

CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE START-UP SOCIETIES IMAGINARY

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Table of contents

Table of contents.....	i
List of figures	iv
List of tables	v
Abstract	vi
Acknowledgements	viii
Contribution to original knowledge.....	x
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Thesis aims and research questions	3
1.3 Context and scope of the research.....	5
1.4 Methodology.....	6
1.5 Empirical and theoretical contributions.....	7
1.6 Layout of dissertation.....	11
Chapter 2 – Stepping on new off/shores: Extraterritoriality, urbanization, entrepreneurialism, and enclavism at sea and on land	14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Extraterritoriality and ocean urbanization.....	16
2.2.1 (Socially constructed) Freedom of the seas.....	18
2.2.1.1 <i>Territoriality and sovereignty</i>	21
2.2.1.2 <i>Ocean urbanization, urban liquefaction</i>	25
2.3 The ocean as a space of secession	30
2.3.1 Floating cities as urban expansion programs	31
2.4 From the entrepreneurial city to the city as a private enterprise	37
2.4.1 Urban entrepreneurialism.....	38
2.4.1.1 <i>The role of the entrepreneur</i>	42
2.4.1.2 <i>Start-up city, start-up state, and start-up urbanism</i>	46
2.5 Extraterritoriality and urban privatization	50
2.5.1 Special economic zones	51
2.5.1.1 <i>The zone as enclave urbanism</i>	53
2.5.1.2 <i>The zone as a technology of land grabbing</i>	56
2.6 Conclusion	58
Chapter 3 – A theoretical framework for examining start-up societies: Cultural political economy and critical futures studies.....	60
3.1 Introduction	60

3.2 Critical futures studies	63
3.3 Cultural political economy.....	68
3.3.1 Complexity reduction.....	74
3.3.2 Imaginaries and evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection, and retention	75
3.3.3 Crisis	78
3.3.4 Four modes of strategic selectivity in cultural political economy	81
3.3.4.1 <i>Agential selectivity</i>	82
3.3.4.2 <i>Discursive selectivity</i>	82
3.3.4.3 <i>Technological selectivity</i>	83
3.3.4.4 <i>Structural selectivity</i>	84
3.3.4.5 <i>The four modes of strategic selectivity in the start-up societies imaginary</i>	86
3.3.5 Drawbacks.....	88
3.3.5.1 <i>Is CPE appropriate for micro- and meso-level analysis?</i>	88
3.3.5.2 <i>Is cultural political economy totalizing?</i>	91
3.3.5.3 <i>Is cultural political economy anthropocentric?</i>	91
3.4 Conclusion	92
Chapter 4 – Methodology: Critical discourse analysis and multi-sited fieldwork	94
4.1 Introduction	94
4.2 Data collection and analysis.....	94
4.2.1 In-person fieldwork	101
4.2.2 Digital fieldwork	105
4.2.3 Data analysis	107
4.3 Critical discourse analysis.....	114
4.3.1 Discourse in social practice: genres, discourse, and styles	115
4.4 Cultural political economy and critical discourse analysis.....	121
4.4.1 Differences between critical discourse analysis and cultural political economy	122
4.4.2 Critical discourse analysis and imaginaries	125
4.4.3. Critical discourse analysis and the critique of strategies.....	127
4.5 Critical futures studies and critical discourse analysis	129
4.6 Drawbacks.....	133
4.7 Conclusion	135
Chapter 5 – Encrypted geographies: Cryptography and the start-up societies imaginary.....	137
5.1 Introduction	137
5.2 Encryption, trust, and governance.....	141
5.2.1 Decentralized Autonomous Organizations.....	145
5.3 Coding an exit from politics.....	149
5.4 Software country.....	158
5.5 Encrypted Meanings.....	161
5.6 New cyberelites	164
5.7 Spatialities of encrypted geographies	168

5.7.1 Ulex – An open-source legal system.....	168
5.7.2 The electronic frontier	172
5.8 Conclusion	175
Chapter 6 – “A brilliant future of floating islands”: Sea level rise as a new profit frontier	179
6.1 Introduction	179
6.2 Blue economy	183
6.3 Seasteading.....	187
6.4 Seasteading is extrastatecraft	189
6.5 Sea level rise as a new profit frontier.....	192
6.6 Seasteading is cryptostatecraft	195
6.7 Polynesians’ pantry, seasteaders’ backyard	201
6.8 Conclusion	204
Chapter 7 – Charter cities: The special economic zone as a dispositive and its appropriation by non-state actors.....	208
7.1 Introduction	208
7.2 Charter cities as urban entrepreneurialism 2.0	211
7.2.1 Charter cities	212
7.2.2. The zone as profitable alternative to development aid.....	215
7.3 The zone as a dispositive	219
7.3.1 Founders and builders	221
7.3.2 Building cities for builders.....	226
7.4 Honduras Próspera LLC	232
7.5 Próspera and the cryptotrad political rationality.....	245
7.6 Conclusion	247
Chapter 8 – Conclusion.....	250
Appendix 1 – Lists of start-up societies ventures and related organizations	257
Appendix 2 – List of interviews.....	264
Appendix 3 – Consent form and interview questions.....	265
References.....	270

List of figures

Figure 1 Startup Societies Foundation Summit 2017, San Francisco, California. Audience in the main room. Photo credit: Louis-Philippe Amiot.	102
Figure 2 Titus Gebel speaks at the Startup Societies Summit 2018, Arlington, Virginia. Photo by the author.	102
Figure 3 Jim Davidson, a participant at the 2017 Startup Societies Summit in San Francisco, shows his self-published book, Being Sovereign. Photo by the author.....	103
Figure 4 Mark Edgington, also known as Mark Edge, a co-founder FreeTalkLive.com, and a former member of the Free State Project, a movement to recruit 20,000 individuals to move to New Hampshire and make it a libertarian stronghold, and former ambassador for Free Private Cities, is dressed as a king to promote his online radio station at the 2018 Startup Societies Summit in Arlington, Virginia. In 1999, Edgington was convicted of second-degree murder and spent eight years in prison. Photo by the author.....	104
Figure 5 “Shenzhen then... and now” (Startup Societies Foundation, 2020)	131
Figure 6 Floating Island Concept Design. Credit: Blue Frontiers, 2017.....	138
Figure 7 Varyon Advertisement at the Startup Societies Summit 2018. Photo by the author. ..	140
Figure 8 Promotional image for MS Satoshi, Ocean Builders (2020).....	154
Figure 9 Blue Frontier's Homepage (Blue Frontiers, 2019, removed)	192
Figure 10 Twitter Thread by Bluebook Cities' Co-Founder (Brown, D., 2021)	223
Figure 11 Honduras Próspera LLC Website (2021)	237
Figure 12 Próspera Arbitration Center Website (2021).....	239
Figure 13 Próspera Residence Design. Credit: Honduras Próspera and Zaha Hadid Architects.	241

List of tables

Table 1 List of Events Attended	97
Table 2 Online Discussion Groups	98
Table 3 Dominant Themes in Start-up Societies Newsletters (Individual Organizations).....	108
Table 4 Dominant Themes in Start-up Societies Newsletters	109
Table 5 The Start-up Societies Discourse in Social Practice	119

Abstract

Right-wing venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, and ideologues, often with no prior experience in urban planning or policy making, are exploring city-building as a means to develop alternative spaces of political, social, and technological experimentation. These ventures are frequently referred to as start-up societies, defined as experimental, small-scale communities. Such projects include not only floating cities, private cities, and charter cities, but also “network states” and “software countries,” which would start as digital communities and eventually congregate in a physical location. This dissertation employs a cultural political economy theoretical framework and a critical discourse analysis methodology to examine the emergence of the start-up societies imaginary, the strategies through which it is presented as a solution to a perceived crisis of the economic, political, and cultural orders, the likelihood of this solution being retained, and some potential consequences on democratic urban futures. Specifically, it examines how start-up societies ventures rely on such emerging technologies as cryptocurrency and blockchain to rethink notions of sovereignty, territoriality, community, and trust and how, conversely these technologies contribute to shaping the start-up societies imaginary. An overarching argument running through this dissertation is that the start-up societies imaginary is an attempt to resolve the contradictions that result from the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism and that it synthesizes the de-democratizing forces of these two rationalities. I illustrate these arguments through two case studies: a project to build a floating island in French Polynesia in 2017 and a project to build a charter city in Honduras launched in 2017 and ongoing at the time of writing.

Résumé

Des capital-risqueurs, des entrepreneurs et des idéologues de droite, souvent sans aucune expérience préalable en planification urbaine ou en élaboration de politiques, explorent la construction de villes comme moyen de développer des espaces alternatifs d'expérimentation politique, sociale et technologique. Ces entreprises sont souvent appelées « start-up societies » et définies comme des communautés expérimentales à petite échelle. De tels projets incluent non seulement des villes flottantes, des villes privées et des villes à charte, mais aussi des « États réseau » et des « pays logiciel », qui commenceraient comme des communautés numériques et finiraient par se rassembler dans un emplacement physique. Cette thèse utilise une approche d'économie politique culturelle et une méthodologie d'analyse critique du discours pour examiner l'émergence de l'imaginaire des « start-up societies », les stratégies à travers lesquelles il est présenté comme une solution à une crise perçue des ordres économique, politique et culturel, la probabilité que cette solution soit retenue, et les conséquences potentielles sur les futurs urbains démocratiques. Plus précisément, j'examine comment les « start-up societies » s'appuient sur des technologies émergentes telles que la crypto-monnaie et la blockchain pour repenser les notions de souveraineté, de territorialité, de communauté et de confiance et comment, à l'inverse, ces technologies contribuent à façonner l'imaginaire des « start-up societies ». Un argument primordial qui traverse cette thèse est que cet imaginaire représente une tentative de résoudre les contradictions qui résultent de la convergence du néolibéralisme et du néoconservatisme et qu'il synthétise les forces dé-démocratisantes de ces deux rationalités. J'illustre ces arguments à travers deux études de cas : un projet de construction d'une île flottante en Polynésie française en 2017 et un projet de construction d'une ville à charte au Honduras lancé en 2017 et en cours au moment de la rédaction.

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Contribution to original knowledge

This dissertation is written in monograph format and contains original scholarship in the field of geography. It is the sole work of the author. It presents original findings on the start-up societies movement and an innovative theoretical approach to analyze how future imaginaries are formed, selected, and retained.

Chapters 5 and 6 were submitted in shortened forms for publication in forthcoming edited volumes, namely J.Hagen and Diener, Alexander C., (Eds.), *Invisible Borders*. Routledge, and in A-K. Hornidge, Low, Kelvin E.Y., Abdullah, Noorman, and Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Rapti, (Eds.), *Coastal mobilities in translation: Mobilities, meanings, maneuverings*. Brill (Asian Studies Series).

Chapter 7 was submitted to *Urban Geography* and received a “revise and resubmit” request.

An article that examines Ocean Builders, a private venture to develop a seasteed community off the coast of Thailand, was published (Simpson, 2021).

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Right-wing venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, and ideologues, often with no prior experience in urban planning or policy making, are exploring city-building as a means to develop alternative spaces of political, social, and technological experimentation. These ventures are frequently referred to as start-up societies, defined as experimental, small-scale communities (*Startup Societies Foundation*, 2020a), and the term start-up society has been used by many individuals to describe a new, radical form of entrepreneurial city built, owned, and governed by private entities (e.g., Brimen, 2017; Frazier & McKinney, 2020; Quirk & Friedman, 2017, pp. 55–65).¹ Such projects include not only floating cities (*The Seasteading Institute*, 2020), “free private cities” (Gebel, 2018), charter cities (Lonsdale, 2020; *Pronomos Capital*, 2019a), but also “network states” and “software countries,” which would start as digital communities and eventually congregate in a physical location (Srinivasan, 2017, 2020a).

I use the term start-up societies, as opposed to start-up cities or start-up countries, because it is the term employed by the Startup Societies Foundation, a small non-profit organization headquartered in Utah and whose events I attended, and which provided the starting point for my research. This term reflects the movement’s ambition to employ the business model of the technology start-up to transform society, and the common objective of the various initiatives described above to develop new ways to organize how we govern ourselves, to form communities, and to by-pass, or provide an alternative to, traditional political processes. This

¹ I use the hyphenated version of “start-up,” which is used by such major news organizations as the BBC, the New York Times, and most academic literature. I understand the start-up societies imaginary to be one coherent (but contested and always in need of repair) imaginary. When referring to the start-up societies imaginary, I use start-up societies in the plural form because this imaginary entails the creation of multiple competing start-up societies (e.g., A Thousand Nations, 2019).

dissertation focuses on contemporary initiatives that explicitly engage with the concept of start-up society or can be characterized as being part of the broader start-up societies movement with its aim to build new cities to go “beyond” politics (Thiel, 2009). Such micronation projects as the Free Republic of Liberland (2019), although they share common political and cultural influences with the start-up societies movement and with whom proponents of start-up societies occasionally collaborate, are beyond the scope of this research as they seek to replicate, rather than challenge, the model of the nation-state.

The Startup Societies Foundation defines a start-up society as “typically a small territorial experiment in government” (*Startup Societies Foundation*, 2020a) and as “any form of experimental government located in a small geographic area” (McKinney, 2017c). Joseph McKinney, the president of the Startup Societies Foundation, readily admits that this is a word he and his team have “made up.”

We made that word up to show awareness about the different experiments around the world. To build a movement of consciousness. Of consciousness of society builders. It is purposely broad. Because we are a coalition of methodology, not ideology. With that word we tied together seemingly disparate people with common obstacles. With a common word we create a common network to draw from. (McKinney, 2017c)

The Startup Societies Foundation claims that although the word start-up society is new, “the concept is anything but” and that “civilizations all start as start-up societies” (McKinney, 2017c; *Startup Societies Foundation*, 2020a). The examples of start-up societies it lists on its website include special economic zones, eco villages, microstates, intentional communities and common-interest developments, seasteading, and smart cities. What these disparate examples have in

common is their small scale and, according to the Foundation, their ability “to generate enormous prosperity when they succeed” (*Startup Societies Foundation*, 2020a).

From their proponents’ perspective, start-up societies represent a pragmatic and profitable solution to a dissatisfaction with the “governing status quo” (Deist, 2012). They offer a response to governments’ centralized power and their perceived inability to respond appropriately to the social, economic, and political challenges brought about by accelerating technological development and globalization. Although start-up society ventures are often derided in the media as the fantasies of wealthy eccentrics, their supporters argue that such endeavors to develop new extraterritorial, private urban spaces will primarily benefit low-income individuals by attracting foreign investments and technology transfer, and by creating employment and business opportunities.

This imaginary has found support not only among states, including French Polynesia and Honduras, but also among transnational organizations like the United Nations (e.g., Mohammed, 2019). Supporters view such experimental cities built “from scratch” as potential fixes to national socio-economic challenges and global environmental challenges. Unsurprisingly, start-up society ventures are the object of much controversy and contestation. Their opponents denounce their anti-democratic aspects and argue that these alleged urban experiments are, in fact, simply gifts. Nonetheless, the start-up societies imaginary resonates with several powerful non-state and state actors, has had a tangible even if still limited impact in the world, and as such, it is worthy of critical attention.

1.2 Thesis aims and research questions

The overarching objective of my research is to explain the emergence of the start-up societies imaginary, why it appeals to and comes to be selected and retained by non-state and

state actors as a solution to crises (or fails to) and how. My analysis is grounded in a cultural political economy (CPE) theoretical framework, which is concerned with the critical analysis of imaginaries and with how the interpretations of, and the corresponding responses to crises are constrained by the dialectical relation between semiosis (i.e. sense- and meaning-making) and extra-semiotic factors.² In other words, a CPE framework seeks to understand why and how some solutions, or imaginaries, are privileged over others, how this is shaped by how agents (e.g., individuals, institutions) make sense of the world, and how both agents' interpretations of crisis and their responses to it are constrained by semiotic resources and extra-semiotic elements. It does so by examining the uneven interaction of the discursive and the material and "the ways in which certain semiotic and structural 'solutions' are privileged over others thanks to the operation of structural, discursive, technological and agential selectivities" (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 191).

I take up the CPE research agenda proposed by Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop (2013, p. 226; 478) and ask the following questions: When and where did the concept of start-up society emerge and begin to gain credence? What contradictions does it seek to harmonize or transcend? Which networks are promoting the concept of start-up society, how and why? What problems or crises is this concept addressing and how are these crises conceptualized by proponents of start-up societies? What ideas and practices does the concept of start-up society draw upon? What political, economic, and socio-cultural changes does the concept of start-up society promise, and who stands to benefit from them and who stands to lose?

² In a CPE framework, imaginaries are "fragile and contingent semiotic systems" that "exist at different sites and scales of action – from individual agents to world society" (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 165). Imaginaries "frame individual subjects' lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or inform collective calculations about that world" (Jessop, 2009, p. 344).

A second underlying aim of my research is to demonstrate how CPE can contribute to the transdisciplinary field of critical futures studies (CFS), which examines how imagined futures are entangled with material practices and questions the conditions under which texts (including discourses, audio and visual representations, etc.) about the future are produced, what it calls the “political economy of the future” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, pp. 121–122).³ Both CPE and CFS are concerned with the transformation of particular imaginations (construals) into sedimented imaginaries (constructions) and with problematizing taken-for-granted imaginaries. Together, CPE and CFS offer a comprehensive framework to examine how urban future imaginaries, such as the start-up societies imaginary, are shaped by the uneven interaction of semiotic (discursive) and extra-semiotic (material / structural) elements.

1.3 Context and scope of the research

This dissertation offers an innovative analysis that takes the start-up societies movement as its starting point and examines both the forms the start-up societies imaginary takes (seasteading, private cities, charter cities, network states) and how it is shaped by the uneven interaction of strategic discursive, agential, technological, and structural selectivities. As of the time of writing, no scholarly work has provided a comprehensive examination of the contemporary start-up societies movement.⁴ Projects to build libertarian cities and micronations have been sparsely examined in scholarly literatures in the fields of geography and legal studies. Whereas legal scholarship has focused on the legal ramifications of floating cities and micronations (Binder, 2016; Fateh, 2013; Grimmelmann, 2012; Horn, 1973; Keith, 1977;

³ In their introduction to critical futures studies, Michael Godhe and Luke Goode use “future” in the singular form (Godhe & Goode, 2018; Goode & Godhe, 2017). I use “futures” in the plural form because key aspects of the future “are out of our control, which means that the future can never be singular or predetermined, and that a range of uncertainties give shape to different possible trajectories” (Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, 2020).

⁴ One forthcoming book by the historian Raymond Craib (2022) looks at what he terms “libertarian exit” and examines projects to build libertarian micronations from the 1960s to modern-day seasteading.

Menefee, 1995; Ranganathan, 2019; Saunders, 2019; Schmidtke, 2019), geography scholarship has focused on critically examining private libertarian cities, in particular seasteading, as a socio-spatial expression of neoliberalism (Lynch, 2017; Miéville, 2007; Peck, 2011; Ruchlak & Lenz, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2012).

This strand of scholarship makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how the start-up societies', especially seasteading's, socio-spatial imaginary is shaped by neoliberal thinking. However, it provides only a partial explanation that mainly confirms the hegemony of neoliberalism. The existing scholarship does not question why and how the start-up societies imaginary is positively received by several non-state and state actors, and what this suggests about how neoliberalism is evolving and what directions it may be taking. This dissertation contributes to the literature on start-up societies by addressing this gap and drawing attention to unexplored political, economic, and cultural influences that shape the semiotic aspects of the start-up societies imaginary, in particular the influence of cryptocurrency and blockchain technology.

1.4 Methodology

Of the few studies on start-up society ventures, only Steinberg et al. (2012) and Ruchlak and Lenz (2020) have directly interacted with or interviewed proponents of start-up societies (seasteading in the case of the former, and free private cities in the case of the latter).

Methodologically, my research builds on five years of continued interaction with proponents of start-up societies both in person and online. I employ a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of start-up societies texts supplemented by in-person and digital fieldwork. In-person fieldwork included attending 2 summits organized by the Startup Societies Foundation, one at which I gave a talk on Operation Atlantis, the project of an American pharmaceutical entrepreneur to build a libertarian

micronation in the 1960s – 1970s (Simpson, 2016). I conducted 10 semi-structured and informal interviews and 1 focus group with Startup Societies Foundation staff and with individuals involved in the start-up societies movement, as well as an online survey with 22 respondents. I also compiled newsletters and documentation from start-up society ventures as well as relevant public posts on social media such as Twitter, and I listened to recorded interviews, presentations, and podcasts. I used MaxQDA, a qualitative analysis software, to identify key themes and concepts. I used Kumu, an online software, to create a conceptual map of key themes and concepts present in the start-up societies discourse and a map of the start-up societies network including agents and organizations. My methodological and analytical approaches, detailed in Chapter 4, allowed me to contribute an informed and nuanced analysis of the start-up societies discourse, the strategies employed to promote a particular vision of a future of decentralized “competitive governance” (P. Friedman & Taylor, 2012) between private cities on land, at sea, and in cyberspace, and of the mechanisms through which proponents of start-up societies argue it could be realized.

