próspera ZEDE, illustrating a synergy between different parts of the network. In this case the node (Próspera ZEDE) creates opportunities for deregulated real estate development while virtual networks like Nomad can help populate new jurisdictions.

Spectra Villages, whose purpose includes supporting DAOs in finding and acquiring rural land for the development of co-owned and co-living urban settlements that are "supported by global digital networks," reported having purchased 80 acres of land in Puerto Rico. Like the Seasteading movement, Spectra's visual representations invoke *modularity*. One Spectra graphic starts with a single man, the "Spectran." A group of Spectrans in a shared virtual community form a "Block" which can then create a "Village" in the physical world. Spectra villages "create the ability to incrementally build up Spectra's practices, processes, and global community" (Rzepecki et al, 2023). Up to nine Blocks would then join to form a "Cluster" which can then form a "physical city" that would "join its digital sibling in VR (virtual reality)." Next comes "Spectra World," described as "the massive virtual world which includes the digital siblings of all physical cities, villages, and one-off developments; the blocks and clusters which have not been tied to physical land; and the Spectrans not in Blocks" (Rzepecki et al, 2023).

Discourses of decentralized living and decentralized statehood present in network state gatherings, coupled with visual representations of the network state as a modular formation or a web of linkages in a state of constant flux, build an imaginary in which there is no central power. Srinivasan (2022) in fact positions "The Network" directly against "The State," the latter using coercion through institutions to address societal problems and the former relying on technology and free individual action. However, Srinivasan also recognizes that the network does not produce sustained decentralization. Using corporate startup metaphors, he instead accepts a "recentralized center" and calls for a "recentralization" to follow disruption of the current nation-state paradigm:

> The way to demonstrate [the recentralized center] is a step forward is via mass exodus of people from both American Anarchy and Chinese Control to the recentralized center, to high-trust startup societies and network states [...] But the whole point is that the new boss is **not** the same as the old boss any more than Apple was the same as BlackBerry, Amazon was the same as Barnes and Noble, or America was the same as Britain. Recentralization means new leaders, fresh blood. (Srinivasan 2022)

The inherent contradictions in the network state's proposal for decentralization generate significant questions for real world case studies: How do private entities implement geographically decentralized systems of governance on the one hand, while reproducing state forms under corporate power on the other? Will new forms of centralized power enable capital and settler-colonial mobility while serving to discipline outsiders and non-elites within their boundaries? How does "decentralization" operate as an ideological discourse that masks power

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[7] Praxis Nation, "Declaration Speech," *Praxis Nation*, accessed March 3, 2025 on https://www.praxisnation.com/news/declaration-speech

concentrations where they lie in libertarian or anarcho-capitalist territorial projects?

THE PROSPERA ZEDE: GOVERNMENT AS A PLATFORM

On October 15, 2024, Ron McNab, the mayor of Roatán, was interviewed by reporters regarding an alleged unpaid $12 million in municipal taxes owed by the Próspera Zone for Economic Development and Employment (ZEDE). Days prior, McNab's office had authorized the closure of one of Próspera's satellite offices located near the municipal building and had padlocked the front entrance. McNab recounted that instead of providing financial records, Próspera's Technical Secretary had proposed a "government to government" negotiation. He told reporters, "For the love of God, I don't recognize Próspera as a government. At most, I can recognize Próspera as an investor, and a bad investor at that, who doesn't even pay for their operation permits, who doesn't even get construction permits, who doesn't even get environmental permits (RMITV, 2024)." He added "The law doesn't even give me the authority to negotiate with other governments, and I don't recognize Próspera as a government anyway (RMITV, 2024)."

Próspera's self-positioning with the Roatán municipality as an independent government is indicative of a conflict over jurisdiction, one in which Próspera claims administrative autonomy and government authority in practical terms such as managing its own tax system and environmental permits. In one example, Próspera defended its authority to grant environmental permits for the construction of the Duna Residences building after the Honduran organization Community and Environmentalist Revindication Alternative (ARCAH) filed an official request for information from the Honduran Environmental and Natural Resources Ministry (SERNA for its Spanish acronym) over concerns about the ecological impacts of uncontrolled construction[8]. In August 2023, SERNA confirmed that the ministry had not granted a construction license. In response, Próspera ZEDE's Technical Secretary, Jorge Colindres, published a photo on X of a 10-year permit granted on April 25, 2022, signed by Lawrence Goff, who has been listed as "ZEDE Manager and Registrar and Ad Hoc Secretary of the General Service Provider (GSP) of Próspera.[9]" In the same X post, Colindres suggests that ARCAH address its grievances by filing a complaint with the Próspera Arbitration Center (PAC), asserting the authority of Próspera's internal private dispute resolution system over Honduran regulatory and judicial institutions[10].

