

Perforated Nations, Universities, and the Zonal Politics of Knowledge Production

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Abstract

A common assumption regarding universities is that they can be mapped onto what Quinn Slobodian (2023: 2) describes, as a “jigsaw of nations” which in turn make up a coherent global system. Yet as he and others (see Sassen 2006) point out, capitalism has always worked by “punching holes in the territory of the nation state, creating zones of exception” (Slobodian, 2023: 3). In this chapter we explore a range of what we call zonal projects and their cultural and economic politics, arguing these are variously shaped by dynamic combinations driven by state and non-state actors (e.g., private venture capitalists) aiming to produce new cultural political economies. We look at four cases, each different, to illustrate a range of bordering processes that include processes of secession *and* accession, but all of which aim to advance a new zonal (geo)politics of knowledge production in part by repositioning the university. Taken together, these cases: (i) highlight the cultural, political, and economic complexities, involved in creating zones of exception, (ii) point to the need to get beyond non-relational binary accounts of inside/outside, zone/nation, (iii) offer a processual account of secession and accession, and (iv) makes visible shifting strategies over time in relation to challenges and changes in the wider geopolitical and cultural spheres.

Introduction

A common assumption regarding universities is that they can be mapped onto what Quinn Slobodian (2023: 2) describes as an imaginary “jigsaw of nations” which in turn makes up a coherent global system. But even if that global order was relatively cohesive in the 1990s, the ‘war on terror’ of the 2000s, the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08, and the resurgent nationalism of the last decade have increasingly fractured and fragmented the global system. As Slobodian points out, however, it would be wrong to assume that globalization is on the wane, and that we’ve returned to a period of where national sovereignty dominates (see also Hardt & Negri 2019). Rather, capitalism has always worked by “punching holes in the territory of the nation state, creating zones of exception” (Slobodian 2023: 3). Rather than ending, globalization is changing form. Put differently, uneven and *combined* development carries on even if it is difficult to characterize its irregular morphology (Peck 2021).

Our aim is to demonstrate that the university is deeply implicated in these spatial projects of perforation. Universities are necessary for the uneven, and specifically zonal, reproduction of capitalism. At the same time, as semi-autonomous institutions with their own cross-territorial networks, universities punch holes in national territory. After all, there is a reason we refer to the location of many universities as the camp(us). The camp can take on deeply wicked functions¹, but the point we are making here, drawing on Giorgio Agamben (2003), is that the camp is both a space of exception from ordinary sovereignty and at the same time that exception constitutes sovereignty (Minca 2015). In this light, universities are crucial for nation-

¹ The most obvious example are the concentration camps of the Holocaust. A contemporary example would be immigrant/refugee camps, which are increasingly located ‘off-shore’ on islands, or outside of the formal territory and jurisdiction of the desired destination of the migrants. Interestingly, ‘onshore’ in the U.K., migrants are now often temporarily housed on former military bases—another kind of camp with a less than straightforward relationship to ‘normal’ national jurisdiction—military law.

state-led projects of economic development as well as national identity, and also as nodes of nonconformist thinking that sometimes threaten hegemonic power. For sovereign states, policy makers, thought leaders, and investors, these perforated or exceptional spaces of knowledge production are both a blessing and a curse. Throughout history, and with some but never complete success, powerful actors have tried to bend universities to their will to fuel social and technological innovation, fight hot and cold wars, and reproduce class and ideology.

Our main interest in this chapter is the ways various state and non-state actors (e.g., private venture capitalists) are enrolling the university into broader struggles to (re)shape spaces of capitalist production as well as their own competitive position in a time of geopolitical and geo-economic restructuring. There is no map for these uncharted waters, but nevertheless, navigation of new university spaces seems central to contemporary statecraft, or in the case of the anarcho-capitalists, anti-statecraft. We explain these evolving shifts as processes of secession and accession from and into the nation-state. We begin by sketching out what we mean by perforation, zonal politics and states of exception before turning to four cases to exemplify, though not exhaustively, these projects and their geopolitics. We conclude with a set of reflections on what the four cases tell us about the spatial, temporal, and socio-political nature of zonal politics.

A Jig-Saw of Nations?

In his book, *Crack-Up Capitalism*, Quinn Slobodian (2023: 2) invites the reader to imagine the standard world globe; the stuff of school social studies lessons, as an uneven “...mosaic of colours, pixelated more densely in Europe and Africa, easing out to broader chromatic stretches across Asia and North America”, with each patch of land having its own flag, anthem, cuisine, and national costume. This vision, of a world of nations mapped into bordered territories (Sassen 2006), was reinforced following World War II, oversights by the rise of post-war multilateral institutions. However, as Slobodian argues (2023: 2), “...we make a mistake if we see the world only in this jig-saw of nations. ...The modern world is pock-marked, perforated, tattered and jagged, ripped up and pin-pricked”.