1.5 Empirical and theoretical contributions

My research adds to the existing scholarship by (a) proposing a comprehensive analytical framework to examine the emergence of the concept of start-up society and why and how it comes to be selected and retained (or not) by certain actors as a solution to current crises and as a desirable vision of the future; (b) contributing original empirical data and demonstrating how the emergence and adoption of the start-up societies imaginary is correlated to the development of cryptocurrency and blockchain technology as well as to the growing popularity of the special economic zone model of urban development; and (c) exploring what the start-up societies imaginary tells us about the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

I make three key arguments that advance our understanding of the start-up societies imaginary. First, I argue that start-up society ventures should be understood as the continuation of a trend that dates back to the 1960s and 1970s when American and British entrepreneurs attempted to create new countries both on land and at sea (Strauss, 1979), albeit also responding to a new context, rather than as a new phenomenon stemming from the 2008 economic crisis as Lynch (2017) suggests. Moreover, theorizing start-up society ventures as libertarian enclaves (Lynch, 2017) ignores that the movement addresses contemporary political and economic crises both by a broad spectrum of political and cultural influences, and a reliance on such emerging technologies as cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies and on the model of special economic zone, to solve these crises.

The contemporary start-up societies imaginary emerged as a response to crises of the political, cultural, and economic orders. Specifically, it is a response to the state's monopoly over geography, individuals, the economy, and their governance, and that developed in the context of the culture wars and the turn to neo-Keynesianism in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis; the development of cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and new decentralizing technologies such as blockchain; and of a perceived decline of the West's global influence and power. As mentioned above, a key contribution of my research is its examination of how the start-up societies imaginary is shaped by the discourses around cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology as well as by these technologies' narrative qualities, and by the possibilities they offer to re-think governance and community. I theorize the spaces which proponents of start-up societies aim to develop as encrypted geographies, which I define as spaces that rely on emerging cryptographic technologies like blockchain and cryptocurrency and that are both digitally and semiotically encrypted, and selectively recruit and exclude individuals.

Second, I demonstrate how, in addition to being shaped both by the discourses around cryptocurrency and blockchain technology and the socio-spatial possibilities they offer, the start-up societies imaginary is also partly a result of the “recontextualization” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 20) of the neoliberal discourse as well as of neoconservative and neoreactionary philosophies. That is, examining the start-up societies imaginary illustrates how dominant neoliberal and neoconservative discourses are disseminated across structural and scalar boundaries (Fairclough, 2013, p. 20) to realize certain objectives. I analyze how key concepts and themes, such as Ludwig von Mises’ concept of the “sovereign consumer,” an idea which Olsen (2020) shows “hinged on the idea of democracy as a method of choosing and sought to re-invent the market as the democratic forum par excellence” (p.45), and the idea of the frontier spirit are inculcated as ways of being in the start-up societies imaginary. Specifically, I show how the start-up societies imaginary ultimately aims to replace public, democratic institutions with a society of pioneering entrepreneurs bound by legal contracts. This is significant because it suggests that beyond being simply an expression or a symptom of neoliberalism or an innovative grift, start-up society ventures seek to realize broad and complex objectives that affect identity and subject formation, governance, and power structures.

Third, and related to the previous point, an overarching argument running through my dissertation is that the start-up societies imaginary is ultimately an attempt to resolve the contradictions that result from the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in the United States and abroad and that it synthesizes the de-democratizing forces of these two rationalities (W. Brown, 2006). As Brown (2006) explains:

[N]eoliberalism confidently identifies itself with the future, and in producing itself as normal rather than adversarial does not acknowledge any alternative futures.

Neoconservatism, on the other hand, identifies itself as the guardian and advocate of a potentially vanishing past and present, and a righteous bulwark against loss, and constitutes itself a warring against serious contenders for an alternative futurity, those it identifies as “liberalism” as home and “barbarism” abroad. (p.699)

I contend that the start-up societies imaginary signifies a new facet of a political rationality, a “new political form, a specific modality of governance and citizenship” (Brown, 2006, p. 702), that aims to advance the neoliberal project to liberate markets and allow the free flow of capital, and that it does so by means of neoconservative strategies such as promoting individual and family responsibility, advocating for a limited and, often, a privatized government, and working to replace the welfare state with private and profitable philanthropic actions.⁵ Conversely, it operationalizes these values to advance the neoliberal project and the sedimentation of the “two fundamental mechanisms of the new global Utopian system: the right of migration and the abolition of taxes” (Jameson, 2007, p. 219). I call this emerging form of political rationality cryptotrad. This term underscores the start-up societies’ movement reliance on cryptography and such technologies as blockchain and cryptocurrency, and suggests how, at the core of this political project that claims to be innovative, disruptive, and future-oriented, is a project to reaffirm and preserve “traditional” and conservative Western values.

Encrypted geographies are the spatial expression of the cryptotrad political rationality. As Brown (2006) explains, while “neoliberalism figures a future in which cultural and national borders are largely erased, in which all relations, attachments, and endeavors are submitted to a

⁵ My argument also draws on the work of Melinda Cooper whose book *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (2017) demonstrates how “Neoliberalism and social conservatism are [...] tethered together by a working relationship that is at once necessary and disavowed: as an ideology of power that only ever acknowledges its reliance on market mechanisms and their homologues, neoliberalism can only realize its objectives by proxy, that is by outsourcing the imposition of noncontractual obligations to social conservatives. In extremis, neoliberals must turn to the overt, neoconservative methodology of state-imposed, transcendent virtue to realize their dream of an immanent virtue ethics of the market” (p. 63).

monetary nexus,” neoconservatism “scrambles to re-articulate and police cultural and national borders, the sacred, and the singular through discourses of patriotism, religiosity, and the West” (p.699). In the case of start-up societies, new legal, physical, and digital borders that protect a community of like-minded individuals from the state and from incompatible political rationalities replace cultural and national borders. All social relations are subjects to contractualization and monetization, what Titus Gebel (2018), the founder of Free Private Cities, a non-profit organization advocating the development of privately owned, contract-based communities, calls “the market of living together,” but with the goal of enforcing a neoconservative civic order backed by the private sector. The start-up societies imaginary can therefore be understood as a response to a perceived failure of the modern state to preserve neoconservative values and, more broadly, to a perceived decline of the West, using new cryptographic technologies of decentralization.

1.6 Layout of dissertation

The dissertation comprises eight chapters, each building on the last. Chapter 2 begins by reviewing the literature on start-up societies and on key concepts essential to understanding the start-up societies movement: (de)territorialization and extraterritoriality, urbanization of the ocean space, secessionism, and urban entrepreneurialism and the development of new forms of enclave and privatized urbanisms including the special economic zone. Chapter 3 describes the theoretical framework (CPE) used to examine the start-up societies imaginary and explains how a CPE approach can contribute to the field of CFS by offering a comprehensive analytical framework to examine how imaginaries of the future are formed and why some get selected over others. Chapter 4 lays out my research methods, describes my multi-sited approach to fieldwork and explains how a critical discourse analysis methodology complements a CPE/CFS framework

and can be used to identify and analyse “the specific mechanisms through which semiotically mediated practices and social relations are reproduced” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 126).

Chapter 5 introduces the concept of encrypted geographies and argues that the start-up societies imaginary is shaped both by the discourses around blockchain technologies and cryptocurrency, and by these technologies’ narrative qualities. Chapter 6 offers a case study of the start-up society movement, the Seasteading Institute and Blue Frontiers’ project to build a floating island in French Polynesia, and of the formation of encrypted geographies. Chapter 7 explores the growing interest on the part of both non-state and state actors in the concept of the charter city and examines how start-up societies’ secessionist political ambitions are presented as a form of development aid that will primarily benefit the poorer groups of society.

In both Chapters 6 and 7, I draw attention to how the model of the special economic zone is leveraged to realize the start-up societies vision of a decentralized, privatized future. The arguments developed in Chapters 5 to 7 support the broader argument this dissertation makes, namely that start-up societies projects deploy neoconservative strategies to advance a neoliberal market rationality, and vice versa. Ultimately, the start-up societies imaginary transforms social and political problems into “individual problems with market solutions” (W. Brown, 2006, p. 703), encourages citizens to view themselves as sovereign consumers of governance products, imposes the adoption of entrepreneurial subjectivities on both individuals and institutions, and promotes an anti-democratic vision of the future.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes with a discussion of how cryptotrad futures reproduce the structures they wish to exit and limit, rather than encourage, urban and political experimentation. The present study is but the first step in a comprehensive examination of how new economic and political imaginaries derived from cryptographic technologies shape urban futures, and in a

comprehensive critical analysis of the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in the United States and abroad. Insight drawn from the proposed theoretical approach and methodology may help scholars in the field of geography, sociology, political science, and anthropology to explore how and why urban future imaginaries are formed, selected, and retained.

Chapter 2 – Stepping on new off/shores: Extraterritoriality, urbanization, entrepreneurialism, and enclavism at sea and on land

2.1 Introduction

Propeller Island (1895/2005), one of Jules Verne's lesser known novels, tells the story of a French quartet touring the United States who, while on their way to San Diego, find themselves lured onto Standard Island, a man-made floating island propelled by a ten million horsepower engine and inhabited by billionaires. The capital of Standard Island, Milliard City, is home to the Milliardais (a play on the French word for billionaire), who are divided into two groups, the Protestant Larboardites and the Catholic Starboardites, and who co-habit peacefully for most of the novel. Residency aboard Standard Island is restricted to individuals born in the United States, a decision made to avoid potentially upsetting conversations on international relations. Standard Island is described as an "independent city, a free city, on which the Union has no right, and which depends on itself only" (p.21).⁶ It has its own flag, that resembles the American flag but exhibits a single star.

Living conditions aboard Standard Island are exceptional. Sidewalks are set on conveyor belts, and electric moons light up the sky. The weather is engineered, and the air is distilled to increase the life expectancy of the population. Milliardais wear biometric devices that keep them informed about their health and communicate with the mainland using the "teleautograph," a kind of fax machine connected by undersea cables and via which they can order such luxury consumer goods as the latest European haute couture. There is no industry on Standard Island, and the Milliardais enjoy an exclusive life of leisure in a pristine environment.

⁶ My translation.

As Standard Island cruises across the Pacific Ocean, the Milliardais' peaceful existence comes under threat. The island is infested with lions, tigers, and snakes sent by the British, who are unhappy with its presence in international waterways. The island is also invaded by indigenous tribes, and the Milliardais are rescued in extremis by French colonists living on neighboring islands. In the second half of the novel, the Standard Company, which owns Standard Island, files for bankruptcy after its speculative investments in the construction of a new city in Arkansas collapse along with the land on which the city was to be built. The floating island is purchased by its residents, until then only tenants, and a heated debate on how to ensure its rentability ensues. The leader of the Larboardites suggests turning Standard Island into a floating factory to produce salted pork, which the leader of the Starbordites opposes. Both men stir the island in opposite directions until the machinery breaks, and Standard Island is destroyed.

As a work of science fiction, the novel offers a prescient description of telecommunications, e-commerce delivery, weather engineering, smart watches, and of the cultural phenomenon of the quantified self. As a sociological satire and a critique of colonialism, the novel, set in the Pacific Ocean, is also seemingly prophetic of seasteading, particularly the Seasteading Institute's project to build a floating island in French Polynesia. Published 126 years ago, *Propeller Island* is remarkable in its astute exploration of many themes that are relevant today and pertinent to the study of the start-up societies imaginary: (de)territorialization and extraterritoriality, elite mobilities, urbanization of the ocean space, offshoring, technology and inequality, secessionism and the development of new forms of private urbanism, and the particular role of entrepreneurial non-state actors in shaping urban policies and governance.

This chapter reviews how these themes have been theorized and conceptualized in the geography literature. It comprises three main sections. The first and last sections examine

extraterritoriality and emerging forms of enclave urbanism at sea and on land, respectively. What connects these two trends and sections is the development of new urban entrepreneurial practices and policies and the increasingly influential role of technology and technology start-ups. In other words, how entrepreneurial practices and entrepreneurs shape urban spaces and policies. It explores the following questions: How has ocean-space shaped the contemporary understanding of territory? How are ocean-space and extraterritoriality used to advance and host new forms of urban and privatized entrepreneurialism? Who gets to benefit from these? What does it suggest about urban mobilities? How is urban entrepreneurialism transformed by the growing influence of technology companies and by the business model of the start-up company? Who gets to engage in start-up urbanism and who benefits from it?

2.2 Extraterritoriality and ocean urbanization

Another of Verne's novels, *A Floating City* (1871), is about a love story onboard the steamship *SS Great Eastern*, the largest ship at the time of its launch in 1858. Both *Propeller Island* and *A Floating City* were inspired by the development of the cruise ship industry, which Verne understood to represent a new form of elite mobility. Scholars and researchers have since continued to examine this phenomenon that journalist Ian Urbina (2019) recently described as “a kind of gentrification of the ocean” (p. 272). Indeed, Verne's novels foreshadowed the apparition of such modern luxury cruise ships as *MS The World*, described on its official website as “the largest private residential ship on the planet” (*The World*, 2020).

Home to a select group of high-net-worth individuals, *The World*, which has been sailing under the flag of the Bahamas since 2002, offers residents and guests “the very highest standard of anticipatory service and bespoke comfort in every detail” as they “journey across the globe in the comfort of [their] own home” (*The World*, 2020). Like Verne's *Standard Island*, *The World* is

collectively owned by its residents. In October 2004, the residents purchased the ship from the European bankers who controlled the vessel, a purchase that was motivated by the ship's Florida-based operator, ResidenSea Ltd., strategy of renting unsold apartments to tourists despite residents' opposition (Perez, 2004).

The World can offer "a lifestyle that exists nowhere else on earth" (*The World*, 2020) precisely because the ship is removed from the earthly public realm, "flowing around a global-national urban system" and "generat[ing] a form of networked extra-territoriality – a social space decoupled from the perceived risks and general dordiness of the social world beneath it" (Atkinson & Blandy, 2009, p. 92). Yet, although *The World* can be described as a "roaming enclav[e]" host to affluence that is "liberated from a fixed abode," it remains connected through legal systems, land-based assets, supply chains, and technology infrastructure (Atkinson & Blandy, 2009, p. 94). *The World*, Atkinson and Blandy (2009) conclude, "floats but it is still not fully disengaged from the social and political systems beneath it" (p. 107). Indeed, the stark reality of the inseverable legal, political, and biological connection of *The World*'s residents to the rest of the actual world was evidenced in March 2020, when the ship was taken out of service and laid up at the Port of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the Canary Islands, and passengers and crew were disembarked due to the COVID-19 pandemic (The World, 2020).

Atkinson and Blandy (2009) use the case of *The World* to examine how affluent elite networks are increasingly deterritorialized and opt to move and live in "spaces [that] are 'afloat,' a networked and fantasy fortress archipelago of homes, offices, schools and places of play and culture, a world that is other to mundane daily lives" (p. 99). But unlike private residential developments and business districts, *The World* "exemplifies a new dimension of mobility, which is accompanied by a different and complex relationship to the control of territory" for the

“new nomad class” is “choosing temporary and collectivized property rights over permanent and exclusive ownership” (pp. 104, 105). Indeed, the possibility to enjoy *The World*’s upscale mobile environment without the responsibilities that single ownership entails is at the core of *The World*’s marketing, which describes it as a solution to the “personal burdens of time, costs, and logistics in staffing and maintaining a private yacht” (*The World* Residences at Sea, mailing list, February 22, 2021). Atkinson and Blandy (2009) contend that *The World* thus illustrates how global capitalism is characterized by “endless profit and the production of wealthy individuals who may find it more attractive to secede from identities and responsibilities in nation-states and communities” (p. 107). As we will see, such secessionist ambitions are also shared by proponents of start-up societies, albeit with the broader aims of rethinking governance and the organization of society and fostering the development of entrepreneurial subjectivities.

2.2.1 (Socially constructed) Freedom of the seas

The case of *The World* is particularly interesting not only because it illustrates a new form of elite mobility, but also because it exemplifies how ocean space is a legally and politically distinct space that can be leveraged by individuals, corporations, and states. This land-sea distinction is at the core of the seasteading imaginary, which views the ocean as a blank legal, political, and cultural space. Seasteading advocates capitalizing on the “dynamic geography” (P. Friedman, 2002) of ocean-space to “lower barriers to entry” to the “governance industry” (P. Friedman & Taylor, 2011) and conceptualizes the high sea as a space of freedom. However, the ocean is neither lawless nor empty (Anderson & Peters, 2014a; Braverman & Johnson, 2020). In fact, it is a space of “turbulent” “blue legalities,” the aspects of ocean law and governance shaped by the materiality of ocean-space and that impact a wide range of topics from sovereignty to marine life to robotics (Johnson & Braverman, 2020, p. 4).

Blue legalities are intimately connected to land-based legalities, and vice versa. Research in the field of geography has demonstrated how legal and geographical conceptualizations of ocean-space as extraterritorial have been integral to the development of the modern sovereign territorial state, capitalism, and of the field of geography itself. This scholarship is part of an “oceanic turn” in the social sciences and the humanities, itself spurred by developments in geopolitics including new legal claims over ocean space and the continental shelf made via the 1945 Truman Declaration and the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, and by the post-1970s “spatial turn” (DeLoughrey, 2017, p.34).

Another strand of oceanic turn literature focused on mobilities has called for an engagement with “oceans, ships, and other forms of seagoing travel and life” to explore “mobilities beyond surficial connection and flows across our oceans, and making more expansive the subjects and objects of scale of investigation” (Peters & Squire, 2019, p. 101). This scholarship also addresses how mobilities associated with the oceans and its resources unsettle sovereignty and enable “novel political configurations that are embedded within motion to emerge” (Havice, 2018, p. 1281). Such approaches draw attention to the three-dimensional, voluminous, and fluid nature of ocean space and of oceanic mobilities, and examine how they shape lived experience both on land and at sea (Anderson & Peters, 2014a; Peters, 2010, 2012, 2015; Spence, 2014; Squire, 2020; Steinberg, 2009; Steinberg & Peters, 2015).

More recently, climate change, rising sea level, and pressing concerns about the future of Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) at risk of being submerged have galvanized interest not only in oceanic futures, but in oceanic space as an ontological space that can offer “a fertile environment for reconceptualizing understandings of space, time, movement, and, connectedly, our experiences of being in this transformative and mobile world” (Peters & Steinberg, 2019, p.

13). However, as Winder (2019) points out, this should not be mistaken for a “‘new’ endeavour””; many non-Western epistemologies make no such ontological distinction between land and sea and understand the land-sea space as continuous rather than divided space, and the ocean a lively space of historical and personal connections tied to personal identities rather than as a blank, empty space (Hau’ofa, 2008; Sammler, 2020).

Nonetheless, the oceanic turn has the potential to disrupt the field of geography itself. A key contribution from Lambert et al. (2006) in this direction contends that the field of geography “has often been a ‘landlocked’ field,” meaning that historically and epistemologically it has employed perspectives that view all phenomenon from the land. These scholars posit that “historical geographies of the sea have the potential to reorient our perspectives in significant ways” by drawing attention to “new spaces of analysis beyond the local and the national” and to “more-than-human” worlds and interactions (p. 488). Lambert et al. (2006) further argue that land and ocean spaces are not opposites but are rather “always in tension as identities and power relations are in the making” (p. 488). The oceanic turn therefore promises to expand our ontological and epistemological approaches and to complicate and improve our analyses of socio-spatial relations. In my research, these developments are particularly helpful to understand how the government of French Polynesia and the promoters of the Floating Island Project engaged with Polynesian ontologies and epistemologies to present the construction of a floating island as a “logical” next step in Polynesian history, but also why it was rejected by the population as the commodification of Polynesian heritage and culture.