While Honduran critics reference exercises of autonomy like these as examples of the Próspera ZEDE acting as a "state within a state," Próspera representatives instead refer to the ZEDE as a public private partnership between Honduras and the Próspera "platform." In discourses that assert that Próspera is is not a city, but instead a platform for cities to be built[11], Próspera representatives eclipse the physicality and territoriality of the PZ. The platform, however,

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[8] Oficio No. UTGPC-157-2023. Tegucigalpa M.D.C. August 18, 2023. Accessed at Arcah [@Arcah_hn]. (2023, August 24). *Se Confirma por parte de MiAmbiente (…) que promueve ZEDE Próspera* [Post]. X. https://x.com/Arcah_hn/status/1694769924051194067

[9] Próspera ZEDE (2022). Management Report: Transitional Report of the Former Technical Secretary Mr. Tristan Mason Monterroso. https://pzgps.hn/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/PZ-Informe-de-Gestion-2022-signed.pdf

[10] Colindres, G. [@GeorgeColindres]. (2023, August 24). *Aqui el permiso y licencia (…) desinformación* [Post]. X. https://x.com/GeorgeColindres/status/1694774467363258470

[11] Geglia, B. (June 28, 2023 Field Notes)

encompasses more than the software housing the Próspera ZEDE's e-resident services; it refers to the whole of the jurisdiction's legal code and governance system—one intended to be applied across geographical contexts. On its website, the Próspera ZEDE describes the platform as "a transformative government model that will unleash economic growth in our partner nation and empower individuals to pursue their dreams.[12]" The same site describes the platform as "governance institutions" that "have been developed by and for local and global entrepreneurs and businesspeople" and that "institutes key checks on government power, a bill of rights protecting people of all income levels, and a straightforward structure for doing business[13]."

Operating as a metaphor, the "platform" is deployed as a stand-in for the institutions comprising the Próspera ZEDE's governance system. In accompanying visual graphics, the PZ platform is depicted as a subsoil layer underneath a slice of territory. The platform layer is divided into four squares: tax & regulation, general services, a bill of rights, and dispute resolution[14]. Visually, the "platform" is depicted as underlying the top layer—a developed Próspera hub, metaphorically enabling it, just as a tech platform provides the code and system infrastructure for running applications, services, or other technologies.

The metaphor of government-as-platform achieves various ideological effects that serve libertarian re-territorialization and privatization. First, it depoliticizes the act of governance by technologizing it and treating it as code. The discursive "code-ification" of the governance model also enhances the idea of its mobile nature; the imaginary of a platform that could be inserted or applied across physical territory with similar results erases the specific social, cultural, political, and material realities of place. Second, the metaphor of the mobile platform supports the imagined "decoupling" (Macdonald, 2019) of sovereignty from territory, which underpins the kind of territorial casualization necessary for a reordering of sovereignty and authority under competing private jurisdictions. Finally, it can be considered that the platform metaphor interpellates the citizen as "user" or "subscriber," reinforcing impermanent and apolitical notions of mobile citizenship. Constructions of new Residents as platform users reinforce a citizen-by-subscription paradigm and project the techno-libertarian goal of ease of entry into and exit from jurisdictions, as well as the profit-maximizing strategy of jurisdictional triage—gaining legal status in multiple jurisdictions simultaneously.

Platform technology metaphors and network state discourses provide a way for Próspera spokesmen to talk about government and a state apparatus in apolitical and obscured ways. Therefore, it is worth examining the Próspera government itself to identify where and how state-like power is enacted and by whom. Próspera's governance structure is comprised primarily of Honduras Próspera Inc. (the zone's "Promotor and Organizer"), a private General Service Provider (GSP), and Próspera Arbitration Center LLC (PAC), a private arbitration center for non-criminal legal disputes, the Technical Secretary, the zone's maximum authority, and a Council of Trustees. The nine-person Council of Trustees, (including the Technical Secretary) is the rule-setting body of the jurisdiction; four of these seats are appointed directly by Honduras Próspera Inc., three are elected by all Residents of Próspera (including the Technical Secretary), and the remaining two are elected by a Council of Landowners in which votes are