Although there is a long history of attempts to resist, if not “exit”, the power of national sovereignty (Craib 2022), the politics and practices of perforation have become more legible since the rolling back of the post-war settlement beginning in the 1980s. The roll back and subsequent roll out of a new market-centric political agenda (Peck and Tickell 2002) known in the West as neoliberalism included zonal projects from the beginning. Even though China took a different direction with the development of market socialism with Chinese characteristics, the production of various kinds of exceptional zones was central to its strategy (Ong 2006). In both instances, inside these bordered spaces called ‘nations’ emerged a proliferation of new kinds of fragmented and splintered spaces including “...unusual legal spaces, anomalous territories, and peculiar jurisdictions, almost all of which evolve over time after formation. There are city states, havens, enclaves, free ports” (Slobodian 2023: 2), and, as we will also argue, a fascinating array of perforations with distinct zonal politics. It is furthermore worth pointing out that cultivation of a global scale of capital flows and governance was central to Western neoliberalism from the start (Slobodian 2018), and particularly after the ‘opening’ of China and its membership of the World Trade Organisation in 2001.

Higher education projects of various kinds are deeply implicated in the ongoing politics and practices of perforation, both visibly and less visibly reworking space and territory and recalibrating the politics of knowledge production and its regulation. Multiple examples abound in the world of higher education, from the creation of ‘education cities’ in the Gulf (Al-Saleh 2022), to branch campuses dotted around the world including in East Asia (Olds 2023), to Schwarzman College which is embedded in China’s Tsinghua University and offers a physical environment (classrooms, separate dormitory, food and leisure spaces) that is distinct and regulated differently to that of other students on Tsinghua’s campus in Beijing. Yet strangely these different cases of exception are held up as examples of exoticism, hubris, or simply just whacky, rather than something more basic to the character of the campus. A closer look reveals that universities have always been relatively exceptional and autonomous: they are spaces of experimentation and cosmopolitanism even if they are also beholden to the power of nation-states.

Extending our Spatial and Temporal Grammar

There is an emerging and important literature on higher education, rescaling, state strategies and capitalism, to which we have contributed (cf. Robertson et al. 2002; Robertson, Olds, Dale and Dang 2016). These contributions draw upon foundational arguments in human and economic geography regarding the deep entanglements of spatial and capitalist reconfiguration (Massey 1992; Harvey 2001). Influential here is Henri Lefebvre who contended that space is not a mere container or stage for social processes, but rather an active product of social relations, ideologies, and processes (Lefebvre 1991).

These insights, however, do not exhaust our spatial lexicon regarding how to conceptualise the ongoing zonal politics of perforation, given significant impetus over the past three decades as a result of neoliberalization. Slobodian’s recent (2023) contribution is important in this regard as he outlines a range of *exceptional* initiatives, which have their genesis in the work of economists like Hayek, von Mises, Rothbard and Friedman, and given literary ballast by philosophers such as Ayn Rand (Slobodian 2019, 2023; see also Craib 2022 on Hayek, Rothbard and Rand).

Yet a wider reading and rendering of zonal politics also enables us to grasp hold of progressive projects and their politics whose use of similar strategies enables a progressive counterhegemonic politics. Ong (2006), in her book on zones and cultural globalisation, describes the puncturing of territories and the insertion of new regulatory policies and politics as taking two forms in the context of cultural globalisation: (i) neoliberalism as exception, and (ii) exceptions to neoliberalism, though as we will show, zonal politics is not limited to these two forms.

We follow Slobodian and use the idea of a “zone” to describe an enclave carved out of a nation and freed from many (or sometimes all) ordinary forms of regulation. These are temporarily-specific zones of exception that can include generous concessions such as tax breaks, more liberal permissions on cultural norms and practices, or the creation of a distinct political project. An archetypal example here are tax havens which protect accumulated wealth and private property from scrutiny, let alone expropriation (Zucman 2016). But there are more and

diverse examples of zones with their forms and politics ranging from export processing zones to immigrant detention centres to Chinese city-regions to regulatory ‘sandboxes.’

Slobodian (2023) describes these zonal practices of establishing ‘exception’ as a form of ‘soft secession’; what gets enclosed is often a different set of laws, and in some cases no or at least weak democratic oversight. The overall intention, at least for those who describe themselves like Thiel, as libertarians, is to extract oneself from shared responsibilities and collective politics (Chafkin 2019). Taken to the extreme, these secessionists are attracted to the idea of a post-national nation and have drawn up plans if not taken steps to establish new communities out at sea, on coral reefs, or on vessels moored beyond the 200-mile boundary to escape the state and the public (Craib 2022).

In terms of higher education, these projects range from small individual investor or institutional projects, as we explore show below; including venture capitalist Peter Thiel’s *Thiel Fellowships*, to Saudi Arabia’s ambition to create a MIT in the Middle East with its billion-dollar endowment for the creation of the KAUST campus in 2009, to mega projects – such as the Singapore Global Schoolhouse, Saudi Arabia’s Neom, or China’s Greater Bay project. The latter was launched at about the time China began tightening up National Security Laws in Hong Kong in 2020, over-determining their political affairs. Importantly, zonal politics might also take the form of relatively progressive political and cultural projects, such as we see with KAUST, or the creation of an indigenous university as we see in New Zealand with the establishment of a Maori university, *Te Wananga o Aotearoa*. Interestingly in this latter case, the liberalisation of some forms of state control over education enabled these counter-hegemonic projects to challenge the ‘nation-building’ project of the post-War II settlement (Marginson and Considine 2000).