An expanding body of interdisciplinary scholarship is taking up the task of exploring how thinking with and from the sea can expand our understanding of what it means to inhabit, govern, and belong in a largely oceanic world (e.g., Anderson & Peters, 2014b; Braverman & Johnson,

2020), only a small subset of which I can address here. Specifically, I draw on oceanic turn approaches to territoriality and sovereignty to understand how the social construction of ocean-space shapes the start-up societies imaginary, in particular the seasteading project of colonizing the ocean. A perspective of viewing both the land and the sea “from the sea” can help us develop a better understanding of why and how ocean-space is often perceived as a frontier to conquer and colonize through the development of the blue economy and ocean urbanization. It can also help us appreciate how aspects of ocean-space such as its dynamism and fluidity, and its romantic association to freedom inform the seasteading vision and the start-up societies imaginary more broadly, and how the ocean offers a space, and a spatial imaginary, that can be used to challenge the modern territorial nation-state.

2.2.1.1 Territoriality and sovereignty

The concepts of territoriality and sovereignty are central to the start-up societies imaginary: start-up society ventures aim to develop experimental extraterritorial spaces by “leasing” sovereignty from countries that, Patri Friedman, the co-founder of the Seasteading Institute and the founder of Pronomos Capital, a venture fund that invests in charter city ventures, claims are increasingly “willin[g] ... to consider making agreements to franchise sovereignty within their territory” (in Solana, 2020). This sub-section focuses on the work of three scholars who theorize the relationship between capitalism, territoriality and the sea to better understand how this relationship contributes to shaping the start-up societies imaginary.

Philip Steinberg (2001, 2009, 2018) addresses how the tension between capital’s need for spatial fixity and its need for spatial mobility are played out on ocean-space in his work. A key concern of his work is how the construction of the ocean as an external space of mobility was

essential to the modern conceptualization of the sovereign, territorial state. Steinberg (2009) describes territoriality as

the manner in which the definition of a society's geographic limits, the organization of its processes, and the control of its people are exercised through claims of authority over bounded swaths of land. A territorial state thus can exist in isolation; it is essentially an inward-looking entity. (p. 470)

Sovereignty, in contrast, “is not necessarily defined and delimited territorially”; sovereign authority can extend beyond a state's borders as in the cases of an embassy located in a foreign country or of a monarch exercising sovereignty authority over its colonies (Steinberg, 2009, p. 470).

Steinberg (2009) problematizes the conceptualization of the sovereign state as the “idealized negation of mobility” and shows how “the rise of the concept of sovereignty historically was interwoven with the designation of certain spaces as beyond the sovereign state's organizational limits” (p. 469), in particular through cartographic representations which, since the eighteenth century, have consistently depicted the ocean as a “fundamentally external space” (p. 487). The modern state, Steinberg argues, was shaped by the “depiction of the ocean as a space beyond territorialization, and the parallel depiction of land as a series of discrete, bounded territories” (p. 488). The modern state's socio-spatial logic is therefore characterized by “parallel tendencies toward territorialization and deterritorialization” (p. 469) expressed in a series of binary oppositions “between inside and outside; between unit and system; between land and sea; between fixity and movement; and between experienced place and relative, abstract space” (p. 468).

The start-up societies imaginary, which aims to challenge the hegemony of the modern, bounded territorial state as the dominant form of sovereign territoriality, paradoxically reproduces these socio-spatial logic and binary oppositions. The case of charter cities (Chapter 7), which are promoted as partially or fully sovereign jurisdictions within existing sovereign territories, is a clear example the start-up societies imaginary's operationalization of the binary opposition between inside and outside and the parallel tendencies towards deterritorialization and territorialization. The case of the Floating Island Project (Chapter 6) illustrates the seasteading project's reliance on the binary opposition between land and sea and between fixity of space and movement of people and capital.

As Steinberg et al. (2012) argue, the seasteading project reproduces some very old contradictions

between the desire to territorialize and deterritorialize, between the desire to establish a sustainable community and the desire to foster one that requires continual re-creation, and between the desire for pure freedom and the need for organization to achieve it. (p. 1545)

Whereas the modern state, as Steinberg (2009) explains, was shaped “by the depiction of the ocean as a space *beyond territorialization*” (p. 488, emphasis added), seasteading depicts the ocean as a space *open to territorialization*, as opposed to land which is depicted as fully territorialized, and does so to challenge the modern state and its monopoly over sovereignty and territoriality. Whereas the sovereign, territorial state can be understood as the “idealized negation of mobility” (Steinberg, 2009, p.469), seasteading conceptualizes individual sovereignty as the idealized negation of immobility. Free to float to the seastead community of their choice, or to float away from an unsatisfactory community, individuals can exert sovereign authority over

their own space and the self and experiment with different forms of territoriality. Seasteading is thus presented as a response to the problem of land-space being fully territorialized to which it finds a solution in ocean-space conceptualized as the last frontier (on earth) open to territorialization. But in doing so, it also reproduces and extends at sea those very conditions of territoriality (authority and control over a bounded space, in this case a seastead) and sovereignty (having its sovereign authority recognized) it seeks to disrupt.

Steinberg demonstrates how the representation of the ocean as an external space of (capital) mobility has shaped the modern territorial state. Examining the topic from a different perspective, Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás (2018, 2021) show how capital accumulation on land is shaping capital accumulation at sea. They propose the term “terraqueous territoriality” to describe “capital’s attempt at transcending the land-sea distinction” and how “capital accumulation [...] seeks to territorialise the sea through forms of sovereignty and modes of appropriation drawn from experiences on land, but in doing so encounters particular tensions thereby generating distinctive spatial effects” (2018, p. 776). These scholars emphasize the “material geo-physical attributes of the sea,” which they concede “imbue [their] use of ‘terraqueous territoriality’ with a degree of environmental determinism” (p. 777). They examine the cases of the flag of convenience, multi-lateral counter-piracy initiatives, and exclusive economic zones as “expressions of how, in encountering bio-physical challenges to its own reproduction at sea, capitalism has used the oceans as a laboratory to experiment with, and generally enforce novel combinations of sovereignty, territory and appropriation,” respectively (p. 778). The sea, they conclude, “is both a crucial site for the valorisation of capital – be it through extraction or transport – and a major bio-physical obstacle to its reproduction” (p. 789).

Campling and Colás' theorization of terraqueous territoriality as “uniquely capitalist alignments of sovereignty, exploitation and appropriation in the capture and coding of maritime spaces and resources” (Campling & Colás, 2021, p. 3) is helpful to understand the challenges of capital accumulation at sea and ocean urbanization. However, it also reproduces the land-sea divide. Their analysis is unidirectional, focused on how capitalism extends more or less successfully at sea, and misses out on important aspect of how the sea shapes capitalism, including capitalism's own dependence on the sea. In other words, Campling and Colás' approach prioritizes a land-based perspective evident in their description of “terraqueous” (versus “aquaterreous”) territoriality. Their conclusion that “[t]he best prospect of a revolutionary horizon is gazing at the sea from land” (Campling & Colás, 2021, p. 322) not only reproduces the land-sea divide, but the landlocking of geography and of theory. In contrast, Steinberg's approach, and those works contributing to the oceanic turn, emphasize the need to examine the continuous, mutually constitutive relationship of land and sea. Indeed, the ocean “exceeds material liquidity” and “*extends* in excess, far landward of its shore” (Peters & Steinberg, 2019, p. 13, italics in the original). Nonetheless, these two perspectives highlight how the land-sea divide, both its social construction and its geo-physical properties, plays a central role in shaping modern political economy, sovereignty, and territoriality.

2.2.1.2 Ocean urbanization, urban liquefaction

In this sub-section, I examine how engaging with the oceanic turn can help us better understand how ocean space is increasingly perceived as an urban space; either as a space of economic development through urban expansion or as a space whose “latent” urbanization must be brought to the surface. Urban growth and rising sea levels create new opportunities and challenges for coastal environments. This is transforming the fields of architecture, urban design

and engineering as well, as evidenced by an increased interest in the urban amphibious as an adaptive solution to climate change (Beatley, 2018; de Graaf, 2021; Grydehøj & Kelman, 2016, 2017; Steinberg, 2011) matched by calls to acknowledge that “the future is fluid” and to develop a “wet urbanism” (Ashraf, 2017) that can transcend the land-sea, dry-wet dichotomy.

Land (2017) proposes a trio of terms to describe the coastal-urban forms of the urban amphibious: the “*urban foreshore*” is a “relatively thin strip of territory that is principally concerned with the needs of arriving strangers” (p. 35, emphasis in the original); the “*urban offshore*” includes such zones of exception as quarantine areas and trading enclaves (p. 38); and the “*urban estuary*” hosts port towns and coastal communities and their rich coastal cultures and dialects (pp. 38-39, emphasis in the original). These three coastal-urban forms problematize “the familiar ‘decline of the waterfront’ narrative” and are “caught up in breakneck growth, furious and intensifying controversy, and undeniable relevance” (p. 34-40).

Of particular relevance to my research is the urban offshore, whose “adjacency is part of its function” (I. Land, 2017, p. 37). To seasteaders, the urban offshore represents a geographical and legal environment that can be exploited politically and economically. The ability to live in proximity to the mainland and benefit from its commercial opportunities and infrastructures is primordial to the successful realization of seasteading projects. What is more, due to the technological and legal challenges of building ocean-going floating cities, since 2014 the Seasteading Institute’s focus has been on developing partnerships with “host nations” for the construction of coaststeads, seasteads located within a country’s territorial waters (P. Friedman and Gramlich, 2009; The Seasteading Institute, 2014).

In fact, most proposed seasteading projects are designed for urban offshore locations. Blueseed, a project launched in 2011 and indefinitely on hold, proposes to host technology

workers and entrepreneurs twelve miles off the coast of San Francisco (“Blueseed,” 2020). Workers could still be near Silicon Valley and join its social and professional networks without having to obtain a work visa.⁷ Another venture by a couple of staunch seasteading supporters and cryptocurrency enthusiasts, Ocean Builders, has designs for a planned seapod community in Panama. Called Satoshi Village, it would create a new urban offshore space that would allow seasteaders to form their own alternative community and benefit Panama by bringing in revenues through commercial activity and tourism. Ocean Builders’ recent proposal to build a seapod development in New York’s Lincoln Harbor yacht club also aims to capitalize on the urban offshore. The Seasteading Institute and Blue Frontiers’ floating island in French Polynesia, which I examine in Chapter 6, was proposed for construction in the archipelago’s urban offshore so that it could access its communications infrastructure and tenants could easily travel to and from the mainland. These examples provide concrete evidence that the urban offshore is a key site for capitalist experimentation and the expansion of urban life at sea.

The high seas, too, are spaces of amphibious urbanization. Couling (2018) posits that ocean urbanization exemplifies the phenomenon of planetary urbanisation theorized by Brenner and Schmid (2014, 2015) and that “the ocean as a natural space persists as a common perception today and in fact is safeguarded as such by our shared imaginations” (pp. 155). Indeed, the cruise ship industry, offshore energy production, deep-sea mining, and telecommunication infrastructures are all facets of ocean urbanization. Couling argues that the ocean is, in fact, a “‘*cultivated seascape*’ serving urban populations and subject to vigorous structuring, planning

⁷ In 2004, a San Diego company called SeaCode, not related to the seasteading movement, proposed housing software engineers on a cruise ship three miles off the California coast. Its founders argued that the ship would also “create jobs on nearby shores” (Gynn, 2013). SeaCode, Steinberg (2011) contends, depended “on utilizing new technologies to engineer a new integration of the sea into the space of the polis” (p. 2119). However, “even as it redefines the polis as porous entity that incorporates flows, liquid spaces, and border crossings, it does so within the existing structure of the state system” (p. 2120). SeaCode, then, was to be “an extension of” rather than “an alternative to” the state system (p. 2120, emphasis in the original).

and management” (p. 156, emphasis in the original). She posits that “properties of contemporary ocean space are determined by both natural and cultural processes, and that the extreme interpenetration of these conditions is a distinguishing characteristic of the space itself” (p. 157). But the urbanization of the ocean is concealed by distance, reduced or inexistent daily social interactions, and submerged infrastructures rarely visible from the surface (pp. 157-158). These three factors, Couling argues, “are in fact hallmarks of extended urbanisation” (p. 158).

With technological advances, the ocean has become an increasingly complex space whose urban characteristics, often invisible to the eye, play a key role both in asserting territorial claims and in ensuring the mobility of capital. However, Exo Adams (2018, 2019) shows how, in fact, the urbanization of the ocean has a much longer history, itself intrinsically linked to what he calls the “maritimization of land.” Exo Adams shows how the influence of the modern conception of circulation, developed at the end of the sixteenth century, played a key role in shaping both the modern formation of territory and urbanization processes.

The first theorist of urbanisation, the Spanish engineer Ildefons Cerdà i Sunyer, theorized the *urbe* as a “radically new systemic spatiality” that was to be “a universal, technologically-mediated, domestic spatial order – a generic grid of human habitation predicated on an enabling limitless circulation (a principle he called *vialidad*) and its perpetual self-expansion (*urbanización*),” and the engineer repeatedly drew on “metaphors of the ocean to describe the unbounded forces that drive *urbanización* (Exo Adams, 2018, pp. 129-130).

Cerdà i Sunyer’s vision was “a project to depoliticise state space by reconstituting it as a technology of pure human circulation, the expression of nineteenth-century liberal idealism” (p. 131). It was to be “a perpetual, bloodless revolution in which technology would overthrow politics” (p. 131). This is particularly interesting in the context of a study of the start-up societies

imaginary, which also presents technology as a potential replacement to politics and aims to allow unhindered human and capital circulation.

Exo Adams (2018) also underscores how the concept of *réseau* (network), adapted from medical and hydrological sciences, was used to propose “counter-territorial spatial imaginari[ies]” (p. 133). He points to the work of the Saint-Simonian Michel Chevalier who “held that nations organised around networks could achieve a state of perpetual peace through the natural interstate independencies that would arise with the unlimited circulation of goods and finance that a network space would enable” (p. 132). The idea of *réseau*, Exo Adams argues, “helped to redefine the ontological status of the territory”: “Without the boundaries of territory that defines its absolute interior, land could become – at least in ideal projections – a sea-like space in which unbounded, private trade could be conducted in regulated channels of traffic stretching across continents” (pp. 140-141). However, “[w]hile playing up to maritime ontologies of freedom, openness, and mobility, the *réseau* unwittingly unleashed on land what had always accompanied imperial ocean-space: a logic of security, regulation, and control” (p. 143).

The maritimization of land is mirrored in the start-up societies imaginary in two ways. First, the start-up societies urban imagination, particularly seasteading’s, is shaped by the conceptualization of the ocean-space as a perfect apolitical space of flow and circulation. It can be argued that start-up society ventures seek to reproduce the mobility afforded by ocean-space on land, both through encouraging the free movement of people who would vote with their feet or who could be digital residents of a start-up society without having ever been physically there, and through developing new legal and technological strategies to allow the free flow of capital. Second, the start-up societies movement’s attempt to re-imagine territoriality, community, and

society is shaped by a conceptualization of the internet as a space that shares spatial and legal qualities with the ocean-space, as well as with the sky or outer space (“the cloud”). In both cases, these conceptualizations draw on the idea of a boundless urban socio-technological network and suggest the existence of “territory beyond terra” (Peters et al., 2018; see also Barlow, 1996). However, as I explain in Chapter 5, here too the idea of *réseau* carries with it a logic of security, regulation, and control, and deterritorialization inevitably leads to reterritorialization, which, in turn, leads to fragmentation and the formation of invisible borders.

2.3 The ocean as a space of secession

The previous sections have introduced the oceanic turn and reviewed theorizations of the relationship between ocean-space, territoriality, sovereignty, and ocean urbanization that are helpful to understand how the seasteading project of establishing mobile oceanic colonies seeks to transform sovereignty and territoriality, while also being shaped by dominant understandings of these concepts, and extends capitalist urbanization at sea, and to understand how start-up society projects are contributing to the maritimization of land. This section briefly reviews architectural movements and proposals to build floating cities that have conceptualized ocean-space as both a refuge and a new frontier.

Floating cities projects can be divided between those ventures that seek to address issues of urban crowding and sustainable development and those justified by a libertarian ideology and whose primary goal is the creation of autonomous polities such as the contemporary seasteading movement. In both cases, the ocean is conceptualized as a refuge and a frontier where urban amphibious developments could help alleviate political, social, and environmental pressures. First, I review the literature on floating city projects that sought to develop refuges from urban crowding and climate change and to address neo-Malthusian fears of resource scarcity. Second, I

provide more information on seasteading, which is one of multiple political and architectural proposals that have envisioned ocean-space as a space of secession, from pirate utopias to projects to floating cities to host and better control migrant workers.⁸

2.3.1 Floating cities as urban expansion programs

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s were particularly rich in proposals to build floating and underwater cities and to create new oceanic countries (Dobraszczyk, 2019; Huebner, 2020; Kaji-O’Grady & Raisbeck, 2005; Squire, 2020; Strauss, 1979). One hypothesis for this phenomenon is that this period represented “a *gap* between the enactment of the 1958 Geneva Conventions, encouraging the exploitation of the ocean’s resources, and the ensuing court interpretations and state action which indicated the extent to which this activity would become a coastal state hegemony” (Menefee, 1995, p. 111, emphasis in the original).

In the 1960s, the Japanese Metabolists produced multiple mobile, modular and plug-in floating city designs that sought to address issues of resources and land scarcity, urban crowding and mobility and that continue to influence and inspire today’s ecomodernist thought, which advocates using technology to decouple human development from environmental impact and allow continuous industrial growth (Huebner, 2020).⁹ Key proposals of that era include Kenzo

⁸ A discussion of pirate utopias is beyond the scope of this research. However, it is worth noting that Hayward (2014) makes a parallel between seasteading and eighteen-century maritime pirate societies which, he argues, “share at their core a similar vision of anarcho-syndicalism” (p. 5). Graeber (2013) has compared pirate ships to the early colonies of the North American frontier which were “spaces of intercultural improvisation, and, like the pirate ships, largely lay outside the purview of any states” (p. 179). There are indeed similarities between pirate communities and seasteading, but the latter’s models of social organization and governance, anchored in the idea of the sovereign consumer, are closer to the model of the cruise ship owned and managed by private entities.

⁹ This influence can be seen in the work of Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), an architecture firm commissioned to design Oceanix, the floating city project of Marc Collins Chen, the entrepreneur at the origin of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia. Two concepts, both coined by Ingels, are central to BIG’s architectural philosophy: pragmatic utopianism and hedonistic sustainability. Both are based on the belief that “today’s environmental problems are not political, economical [sic] or even ecological – they are simply a design challenge!” (Bjarke Ingels Group, 2009, p. 51). Pragmatic utopianism “takes on the creation of socially, economically, and environmentally perfect places as a practical objective” (Bjarke Ingels Group, 2009, p. 13). It advocates “trying to make everybody happy” rather than

Tange's Tokyo Bay Plan (1960) which advanced the idea of city as process and proposed a new spatial order that would reflect the spontaneous mobility of contemporary society (Lin, 2007), Kiyonori Kikutake's floating Marine City (1958-1963) and Aquapolis (1975) built for the Okinawa International Ocean Exposition, and Kisho Kurokawa's Floating City (1961), a housing project to be built on Lake Kasumigaura. Buckminster Fuller's Triton City (1964), commissioned by a Japanese developer, was designed as a series of floating city-blocks to be anchored in Tokyo Bay, but was never built.

Several projects were motivated by concerns around climate change and the need to preserve marine biodiversity. In the early 1970s, the French architect Jacques Rougerie, who presented at the conference on floating islands organized by the Seasteading Institute in Tahiti in May 2017, designed multiple floating cities. Thalassopolis I (1970) was a proposed city comprising an aggregation of connected floating villages that could host 45,000 people. More recently, Rougerie proposed building oceangoing research vessels such as the Cité des Mériens (2009), a floating city shaped like a manta ray that could house 7,000 international researchers (*Jacques Rougerie Architecte*, n.d.), and SeaOrbiter, an international ocean station that could host a crew of 18 aquanauts (*SeaOrbiter*, n.d.). Other recent proposals include Vincent

engaging in political debates: "What if design could be the opposite of politics? Not by ignoring conflict, but by feeding from it" (Bjarke Ingels Group, 2009, p. 13). Ingels' pragmatic utopianism mirrors seasteaders', and the start-up societies movement's more broadly, belief that politics are counter-productive because they are a source of conflict: "[Y]ou can be critical through affirmation rather than negation. You can be critical by putting forward alternatives rather than spending all your energy whining about the alternatives you don't like" (Ingels, quoted in Parker, 2012). The second concept, hedonistic sustainability, derives from the argument that it is preferable to adapt the built environment to consumerist behaviors rather than trying to change people's behavior. To Ingels, a vision of sustainability that requires sacrifice is ultimately unsustainable because it limits the potential for widespread public support (Ramiller & Schmidt, 2019, p. 287). Hedonistic sustainability rejects the "puritan concept where you're not supposed to take long warm showers or take long-distance flights for holidays" (Bjarke Ingels Group, 2009, p. 34) and advances "the idea that you can actually be sustainable but increase the quality of life while doing so" (Bjarke Ingels Group, 2009, p. 34). It is "eco-awareness divorced from thoughts of privation" (Parker, 2012). Critics see this radical compliance as complicity and argue that the fact that many of BIG projects include luxury housing and corporate office towers "substantiate the view that Ingels has little interest in a sustainable critique of the dominant conditions" (Ramiller & Schmidt, 2019, p. 287).