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[12] *Prospera* [Website], (n.d.). Retrieved from https://prospera.vercel.app

[13] Ibid

[14] Ibid

allocated proportional to square meter of property[15]. With high levels of land concentration at the inception of the jurisdiction, the Council is designed to secure the implementation of Próspera's master plan[16]. Próspera Residents can vote directly to repeal laws passed by the Council with a two-thirds majority within seven days of the rule's approval, once Próspera has reached a population of over 10,000 natural person Residents[17].

The 2013 ZEDE law also concentrated power in an oversight board called the Committee for the Adoption of Best Practices (CABP) with members appointed by the Honduran President[18]. Próspera's Technical Secretary is elected by the Residents of the zone but is subject to approval by the CABP. The CABP is funded by contributions from the ZEDEs, and its mandate includes approving the charters of new ZEDEs in areas of low population density and approving ZEDE internal rules[19]. The CABP has the authority to replace its own members without Congressional ratification[20], creating transparency and accountability issues (Nuila Herrmannsdörfer, 2021).

Próspera's contracted General Services Provider has the authority to grant or deny status to both physical Residents and e-Residents. The GSP can make citizenship decisions based on a criminal background check and subjective factors such as a shared belief in the Próspera system and the "harmony and reputation of the zone" (Geglia & Nuila Herrmannsdörfer, 2021). The Próspera GSP also established "Prohibited Citizens," a rule that bars citizens of 18 specific countries from accessing Resident status in the PZ. The Prohibited Citizen Restriction was based "in the public policy to exclude access to the Próspera ZEDE and its e-governance services to potential government agents of countries that are sanctioned internationally or that are of high risk for [Próspera's] motives" (Critero.hn, 2023). A second norm was approved by the GSP to grant exemptions to individuals from this list of restricted countries after completing an improved "know your customer" (KYC) evaluation (Critero.hn, 2023). Thus, through its GSP, Próspera acts as a state by implementing hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion in the physical space and relative to political rights.

THE PROSPERA ZEDE: BUILDING A CONTRACT STATE

Looking at the case of the Próspera ZEDE, I argue that "the contract state" is a useful framework for understanding how the state is re-imagined and re-designed in libertarian re-territorialization schemes. While only partially achieved, the contract as a mode of establishing politico-territorial relations is salient, as citizenship and belonging, territorial

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[15] According to Article 6.02 of the Próspera ZEDE Charter, the council of landowners votes for two Council of Trustee Seats proportionate to property owned until the ZEDE reaches a population of 10,000 Natural Residents or until August 22, 2025. After this point the Council of Trustees can determine its continuity.

[16] In an example of this, landowners unanimously elected a member of the Council of Trustees in May 2022. 3,101,768 votes were cast by six companies, with Honduras Próspera Inc.'s Erick Brimen casting votes on behalf of four of the companies. Próspera ZEDE. (2022, May 7). *Certified results of May 7, 2022 Landowners (Re)Selection Meeting for Council Trustees.* https://pzgps.hn/prospera-zede-certifide-results-of-may-7-2022-landowners-reselection-meeting-for-council-trustees-prospera-zede-resultados-certificados-del-7-de-mayo-de-2022-reunion-de-reseleccion-de-propietario/.

[17] Amended and Restated Charter & Bylaws of the "Próspera ZEDE." Article 6.03(2). https://pzgps.hn/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Text-of-PZ-Amended-Charter.pdf

[18] República de Honduras, Poder Legislativo (2013) Decreto No. 120-2013. La Gaceta. Article 11.

[19] Ibid

[20] Ibid

borders, regulation, and even sovereignty are reconceptualized under a contractual logic that forecloses possibilities for popular sovereignty. Understanding this shift in claims to authority and legitimacy allows us to understand the discourse of decentralization as signifying a process of casualization in which certain forms of state power are reproduced and centralized in new spheres and private entities while enabling flexible conditions for capital. The following are some points to consider regarding the development of such contract relations.