However, it is important to avoid binarized thinking, of imagining what is outside to be the negative image of what is inside (Peck 2021). Rather, we need to be attentive to the *balance* of social forces – discursively presented and materially and institutionally backed, and which of these overdetermine the shape and topography of the zone and its politics – as well as what happens outside. Further, we must consider that the zone is the ongoing and dynamic outcome of strategies – or zonal politics – that is driving uneven and combined development forward.

It thus follows, as our cases will show, that *strategic secession* from national territorial space is not the only strategy of zonal politics. We also see *strategic accession* or political-territorial acquisition taking place. For example, in the case of the Greater Bay Area between Hong Kong, China and Macau, with China now imposing a new understanding of what might be developed and how. Alternatively, we also identify strategic secession in the case of KAUST so that a new space for development is implanted onto the national territorial space with the purpose of boomeranging development outward once its institutional and cultural credentials are established.

Case 1: Singapore’s Global Schoolhouse

Our first case study examines the perforation of the city-state of Singapore by foreign universities since 1998, though one that is tightly managed by the Singaporean state and the long ruling People's Action Party (the PAP). Interestingly, while Slobodian includes an entire chapter on Singapore in his Islands section of *Crack-Up Capitalism*, he does not make mention of this higher education initiative. The initiative has a distinctive zonal nature in that the zones the Singaporean state has created are campus-scale in nature, variably governed depending on the nature of the foreign universities that have established a commercial presence there, with governance style and approach evolving over time, by design. Needless to say, given the nature of higher education, the issue of academic freedom in the Singapore case has consistently emerged as a topic of discussion, debate and governance politics, sometimes leading to the dissolution of these temporarily forged zones, or their accession/folding into national higher education institutions (HEIs) after a multi-year period of experimentation and capacity building.

Opening up territory

The postcolonial globally oriented tilt of Singapore's Higher Education (HE) landscape started with the World Class University (WCU) program that a statutory board – the Economic Development Board (EDB) - launched in 1998. This program was designed to attract at least 10 WCUs to Singapore within 10 years via a variety of linkage mechanisms (from joint ventures to autonomous campuses) (Olds 2007). The context for the opening of national territory to foreign universities was the 1997/98 Asian economic crisis. This crisis spurred on a state-led strategic rethinking of the national higher education system, especially its perceived rigidities, lack of innovation (e.g., with respect to human resource management), and relatively weak 'brand' power. Greater autonomy for national universities was sought, universities were enabled to establish their own philanthropic strategies, and an International Academic Advisory Panel was created by the Ministry of Education. Foreign universities were deemed, at this time, as an effective vehicle to spur on transformations within the national (public) universities so they would become more agile, innovative, and competitive.

The WCU program morphed into the 'Global Schoolhouse' initiative in 2002 following the release of a series of reports sponsored by the state-sponsored Economic Review Committee (ERC). Four market segments were constituted via policy discourses and associated regulations, and an idealized pyramidal three-tier university system was also constituted, with foreign universities associated with the top and bottom levels – the top to help brand Singapore, and the bottom to drive the diversification of the services sector (Olds 2007).

From 1998 through to 2024, Singaporean territory has been purposively pockmarked by the presence of foreign HEIs through a range of articulation mechanisms:

- Standalone branch campuses (e.g., ESSEC, INSEAD, James Cook University)
- Formative roles via fee for service to create new national HEIs (e.g., the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania helped establish Singapore Management University; MIT helped establish the Singapore University of Technology and Design)
- Joint ventures (e.g., Duke-NUS Medical School; the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, a partnership between Nanyang Technological University, and Imperial College London; Yale-NUS College)

- The creation of a campus (Campus for Research Excellence and Technological Enterprise (CREATE)) within a campus (at the National University of Singapore) that houses research centres associated with elite research universities from the United States, Switzerland, Germany, England, France, and Israel.

In all of these cases statecraft evolved over time, with large subsidies and non-financial support on offer in the first 5-10 years to draw in select foreign HEIs.

While the WCU and subsequent Global Schoolhouse initiatives were typically ambitious projects for the Singaporean state, a number of conflicts and closures have generated periodic negative media attention over the last two decades (Leow 2019). This said, Singapore continues to function as a relatively successful education hub, part of the global archipelago of higher education internationalization. And a key dimension of this success occurs via the deterritorialization of academic freedom.

Deterritorializing academic freedom

Foreign universities that have stretched their institutional fabrics out across space and into this relatively illiberal Southeast Asian city-state have faced a series of challenges to self-governance, and none more important than to academic freedom. If there is a lack of clarity about the nature of academic freedom in Singapore given that guidelines are not codified, and there appear to be no formalized procedures for dealing with serious contests about academic freedom, do foreign universities just accept the same opaque conditions faculty and students that the country's national universities accept?