Callebaut's Lilypad (2008), described as a "floating ecopolis for climate refugees," and Aequorea (2015), an "oceanscraper printed in 3D from the Seventh Continent's garbage" (Vincent Callebaut Architectures, 2020). Another project, Green Float, by the Japanese corporation Shimizu, is a plant-like floating city for 30,000 people (Shimizu Corporation, n.d.). Although none of these projects have been realized, they demonstrate an ongoing interest in and engagement with the ocean as a space where urban amphibious colonization could potentially address contemporary issues such as urban crowding, climate change, and forced displacement. In contrast, seasteading is primarily a secessionist movement that came to engage with issues of climate change only in recent years.

Seasteading is defined as "the practice of establishing permanent settlements on structures located in areas of sea outside the jurisdiction of any country" ("Seasteading," 2017) and as such can be understood to include projects to build both floating and artificial islands. There is a consensus in the scholarly literature on the notion that seasteads will require at least the support and ideally the official recognition of existing states in order to be successful (Binder, 2016; Fateh, 2013; Schmidtke, 2019). However, even when unsuccessful, projects to build seasteads and micronations in international waters raise important legal issues. Ventures to build seasteads and oceanic micronations represent potential threats to the national security and sovereignty of neighboring countries and highlight the lack of clear and enforceable regulations to govern ocean space and its colonization. The failed oceanic micronations projects of the 1960s and 1970s, Menefee (1995) suggests, may also be seen "as early warning signs of the Great Sea Rush, which was to result in the extensive ocean claims of today and the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea" (p. 111; see also Merrie et al., 2014, on more recent developments in the "sea rush").

Others, in contrast, have expressed optimism at the idea of floating cities. Keith (1977), for example, envisions a “floating city-state moving along the coastlines of other states” that “could collect those citizens who wish to emigrate to new life on the oceans” (p. 203). He suggests that a “floating city-state may ultimately be more than a method of settling the oceans” and could help transform “the international community and the concept of ‘nation’ itself,” and even possibly “contribute to the development of a new transnational order” and of a genuine “internation – a body of people with a wide variety of races, languages, customs and histories” (pp. 203-204): “The floating city-state might not only offer a new lifestyle, but also a refuge to modern-day ‘serfs’ of countries around the world who seek freedom from the governmental systems under which they live” (p. 203).

Keith’s description of the mobile, floating internation is akin to the contemporary seasteading project of creating communities that would welcome individuals dissatisfied with their countries’ political systems and who want to experiment with new forms of governance. The ocean’s “dynamic geography” (P. Friedman, 2002), seasteaders argue, offers a uniquely appropriate environment for such an endeavor. Ranganathan (2019), however, is right to point out that the seasteading ventures attempted to date reveal a “disjunct between the rhetoric and reality of seasteading” as the projects, anchored or moored, all “downpla[y] the very elements upon which the idea of seasteading is promoted: dynamic geography, and unimpaired freedom for residents to innovate legal and political arrangements on board” (p. 209).

Indeed, so far, seasteading ventures have in practice all diverged from the theory that underpins its vision for new mobilities of individuals and capital on the ocean. Seasteading is limited in practice by legal and technological constraints and it has been more successful as a “mechanism that utilize marine romanticism and science fiction fantasy to spur a critique of

twentieth century state-regulated capitalism” (Steinberg et al., 2012, p. 1545) than as an actual means of secession. Nonetheless, as I discuss in Chapter 6, the idea of seasteading has had a real impact on how states and non-state actors envision the future of adaptation to climate change. Recent years have seen a renewed interest in floating cities as a potential solution to urban crowding and climate change. For example, Oceanix, a venture launched by Marc Collins Chen, the entrepreneur who brokered the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, has been positively received by the United Nations as an urban entrepreneurial approach to ocean urbanization (Mohammed, 2019).

Geographers have explored what seasteading reveals about the effects of neoliberalism on socio-spatial dynamics and the contradictions at the core of the seasteading project. With the exception of a contribution by Steinberg and colleagues (2012) that examines seasteading’s “buried ideals about the nature of ocean space, the limits of sovereignty, and the liberatory role of technology and capitalism in the drive for social change and individual freedom” (p. 1532), the scholarship on seasteading tends to gloss over the long historical roots of seasteading and the historical, political, and cultural influences that shape the start-up societies imaginary and uses the cases of seasteading and start-up societies to support a broader argument about the hegemony of neoliberalism.

In the scholarly literature in the field of geography, seasteading is conceptualized as a symptom of advanced neoliberalism and described as a form of “utopian enclave libertarianism” (Lynch, 2017), as “floating utopias” where “[s]easteading libertarians [can] flee the oppression of bourgeois democracy for the freedom of dictatorship” and that concretize “the dreams ... not of open borders, but mobile ones” (Miéville, 2007, pp. 322, 325), and as a “premonition of ‘floating suburbia’” that illustrates how “planar imaginaries of the boundless frontier have

always been a vital component of neoliberal thinking” (Peck, 2011, pp. 911–912).¹⁰ “Suburban frontiers,” Peck argues, “skirt appropriately around not only the edges of the city but also the edges of regulation” (p. 886). Seasteading, then, is a form of “offshore suburbanization” (p. 912) that extends neoliberal deregulation over the ocean-space. However, it can be argued that suburbia is a place of immobility where individuals generally settle in search not of adventure and mobility but of safety and stability. So, seasteading may extend neoliberalism’s reliance on the frontier over the ocean-space, but not in a particular suburban form.

It is not only neoliberalism that seasteading extends over ocean-space but also the colonial spirit of the American Manifest Destiny. Indeed, Veracini (2015) argues that seasteading’s “serial modularity and programmatic displacement” and its ambitions to “produc[e] political change through sovereign mobility confirms a fundamentally settler colonial imagination” (p. 80). Seasteading, he concludes, amounts to a “permanent settler revolution” (p. 82). Veranici makes an important point. However, as I discuss in Chapter 6 and 7, seasteaders and other start-up societies enthusiasts reject colonialism and do not see themselves as colonialists, but as pioneers, founders, and builders. This distinction is key to the seasteading and start-up societies movement’s justification of its objectives, but is systematically rejected by the populations of the potential host nations where start-up societies projects have been launched.

In sum, the scholarship on seasteading makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how the start-up societies socio-spatial imaginary is shaped by neoliberal thinking but provides only a partial explanation that mainly confirms the hegemony of

¹⁰ Peck also remarks that the idea that citizens physically voting with their feet would lead to optimal governance and allocation of resources can be traced to a paper by the economist Tiebout (1956) that describes how a “pure theory of local expenditures” could be derived from analyzing how individuals reveal their preferences by voting with their feet, and apparently submitted as a tongue-in-cheek joke, but ended up having tremendous influence on contemporary economic theory (Leven, 2003; Peck, 2011, pp. 898–899, 2015).

neoliberalism. It does not question what seasteading and start-up societies tell us about how neoliberalism is evolving, nor does it address why and how the start-up societies imaginary appeals to a growing number of non-state and state actors. A possible reason for this gap concerns the methodology employed to research seasteading and start-up society projects. With the exception of Steinberg et al. (2012) and Ruchlak and Lenz (2020), none of the researchers who have written on seasteading and start-up societies have directly engaged with the individuals who promote these ventures and have generally relied on secondary sources and news reports. The scholarship on seasteading and start-up societies says little about the context and the incentives that gave rise to such initiatives or about the subjectivities of proponents of seasteading and start-up societies beyond their libertarian inclinations. This dissertation adds to the literature and offers an empirical contribution that examines the influence of the discourses around blockchain technology and cryptocurrency, and the central role these technologies play in shaping the seasteading and start-up societies imaginary. Moreover, studying the start-up societies movement as a whole, rather than focusing solely on seasteading, allows me to (a) emphasize how seasteading is part of a broader trend towards the privatization of urban space, including ocean space and (b) situate it within broader contemporary trends in urban entrepreneurialism.

2.4 From the entrepreneurial city to the city as a private enterprise

Start-up society ventures can be understood as a radical form of urban entrepreneurialism and as a new iteration of privatized urbanism. Whereas urban entrepreneurialism refers to the “proactive promotion of local economic development by local government in alliance with other private sector agencies” (Hubbard & Hall, 1998, p. 4) and to “urban management practices which use public resources to pursue profit-earning ventures” (Lauermann, 2017, p. 1),

proponents of start-up societies propose turning the city itself into an entrepreneurial, profit-earning start-up venture that can disrupt how we organize and govern ourselves, and a product that can be marketed and sold to developers and governments.

Although start-up societies promoters sometime act as housing and building developers, as in the case of Honduras Próspera LLC, their justifications and motivations are different in that they aim to promote new, radical forms of privatized urbanism in which both urban space and its politics are fully privatized and not subject to democratic oversight. This section reviews the development of urban entrepreneurialism and situates the emergence of the contemporary start-up societies imaginary within this process to better understand how start-up society urban entrepreneurialism differs (or does not) from existing urban entrepreneurial practices.

Rather than understanding entrepreneurial governance as the manifestation of a radical shift at the local or regional level, it is better understood as a strategic discursive-material response on the part of both the state (local, regional, and national) and actors' coalitions and shaped by historical and multi-scalar geographical economic contexts and structural pressures. The analysis of the development of urban entrepreneurialism presented in this dissertation likewise highlights how cities and states are active actors situated in a particular geographical and cultural, political, and economic conjuncture who deliberately choose to describe themselves as entrepreneurial, to develop entrepreneurial policies, and to restructure global capital.

2.4.1 Urban entrepreneurialism

The transition from the post-war Fordist-Keynesianist regime to a post-Fordist regime of urban governance since the 1970s has received tremendous attention in urban studies and a complete literature review of the development of urban entrepreneurialism is beyond the scope of this research. I focus instead on a set of key questions relevant to understanding the start-up

societies imaginary: what is urban entrepreneurialism, how and why did it emerge, what are its consequences, and how has it been transformed by disruptive technologies in recent years?

Harvey (1989), in his seminal article on the subject, characterizes what he identifies as a shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism based on three assertions: the “centerpiece” of the “new entrepreneurialism” is the state-driven formation of public-private partnerships “in which a traditional local boosterism is integrated”; the nature of the activity of such partnerships is speculative; and the focus of urban entrepreneurial activity is on the political economy of place rather than territory (p. 7). Harvey acknowledges there is “a general agreement” that this shift “has something to do with the difficulties that have beset capitalist economies since the recession of 1973,” which led to a greater involvement at the local level (p. 5). Unfortunately, he focuses on the economic and spatial consequences rather than the causes of this shift.

To understand the development of urban entrepreneurialism, it is helpful to turn to the work of Jessop (1997) which offers an elaborate explanation for the causes of the shift to entrepreneurial urban governance. Jessop (1997) argues that the discourse of the entrepreneurial city emerged as a response to the failure of the national state to fulfill the goals of post-war economic policy (“full employment, stable prices, economic growth, and a sustainable balance of payments”) (p. 33). He identifies three structural trends that set the stage for the emergence of the entrepreneurial city:

- 1) a “*de-nationalisation of statehood*” that leads to “new state capacities being reorganized territorially and functionally on subnational, national, supranational and trans-local levels” and creates a space for an enhanced role of cities;

- 2) the “*de-statisation of political regimes*,” which is “reflected empirically in a shift from *government* to *governance* on various territorial scales and across various functional domains”;
- 3) a trend “towards the *internationalization of the national state* and its sub-governments” which re-orientes the national and local states’ strategic action so as to remain competitive in an international, globalized context (pp. 35-37, emphasis in the original).

Jessop argues that because of these structural changes, the city “is being re-imagined – or re-imagined – as an economic, political, and cultural entity which must seek to undertake entrepreneurial activities to enhance its competitiveness” (p. 40). Consequently, “this re-imag(in)ing is closely linked to the re-design of governance mechanisms involving the city – especially through new forms of public-private partnerships and networks” (p. 40).

Harvey (1989) notes how the consensus around urban entrepreneurialism “seems to hold across national boundaries and even across political parties and ideologies” (p. 4). In other words, supporters of urban entrepreneurialism come from both the Left and Right sides of the political spectrum. Jessop’s (1997) interprets the consensus around urban entrepreneurialism as having been “constructed through the intersection of diverse economic, political, and socio-cultural narratives which seek to give meaning to current problems by construing them in terms of past failures and future possibilities” (p. 30). The discourse of the entrepreneurial city therefore successfully resonates and is widely adopted globally because it creates a “linkage between meta-narratives and personal stories and their mediation by institutional narratives” (p. 31) that appeals to both neoliberal and not neoliberal initiatives.

But does the shift from a managerial to an entrepreneurial approach signify a fundamental transformation in urban governance and, if so, how? Indeed, the focus on a “shift” has been criticized for “mask[ing] the fact that city governments, to a lesser or greater extent, have always pursued entrepreneurial strategies and played a crucial role in local economic development” (Hubbard & Hall, 1998, p. 14). Jessop’s theorization of the broader historical, political, and cultural conjunctures that have led to the emergence and large-scale adoption of the entrepreneurial city discourse suggests that rather than resulting from a radical shift, the entrepreneurial city is better understood as a strategic solution to the failure of the post-war national state. It should thus be contextualized within the historical period during which it emerged as well as geographically. While cities may have always pursued entrepreneurial strategies, they have not always explicitly imagined and described themselves as entrepreneurial and designed their governance frameworks accordingly. The explicit use of this discourse is the “distinctive feature” of entrepreneurial cities (Jessop, 1997, p. 28, Jessop & Sum, 2000, p. 2289).

Peck (2014) suggests that cities have been “induced” to “behave entrepreneurially” (p. 398) and even to engage in “‘defensive’ entrepreneurialism” (p. 400). Such an approach suggests that cities are powerless, reactive agents before global economic and political forces. Jessop and Sum (2000), however, consider cities active economic actors (p. 2310). Similarly, Pow (2002) warns that city governments should not be seen as “passive economic actors” that find themselves constrained to “engage in high-risk speculative partnerships with private capital.” Instead, we must acknowledge “the capability of the local state in shaping national urban systems and urban competitiveness” (p. 58).

Both the state (at the national and regional levels) and coalitions of individuals influence a city’s entrepreneurial strategies (Leitner, 1990; Pow, 2002). Leitner (1990) proposes addressing

conflicting explanations regarding whether the entrepreneurial behavior by the local state is either economically determined or stemming from the initiatives of relatively autonomous agents by analyzing “how economic and political processes operating at different spatial scales interact to determine local policy formation and outcomes.” She argues that “the structure and dynamic of both the national and international capitalist economy and the [US] political system circumscribe the policy options open to the local state” (pp. 152-153) and, within this context, the local state’s entrepreneurial strategies are shaped in response to pressures from both “the interests of the apparatus of the local state itself and its managers and the competing interests of different social groups and classes” (p. 153). The local state’s actions can therefore “only be understood through an examination of non-local and local economic and political pressures and the specific local context and the interrelations between these” (p. 153). In sum, entrepreneurial cities are embedded within broader socio-economic and political networks and respond to pressure from actors’ coalitions, but they are not powerless. What distinguishes entrepreneurial cities is both their self-description as such and their capacity to govern accordingly. However, cities are made of people, and certain agents, in particular entrepreneurs, are called to play a particular role in the making of entrepreneurial cities.

2.4.1.1 The role of the entrepreneur

A weakness in Harvey’s theorization of urban entrepreneurialism concerns the definition of the “entrepreneur,” the nature of which remains an “elusive” element (McNeill, 2017, p. 234), and of “entrepreneurial,” which he “never really spelt out” and “left it as given we’d somehow know” (Merrifield, 2014, p. 390). Harvey (1989) writes that it is “important to specify who is being entrepreneurial and about what” (p. 6), but gives little precision about what it means to be entrepreneurial other than “being speculative in execution and design” (p. 7). Pow’s (2002) and

Jessop and Sum's (2000) examinations of Singapore and Hong Kong respectively clearly illustrate the complementary roles of state and business networks in shaping entrepreneurial policies. But understanding the development of urban entrepreneurialism also requires that we consider how, since the post-Fordist era, the entrepreneur "has been thrust to the center of the economic imaginary with breathless speed and insistence" (Szeman, 2015, p. 474). In this subsection, I examine what makes an entrepreneur, and what role do entrepreneurs play in shaping entrepreneurial urban strategies.

Painter (1998) argues that "entrepreneurs are made rather than born" (p. 260) and that their entrepreneurial education curriculum includes the "inculcation of particular knowledges, ways of reasoning, and self-understandings" (p. 260). The entrepreneurial regime, Painter (1998) argues, is therefore not something that arises spontaneously but rather results from "an active disciplinary process" that involves "a huge effort of institutional reform and discursive construction. Actors in the urban economy from schoolchildren to state officials and from business executives to welfare claimants have to learn how to be 'entrepreneurial'" (p. 268).

Along the same lines, Peck (1995) argues that in Britain "'business interests' are currently being mobilized, given their form and presented with their function *by the state*" (p. 17, emphasis in the original). This phenomenon was facilitated by Thatcherism and its appeal to nineteenth-century market principles and to the Victorian ideal of the self-made entrepreneur. Under Thatcherism, Peck (1995) argues, "the nature of the business elite was redefined, in what may constitute a shift to a new 'mode of political rationality'" and "it was the maverick entrepreneur rather than the bureaucratic manager, who came to form the 'new' business elite" (p. 24). Businessmen became informal consultants for the state. This position was further legitimated through the creation of state-sponsored business associations.

Peck (1995) suggests that in offering a prominent role to the agenda of business, in giving “a privileged place to the ‘entrepreneur over the manager,’ and to ‘voluntarism over compulsion,’” Thatcherism echoed the politics of Victorian philanthropy and paternalist capitalism (pp. 29-31). However, a crucial difference between nineteenth-century Victorian philanthropists and “modern-day ‘paternalists’” is that whereas the entrepreneurs and philanthropists of the nineteenth century could establish their own agenda, “the political power of modern local business elite is in effect licensed by the state; it is the *power of institutional position*” (pp. 31, 41-42, emphasis in the original). Therefore, the form of localism witnessed since the late 1970s and early 1980s differs from that associated with the Victorian philanthropists in that “it is very much a *centrally orchestrated localism*” and “local business elites have been incorporated into the political process by the state as a means of furthering the *restructuring of the state apparatus*” (pp. 41-42, emphasis in the original).

In sum, Peck (1995) argues that during the transition from Keynesian to post-Fordism, the growth of urban business elites was “inextricably related to the restructuring of the state, and to struggles around the reconstitution of central-local relations” (p. 42) and ultimately helped serve the state’s mandates. But with regards to the state’s mandates, Szeman (2015) more recently suggests that

it is now the market that supplies the state its principles and mandate, rather than the state guiding, shaping, and supervising the market on behalf of those subjects who (at least in theory) collectively legitimate the state’s actions and practices. (p. 483)

This suggests that entrepreneurial governance is being supplanted by market governance as both the state and the entrepreneur now respond to the market’s demands and mandates. As we will see, this shift is accelerating the privatization of urban space.

MacLeod (2011) argues that while the shift towards growth-focused urban entrepreneurialism has had a “profound impact in shaping the landscape of cities,” the shift towards privatism, the “private ownership and control over urban space” (p. 2645), is now “significantly reconfiguring the institutional landscape of urban politics and policy” (p. 2637). Moreover,

[T]he ideology of privatism effectively depoliticizes policy making by systematically excluding all those voices and interests who reject the sanctity of the “free-market” and the desire to maximize private profits through the use of public subsidies. The effect is to insulate the government policy making process from public influence and scrutiny, stymie groups supporting alternative strategies, and promote policies that favor private actors and corporations rather than the public good. (Gotham, 2001, p. 290, cited in MacLeod, 2011, p. 2637)

The consequences of privatism are a strategic selectivity, the blurring of the public and private, and the depoliticization of policy-making (MacLeod, 2011). MacLeod (2011) therefore offers the term “depoliticized” as “the more appropriate term with which to interpret the present-day consensual ‘police’ and order” (p. 2652).