Contract Citizenship

In the Próspera ZEDE, citizenship is rendered contractual through an Agreement of Coexistence (AoC) which acts as a legally binding contract between Residents and the Próspera government. The AoC, which must be signed by all Residents, establishes compliance to the overall Master Plan of the PZ and asks that Residents commit to "such delegation of popular sovereignty as is necessary to sustain the power and authority held in trust by the PZ[21]." In turn, the Resident enjoys protection of individual rights for which they can seek recourse through a Human Rights Ombudsman. Residents can sue Próspera for violations of the contract and, conversely, a breach of the AoC can result in revocation of Resident status and eviction from the zone[22]. New Residents are subject to a probationary period of one year, during which the PZ can terminate their residency without cause[23].

Contract Regulation

In the Próspera ZEDE, industry regulation is executed through an individualized model that provides regulatory flexibility for investors. Companies can opt to operate under Honduran law, select the regulatory framework of any OECD country, or propose their own regulations. Proposed regulations are approved by the Council of Trustees and become part of the menu available to other industry actors (Prospera n.d.a). Próspera then implements what they call "decentralized enforcement," which allows individual Residents to sue a company over violations in lieu of a centralized oversight or regulatory body (Prospera n.d.b). A contract model of regulation, in which industry actors agree to adhere to a particular set of policies, maximizes flexibility for investors.

Contract Borders

In 2021, Próspera ZEDE purchased the Port of Satuyé in La Ceiba (mainland Honduras) and incorporated it into the PZ. The incorporation set a precedent regarding the addition of non-contiguous land through purchase. Alternatively, the ZEDE Law allowed individual landowners in areas subject to the ZEDE regime to incorporate their land into the PZ jurisdiction with a signed and notarized document.[24] Prior to the law's derogation, such an arrangement would have meant that PZ "hubs" could materialize in a dispersed way throughout Honduran territory. The 2013 Organic ZEDE Law enabled this kind of border fluidity in Article 39, which declared

[21] ZEDE of North Bay (2019). Resolution Approving Legal Entity Resident Agreement of Coexistence. Article II, Section 1(B). Retrieved June 11, 2025 at https://pzgps.hn/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/§5-1-35-0-0-0-1-Legal-Entity-Resident-Agreement-of-Coexistence-ES-signed.pdf

[22] Ibid. Articles IV & V

[23] Ibid

[24] República de Honduras, Poder Legislativo (2013) Decreto No. 120-2013. La Gaceta. Article 26

coastal Honduran departments subject to the ZEDE regime. Areas of low population-density in these departments could theoretically bypass Congressional approval to establish a ZEDE. With the border flexibility achieved by making territorial expansion *contractual* in these cases, the ZEDE Law would have helped landowners approximate the Seasteading movement's dream of fluid geography (vote with your land), while staying spatially fixed.

Contract Sovereignty

While Próspera's high degree of autonomy under the ZEDE law and constitutional reforms included certain limits ensuring Honduran military control over the jurisdiction and the application of Honduras's international treaties, Próspera's partial sovereignty —the authority to oversee fiscal policy, security forces, legislation, and regulation within its borders without intervention from the Honduran Congress— was tied in its inception to its relationship to the host-nation, (what some startup society advocates have called, using market discourse, "franchised sovereignty"[25]). However, two main developments signal a turn towards contractual form of sovereignty, in which the ongoing legitimacy and authority of the PZ rests increasingly in international investor protection norms and in different forms of binding agreements. First, a reform to the ZEDE law passed by the Honduran Congress on June 11, 2021, advanced the "rule by contracts" model. The primary function of Decreto Legislativo 32-2021 was to grant ZEDEs *Zona Franca* status and guarantee a sales tax rate of zero for all Honduran products and services used for production within the ZEDEs[26]. It clarified that ZEDEs were not subject to formal obligations to any Honduran national tax authority or to Congressional intervention in internal ZEDE affairs. However, Article 4 of the same decree mandated the Honduran President to define, through a *reglamento*, the relationship between the executive branch and the ZEDEs. The details of this relationship were to be determined in consultation with ZEDE governments and approved by a majority of ZEDE Technical Secretaries. The same agreement would have to be reached to reform or annul the *reglamento*. The consultation process would be organized through the Committee for the Adoption of Best Practices (CABP), and disputes between a ZEDE administration and the Honduran government (federal or municipal) would be resolved through arbitration[27]. The 2021 reform therefore reconfigured the relationship between ZEDE jurisdictions and the Honduran government to adopt a more contractual model with the executive power.