The answer is a clear and resolute “no,” at least for highly respected universities like Yale, Duke, and leading business schools like INSEAD. Rather, what they do about academic freedom depends upon the outcome of negotiations between each of these foreign HEIs and the Singaporean state. One of the more intriguing things about the development process is that most of the foreign universities that have engaged with the Singaporean state have developed what are effectively bilateral understandings of academic freedom that stand separate and above the national HEI landscape and are generally tied to zones scaled to the legal campus territory. Universities that care about academic freedom engage with officials and politicians representing the Singaporean state and formulate unique understandings of academic freedom. Some are formulated over handshakes and left uncoded, while others are written into confidential agreements. See, for example, INSEAD's defacto agreement where they reached a “verbal understanding” about what activities and publication platforms to avoid (Olds and Thrift 2005:282). The most formal and transparent agreement was brought to life by Yale University in 2010 as part of the process of creating Yale-NUS College in 2011, and which is summarized here.²

This is a strategically delineated understanding of academic freedom; one specified by just two parties in this case, and one that applies in narrowly circumscribed geographic contexts (the campus). It is, in other words, exceptional to this specific zone. And the outcome is a plethora of differentially shaped academic *freedoms* in Singapore, scattered across the city-

² <https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/about/policies-and-procedures/>

state in association with the foreign universities, shorn from much of the context local universities (and their academics) are embedded in, not to mention the conventions of the 'home' campuses of the foreign HEIs.

In the end, though, the Singaporean state governs the higher education system, state largesse provides the foundations for these experiments, and the state closely manages and reshapes, over time, the arrangements. The impending demise of Yale-NUS College in 2025, much to the surprise of Yale University and Yale-NUS faculty, staff and students (Fisher 2021; Lewis 2024), is a good reminder that zones are temporary arrangements. And these arrangements can falter when the context changes, as it did for Yale-NUS vis a vis political concerns about support for elitist institutions; cultural concerns about high proportions of international students; fiscal concerns about the cost of operation; and, cultural-political concerns about select course and student activities on the campus.

This latest controversy – pulling the plug on the Yale-NUS initiative, and fully folding it into the administrative structure and associated governance system of the National University of Singapore – means New College (as it will be called) will control all aspects of academic life. It is perhaps the ultimate irony that the temporal shift from the zonal politics of the Global Schoolhouse to the accessionist-integrationist politics of New College is being overseen by the former dean of the NUS Law School – Simon Chesterman – who is the Australian son-in-law of Tony Tan, the deputy prime minister of Singapore from 1995-2005 and the PAP politician who was principle advocate and sponsor for the WCU and Global Schoolhouse initiatives.

This Singapore case, a globally connected city-state, with a prominent role shaping regional development processes across Southeast and South Asia, is an excellent example of how illiberal states can wax and wane regarding the perforation of their territory by foreign HEIs. And while the presence of a Duke U or an INSEAD is likely to continue for decades, the state shapes the articulation mechanisms in a close and very strategic fashion, always cognizant about what is happening in these sites, and ultimately maintaining control.

Case 2: KAUST – House of Wisdom or House of Reason?

KAUST, or more precisely the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, is a stunning university campus in Saudi Arabia providing a fascinating glimpse at a rather different kind of zonal politics arising from soft secession, Saudi style. Far from the madding crowd, to borrow a phrase from Thomas Hardy's famous novel, KAUST is paradoxically cut off from the travails of life in Saudi whilst yoked to it (Lindsay 2010).

What is stunning is not simply its location, situated on the Red Sea at Thuwai – a strategic distance from Jeddah, or indeed its eye watering endowment of some US\$20 billion (including \$10 billion from King Abdulah bin Abdul Aziz), but its mutely stated ambition to challenge Saudi traditional culture with a developmentalist nationalist project from its new space of exception (Pavan 2016). As we will show, a simplistic understanding of perforations in the nation's spatial topography, with new institutional arrangements, would miss the complex dynamics that keep such a project in motion.

KAUST, imagined and materialised as the MIT of the East (Koch 2016), is also tasked with engaging in the complex cultural politics of a traditional Arab society by disengaging with it. This House of Wisdom, as it is touted ³, arcs back to older cultural narratives, whilst nevertheless driving forward a small, elite, mostly Western (faculty and students) research intensive, co-educational university, to advance a very different kind of higher education enterprise in Saudi intended to set in motion a more non-traditionalist zonal politics back into the national territory region.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that higher education initiatives in the Arabian Peninsula are a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1957, King Saud University was the first to be established. When King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz ascended the throne in 2005, there were only seven public universities (Qasem 2021) servicing a population of some 24.4 million (World Bank 2024). Ten years later, there were 28 public and 9 private universities, all single sex in their intake (aside from KAUST, which is the only co-education university). In 2019, a total of 1.72 million students out of 3.5 million population between the age group of 18-24 years, were enrolled with higher education institutes across Saudi Arabia, almost double that of a decade ago.

Cultural politics, beyond the zone

KAUST is best understood as sitting within a suite of well-funded higher education reforms promoted by Saudi's King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz in 2006. Funding to education in Saudi Arabia takes some 25% of the Kingdom's annual budget (Pavan 2016), includes a generous scholarship programme for Saudi students to study abroad (in 2014 there were some 200,000 Saudi students studying abroad funded by the Kingdom), significant funds to boost public and private higher education within Saudi, free tuition, and a monthly stipend (Quasen 2020). The overall goal of these initiatives was to better qualify Saudi youth to play a more active role in public and private enterprise in an economy based on oil. In the case of KAUST, its students – mostly non-Saudi – have funded scholarship places, whilst faculty are on generous employment packages.