MacLeod’s argument echoes Peck’s (1995) suggestion that “privatism in public-policy” is “typically presented in terms of ‘partnership’ [but] is paradoxically constructed in terms of a *depoliticization* of the development process” as decisions-making processes are shielded from scrutiny and debate (p. 30, emphasis in the original). In the same line, Beveridge and Koch (2017) argue that depoliticization can be understood more as a “contingent political strategy than a political condition,” and that it is “an integral part of managing urban conflicts and rationalizing urban governance” (pp. 39-40). They suggest that research on depoliticization

should address “how the definition of the political – through discursive and institutional practices – reshuffles the practices of politics,” and “focus on the practices to articulate, remove, displace or obstruct urban conflicts as/from the political” (p. 40).

The conceptualization of markets as the ideal form of governance and the idealization of the entrepreneur and of “entrepreneurship as the new common sense” (Szeman, 2015) is at the core of the start-up societies imaginary. Proponents of start-up societies consider market competition as both the most effective way to preserve freedom of choice and to accelerate social and technological progress. They conceptualize governance as an industry and “builders” and “founders” as the only individuals able to bring about innovation, both technological and social. Ultimately, the start-up societies movement can be understood as a radical expression of a broader shift towards authoritarian politics and the de-democratization of society, achieved by “turn[ing] freedom into a promise of individual freedom and sever[ing] the connection between freedom, participation, and solidarity” (Ludwig, 2020, p. 165; W. Brown, 2021), and evidenced in the rise of privatization and depoliticization as strategies of urban competitiveness. I address these issues in depth in Chapters 6 to 8.

2.4.1.2 Start-up city, start-up state, and start-up urbanism

The start-up societies imaginary can further be situated within trends in urban entrepreneurialism and depoliticization that have been the object of considerable attention in the urban geography literature. Key concepts include start-up culture and its relationship with the start-up city; start-up urbanism; and the start-up state. McNeill (2017) describes start-up culture as “the urban economic lovechild of [Edward] Glaeser and [Richard] Florida,” two scholars known for their emphasis on the role of entrepreneurs and the creative class in building and

shaping cities and promoting an “entrepreneur-builds-city narrative” which creates structural divides that are “deeply gendered” as it often favors younger white males (pp. 233-234).

Start-up culture is also intimately connected to the rise of smart and sustainable urbanism (Bibri & Krogstie, 2017) and with the notion of “urban experimentation” and the resurgence of conceptualizations of the city as a laboratory (Caprotti & Cowley, 2017). The urban studies literature characterizes the smart city by the increased role of urban entrepreneurial policies in relation to technological developments. This literature raises concerns about the growing role of private corporations and intermediary experts in urban planning and economic policy and critically examines the utopian promises of the smart city (Grossi & Pianezzi, 2017; White, 2016; Wiig, 2015). Smart cities have been conceptualized as an expression of Western neoliberal ideology (Grossi & Pianezzi, 2017) whose sustainability imaginaries and techno-politics (Miller, 2019) create new forms of urban inequalities and generally engender more problems than they solve.

In a context of entrepreneurial governance by market imperatives and a greater reliance on the private sector for urban development, start-ups have come to occupy a “normative position [...] within urban politics and policy discourse” (McNeill, 2017, p. 236). This is clear from the multiplication of non-profit initiatives, educational programs, and multi-scalar policies including visa programs all designed to form and attract entrepreneurs and create “start-up ecosystems” to help cities, regions, and countries lead in the “innovation economy” (e.g., *Bonjour Startup Montreal*, 2021; *MaRS*, 2021; *Start-up Visa Program*, 2018). This new urban entrepreneurialism, heavily shaped by start-up culture, has been described as “start-up urbanism” and characterized by the “decisive role” of the entrepreneurial state “in creating a self-propulsive start-up economy” (Rossi & Di Bella, 2017, p. 105).

McNeill (2017) argues that how start-up companies frame the urban and how local governments adapt to the new reality of the knowledge-based and gig economies is leading to a new form of inter-urban competition. A key component of this shift is the aforementioned development of “start-up ecosystems (measured by themed technology or coding meet-ups, co-working spaces, and active angel venture investors)” (McNeill, 2017, p. 233). Levenda and Tretter (2020) argue that we are witnessing the “environmentalization of urban entrepreneurialism,” meaning that urban entrepreneurialism today is directed at finding ways to use the urban environment to support entrepreneurship through the creation of ecosystems, and it is “increasingly greener” and shaped by a focus on urban sustainability (p. 491). Their theorization supports the broader argument that the start-up city creates a new political space where “the entrepreneur meets the entrepreneurial city” (McNeill, 2017, p. 238) and that cities are not only increasingly made “for entrepreneurs” (Levenda and Tretter, 2020, p.492), but also designed to “enabl[e] the individual to become an ‘entrepreneur of himself’” (Rossi & Di Bella, 2017, p. 1001)

Start-up urbanism makes the state more urban, too. Moisio and Rossi (2020) argue that we are witnessing the emergence of the “start-up state” as a rising “political-cultural-economic formation” (p. 534) which, through highly mediatized strategic investments in the start-up economy and entrepreneurial educational programs, “instrumentalises urban life in the contemporary capitalist conjuncture in the name of the ‘national interest’” (p. 548). Their research demonstrates that

the state is becoming more experimental not only in terms of bringing about a broad cultural change in the name of entrepreneurialization, but also in terms of generating

economic activities that are infused with an urban mentality for the sake of national economy and competitiveness. (p. 548)

In other words, the state increasingly “seek to capitalise on the endogenous entrepreneurial capacity of urban environments” which are viewed as spaces that sustain the knowledge-based economy through the social and economic opportunities they provide to individuals and businesses (Moisio and Rossi, 2020, p. 534). Cities are viewed as catalysts of entrepreneurship and capital creation essential to national competitiveness in a context of knowledge-based economy. Moisio and Rossi’s point is that too often cities are perceived as “somehow spontaneously generating high-tech entrepreneur and economic value” (p. 538), but in fact the state plays a key role in mobilizing the urban and “introject[ing] [the] urban imaginary into state apparatuses at the same time” (p. 537). They conclude that the common conception that “the start-up economy is almost exclusively produced in the interaction between private economic actors, start-up entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial city governance harmfully de-politicizes societal development” (p. 549).

Rossi and Wang (2020) use the term “urban entrepreneurialism 2.0” to describe this “new wave of technology-based urban entrepreneurialism” (p. 483) that is both consolidating the economic hierarchy and fostering the normalization of “improvised entrepreneurialism” by “enabl[ing] an increasingly impoverished middle class to engage with entrepreneurship in accidental, improvised ways that resemble the survival strategies of the urban poor in the South” (p. 484). Of particular relevance to my research is how urban entrepreneurialism 2.0 and start-up urbanism have garnered interest from technology entrepreneurs who view the privatized city as a technological product that could “replace” politics and as an environment that could transform

state structures and power relations by fostering the development of entrepreneurial subjectivities.

A less explored trend within start-up urbanism, and the object of research of this dissertation, concerns the proliferation of start-up entrepreneurs, often “highly skeptical of any form of government involvement” and demonstrating a “deeper ideological commitment to the fusion of technological advance with individual liberty” (McNeill, 2017, p. 235), who aim to develop literal start-up cities. Technology companies and entrepreneurs now envision expanding their commercial activities not only to (re)develop urban areas (e.g., Alphabet’s Sidewalk Labs in Toronto), but also to build whole new cities that could be spaces of technological, social, and political experimentation. These urban spaces would function as public-private, or fully privatized, start-ups that could potentially generate important revenues through the development of business-friendly environments that would attract workers, especially the creative class and, of course, through data extraction.

2.5 Extraterritoriality and urban privatization

The city-as-a-start-up is conceptualized by its proponents both as an extraterritorial space geographically located within a host country but legally and socially “outside,” and as a product. This imaginary is influenced by several existing models, especially experimental enclaves and offshoring practices.¹¹ This section reviews the literature on two key models, namely the special economic zone and the common-interest residential development and discusses theorizations of the zone as enclave urbanism and as a technology of land-grabbing.

¹¹ There is a vast literature on offshoring, an “issue not just of money and taxation but of many other processes that are offshore and wholly or partly rendered secret, including manufacturing industry, pleasure, energy, waste, carbon dioxide emissions and security” (Urry, 2014, p. 3), which I do not have the space to address in depth here. I focus on the special economic zone, one of the many urban models and political technologies that facilitate offshoring and which is at the core of the start-up societies imaginary.

2.5.1 Special economic zones

Another important development in contemporary urban entrepreneurialism, and a source of inspiration to start-up city entrepreneurs, is the multiplication of special economic zones (SEZ) globally and in the South in particular. Indeed, SEZs have become a preferred strategy for urban entrepreneurial (re)development in both hemispheres. In 2019, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimated there were approximately 5,400 zones in the world, 1,100 of which were created between 2014 and 2018. There are plans for another 500 (UNCTAD, 2019). The zone is a key space for the expansion of offshoring practices and of “the practice of sovereign bifurcation, by which states intentionally divide their sovereign space into heavily and lightly regulated realms” (Palan, 2003, pp. 7–8).

A SEZ is a delimited geographical area that offers an advantageous regulatory framework (e.g., low taxes, tax breaks, relaxed labor laws) to capitalize on a region’s competitive advantage and accelerate its economic development. A zone’s geographical area can be small or large. It can also be a single enterprise that obtains privileges and benefits comparable to those of an SEZ (Carter & Harding, 2011, p. 3). The SEZ terminology applies to “any area or zone which operates under a special legal or regulatory framework and offers incentives to enterprises to locate or which are located within the specific area” (Carter & Harding, 2011, p. 3). SEZs today go by many different names: freeports, export processing zones, industrial parks, urban enterprise zones, specialized zones, business district improvements zones, innovation or entrepreneurial hubs, free zones, prosperity zones, ecozones, and more. The polyonymy of the zone and its global omnipresence testify to how the zone has become “a new urban paradigm” (Easterling, 2014, p. 31). Recently, Malaysia and Portugal have launched “digital free trade zones” and “technological free zones” that merge physical and virtual zones and aim to facilitate

cross-border e-commerce activities and attract technology start-ups (Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation, n.d.; Harsono, 2020; Huillet, 2020).

The zone, Easterling (2014) writes, “is heir to the mystique of ancient free ports, pirate enclaves, and other entrepôts of maritime trade” (p. 44). It is “both ancient and new” (Easterling, 2014, p. 44). The genealogy of SEZs can be traced back to the Hanseatic states and colonial free ports (Bach, 2011, pp. 98–99; Easterling, 2014, pp. 44–45), both of which proponents of start-up societies suggest could be revived under a modern, polycentric, and digitized form to “disperse concentrated political power, curb its capture by rent-seeking special interests, and reverse the plunge into untenable debt” (Frazier, 2018, p. 2). For example, Mark Frazier (2018), the chairman of the Startup Societies Foundation and a SEZ consultant, advocates the creation of a “new Hanseatic League” of “free zones and free cities” and “aligned online guilds of volunteers” that would offer “blockchain-based land registries, smart contracts, e-governance toolkits, and arbitration services” (pp. 31, 34).

Zones are also “spaces of connection and futurity” (Cross, 2014, p.13). Jonathan Bach (2011) describes the zone as “conjur[ing] up an odd assemblage of nineteenth-century Owenite utopian legacies and their contemporary traces via Soviet ‘total planning’ cities, garden cities, company towns, gated communities, and even aspects of new urbanism” (p. 109). Examining the zone from a cultural approach, Bach (2011) argues that the “Zone – with a capital Z – signifies a shift in the socio-spatial formation of late modernity as export zones turn from a pragmatic *space* for the production of exports into a *place*, imagined and lived” (p. 99, emphasis in the original; see also Cross, 2014). Bach uses the term “Ex-City” to express how the zone “fashions urban space out of the mix of exports, excess, exception, and exhibition” (p. 116). He argues that the zone is a “cultural phenomenon” whose prominence “draws from its discursive power as a

modernist fantasy of rationality and new beginnings” (p. 99) and that SEZs are “a key location for understanding the social and cultural impact of globalization on overlapping territories and urban space, particularly in the post-colonial world” (p. 116).

In sum, zones both are carrier of a “medieval modernity,” an oxymoronic phrasing which problematizes teleological understandings of modernity and “indicates how the medieval lurks at the heart of the modern, how the feudal exists within capitalism” (AlSayyad & Roy, 2006, p. 16), and simultaneously future-oriented and built on an economy of anticipation (Cross, 2014). In all cases, zones are conceived as “vehicles” for bringing about “futures of growth, profit, and improvement” (Cross, 2014, p.13).

2.5.1.1 The zone as enclave urbanism

With the noteworthy exception of the discipline of economics, which has taken a generally positive view of SEZs as spaces of concentrated economic development that accelerate innovation and improve employment opportunities (e.g., Kuo et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2017; Moberg, 2017, but c.f. Frick et al., 2019), and publications in philosophy journals that argue that charter cities, a variant of the SEZ model originally proposed by the economist Paul Romer (2009) (see Chapter 7), are “an instrument of cosmopolitan justice in nonideal global conditions” (Freiman, 2013, p. 41) and that “the real challenges confronting charter cities are practical rather than moral in nature” (Sagar, 2016, p. 510), the social sciences are critical of SEZs. In particular, research in urban studies, anthropology, and sociology has been critical of zone-induced socio-spatial restructuring. Two key concerns in these literatures relate to how SEZs and charter cities foster a new form of enclave urbanism (Geglia, 2016; Hardaker, 2020; Kleibert, 2018; Lynch, 2017; Palma Herrera, 2020) and how it has been deployed by states as a technology of

land grabbing (Ananthanarayanan, 2008; Brondo, 2013; Cowaloosur, 2014; Levien, 2012; Martin & Geglia, 2019; Sandi, 2020).

Douglass et al. (2012) describe enclave urbanism as being marked “by an intra-metropolitan structure that consists of specialized areas containing distinct combinations of cultural, functional, and economic groups and/or activities” (p. 169). Enclave urbanism, they argue, is defined by “the introduction of social, legal, and physical boundaries that demarcate each of these areas”, which are often regulated through “specific governance regimes” (p. 169). Arguably, such features of enclave urbanism have always existed in cities. Historical examples include the Hanseatic League and its merchant guilds and markets towns, the company towns of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the segregated neighborhoods, gated communities, and red lining strategies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Like SEZs, other forms of enclave urbanism are also an expression of “medieval modernity” (AlSayyad & Roy, 2006). This is evidenced in the multiplication of newly built master-planned cities in the global South that often have private governance structures “that fall within the broad tradition of company towns, treaty concessions, free ports, and independent city-states” (Murray, 2015, p. 203; Herbert & Murray, 2015). These new urban spaces are often private, elite-led enterprises (Brill & Reboledo, 2019; Fält, 2019; Moser, 2015).

New master-planned cities are not unlike common-interest developments (CIDs), often called gated communities. CIDs have been on the rise in the U.S. since the 1980s (McKenzie, 2006, p. 14) and target a particular group of buyers, but they differ from new master-planned cities which are generally designed to advance state objectives (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019; Moser, 2018). New master-planned cities also target wealthy individuals or the growing middle-class, and those few public-private partnerships to develop private communities meant to help

integrate marginalized communities such as Haram City in Egypt (Arese, 2018), have met with limited success.

CIDs are often described as an American phenomenon, but the scholarship on enclave urbanism demonstrates that the rise of privately governed and secured neighborhoods is a global phenomenon constituted of processes that, although tied to wider trends in the globalization of culture and economy, “play themselves out differently in different social, cultural, economic and institutional contexts” (Glasze et al., 2006, pp. 3–4). Research on CIDs has addressed the issue of the “diffusion versus emergence” (McKenzie, 2006, p. 26) of private neighborhoods at length and shown that analyses of CIDs must be historically and geographically contextualized. For instance, Webster, Wu, and Zhao (2006) find that the condominium is an institution deeply embedded in contemporary Chinese society and trace its emergence to the centrally planned era during which quasi-autonomous work units, governed by a residents committee, practiced communal ownership of local territory (p. 152). In South Africa, the development of enclave communities has been linked to an increased perception of insecurity and high crime rate (Jürgens & Landman, 2006), whereas in Latin American cities it is rather the desire to achieve an ideal lifestyle that drives the demand for this type of neighborhoods (Janoschka & Borsdorf, 2006). Unifying these different analyses of private neighborhoods is “the idea that private neighborhoods are a new territorial form of political organization on the local scale” (Glasze et al., 2006, p. 7).

Particularly significant and relevant to my research is how SEZs, as production enclaves, and gated communities, as consumption enclaves, now empirically converge in the form of mixed-use urban enclaves, a process Kleibert (2018) theorizes as the rise of “spaces of exception 2.0.” She argues that these spaces suggest “an intensification of the enclave strategy to economic

development” and have “morphed into exclusive developments, combining service-based SEZs, gated communities, and entertainment functions within a single structure” (p. 478). Kleibert’s study of the Philippines’ enclave strategy to economic development thus contrasts with Ong’s (2004, 2006) “zones of exception” deployed for development, and she argues that we are witnessing “a shift from an enclave strategy based on spaces of exceptions to one based on spaces of exclusion” (p. 482).

My dissertation problematizes Kleibert’s theorization of spaces of exception 2.0 and posits that the objective of zones is both exception and exclusion, and ultimately the conditioning of subjects into entrepreneurs. In Chapter 5, I show how start-up societies create what I call encrypted geographies, spaces that rely on emerging technologies like blockchain and cryptocurrency and that selectively recruit and exclude individuals. Chapter 6 examines how the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia merge the idea of zone and of upscale eco-island to create one such encrypted space that, in practice, would have likely been inaccessible to French Polynesian other than those servicing the island. Chapter 7 examines the idea of charter cities and, through the case study of Honduras Próspera LLC, a mixed-used urban enclave in development in Honduras, further demonstrates how policies to create zones of exception are used to create spaces that, developers claim, will be inclusive but in fact are more likely to create exclusion and inequalities, and ultimately assist the state in fostering the creation of entrepreneurial subjects and in becoming a start-up state itself.

2.5.1.2 The zone as a technology of land grabbing

In addition to spaces of exception and of exclusion, SEZs have also been theorized as spaces of production and capital accumulation. In transition and emerging economies, these objectives are often achieved by expropriating agricultural or fishing communities and turning

greenfield sites into new real estate developments. In their study of a collaboration between South Korea and Honduras to develop special economic zones in the latter, Martin and Geglia (2019) conceptualize contemporary urban economic zones as a representational-material “traveling spatial ideology” that is given the appearance of a coherent mobile policy or model “through a combination of spectacle and fantasy on the one hand, and erasures and exclusions on the other” (p. 3). Ultimately, “this combination of utopian imaginary and spatial abstractions operates as ideology, obscuring the political-material project of land enclosure that underscores contemporary SEZ forms” (p. 4). Their conceptualization of the zone as a “technology of land appropriation” echoes the work of other researchers who argue that the zone, in particular in the global South, represents a form of “expropriation under the pretense of cooperation” (Cowaloosur, 2014) and functions as a strategy of “accumulation by dispossession” through the use of “extra-economic force” (Levien, 2012).