Article 5 of the decree further granted the executive branch the authority to sign legal and fiscal stability agreements with the ZEDEs. Shortly before the end of Juan Orlando Hernández's second presidential term, Próspera ZEDE signed a 50-year Legal Stability Agreement (*Acuerdo de Estabilidad Jurídica*). After the electoral victory of an opposition coalition in Honduras led by the Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE) party, and the subsequent repeal of the ZEDE law by Congress in 2022, Próspera's agreement, or *contract*, became one of its primary claims to legitimacy in Honduras and in the international sphere. In 2023, three companies, Honduras Próspera Inc., Prospera Arbitration Center LLC, and Saint John's Bay Development Company LLC, filed for arbitration against Honduras, claiming up to $10.775 billion, with the International

[25] Field notes (2017, August 11). Startup Society Summit. San Francisco, California.

[26] Decreto Legislativo 32-2021 of 11 June 2021. Published in *La Gaceta* No. 35,628, June 15, 2021.

[27] Ibid, Article 4.

Center for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID)[28], an investor protection mechanism supported by the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), citing the legal stability agreement, a 2014 investment treaty between Honduras and Kuwait guaranteeing 50 years of legal stability, and other legal arguments. In 2024, the Honduran Supreme Court ruled the ZEDEs to be unconstitutional with retroactive application[29]. Próspera's Technical Secretary has since questioned the legality of the ruling and deployed language of acquired rights to justify continuing to operate under the now derogated ZEDE regime (Roatán Tourism Bureau 2024)[30]. Since the arbitration claim was filed, the Próspera ZEDE has continued to grow and raise additional investment (Próspera, 2025). These actions advance a model in which a jurisdiction's authority is justified through investor protections and contractual agreements, even after losing recognition from the host nation's sovereign institutions.

CONCLUSION

Libertarian or anarcho-capitalist geographies seek to overcome the constraints not only of nation-state democracy but of the fixed nature of territory and of geography. Imaginaries such as "seasteads," "private cities," and "network states" present visions for re-territorialization, each deploying its own set of visual and discursive metaphors that reinforce the ideology of decentralization and downplay the creation of private sovereignties and new state forms. This article has endeavored to do two primary things: first, to analyze those visual representations and proposals for venture capital-driven territorial projects to discern between what they represent structurally versus how they are coded in metaphor, and second, to examine the governance system of the Próspera ZEDE. This examination problematizes the discourses of decentralization and statelessness. In the authority of the Committee for the Adoption of Best Practices, in the disproportionate power of Honduras Próspera Inc. in the jurisdiction's rule and regulation-setting, and in the discretionary power of the General Service Provider to control who can access Resident status, the Próspera ZEDE provides examples of how power in and over the jurisdiction is concentrated in corporate structures, unaccountable committees, and in the landowning class, while it is simultaneously appropriated from the Honduran Congress and state agencies.

While the Próspera ZEDE government has claimed authority over a physical territory, here I have argued that the concept of democratic governance has been supplanted with elements of a contract state model. The streamlining of contractual logic and legal arrangements throughout multiple state-like functions in the ZEDE shows how private state formation is able to take shape while simultaneously enabling some of the jurisdictional fluidity dreamt of by seastead and network state activists. As "network state" "startup society," and "free private city" imaginaries spread and produce new projects through venture capital networks and

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[28] International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes [ICSID]. (n.d.). *Honduras Próspera Inc., St. Johns Bay Development Company LLC, and Próspera LLC v. Republic of Honduras.* https://icsid.worldbank.org/resources/multimedia/honduras-prospera-inc-st-johns-bay-development-company-llc-and-prospera-0

[29] Corte Suprema de Justicia RI-CSJ-0738-2021.

[30] Such claims are also made in X posts by Jorge Colindres, Próspera ZEDE's Technical Secretary. See Jorge Colindes [@GeorgeColindres]. (2024, September 2021). La CSJ no puede dar efecto retroactivo a las sentencias de inconstitucionalidad [Tweet]. X (formerly Twitter). https://x.com/GeorgeColindres/status/1837263208446394531

alliances with nation-state governments, it is imperative to study new state models as they emerge, especially as they intersect with the rise of global corporate governance and right wing authoritarianism. As techno-libertarian territorial models expand, evolve, and articulate, scholars should continue to critically interrogate if and how private state models and modes of statecraft are being produced in supposedly "stateless" spaces.

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