At its launch in 2010, King Abdullah declared that this new House of Wisdom would stand as a beacon of tolerance. In doing so, he was referencing the effect of rising militancy amongst Wahhabi extremists, whose anti-foreign views and attacks on both foreigners and Saudi police leading to serious loss of life, was blamed on the Saudi education system (Koch 2014). These events were to motivate a self-interested monarchy, itself dependent on a very large foreign-born ex-pat labour force, to reform the education system.

That said, the irony is not lost on those looking on; that the current Prime Minister, and Chair of the KAUST's Board, His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, was widely viewed as presiding over the savage butchery of Saudi dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. This House of Wisdom, despite its bordered and differently ordered life in the desert, has an existence tied to the regime's political calculus. And while KAUST would figure prominently as a symbol for a new and more open Saudi nation, its basic political role fits squarely within Abdullah's push to marginalise the clergy, undermine religious extremism, and reconsolidate the authority of the ruling family

³ <https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en/about/message-from-the-king>

(Koch 2016). The religious police do not operate on the university campus, women are allowed to mix freely with men, and they are not required to wear veils in their co-educational classes. But Saudi Arabians make up a small percentage of faculty and students at KAUST.

House of Wisdom, or House of Reason

As Koch (2014: 52) observes, KAUST's techno-science orientation was justified by the view that too many Saudi students had less than relevant social science qualifications. Critics of these kinds of ventures, however, suggest that stripping away the social sciences is necessary to stymie political criticism of the regime. Aimed at graduate students and researchers in the fields of science, engineering and computing – with a focus on food and health, water, energy and the environment, KAUST advances the West's enlightenment project of science as the dominant form of reason, and a means of realising a different future (Alhoian 2018). And whilst KAUST's stated ambition is that a mixed-gender student and faculty population will help modernize the Kingdom's deeply conservative society, that KAUST's research areas are linked to labour market opportunities only available to males in Saudi Arabia, makes it difficult to see that the effects of this state of exception, are likely not to materialise.

There are currently 901 students enrolled in KAUST, with some 572 male and 329 female students from 67 countries (KAUST website, 2024). Of these 901, only 268 students are from Saudi Arabia. And whilst this number of Saudi students has improved from being around 8% when it started (Koch 2014), of the 268 Saudi students currently enrolled, it is unclear what percentage are Saudi females as figures are not given. Given the disciplines at KAUST, it is likely to be a relatively low number of females. Similarly, KAUST faculty are also largely assumed to be largely male, though accessing accurate figures is also challenging. This House of Wisdom is a distinctly male zone, suggesting that the effectiveness of the zonal politics to challenge traditionalism, at least in the sense of gender hierarchy, is largely symbolic. Taken together, it is difficult to see how this House of Reason could have an effect on national traditional culture given that it is not possible for these international students and faculty to remain in Saudi and be integrated into Saudi life.

Back to the relational basis of zonal politics

That KAUST continues to be a well-funded facility for mostly well-funded foreign students and faculty, suggests that the zonal politics that launched this university continue to shape its current form and likely future. As this case shows, placing a literal border around the university is no guarantee of enabling the kind of secession effects its architects had hoped for. Add to this its ongoing dependence on foreign students and faculty, a significant cost to the Kingdom and one can see why critics in favour of reform remain sceptical.

But zones like KAUST can be attractive for reasons beyond the immediately national. The cost of higher education in countries like the UK and the USA, challenges to secure research funding, and a saturated market of doctoral graduates produced by the West, generate movement into and out of the zone, as short, enclaved periods in a longer career for Western scientists. Here again, the temporary status of foreign labour in the region, reproduces a longer standing set of relations in Saudi Arabia, of high skilled foreign workers and less well-paid locals, and with it a politics of resentment towards the ruling class. Nevertheless, as

exceptional as it is to the dominant cultural norms in Saudi, the existence of a co-educational campus would have been unthinkable until very recently. As Agamben might remind us, the camp(us) is never an absolute exception, but rather constitutive of the—perhaps very gradual—emergence of a new, ordinary set of norms.

Case 3: The Greater Bay Area (GBA) and Strategic Accession

In our third case, we examine the launch of the Greater Bay Area (GBA) project in 2019 involving China, Hong Kong and Macau, and point to the shifting politics of this initiative. We argue that whilst many accounts of the GBA suggest willing enthusiasm for the GBA especially from Hong Kong, its weakened position politically and economically has created a climate of fear as well as concern over institutional survival and economic growth. Taken as a whole we show how zonal politics involve a series of evolving processes: strategic secession from Mainland China, followed by strategic accession, absorbing those within the zone into a new set of orchestrated rules.