Moreover, the creation of exclusive economic zone and conservation zones as potential sources of income can also be used as a mechanism of ocean-grabbing or blue-grabbing (Benjaminsen & Bryceson, 2012). Bennett et al. (2015) offer the following framework to identify instances ocean-grabbing: it must “(1) occur by means of inadequate governance, and (2) be implemented using actions that undermine human security and livelihoods, or (3) produce impacts that reduce social-ecological well-being.” Although it is not hard to imagine how projects of industrialized resource extraction dispossess native populations and cultures, blue-grabbing can happen through the development of blue growth-oriented conservation policies. These initiatives are most frequently presented as a means to restore ocean health, and they often deploy an “‘antipolitical’ framing of climate change and environmental change” that precludes and undermines more “progressive and transformative solutions” proposed by such coastal

groups as fisher peoples' movements (Barbesgaard, 2018, pp. 131–132, 145). In response, and as was the case with the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, small-scale fishers' movements "are increasingly framing their opposition in terms of the broader struggle for 'food sovereignty'" (Barbesgaard, 2018, pp. 143–145). Foley and Mather (2019) show how, along the same line, terraqueous territoriality is also used by marginalized coastal groups who deploy adjacency as an assertion of a particular form of terraqueous territoriality to claim ocean space and resources. I examine such instances of zones as a technology of ocean-grabbing in Chapter 6, and as technology of land-grabbing in Chapter 7.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how the conceptualization of ocean-space as a space beyond the control of the state has played a key role in the formation of the modern territorial state and the maritimization of land and how, conversely, territoriality and capitalist urbanization on land shapes the urbanization of the ocean-space. In addition to being a space of urban expansion, resource extraction, and both capital and human mobility, the ocean is also a space of secession, either a refuge, a new frontier to conquer, or a combination of both. This chapter has examined the conceptualization of the ocean as a space of secession that is perceived both as a refuge from the hegemony of the state and from neo-Malthusian fears of resources scarcity, and as a frontier to colonize and exploit.

An element common to both oceanic and land-based urbanization is the reliance on urban entrepreneurial policies on the part of both state and non-state actors. The chapter has briefly discussed how urban entrepreneurialism, its emergence, forms, and functions, and consequences have been theorized in the urban studies literature. It has drawn attention to the development of start-up urbanism, underscored the role of technology entrepreneurs in reshuffling the practices

of urban politics, and examined how the model of the start-up company contributes to shaping entrepreneurial policies as well as to the urbanization of the state. It has discussed how this shift to urban entrepreneurialism 2.0 further depoliticizes and accelerates the privatization of urban spaces, and the development of private urbanism and its various forms such as special economic zones and common-interest developments, both of which provide inspiration to proponents of start-up societies.

The following analysis deploys insights from this vast body of scholarship to address emerging trends in urban entrepreneurialism and spaces of exception 2.0. It expands the application of theorizations of urban entrepreneurialism and ocean urbanization by looking at how the start-up societies movement engages with discourses such as the blue economy and the Sustainable Development Goals (Chapter 6) to justify the development of new zones within the territory, both land and ocean-based, of host countries. It also contributes to the literature on extraterritoriality and urban entrepreneurialism by examining how proponents of start-up societies appropriate the idea of the zone to advance a neoconservative view of urban futures (Chapter 7). The next chapter explains the theoretical framework employed for this analysis.

Chapter 3 – A theoretical framework for examining start-up societies: Cultural political economy and critical futures studies

3.1 Introduction

There is a growing interest both among non-state and state actors in start-up societies as a micro-spatial “fix,” i.e., as a strategy of “geographical expansion and geographical restructuring” (Harvey, 2001, p. 24), for contemporary economic, political and social crises.¹² To non-state proponents of start-up societies, they represent an opportunity to experiment with new governance and economic frameworks, develop new spaces to park mobile capital where it can be protected from taxation, and to restructure how society is organized and governed. To state actors, start-up societies represent an opportunity to develop new spaces of foreign direct investment and capital accumulation and to help address national and regional economic challenges. For both kinds of stakeholders, projects to develop start-up societies entail a micro-geographical restructuring that both concentrates economic development in new dedicated zones and facilitates the circulation of capital. Start-up society ventures can be further described as *experimental* micro spatial fixes. They also seek to experiment with new economic systems (e.g., cryptoeconomy), alternative and digitized governance frameworks, and new hybrid geographies.

The overarching aim of this research is to explain the emergence of the start-up society concept, why and how it resonates with certain non-state and state actors and comes to be selected and retained (or fails to) as a solution to crises. My theoretical approach brings together two transdisciplinary frameworks, cultural political economy (CPE) and critical futures studies

¹² On the notion of “fix,” see also Jessop (2006): “A spatio-temporal fix resolves, partially and provisionally at best, the contradiction and dilemmas inherent in capitalism by establishing spatial and temporal boundaries within which a relatively durable pattern of ‘structured coherence’ can be secured and by shifting certain costs of securing this coherence beyond these spatial and temporal boundaries. This sort of spatio-temporal fix displaces and defers contradictions both within a given economic space and/or political territory and beyond it. It also involves an internal as well as an external differentiation of winners and losers from a particular fix, linked to the uneven social and spatial distribution of benefits from a given fix and to its associated uneven development” (pp. 162-163).

(CFS), that offer complementary conceptual and analytical tools to examine the dialectics of the semiotic and extra-semiotic aspects of the start-up societies imaginary and how the interaction between both shapes its conceptualization, selection, and retention.

CPE was developed over the last decade principally by scholars at the University of Lancaster, in particular Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop (2013), Norman Fairclough (2013a; 2003), Martin Jones (2008), and Andrew Sayer (2001). It is a theoretical framework that integrates the contributions of the cultural turn to critical political economy and highlights the role of semiosis (the intersubjective production of meaning) in shaping the articulation between the economic and the political (Jessop, 2009; Sum & Jessop, 2013). Here, semiosis is “an umbrella concept that refers to cultural turn approaches oriented to argumentation, narrativity, rhetoric, hermeneutics, identity, reflexivity, historicity and discourse” (Jessop, 2004, p. 161).

Importantly, CPE does not simply “add” culture to political economy: “It does not aim to produce an additive, three-dimensional analysis but stresses the role of semiosis in enabling social actors to ‘go on’ in a complex world in *all* spheres of social life” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 22). Ramon Ribera-Fumaz (2009) describes CPE as

the result of moving from a one-sided emphasis on either the *cultural constitution of political economy*, or on the political economy of culture, towards a *critical cultural political economy* of social processes. This means that culture cannot be reduced to the economic and *vice versa*. Social processes are co-constituted by cultural, political, and economic processes. (p. 457, emphasis in the original)

CPE posits that the world “is too complex to be grasped in all its complexity in real time” and therefore agents must engage in processes of complexity reduction to make sense of it (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 3). The two processes of complexity reduction are semiosis and structuration.

Semiosis is a “dynamic source of sense and meaning” (p. 148). Structuration “sets limits to compossible combinations of social relations” and as such contributes “to the institution of specific political economies” (p. 148). CPE examines how the dialectical relation between both semiosis and structuration transforms “unstructured complexity into relatively meaningful and structured complexity (p.148).

A CPE approach does not claim to explain “how minds make sense of *texts*” (Fairclough et al., 2002, p. 27, emphasis in the original). Indeed, “the intersubjective production of meaning and other semiotic effects is exceptionally difficult to explain, not least because it involves more or less inaccessible mental processes” (Fairclough et al., 2003, p. 27). In fact, semiosis “cannot be understood without identifying and exploring the extra-semiotic conditions that makes semiosis possible and secure its effectivity” (Fairclough et al., 2003, p. 27). The focus of CPE is on how the continuing interaction of semiotic and extra-semiotic processes gives certain imaginaries “performative, constitutive force in the material world” and contributes to social structuration (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 141).

CFS is an emerging transdisciplinary field concerned with how imagined futures are entangled with material practices and questions the conditions under which texts about the future are produced, what it calls the “political economy of the future” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, pp. 121–122). Both CPE and CFS are concerned with the transformation of particular imaginations (construals) into sedimented imaginaries (constructions) and with problematizing taken-for-granted imaginaries. Together, CPE and CFS offer a framework to examine how urban future imaginaries like start-up societies are shaped by the uneven interaction of semiotic and material aspects, and why and how some future imaginaries more resonant than others.

This chapter comprises two main sections. First, it describes CFS and how the study of the start-up societies imaginary fits within this field. It describes and explains how a CPE analysis of the start-up societies imaginary can contribute to CFS as a field of study by offering a comprehensive and innovative analytical framework to understand why and how particular urban futures are imagined, selected, and retained. Second, it describes CPE, and how it can be applied to a critical analysis of the start-up societies imaginary and the contemporary start-up societies movement.

3.2 Critical futures studies

Like the zone (Chapter 2), the start-up societies imaginary is both simultaneously future-oriented and anchored in the past. The start-up societies discourse is primarily concerned with imagining the future, theorizing how the future is “made to happen,” and developing strategies to realize the start-up societies future imaginary. However, this concern with the future is also often focused on tradition and recovering past practices and insights. An underlying objective of my dissertation is to add to the literature on futures and foresight studies by demonstrating how a CPE approach can contribute to the studies of how futures emerge and why some futures come to be selected over others. Indeed, there is a renewed interest across the social sciences in futures and foresight studies, and in particular in imaginaries of socio-technical and urban futures (Bryant & Knight, 2019; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Oomen et al., 2021; Salazar et al., 2020; Urry, 2016; Zeiderman & Dawson, 2021). As the concept of start-up society has been received positively by certain states, transnational organizations, and influential individuals, an examination of how the start-up societies imaginary comes to be selected is particularly relevant to understanding how urban futures imaginaries emerge and are selected and retained.

One recent approach to futures studies is that proposed by Oomen et al. (2021) and which offers a theoretical framework that engages with the theory of performativity to address the lack of theorization about how imaginaries of the futures emerge and come to be widely adopted in the collective imagination. Their theory relies on what they term “techniques of futuring” (ToFs) which are “characterized by a dynamic relationship between structure and agency” (p. 8). Such an analysis includes examining the “dramaturgical social theory of futuring,” which they describe as “*the sequential social performances that allow particular visions and collective imaginations to become socially authoritative*” (p. 9, emphasis in the original). This approach is primarily concerned with analyzing the discursive strategies through which images of the future are created, disseminated, and shape “the possibility space for action” (p. 2). Specifically, it looks at (1) the “storylines” about the future that agents create; (2) the ways in which the “performance” is staged sequentially, and (3) the structures that allow some imaginaries to “*become persuasive*” (p. 12, italics in the original). Taken together, these make up a “dramaturgical regime” that brings imagined futures into the present (pp. 13-14).

ToFs and CPE emphasize different elements. This is not due only to these two approaches asking different questions, but to their different ontological and epistemological approaches. First, ToFs is a constructivist approach that emphasizes discourses and performativity and suggests that imaginaries are a form of theatrical play shaped by, but not necessarily grounded in a reality independent of agents. In contrast, CPE is an approach designed to chart a course between constructionism and structuralism, and to avoid giving ontological primacy to discourse (Sum & Jessop, 2013). As such, CPE allows researchers to start from any point of entry and emphasizes historicity and processes of complexity reduction (semiosis and structuration).

Second, ToFs examine “the particular *sequencing of events*” (p. 12, emphasis in the original). It considers that visions of the future are “staged” performances (pp. 11-12). Rather than examining sequential social performances, which assumes or imposes a temporal or concerted linearity, CPE examines how the uneven interaction of strategic discursive, agential, technological, and structural selectivities shapes understandings of and responses to crises, and how this results in some solutions, or imaginaries, being selected and privileged over others. This prevents prioritizing discursive selectivity at the expense of the other modes and allows for a deeper examination of which selectivity has a greater influence, in what context, and why. Moreover, the idea of a “sequencing” of events can only be explained retroactively and assumes a certain determinism and logic in how agents act. In contrast, CPE allows for a more flexible and dynamic analysis that allows researcher to explore how agents make sense of a complex world, even when meaning-making processes do not necessarily fit within accepted conventions.

Third, ToFs examine how imagined futures depend on “structural bounds that allow them to *become* persuasive” (p. 12, emphasis in the original). CPE goes further and examines how structures not only helps certain imaginaries to gain traction, but also how imaginaries are constrained by existing structures and semiotic processes. For example, Oomen et al. (2021) suggest that it is the structure and its “dramaturgical convention” that “allows imagined futures to become persuasive and travel politically and socially” (p. 14). A CPE approach argues that what makes imaginaries persuasive is the interaction between structures, agents, discourses, and technologies. A ToFs approach focuses on “how” questions, whereas a CPE is equally concerned with both “how” and “why” questions. Ultimately, a ToFs approach emphasizes the social construction and performativity of futures, whereas a CPE approach emphasizes how the

construction of futures is grounded in, and therefore necessarily constrained by, a reality that exists independently of agents.

My approach to the study of future imaginaries is closer to what Godhe and Goode (Godhe & Goode, 2018; Goode & Godhe, 2017) describe as critical futures studies (CFS). This emerging inter- and transdisciplinary field differs from “mainstream” futures studies, such as those studies produced by consultancies for corporate clients and those approaches concerned with forecasting future trends (e.g., Gutsche, 2020; Smith & Ashby, 2020; Toffler, 1971), in two ways. First, it considers popular culture to be a “rich repository of imaginative futurescapes” and it acknowledges that “our societal capacity to imagine, desire or fear particular futures is as much an affective as it is a cognitive process” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, pp. 111–112). Second, it is motivated by an “emancipatory interest” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 127) and is committed to the democratization of the future as opposed to “a technocratic ethos that claims the future is best left to the experts” (p. 112).

A CFS framework demands that we ask, “Who can speak with authority and legitimacy about the future? Whose imagined futures are deemed possible or plausible, and whose are silenced or dismissed as unrealistic and impractical? Who benefits from promoting particular visions of the future?” (Godhe & Goode, 2018, p. 153). It is concerned with “the ways in which cultural texts not only represent the future, but also actively shape it by opening up or closing down imaginative possibilities” (Godhe & Goode, 2018, p. 151). In other words, a CFS framework “adds” critical insight from the cultural turn to the study of futures. I also interpret this to mean that such an approach should look at past representations of futures and interpretations of how the future has been “made to happen.”

Future innovations, including urban futures, are shaped by existing socio-material, complex systems and path-dependencies that make only certain futures possible at any moment in time (Urry, 2016, p. 78). CFS and CPE offer complementary analytical tools to examine the path-dependent and path-shaping semiotic and structural features of future imaginaries and how the dialectic of semiosis and structuration makes certain futures possible and prohibits others. Both CFS and CPE are grounded in a discursive-material approach, are concerned with the transformation of imaginations into imaginaries, and problematize taken-for-granted imaginaries. CPE examines how the dialectical relationship of semiotic and extra-semiotic processes give certain imaginaries “performative, constitutive force in the material world” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 141). CFS recognizes that “discourses and ways of knowing are inextricably entwined with material forces” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 113). It distinguishes between imagination and imaginary and considers that “[F]uture imaginations and future imaginaries are dialectically entwined” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 125): “When imagination congeals into something taken-for-granted it becomes a social or cultural imaginary” (p. 123).

CFS examines “the ways in which certain futurescapes carry affective weight” and “the ways in which they compete for legitimacy” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, pp. 111–112). CPE can contribute to such an analysis, as I explain in further details below, through its key theoretical contribution, namely is its emphasis on the role of the evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection, and retention “in shaping the movement from social *construal* to social *construction* and their implications for the production of domination and hegemony” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 23, emphasis in the original). A CPE framework can therefore add to CFS by explaining how such futurescapes are shaped by processes of complexity reduction and by the uneven interaction of strategic selectivities.

In terms of *Ideologiekritik* (critique of ideology), CPE is interested in how crisis challenges dominant imaginaries and how it repoliticizes sedimented discourses (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p.404). CFS likewise argues that imaginaries, like utopias, “can expand as well as shrink our horizons” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 124) and seeks “to defamiliarize unquestioned, sedimented or ‘common sense’ discourses of the future, to shake them up in order to broaden the field of possibility” (p. 112). CFS problematizations can help us identify what imaginative futurescapes the start-up societies imagination draws on, the particular story of the future and of how the future comes to be the start-up societies discourse tells, how the futurescapes it proposes carry a particular affective weight, and how these factors help (or hinder) the sedimentation the start-up societies imagination into an imaginary. Conversely, a CPE approach can help us understand how the transformation of imagination into imaginaries is shaped by processes of complexity reduction and the uneven interaction between the different strategic selectivities.

3.3 Cultural political economy

CPE has been described as a trans- and pre- or post-disciplinary approach, meaning that it is committed to transcending disciplinary boundaries “in order to better understand the complex interconnections within and across the natural and social worlds” (Jessop & Sum, 2001; Ribera-Fumaz, 2009; Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. ix).¹³ It draws on evolutionary and institutional political economy, with which it integrates the contributions of the cultural turn (Jessop, 2004, p. 160). Methodologically, this means that CPE “combines concepts and tools from critical semiotic analysis with others from critical political economy to produce a distinctive post-disciplinary

¹³ Jessop and Sum (2001) describe CPE as “pre-disciplinary in its historical inspiration and as post-disciplinary in its current intellectual implications” (p. 89). They argue that “the most pertinent intellectual traditions [to the analysis of the contemporary world] are found among those that antedated disciplinary boundaries and/or refused to accept them” (p. 91). I agree.

approach to the analysis of capitalist social formations” (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008, p. 1155; Jessop & Sum, 2001).

As a theoretical approach, CPE draws on a long tradition of inter- and trans-disciplinary studies, in particular political economy and cultural studies (Ribera-Fumaz, 2009; Sayer, 2001, pp. 702–705).¹⁴ Recently, Ribera-Fumaz (2009) showed how in contemporary times, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, a “small but growing body of work” in urban political economy has engaged with the cultural turn to “rethink the culture-economy articulation” without “reifying the economic as solely cultural, or reducing the cultural to the economic base” (p. 448; p. 455). Ribera-Fumaz highlights how the work of such scholars as the sociologist Sharon Zukin and the geographer Don Mitchell brought a new focus to the role of culture in shaping urban spaces. Furthermore, a renewed interest since the 1990s among cultural geographers in the work of Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, and Henri Lefebvre has set the stage for a “shift from orthodox urban political economy to a dialectical rather than one-sided concern with culture” (Ribera-Fumaz, 2009, p. 460).

Harp (1991) also remarks that cultural studies, which is concerned with historical forms of consciousness or subjectivities, “provides a point of creative tension within the dominant structural features of an orthodox political economy approach” and that in doing so, “it defines the need for a middle ground both conceptually and empirically while holding on to certain essential features of these two interdisciplinary fields” (p. 208, drawing on Johnson, 1986). Harp suggests engaging with the concept of community to explore how, beyond market forces and structures, meaning-making among a community is shaped by the local setting, which

¹⁴ Jessop (2009) admits that classical political economy, the German Historical School, and “some versions of critical political economy and/or ‘old institutionalisms’” and urban political economy (its focus on urban entrepreneurialism and the role of culture) oftentimes also advanced similar arguments (p. 336, see also Sum and Jessop, 2013, pp. 10-11).

“influences perceptions and life styles of workers by imposing different sets of opportunities and constraints” (p. 216). In a study of the start-up societies imaginary, such an approach would explore how meaning-making among proponents of start-up societies is shaped both by the global political economy and the local environment (which, in this case, includes digital localism, a term I use to refer to instances in which digital worlds and interactions are communal spaces and form localities in which actors are closely and deeply embedded), and how such processes contribute to shaping the start-up societies conceptualization of community.

CPE has been applied to the study of policy (Jessop, 2009), of state strategies and regional economic development (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008), of political and human geography with an emphasis on the relationship between theory and empirics (M. Jones, 2008), and to more specific topics like the knowledge-based economy (Jessop, 2004), the study of competitiveness and urban entrepreneurialism (Jessop & Sum, 2000; Sum, 2010, 2015, 2018), transnational “knowledge brands” (Sum, 2010), and the “One Belt One Road” imaginary (Sum, 2018).¹⁵ The many successful applications of CPE demonstrate its usefulness for macro- and meso-levels analysis.

Scholarly engagement with the Lancaster School’s approach to CPE has sought to contribute a greater understanding of the role of culture in economic and political urban processes. For example, Lorentzen and van Heur (2012)’s edited volume offers a cross-disciplinary analysis of the cultural political economy of small cities. Jones (2009) employs a CPE approach to interrogate “the semiotic complement of iconic [architectural] projects *vis-à-vis* political and economic structures” and how this “opens up empirical research questions on the

¹⁵ Jacqueline Best and Matthew Paterson (2010, 2015) have also laid claim to the concept of cultural political economy, but from an international relations and international political economy approach that focuses on the cultural dynamics of the global political economy.

role of architecture in the embedding of economic projects into distinct social formations” (p. 2532). His work demonstrates that CPE is “helpful in understanding the specific ways in which corporate and state actors and institutions mobilise architecture as one way of making political-economic strategies socially meaningful” (p. 2520).

Similarly, Su et al. (2018) employ a CPE framework to interpret heritage tourism in urban contexts by means of a case study of Nanjing, China. They argue that touristic spaces are “infused with selective representational frameworks for political meaning-making” as well as with “economic relations in the built environment,” and that these elements are related to “tourist meaning-making and identities in the cultural/semiotic sphere” (pp. 30, 37). Their study shows how urban heritage tourism practices are co-constituted by the uneven interaction of “political, cultural and semiotic processes, structural and agency relations, and interdependencies and tensions” (pp. 37-38). Applying CPE to a different topic, Watts et al. (2018) show how CPE can be used to conduct an analysis of consumers’ semiotic and material construals of alternative food networks as a subalternative economic imaginary. These different applications of CPE demonstrate the usefulness of a CPE approach at the meso- and micro-levels and how it can reveal their linkages to macro-level processes and meta-narratives.

The present research engages with the Lancaster School approach to CPE and contributes to the literature that applies a CPE approach to the study of urban entrepreneurialism. For example, González (2006) employs an approach that incorporates elements from CPE and interpretative policy analysis to develop the concept of “scalar narratives,” by which she refers to “those stories that actors tell about the changes in the scalar localization of socio-political processes” (p. 839). González examines the “language, practices and rationalities that actors always unfold within the struggle to discursively fix scalar political projects” (p. 839). She shows

“how actors make use of discursive resources to select specific material practices as relevant and significant above others” and to link their particular interests to wider accepted claims to justify them (p. 838). These scalar narratives are path-shaping in how they “cut down the range of possibilities available and offer a selective range of alternatives” (p. 853). She calls this perspective “cultural politics of scales” to reflect “the conjunction between cultural political economy, cultural sociology of space, and politics of scales” (p. 839). Her work engages with CPE in how it emphasizes the role of such extra-economic factors as regional institutional capacity or community politics in the politics of scale or, in other words, in “how the political decision making levels themselves are produced” (Görg, 2007, p. 958).

Dannestam (2008) employs a CPE approach to examine the construction of the “entrepreneurial city” imaginary (p. 362). Following Jessop and Sum (1998; 2000, 2001), she examines the “relationships between entrepreneurial city politics and specific economic imaginaries,” such as the “discourse on competitiveness or the ‘knowledge-based economy’” (p. 363). Dannestam suggests that “CPE can be seen as a way to study how politics is done in a dialectic interplay between discursive and material selectivity” (p. 360). Focus on this interplay, she argues, can help us “to understand why new discourses are translated into concrete politics or why a policy orientation is legitimated with references to certain discourses” (p. 360). She concludes that:

CPE can help us to capture the interplay between material processes affecting cities and the discourses telling them to adapt to these processes *in a specific* way. At this macro level, research should devote attention to those processes (in their material and discursive character) which make policy-makers perceive entrepreneurial city politics as a natural and inevitable response vis-à-vis globalization. (p. 367, emphasis in the original)

González's (2006) and Dannestam's (2008) works demonstrate the usefulness of CPE to understand how the interaction between micro, meso, and macro-levels, including the processes of discursive and material selectivities that operate at each level, shape urban development strategies.

The version of CPE I use is that developed by Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop (2013). Methodologically, this approach to CPE "combines concepts and tools from critical semiotic analysis with those from critical political economy" (Jessop, 2004, p. 161) and addresses three major themes:

- (1) the critique of the distinction between the economic and the political, how such boundaries are constructed and the role they play in "the economic restructuring and the transformation of the state and state intervention";
- (2) the constitution of subjects and their modes of calculation, and how these modes of calculation are shaped by specific material-discursive conjunctures and become institutionalized; and
- (3) "the analysis of how different subjects, subjectivities and modes of calculation come to be naturalized and materially implicated in everyday life and, perhaps, articulated to form a relatively stable hegemonic order (or, alternatively, are mobilized to undermine it)" (Jessop & Sum, 2001, pp. 96–97).

A key contribution of CPE to critical theory and to the critique of domination and hegemony is how it "stages an encounter between Gramsci, Marx and Foucault" and "governmentalizes" Gramsci and "Marxianizes" Foucault (Sum & Jessop, 2013, pp. 205–206). CPE "considers how discourses and discursive practices condition subjectivities and what role they play in consolidating domination and hegemony," but its critique of political economy includes the

Foucauldian concepts of dispositive and governmentality (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 205). While a Gramscian approach is helpful to answer “why” questions and a Foucauldian approach “how” questions, CPE offers a theoretical framework that can answer both.

3.3.1 Complexity reduction

A distinguishing feature of Sum and Jessop’s version of CPE is how it seeks to understand the co-evolution of semiotic and extra-semiotic processes through the evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection, and retention. As I explained earlier, CPE postulates that the social world has both semiotic (discursive / cultural) and structural (material / social) properties and is concerned with the dialectical relation between both (Sum & Jessop, 2013). Its research agenda examines how agents make sense of a complex world through the interaction of two processes of complexity reduction: semiosis and structuration.

By focusing on the dialectical relation between semiosis and structure, CPE offers a framework that avoids both giving “ontological primacy to discourses and discursive practices” and structural determinism (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 211). CPE can be understood as an attempt to enable “an escape” from “hard political economy” and “soft economic sociology” (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008). Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop (2013) describe it “as attempting to navigate between a structuralist Scylla and a constructivist Charybdis” (pp. 22, 147-195). Reflecting on CPE’s trans- and post-disciplinary ambitions to bring different theories into a productive dialogue, Martin Jones (2008) describes CPE as “not so much an attempt to find middle ground as to eliminate it” and to find instead a “common ground” (p. 382).

In examining the dialectical relationship between semiotic and extra-semiotic aspects, CPE stresses the materiality of social relations and highlights “the constraints of processes that operate ‘behind the backs’ of the relevant agents” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 204). In other words,

the world exists independently of agents but is nonetheless shaped by their interpretation of it and their actions, which are themselves constrained by structure and the semiotic resources available. This is significant as processes of complexity reduction “are never wholly ‘innocent’: in construing the world, sense- and meaning-making frame lived experience, limit perceived courses of action, and shape forms of social contestation, alliance-building, and domination” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 149).

3.3.2 Imaginaries and evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection, and retention

A concept central to CPE is imaginaries, the “fragile and contingent semiotic systems” that “exist at different sites and scales of action – from individual agents to world society” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 165). Imaginaries “comprise a specific configuration of genres, discourses and styles and thereby constitute the semiotic moment of a network of social practices in a given social field, institutional order, or wider social formation” (Jessop, 2009, p. 344; Fairclough, 2003).¹⁶ Imaginaries “frame individual subjects’ lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or inform collective calculations about that world” (Jessop, 2009, p. 344). In contrast, “‘institution’ belongs to a family of terms that identify mechanisms that embed lived experience across different social spheres” (Jessop, 2009, p. 344).

An economic imaginary is “a semiotic system that gives meaning and shape to the ‘economic’ field” (Jessop, 2009, pp. 344–345). This means that CPE recognizes that “the

¹⁶ Genres, discourses, and styles form what Fairclough (2003) terms an “order of discourse”, comprising “a network of social practices in its language aspect” (2003 p. 24). Genres are semiotic ways of acting and interacting like job interviews, editorials in newspapers, or advertisements on TV (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 179). Discourses are semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social, or mental), which can generally be identified with different positions of perspectives of different groups of social actors (Fairclough, 2013a, pp. 179–180). Styles are “ways of being”; “bodily behavior in constituting particular ways of being, or social and personal identities, as well as using language as a resource for self-identifying” – for instance being a “manager” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 180). I explain each in detail in Chapter 4.

economy is not only overdetermined but also multiple, relational and discursive” (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008, p. 1167). CPE therefore distinguishes economic imaginaries, which are “imaginatively narrated, more or less coherent subset[s],” from the “actually existing economy,” which encompasses “the chaotic sum of all economic activities” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 166).¹⁷

Economic imaginaries “identify, privilege, and seek to stabilize some economic activities from the totality of economic relations and transform them into objects of observation, calculation, and governance” (Jessop, 2009, p. 345; Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 166). To be effective, economic imaginaries “must have some significant, albeit necessarily partial, correspondence to real material interdependencies in the actually existing economy” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 173). An example of economic imaginary discussed at length by Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum is the “knowledge-based economy,” which “can be read as a distinctive semiotic order that (re-) articulates various genres, discourse, and styles around a novel economic strategy, state project, and hegemonic vision and that affects diverse institutional orders and the lifeworld” (Jessop, 2009, p. 344; see also Sum & Jessop, 2013, pp. 261–295). Another example of an economic imaginary is the blue economy. In Chapter 6, I examine how this particular imaginary was leveraged by both seasteaders and the French Polynesian government to support a project to build a floating island in French Polynesia.

CPE posits that knowledge is always situated and opposes transhistorical analysis (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008; Sum & Jessop, 2013). Analysis focuses on the historical and geographical

¹⁷ A good example to illustrate this is Carolyn Nordstrom’s (2000) discussion of how “shadow networks” and “non-formal” economic activities and markets, such as arms, drugs, and diamonds trade and illegal resources smuggling, far from marginal to the world’s economies and politics, are in fact central to the global economy and shape sovereignty, authority, and power. Indeed, “if all these industries were to collapse overnight, the world’s economies would be in chaos” (p.38). Organizations such as the United Nations or the World Bank generally do not include such networks and economic activities in their strategies, calculations, analysis of policy outcomes, etc.

contexts in which imaginaries are formed. Importantly, although successful imaginaries can become sedimented, they remain always fragile and contingent:

It is the continuing interaction of the semiotic and extra-semiotic in a complex co-evolutionary process of variation, selection and retention that gives relatively successful economic and political imaginaries their performative, constitutive force in the material world. (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 141)

In sum, CPE seeks to explain for how dominant imaginaries “come to provide not only a semiotic frame for *construing* the world but also contributing to its *construction*” (Jessop, 2009, p. 342). Although economic imaginaries are always contested and in need of repair, “[r]elatively successful economic imaginaries do have their own, performative, constitutive force in the material world” (Jessop, 2004, p. 163). This means that “[n]ot only do economic imaginaries provide a semiotic frame for construing economic events but they also help to construct such events and their economic contexts” (Jessop, 2004, p. 164).

The possible applications of CPE’s approach to imaginaries are broad (Jessop, 2009). My research investigates how the start-up societies imagination is shaped by the macro-level economic imaginaries of urban entrepreneurialism and the knowledge-based economy, by the discourses around cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies, and by the technologies themselves, and its transformation from construal to construction and into an imaginary of its own. My fieldwork therefore documents a process that is ongoing and contested. The start-up societies imaginary is not a widely accepted imaginary and may never be. It has been, however, embraced by a significant number of non-state and state actors and has shaped these actors’ actions in response to both economic and ecological crisis.

3.3.3 *Crisis*

Epistemologically, CPE “assumes that knowledge is always partial, provisional, and incomplete” and is focused on how “‘knowledge’ enters strategic calculation, policy formulation, and implementation” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, pp. 5-6). It does so by examining how individuals and institutions learn in, about, and from crisis, and how responses to crises, which disturb taken-for-granted or sedimented imaginaries and lead to the variation, selection, and retention of new ones, are shaped by the uneven interaction of semiotic and extra-semiotic factors (Sum & Jessop, 2013, pp. 408–415). Crises are therefore “potentially path-shaping moments” that “encourage semiotic as well as strategic innovations” and often “prompt a remarkable proliferation of alternative visions rooted in old and new semiotic systems and semiotic orders” (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008, p. 1160; see also Sum & Jessop, 2013, pp. 395–466). In the context of a study of the start-up societies imaginary, crises include the conceptualization by proponents of start-up societies of a crisis of governance. It also includes the socio-economic crisis caused by the development of cryptocurrencies that challenge the dominant mechanisms of the production and circulation of money, as well as the crisis of climate change.

Necessity being the mother of invention may hardly be a revelation, but what is remarkable about a CPE approach, however, is how it

combines semiotic and structural analyses to examine: (1) how crises emerge when established patterns of dealing [...] no longer work as expected and, indeed, when continued reliance thereon may even aggravate matters; (2) how contestation over the meaning of the crisis shapes responses through processes of variation, selection and retention. (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p.397)

A CPE approach explains and allows for the analysis of conflict and how crises are interpreted and addressed by different agents, and how their responses to crises are shaped by the interaction

of semiotic and extra-semiotic elements. This is evident from how “[t]hose affected by crisis typically disagree both on their objective and subjective aspects because of their different entry-points, standpoints and capacities to read the crisis” (p. 397). What crisis construals come to be selected and retained depend on how successfully agents “grasp key emergent extra-semiotic features of the social world as well as mind-independent features of the natural world” (p. 402). Successful construals “in turn produce changes in the extra-semiotic features of the world and in related (always) tendential social logics” (p. 402).

In an examination of the start-up societies imaginary, the CPE research questions are: How do proponents of start-up societies construe economic and political crises, what contribution does the start-up societies imaginary make to crisis management resolution, and does this imaginary offer an alternative to dominant economic imaginaries? Part of the answer to these questions resides in how proponents of start-up societies (individuals and organizations) construe the crisis to which start-up societies are presented as a solution.

Lynch (2017) argues that the discourse of seasteading and private cities, which he conceptualizes as “utopian enclave libertarianism,” has emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and “can be seen as a response to the crisis on the part of free-market advocates who critique previous waves of neoliberal reform for failing to radically transform the existing structure of the state” (p. 82). However, this explanation ignores the earliest attempts to build such enclaves. Indeed, initiatives to build start-up societies have proliferated since the 2008 economic crisis, but multiple attempts to create new countries were made in the late 1960s and early 1970s by libertarian entrepreneurs (Grimmelmann, 2012; Simpson, 2016; Strauss, 1979), many of which were inspired by *Atlas Shrugged* (1985). In Ayn Rand’s influential novel, industrialists, entrepreneurs and artists retreat to a secret community in the Colorado mountains

as society collapses under socialism. The start-up societies movement is better understood as a new iteration of a longer tradition of trying to build a country or a city of one's own in response to a dissatisfaction with not only neoliberal reforms, but post-war progressive policies, modernism, as well as with centralized state power more generally.

Another key element missing from Lynch's theorization concerns the manufacturing of the crisis start-up societies respond to. Jessop (2009) argues that "Whereas a crisis [interpreted as a crisis] *in* the existing economic order can be addressed by minor reforms, a crisis [interpreted as a crisis] *of* the economic order and a failure of minor reforms to resolve the crisis will encourage the exploration of more radical changes" (p. 347, emphasis in the original; Sum and Jessop, 2013, pp. 398-399). Lynch's theorization of "utopian enclave libertarianism" presents seasteading and start-up societies as an attempt to reform the existing economic order in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. But proponents of start-up societies do not conceptualize the crisis as a crisis *in* the economic, political, and cultural order but as a crisis *of* these orders, which they seek to exit. What proponents of start-up societies propose is not reform or the "rethink[ing] and transform[ation] of the liberal nation-state" (Lynch, 2017, pp. 85–86), but a program to "exit" (Startup Societies Foundation, 2017) the nation-state completely through a radical reconceptualization of sovereignty, territoriality, trust, and community. As Joe McKinney (2017b), the president of the Startup Societies Foundation, puts it: "I am not a libertarian. I am an exitarian."

The Startup Societies Foundation, for example, "intend[s] to build alternatives to traditional politics, business, culture and technology" (*Startup Societies Foundation*, 2020a); it aims to build something entirely different and, in doing so, to open up new spaces for political and economic experimentation beyond the existing economic and political orders. Sum and

Jessop (2013) warn that we should “beware” of “manufactured crises” created for “‘political’ motives” (p. 396). A CPE approach to an analysis of how proponents of start-up societies conceptualize the crisis would therefore also question the extent to which the crisis is “real” (i.e., confirmed by empirical facts as opposed to based on the assumption that the political system is broken beyond repair) and the extent to which it is manufactured to justify the adoption of the start-up societies imaginary.

3.3.4 Four modes of strategic selectivity in cultural political economy

Sum and Jessop (2013) suggest that semiosis plays a greater role in path-shaping “when crises disrupt taken-for-granted discourses and generate unstructured complexity, provoking multiple crisis interpretations,” such as was the case with the North Atlantic financial crisis, whereas extra-semiotic factors will “matter most in the retention of some strategic responses as the basis for new, sedimented routines, organizations and institutions” (p. 403). Importantly,

For CPE, what matters is which of these many and diverse interpretations get *selected* as the basis for private and public strategic and policy initiatives to manage the crisis and/or move beyond it. This is not reducible to narrative resonance, argumentative force or scientific merit alone (although each may have a role) but also depends on diverse extra-semiotic factors associated with structural, agential and technological selectivities.

(pp. 404-405, emphasis in the original)

I now describe agential, discursive, technological, and structural selectivities and then explain how they shape the start-up society’s interpretation of crisis and its response to it. I first explain agential selectivity, which CPE understands as “the efficient force in social transformation” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p.191).

3.3.4.1 Agential selectivity

Agential selectivity refers “to the differential capacity of agents to engage in structurally oriented strategic calculation [...] not only in abstract terms but also in relation to specific conjunctures” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 217). This means that “[a]gents can make a difference thanks to their different capacities to persuade, read particular conjunctures, displace opponents and rearticulate in timely fashion discourses and imaginaries” (p. 217). Importantly, “[t]his is always overdetermined by discursive and technological selectivities” (p. 217). In the context of the start-up societies imaginary, this means examining how its selection and retention is dependent on the participation of key non-state and state agents, their capacities to draw on particular imaginaries and discourses (such as that of the blue economy, the special economic zone, or of such emerging technologies as cryptocurrency and blockchain) and technological selectivities (e.g., smart contracts and their application to the governance of business or of everyday life, or technologies of governance such as ease of doing business indexes).

3.3.4.2 Discursive selectivity

Discursive selectivity primarily refers to “the asymmetrical constraints and opportunities inscribed in particular genres, styles, and discourses [...] in terms of what can be enunciated, who is authorized to enunciate, and how enunciations enter intertextual, interdiscursive and contextual fields” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 215). Examining discursive selectivity means examining “how different forms of discourses and/or genres position subjects in specific situations” and certain discursive forms are “more or less accessible to some agents rather than others either because of their sense- and meaning-making competence [...] and their discursive competence in relation to everyday interactions, or because of the demands of socialization into specialized discourses” (p. 215). In the case of start-up societies, this includes technological and

financial literacy, the ability to understand and articulate corporate, entrepreneurial, and legal discourses, and access to the internet.

Importantly, “discursive selectivity is not purely discursive” but “derives from the differential articulation and co-evolution of the discursive and extra-discursive moments of social processes and practices, and their conjoint impact in specific contexts and conjunctures” (p. 215). This means that examining discursive selectivity requires examining how texts are produced and received and how these processes are shaped by extra-semiotic factors and particular conjunctures. In the context of start-up societies, examining discursive selectivity first means examining how the start-up societies imaginary is articulated through particular genres, discourses and styles. Second, it entails examining how extra-discursive and structural selectivities favors certain agents (such as leading technology entrepreneurs, free-market ideologues, and state officials) as well as media of communication (e.g., websites, how-to-guide, academic publications, conferences) to help legitimize the start-up society political project. Third, it means analyzing how discursive selectivity also functions to selectively recruit and exclude agents, which I refer to as “semiotic encryption” (Chapter 5).

3.3.4.3 Technological selectivity

Technological selectivity is understood in terms of Foucauldian technologies of discipline, normalization, and governmentality, and their role in power/knowledge relations and technologies:

Technologies refer here to the mechanisms involved in the governance of conduct and in the selection and retention of specific imaginaries in so far as they provide reference points not only for meaning-making but also for coordinating actions within and across

specific personal interactions, organizations and networks, and institutional orders. (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 477)

In this context, technologies are “meaning-making instruments deployed by agents to translate specific social construals into social construction and hence to structure social life” (Jessop, 2009, p. 339). They include “diverse social practices that are mediated through specific instruments of classification, registration, calculation, and so on, that may discipline social action” (Jessop, 2009, p. 339). A CPE analysis will therefore examine “the asymmetries inscribed in the use of technologies (and their affordances) in producing object and subject positions that contribute towards the making of dispositive and truth regimes” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 216).¹⁸ With regards to start-up societies, this includes, for example, such knowledging technologies as economic impact analyses and environmental assessments, such technologies of power as private arbitration centers, such technologies of agency as entrepreneurship programs, and such technologies of governance as blockchain.