Imagining the GBA

The GBA, denoting a mega-regional development plan, has domestic and international precedents. Domestically in China, macro-regional zones are also nothing new. Examples include the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Economic Zone, the Yangtze River Economic Belt (consisting of 11 provinces and municipalities, from coastal regions Jiangsu and Shanghai to inland Sichuan and Chongqing), and the Pearl Delta Metropolitan Region. Internationally, there are several well-known ‘bay regions’ the GBA aspires to match, such as Tokyo Bay and the San Francisco Bay Area. However, the GBA is unique in its complexity in that it encompasses ‘one country, two systems’, ‘three legal systems’ and ‘three customs zones’.

Scholars who study the GBA’s higher education initiatives tend to do so from the perspective of Hong Kong universities’ need for collaboration with research centres based on the Mainland (which has a wide-ranging industrial base; see Tang 2022). They are characterised by the uncritical boosterism of the role of HE in leading innovation. We argue, contrastively, that the ‘One Country/Two Systems’ which had defined the relationship between Hong Kong and China following the 1997 handover and transition of Hong Kong back to China, is the object of the GBA’s political work; to insert a new ‘third’ system with tighter - though less visible and thus less conflictual - coordination by the Chinese nation-state.

Hong Kong – caught between flows and frictions

Beginning in the 1990s, Hong Kong’s status as a regional education hub grew rapidly, with a critical mass of local and international actors strategically engaging in cross-border education through training and knowledge production (Knight 2011). At the same time, Hong Kong’s success, both as a ‘system’ and an economy, fed a growing sense of its own post-colonial right to democratic processes in Hong Kong, fuelled by a more confident and critical body politic that included academics and students.

But demographic and political challenges and changes in Hong Kong have also created structural conditions that have limited the ability of Hong Kong to insist on the integrity of the

two systems policy. Hong Kong's birth-rate had been on a declining slope for the past thirty years, dropped to an alarming 0.77 in 2021 (well below replacement of the population). Given Hong Kong universities are funded by the University Grants Commission based on undergraduate numbers, any decline in demographics will mean declining incomes for universities from the Hong Kong state. Add to this a significant outflow of students and families to the UK and Australia as a result of the crack down on protestors in Hong Kong in 2019. The ongoing prosecution of so called 'dissidents' in the courts have included academics and student activists, creating a climate of fear.

The tilt to Beijing and the zonal politics of strategic accession

These structural conditions and the ongoing show of police power in Hong Kong has accelerated the political tilt towards Beijing. Unsurprising, its 'internationalisation' policies have begun to align with the rhetoric of Beijing's key strategic initiatives. In the Chief Executive's 2022 Policy Address, John Lee promised that Hong Kong will 'attract more outstanding students along the Belt and Road' (Lee 2022: 50) as well as 'expand its current *Immigration Arrangements for Non-Local Graduates* to cover the campuses of Hong Kong's universities in GBA' (Lee 2022: 68). Viewed through the lens of zonal politics, this 'third space' - the GBA - enables Beijing to draw Hong Kong into a satellite arrangement with other key actors in the Bay, on its own terms. In doing so, it seeks to defuse Hong Kong's power and insert 'enthusiasm' for new HE investments in the GBA via the advance of new set of structural and strategic selectivities (Jessop 2005). More specifically, we focus on how we might make sense of Beijing's political efforts to 'rehabilitate' Hong Kong into the Mainland China fold, through GBA-shaped higher education integration.

The closer collaboration between Hong Kong's higher education sector and that of the Mainland has been institutionalised as a set of 'imperatives' under contemporary China's two grand narratives, namely the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and GBA strategies (Lo et al. 2022). As a result, while maintaining its global ambition and positioning, we observe within HK higher education an accommodating strategic alignment with Beijing's strategic imperatives, wherein the interests of Hong Kong and its universities are subsumed under (and subjugated to) Beijing's directives. In the name of national coordination and putative common prosperity through region-building projects, Beijing imposes its strategy on Hong Kong not so much through diktat, as by way of spatial governmentality, which regulates people's behaviours, interactions, and identities through (re)assembling how space is structured, conceptualised, and imagined.

Schools and universities in authoritarian China are spaces where ideological indoctrination, citizenship formation and social control processes are exercised, and whereby critical thinking and dissents are marginalised and stifled. Liberal education (or perceived another way, uncontrollable students and academics) is more than a thorn in the party-state's side, due to the reality that their combination poses an existential threat to the legitimacy of the state. As Morris and Vickers have observed, issues around schooling have been attributed as the root cause of anti-Mainland sentiments in Hong Kong (Morris & Vickers 2015). Naturally, the antidote – as perceived by Beijing and practised in the Mainland – is to inculcate local youths with a 'Chinese' education. However, the Hong Kong government had to withdraw Moral and

National Education (introduced in 2010) as a compulsory school subject in 2012, in the face of strong local position.

After the academic and student-led Occupy Central Campaign of 2014 (also known as the Umbrella Movement), not only did the pro-Beijing faction decry that the senior secondary school course entitled Liberal Studies (it was subsequently renamed in 2021 as Citizenship and Social Development after the introduction of new elements on patriotism, national development and lawfulness) was responsible for fuelling ‘poisonous’ Western ideas (Vickers & Morris 2022), but more importantly, university campuses were perceived as the seat of pro-independence localism (Law 2019). As promoting the value of nationalism becomes a discursive imperative from Beijing’s perspective, the Western model of Hong Kong universities is found to be no longer viable. As such, these universities must necessarily adopt a hybrid model in which the *national* context becomes just as important as the internationalisation context (Marginson 2021).

The 2019-2020 social unrest ultimately led to the passing of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, thus sounding the death knell of Hong Kong universities’ institutional autonomy and academic freedom. The GBA plan urges Hong Kong and Macau to view the GBA as a rightful leading global hub, driving innovation and growth for all parties involved while keeping silent on the politics and power dynamics inherent in spatial designs and arrangements. Moreover, GBA is symbolic of China’s role as the ultimate designer and arbitrator of this newly created topography, where national interests and international ambitions, defined by Beijing, ultimately trumps the individualistic interests that can and do exist among the stakeholders of the GBA, in that Hong Kong and Macau must align themselves with Mainland-backed development.

Case 4: Secession and the Politics of Start-Up Education, *Beyond* the University

In our first three cases, in various ways and with various levels of success, the national-state is attempting to leverage the zone or the campus for particular political and economic ends. In this final case we examine a set of powerful private actors who seek to undermine the power of the state by undermining the conventional (if there is such a thing) university. We focus specifically on billionaire technology entrepreneur and venture capitalist, Peter Thiel, along with several of his interlocutors, who seek to ‘exit’ both the global order of nation-states as well as the university system that backs it up. They have done this by building their own version of ‘start-up’ higher education whose zonal politics is very different to the others we have explored so far. This case is mainly focused on the USA which, like all our cases above, has a unique cultural, political, and economic history. This said, non-state actors like Peter Thiel have deep and wide transnational networks, primarily associated with organizations, firms and individuals based in Western countries across Europe, North America, and Australasia.

Thiel – the deep pockets of exit architect billionaire

Of the many figures of the so called ‘new right’, few are more connected across its various networks than Peter Thiel. Thiel was educated at Stanford where, in 1987, he founded and

began editing the student-run publication *The Stanford Review*, as a reaction to his perception of an unjustified agenda of multiculturalism across campus. He accumulated his wealth by investing in Silicon Valley start-up firms including Facebook and his own firm PayPal, which he eventually sold to eBay. Since 2003 Thiel's reach has been both extended and embedded into new spheres, including in the military techno-industrial complex through his data surveillance firm Palantir. A donor of millions of dollars to various Republican political campaigns, Thiel also served on Donald Trump's Presidential transition team in 2016-2017. Always a provocateur (though on many issues it is very difficult to determine what Thiel actually believes, points out biographer, Max Chafkin 2021), over the last decade Thiel has sought to establish his credentials as a public intellectual, and is regularly invited to speak by libertarian, paleo-conservative, and so-called alt-right groups. He has also delivered high profile talks at the Republican National Convention, and notably, twice at Oxford University in 2023.

It does not take long after diving into the texts written by Thiel and similar thinkers of his ilk to see how central the Western university is to their diagnosis of the ills of Western society. Thiel and others, like Curtis Yarvin, Nick Land, and Petrie Friedman (Milton Friedman's grandson), all argue that universities in the West are institutions of the left-wing elite, a ruling class obsessed with diversity that has corrupted science and slowed technological development (Smith and Burrows 2021). Along with the administrative or 'deep' state, they argue that elite universities have captured the levers of American state power. One solution for Thiel is complete secession or libertarian "exit" from the nation-state to either cyberspace, outer space, or into the ocean (Craib 2022:181-208). Thiel has, for instance, generously funded the Seasteading Institute, chaired by Friedman, whose projects include building independent pods on the ocean beyond the reach of the state and its territorial waters. Thiel's message is always the same. Universities: stifle innovation because they are overly bureaucratic and risk-averse; discourage radical innovation; and are out of touch with the real-world challenges faced by entrepreneurs and innovators. But most importantly, Thiel has also accused universities of indoctrinating students with politically correct and left-leaning ideologies, hampering their critical thinking.

Confronting those who view a university education as a path to citizenship in a self-governing society or simply an investment in getting ahead, Thiel Fellowships (launched in 2011), provide up to 30 grants per annum of US\$100,000 to young people aged under 23, to drop out of college and develop a company. Casting an eye over the awardees, it is evident that this is mostly a male zone. On the application form for the Fellowship, one question posed is: do you like money? There is limited space here for socially minded innovations of the kind that many female entrepreneurs are better known to commit to. Perhaps more importantly for this chapter is that this is an attempt to evacuate everything but training in the practice of capitalist innovation from higher education, a trade school for aspiring anarcho-capitalists. But whilst it is open to anyone under the age of 23, the pitch is clearly as a negation of a conventional university education. Three prominent quotes feature on the main fellowship webpage, from Plato, Margaret Mead, and Kanye West, all of which critique institutionalized education.⁴

The radical politics of the Libertarians

⁴ <https://thiefellowship.org/> accessed on April 19, 2024

Whilst exit architects like Thiel are a diverse bunch, there are several key themes that join them together. The first is that they are libertarians who argue that what is at stake is the 'American Way of Life' and the 'American Mind'. The culprits in their view are the universities that produce a "decadent, incompetent and captured" left-wing elite (Prokop 2022: 6), on the one hand, and an unaccountable 'deep state', drawing its techno-bureaucratic expertise from the academy, on the other. According to Executive Director of the recently established second office of the arch libertarian Claremont Institute office in Washington: "A great deal of money is funnelled into higher ed, and broadly speaking that money is a system of fraud. ...decent Middle America citizens pay taxes to support universities that are teaching our young people to despise their country or at least have no duties to it....and all this at the expense of the public...states need to start defunding higher education" (Zerofsky 2022: 4). The Claremont Institute has, for instance, worked with the Idaho Freedom Foundation to write reports detailing how a new social justice ideology had penetrated Idaho's universities. The upshot was that the Idaho Legislature cut \$2.5 million from its social justice programming, including banning critical race theory (Zerofsky 2022: 4). The second common trait is that these Libertarians, or self-styled alt-right anarchists, like leading intellectual figure in the new right, Curtis Yarvin (also a recipient of Thiel's patronage), lay out a critique of American democracy, again arguing that it is liberals in elite academic institutions, media outlets and the permanent bureaucracy who hold true power (Prokop 2022: 6). To Yarvin, incremental reforms and half measures are doomed. The game is one of political positioning for an assumption of absolute power. Yarvin's preference is for a 'monarchy' and he casts democracy as dangerous and malignant form for government (Smith and Burrows 2021).

Zonal politics of a different kind

So, what does this case tell us about perforations and their distinct zonal politics? In our view it brings into view perforations in a national system of a different kind. In this case, it involves puncturing a hole in a system, such as the US university system, with the hope that its life blood oozes out and causes it to collapse. There are parallels here to the importance of free market think tanks, a similar form of anti-university, for the development of neoliberal ideas (Djelic & Mousavi 2020). For sure, the so-called left might agree that the university has been corrupted, but for different reasons to those proposed by Thiel and Yarvin. Thiel and the anarcho-capitalists want more start-up corporations, more markets, more techno-science, but without burdensome bureaucracy. In this worldview the academy is emptied of any critique of what some have called an emerging techno-feudalism, and buoyed by arguments propagated by writers like Ayn Rand, which demands that all that is worth fighting for is a world run like a corporation, whose brightest and best have absolute power.

Concluding Remarks

Taken together, these cases: (i) highlight the cultural, political, and economic complexities involved in creating zones of exception; (ii) point to the need to get beyond non-relational binary accounts of inside/outside, zone/nation; (iii) offer a processual account of secession and accession; and, (iv) make visible shifting strategies over time in relation to challenges and changes in the wider geopolitical and cultural spheres.

And what insights do we glean regarding zonal politics involving when the university, as a 'camp' with its own historic claim to exception from the everyday politics of state and civil society, is mobilised in these projects? Our analyses suggest zonal politics can take multiple forms, though we go further than Slobodian and argue they include strategic spatio-temporal moves; of 'secession' *and* 'accession', and evolving combinations of these two.

In the case of Singapore, we have by its very nature a zone or enclave in the form of a city-state, although fundamentally dependent upon global capitalist networks and connections. We see the Singaporean state engaging in practices of perforation and symbolic secession, whilst mobilising processes of accession of the campuses at will as it continues to cultivate its own perforated zone in the global capitalist economy. It is symbolic as secession as the universities are ultimately governed by the One-Party State and can be wound down abruptly and quickly to achieve core cultural-political objectives.

Similarly, the GBA is reimagined though a form of soft secession whose *real* politics is the strategic accession of the Hong Kong campuses in the service of cultivating a Chinese capitalist regional/zonal politics. Here the GBA initiative shows how China is both pulling HK out of its place in Western/Postcolonial capitalist network and replacing with distinctly Chinese global networks. In doing so, the GBA mobilises HE to advance a distinct accession politics now tied more firmly to Beijing.

KAUST can be understood as the outcome of the Saudi Kingdom perforating its own national space, building a zone of exception for the university in the service of reform of a traditional society that resists diversification of economy and culture. The nature of zonal politics here within the nation-state is in the service of an arguably progressive fragment of Saudi society via the deliberate cultivation of a zone of exception (touted as The House of Wisdom, but whose ontology and epistemology might best be understood as The House of Reason). That said, its secession from Jeddah does not grant it the full exceptional space of the Western campus. Then again, the latter is perhaps more than anyone could reasonably expect within the territorial boundaries of Saudi.

And finally, what are we to make of the anarcho-capitalists, and exit architects like Thiel and colleagues? Whilst connected to the establishment and the state in many ways, theirs is pure secession, or put another way, pure exit. It is the anti-university; a negation of 'the other' university whose politics and practices they argue are moribund and corrupt, and damaging to the future of capitalism. Their capacity to resonate with authoritarian populist movements in the United States and other Western countries, provides the ballast for this movement. By puncturing holes in contemporary university in the USA, and elsewhere, by linking widespread resentment amongst the working classes with the politics of the university, the exit architects aim to undermine the autonomy of the camp/us, the university, and offer an alternative 'exit' project and space.

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