3.3.4.4 Structural selectivity

Structural selectivity “denotes the asymmetrical configuration of constraints and opportunities on social forces as they pursue particular projects” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 214). Structural selectivities “are always relative and relational” as “structure is not an absolute constraint that applies equally to all actors but is necessarily asymmetrical” (p. 218). Examining structural selectivity means examining how structures favor certain tactics, strategies,

¹⁸ Michel Foucault coined the term “regimes of truth” to explain how discourses hold certain things to be truths. Foucault defines a regime of truth as “the types of discourse [a society] harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (Foucault, 1977, p. 13). In other words, truth “is always produced in relation to a specific reality, and this production generates a series of effects that Foucault is interested in exploring – paying special attention to the processes of constitution of subjectivity” (Lorenzini, 2016, p. 66).

timeframes, stakeholders, concerns, and identities and how they set path-dependency limits to path-shaping. In the context of a study of the start-up societies movement, this means examining how structures privilege (or do not) the interests of those non-state and state agents who support start-up societies initiatives and the strategies and tactics they employ and examining how the start-up societies imaginary itself is constrained by structural selectivity.

For example, in the case of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, whereas social structures, specifically those related to such local economic activities as fishing, did not favor seasteading's interests, identities and strategies, global economic structures did favor the tactic of employing a blue economy discourse to promote the project. In the case of Honduras Próspera, a private charter city under development at the time of writing, national and global structures (economic, political) seemingly favor the interests, entrepreneurial identities, and strategies of the project's developers and supporters. However, local governance structures (*patronatos*, or community councils) do not support the project.

Examining how structural selectivity sets path-dependency limits to path-shaping also means examining how dominant global structures constrain the start-up societies imaginary itself by privileging capital's interests, entrepreneurial identities, short-term spatio-temporal horizons, and entrepreneurial strategies over other non-capitalist or longer-term alternatives. Finally, it also means examining how structure favors certain social groups, such as developers, investors, and technology and political entrepreneurs.

It could be argued that these explanations can be boiled down to the claim that agents will manipulate language (along with other resources) to advance their material interests. This argument is flawed for two reasons. First, it presumes that agents are actively manipulating language to achieve unfair or unscrupulous designs, agents may be acting under the sincere

conviction that they are, in fact, being fair and scrupulous. Moreover, as explained above, agential selectivity is always overdetermined by discursive and technological selectivities, meaning that we cannot presume agents are acting independently of constraints. In other words, agents act freely, but not under conditions of their own choosing and these conditions shape both their understanding of and responses to crises whether they are aware of it or not.

Second, a CPE approach tries to avoid giving ontological primacy to discourse and to allow an examination of what interests, beyond material interests, agents try to advance. Indeed, as I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the start-up *societies* imaginary is about much more than land-grabbing and capital accumulation. It is about reinventing how we organize ourselves into communities, fundamentally challenging what we understand “society” to be, and fostering the development of entrepreneurial subjectivities. Ultimately, it is about addressing the contradiction of neoliberalism and neoconservatism and using each one to advance the other. It is about advancing a particular ideological understanding of a complex world. By examining the uneven interaction between the four modes of strategic selectivities, CPE offers a heuristic framework that allows for detailed and comprehensive explanations of how and why exactly agents seek to advance their interests, what these interests are, and how both these interests and the strategies through which they are promoted are constrained by semiotic and extra-semiotic factors.

3.3.4.5 The four modes of strategic selectivity in the start-up societies imaginary

Several start-up societies projects are under development at the time of writing (e.g., Honduras Próspera, Ocean Builders), but others exist only in their discursive form (e.g., Free Private Cities, seasteading). In this context, it makes sense to use discursive selectivity as a point of entry. Chapter 5 examines the contemporary start-up societies movement’s discursive

selectivity and how it is shaped by the discourses around blockchain technology and cryptocurrency. It also identifies the narrative qualities of cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies, which are themselves economic imaginaries developed as a response to a crisis of the global political-economic system. It examines the relationship between discursive selectivity and agential selectivity by asking two main questions: (1) who are some of the key agents (nodal actors) developing and promoting the start-up societies discourse? and (2) how do their particular positionality, ability to read particular conjunctures, and powers of persuasion contribute to sedimenting the startup societies imaginary?

Chapters 6 and 7 provide two case studies to further explore the interaction of discursive, agential, technological and structural selectivities in the selection and retention of the start-up societies imaginary. Chapter 6 examines how the discourse used to promote the Floating Island Project engaged with sedimented economic imaginaries and their associated technological selectivities, namely the blue economy, the special economic zone, and the Sustainable Development Goals, and how those residents who opposed the project employed a different blue economy imaginary to contest the construction of the floating island. Chapter 7 examines the concept of charter city and specifically the case of Honduras Próspera LLC, a “prosperity hub” launched by foreign entrepreneurs and under development on the touristic island of Roatán, and focuses on the interaction of discursive, agential, and technological selectivities to better understand how and why certain mechanisms and technologies of governance provide reference points in the start-up societies imaginary and contribute to its sedimentation.

However, identifying and describing interacting selectivities is only part of the CPE research agenda. A thorough CPE analysis “must highlight the contradictions and discursive-material dialectics of who gains and who loses from the restructuring of global, national and

local political economies” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 226). An examination of the uneven interaction of strategic selectivities and how they shape the start-up societies political project must be supplemented with an analysis of who gains and who loses from the consolidation of the start-up societies imagination into an imaginary and from its materialization not only in specific locations, but also on a potentially global scale. Therefore, throughout each chapter, I also examine how selectivities set path-dependency limits to the path-shaping potential of the start-up societies imaginary. In other words, I repeatedly ask how this particular imaginary is constrained by existing structures, semiotic resources, and extra-semiotic factors. My point of exit is structural selectivity, which I address in the final chapter which examines how the start-up societies imaginary contributes to consolidating and/or challenging hegemony and some possible consequences on the democratization of urban futures.

3.3.5 Drawbacks

I have identified three principal criticisms that can be made against CPE and its application to the study of the start-up societies imaginary. They concern the appropriateness of CPE for analyses at the micro and meso levels, the totalizing tendencies of CPE, and the risks of a dominating anthropocentric focus. I address them in this order.

3.3.5.1 Is CPE appropriate for micro- and meso-level analysis?

CPE was not specifically designed to be applied at the micro-level, and research using a CPE approach has generally focused on meso and macro levels. For instance, in terms of crisis, research in CPE has looked at how the 2008 economic crisis was interpreted nationally and regionally and how this shaped responses accordingly (Jessop, 2009, pp. 349–351). However, Jessop and Sum (2001) suggest that a CPE analysis “can develop and articulate the micro-

foundations of political economy with its macro-structuring principles in an overall material-discursive analysis”:

The key to such a cultural political economic analysis would be a reciprocal analytical movement between the micro through the meso to the macro and back again. Thus one could show the linkages between personal identities and narratives to wider cultural and institutional formations that provide both “a web of interlocution” and a strategically selective institutional materiality. One could also demonstrate their connection to larger meta-narratives that reveal links between a wide range of interactions, organisations and institutions or help to make sense of whole epochs, and to the complex spatio-temporal fixes (such as that associated with Atlantic Fordism) that institutionalise particular spatialities and temporalities as inherent material-discursive properties of individual and organizational routines and that define the spatial and temporal horizons within which action is oriented. (p. 97)

A CPE approach to the study of the start-up society concept and its transformation into an imaginary can start from the micro-level, identify who the key actors are and how personal identities and narratives are linked to wider cultural and institutional formations such as start-up culture and an ideology of technology (Alvarez León & Rosen, 2020), and urban entrepreneurialism. It can then move to examine the organizations and networks that form and influence the start-up societies movement (e.g., the Startup Societies Foundation; the Charter Cities Institute; the Atlas Network, an organization which acts as an umbrella for libertarian and free market groups and of which both the Startup Societies Foundation and the Charter Cities Institute are members), and examine how strategic selectivities at these micro and meso levels are shaped by macro-level economic and political imaginaries as well as by emerging

technologies. Such an approach will show the connections between the start-up society imaginary and proponents of start-up societies to larger meta-narratives and how such relationships are expressed in the formation of networks and organizations. It will examine not only how processes of complexity reduction at the micro and meso levels are constrained by dominant economic imaginaries (e.g., neoliberalism, knowledge-based economy), but also how the start-up societies imaginary attempts to restructure such macro-level elements as institutional and political frameworks (e.g., the nation-state, democracy), economies (e.g., proposing an alternative crypto-economic system), and spatialities (e.g., network state).

It could be argued that the start-up societies imaginary contributes little to the construction of the world, that it is not an imaginary proper but simply an imagination (i.e., it has not been institutionalized) and a by-product of other economic imaginaries. But a “reciprocal analytical movement between the micro through the meso to the macro and back again” demonstrates how the start-up societies imaginary provide a particular semiotic framework for construing the world and that it is indeed playing an even more active role in its construction than the process of its institutionalization. This process is, of course, contested and even if successful it will always be “in need of continuous repair” (Jessop, 2004, p. 160). The start-up societies imaginary is sufficiently coherent to have been adopted as a development strategy by the governments of French Polynesia, where it was rejected by much of the population, and in Honduras, where it is contested. It has also spurred the creation of a dozen of non- and for-profit organizations in the United States and in Europe (see Appendix 1) to advance its development and promotion and run by individuals with both the bank accounts and the global connections to exert real power.

3.3.5.2 Is cultural political economy totalizing?

CPE avoids totalization in how it carefully clears a path between structuralism and constructivism. CPE “rejects any universalistic, positivist accounts of reality, denies the facticity of the subject-object duality, allows for the co-constitution of subjects and objects, and eschews reductionist approaches to economic analysis” (Jessop, 2004, p. 161). Ontologically, CPE argues that there is a “real” world independent of our making, but agents must engage in processes of complexity reduction to make sense of it. In other words, CPE does not claim that there is one objective truth “out there,” but rather emphasizes that how we make sense of the world and agree on what we consider to be true is shaped by the dialectical relation between semiotic and extra-semiotic elements. In practice, this means that a CPE analysis of the start-up societies imaginary will be concerned with understanding the imaginary itself, how it is construed, and whether and how it contributes to strengthening hegemony.

3.3.5.3 Is cultural political economy anthropocentric?

Epistemologically and methodologically, CPE is concerned with humans’ understanding of their reality and, in that sense, it is an anthropocentric approach. However, a CPE approach could very well examine how semiotic processes and the interaction between semiosis and structuration are shaped by more-than-human elements (such as ocean-space and its organisms, for example), or how anthropocentrism itself is shaped by semiotic and extra-semiotic economic elements. For instance, my research explores the role of more-than-human elements in shaping semiosis and structure in how it draws attention to how both the conceptualizations and material and immaterial features of ocean-space have shaped the start-up societies, and in particular seasteading’s, imaginary. Another example discussed in Chapter 6 is how, in the case of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, opponents to the projects engaged with the more-

than-human characteristics of ocean space to frame their exposition to the project. Therefore, it can be argued that CPE is anthropocentric in the sense that it is primarily concerned with human thought and action, but this anthropocentrism is kept in check by how CPE allows the recognition of non-human or more-than-human factors in shaping semiosis and structuration.

3.4 Conclusion

Whereas CFS's attention to the affective weight of futurescapes is particularly helpful to examine the role of cultural imaginations of the future in shaping social constructions, or imaginaries, CPE contributes a structured framework to understand the movement from imagination to imaginary, from social construal to social construction. Together, CFS and CPE offer a comprehensive framework to examine how future imaginations and future imaginaries are shaped by dialectically entwined semiotic and extra-semiotic processes and how certain future imaginaries come to be selected and retained through semiosis, structuration and, within each, discursive-material strategic selectivities. My research's engagement with CPE therefore contributes to the emerging field of critical futures studies. Specifically, I demonstrate how examining future imaginaries through a CPE approach can make a significant contribution to our understanding of how futures are construed, selected, retained, and how they shape both our understanding of present and future crises and our response to them.

Employing a CPE framework to examine the start-up societies imaginary allows me to answer the main questions that initially motivated this dissertation: what does the concept of start-up society mean to its proponents, why and how was it developed, and how does it come to resonate with other non-state and state actors? This dissertation provides an explanation for the transformation (in progress and contested) of the start-up societies imagination (construal) into the start-up societies imaginary (construction). The CPE analysis of the start-up societies

imaginary also underscores how, under conditions of globalization and financialized capitalism, micro, meso, and macro levels are linked: personal identities and narratives are shaped by meso and macro level imaginaries whose dominant spatialities and temporalities in turn constrain “the spatial and temporal horizons within which action is oriented” (Jessop & Sum, 2001, p. 97).

Complementing a CPE framework with a CFS approach allows me to address the specific issue of urban futures and to question how the start-up societies imaginary contributes to imagining and shaping the future of governance, cities, community, society, and trust.

Examining how the start-up societies imaginary is shaped by the uneven interaction of agential, discursive, technological, and structural selectivities allows me not only to add to the existing literatures on topics of urban entrepreneurialism, territorialization and deterritorialization, sovereignty, technology and inequality, elite mobility, and power, but also to investigate what the emergence, and the (always contested) selection and retention of the start-up societies imaginary tell us about how these concepts are evolving under conditions of advanced, financialized capitalism. Together, CPE and CFS provide a framework to evaluate whether the start-up societies imaginary is only “more of the same,” or if it proposes something radically new in response to crisis. Finally, this approach explores the broader issue of how we understand and make sense of the world, and how we reduce its complexity also shapes our lived experience of this world and how we envision urban futures.

Chapter 4 – Methodology: Critical discourse analysis and multi-sited fieldwork

4.1 Introduction

The arguments developed in this dissertation draw on textual analysis and ethnographic research. Fieldwork was conducted both in-person and online over the five years of my doctoral studies (2017-2021) and included periods of sustained engagement as a participant and periods of observation. For instance, I was invited to give a talk at the Startup Societies Summit in San Francisco in 2017. I also joined social media groups dedicated to the promotion and the discussion of start-up societies and where I interacted with others and shared relevant news articles. I was neither an insider nor a complete outsider and always identified myself as a researcher.

This chapter comprises five sections. First, it describes how fieldwork was conducted and how the data was gathered and analyzed. As I was unable to obtain official statistics on who attended the Startup Societies Summits, I offer brief anecdotes to provide the reader with a general idea of who attended and why. Second, it describes Norman Fairclough's tri-dimensional approach to CDA. Third, it explains how this approach complements a CPE analysis. Fourth, it demonstrates the complementarity of CDA and CFS. Fifth, it addresses the potential drawbacks of this methodological approach.

4.2 Data collection and analysis

I applied a multi-sited methodology to fieldwork and data collection that empirically follows the moving target (Marcus, 1995). This means following “connections, associations, and putative relationships” of a “mobile and multiply situated” object of study, in this case the concept of start-up society and the decentralized movement that advocates it (Marcus, 1995, pp. 97, 102). Marcus (1995) suggests that multi-sited ethnography “lends a character of activism to

such an investigation” according to which “one finds oneself with all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments” (p. 113). I was sometimes an active participant in the space of investigation, for example when I gave a talk at the 2017 Startup Societies Summit where, incidentally, my partner ended up operating the sound console for the duration of the conference as the organizers had all the required audio-visual equipment but realized when the conference began that no one had the skills to operate it. By sharing some of my research, like facts about previous projects to build start-up societies as well as my own critique of the strategies employed, I contributed to the discussion in my position as a researcher. Other times, I was a silent participant, for example when I attended digital conferences and read interactions on chat groups.

I followed a discursive-material construction rather than an actual object like a commodity chain or a consumer good. Doing so both online and in-person allowed me to better understand the role that the constant overlap and interaction between these two spaces plays in the conceptualization, circulation, and promotion of the start-up society concept. Indeed, the fact that the discursive-material processes that shape lived experience are formed through the interaction of the analog and the digital cannot be ignored. Building on Marcus’ suggestion to “follow” a moving target, Hine (2017) argues that “[i]ncreasingly fieldsites are not easily located either online or offline but involve tracing networks of connection through online and offline space” (p. 25). Burrell (2017) proposes understanding the fieldsite as a “heterogenous network” that is “composed of fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects” and that takes into consideration multiple types of networks such as telecommunications, transportation, and social networks (pp. 55-56). She contends that fieldsite selection is an ongoing process and that rather than focusing on a single site, one should “seek entry points” (Burrell, 2017, p. 56).

My entry point was the discursive selectivity of the start-up societies movement. I initially intended to focus on the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, but as new start-up society ventures were launched and more individuals began advocating their creation and forming online networks to this effect, I expanded the scope of my research to the start-up societies imaginary as a whole. My initial fieldsites were the annual summits organized by the Startup Societies Foundation and the Startup Societies Foundation Facebook group. Overtime, it became apparent that Twitter and Telegram were also key sites of exchanges, connections, advocacy, and strategic planning. This continuous alternance between in-person and digital interactions revealed the key role of the overlap between the physical and the digital in shaping the start-up societies movement, for example, by connecting individuals and bringing people together at conferences announced online or by sharing ideas and resources online, but also in shaping the start-up societies imaginary and strategies, as in the case of Balaji Srinivasan's (2017) description of the Network State or Software Country in which start-up communities first form online and eventually coordinate migration to a physical space.

I attended various start-up societies events both in person and online, which are listed in the table below. Specifically, I attended 2 in-person events and one online event organized by the Startup Societies Foundation, and 6 online events at which proponents of start-up societies presented. I also attended 1 in-person academic conference, the Third International Conference on Amphibious Architecture, Design, and Engineering in Warsaw, Poland, in October 2019. There, I met Dr. Rutger de Graaf van Dinther, co-founder and director of Blue21, the architecture firm commissioned by Blue Frontiers to design the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, and the architect Koen Olthuis, founder of Waterstudio, an architectural practice specialized in floating and amphibious architecture and that worked on a new seastead design for

Ocean Builders, as well as with researchers and engineers working on amphibious urban design. During and after these events, I took written notes and engaged with participants to get a better sense of their motivations in attending the events and to learn about the projects they were working on, if any.

Table 1 List of Events Attended

Event	Purpose	Date	Location
Startup Societies Summit 2017	Focus on start-up societies. I presented on Operation Atlantis.	June 2017	San Francisco, California
Startup Societies Summit 2018	Focus on re-building Puerto Rico. I met with proponents of start-up societies and other researchers.	May 2018	Arlington, Virginia
Third International Conference on Amphibious Architecture, Design, and Engineering (ICAADE 2019)	Conference on amphibious architecture. Presenters included Rutger de Graaf-van Dinther (Blue21 / Floating Island Project in French Polynesia), Koen Olthuis (Waterstudio / Ocean Builders), as well as with architects and researchers of amphibious architecture.	October 2019	Warsaw, Poland
Virtual Startup Societies Summit	Focus on start-up societies and special economic zones as policy tools in a post-Covid world.	May 2020	Online
Joe Quirk online presentation on seasteading	Discussion on seasteading for anarcho-capitalists	May 2020	Online

Friedman 8: 24hrs of International Liberty	Conference organized by the Australian Taxpayers Alliance in partnership with Students for Liberty. Presentations by Joe Quirk and Patri Friedman.	July 2020	Online
Liberland Architecture Symposium	Presentations by Titus Gebel (Free Private Cities), Patrick Schumacher (Zaha Hadid Architects), and Vít Jedlička (Free Republic of Liberland).	July 2020	Online
Paving the Waves World Conference	Conference on amphibious architecture and floating cities.	October 2020	Online
Drastic Virtual	Presentation by Patri Friedman (Pronomos Capital).	October 2020	Online
Ocean Builders / Viva Vivas Zoom Meeting	Ocean Builders Zoom meeting to promote the Crypto Cruise Ship and answer questions.	November 2020	Online

Table 2 Online Discussion Groups

Online discussion group	Purpose	Date
Startup Societies Foundation Facebook Page	Focus on start-up societies projects and discussions.	2016-2021
Telegram group chat on special economic zones and charter cities	Group discussion on special economic zones and charter cities.	2019-2021
Twitter	Used to monitor developments in the start-up societies space such as new ventures, new funding announcements, conference announcement.	2017-2021

Followed key proponents of start-up societies including Patri Friedman, Balaji Srinivasan, and start-up societies projects' account including Próspera, Free Private Cities, and Bluebook Cities.

I attended the 2017 Startup Societies Summit as an invited speaker and at no cost. Events that required a ticket included the Startup Societies Summit 2018 (CAD \$254.03) and the Liberland Architectural Symposium (CAD \$29.18). Online events were generally free. I obtained a student ticket to attend Paving the Waves, an online conference on urban amphibious architecture co-organized by Blue21 (CAD \$168.98), and for ICAADE 2019 (CAD \$118.90). News media had access to all these events. Indeed, the Startup Societies Foundation's annual summits have received some media coverage which, one research participant commented, occasionally made the events appear "bigger" and more radical than they were (e.g., Menegus, 2017). However, this had its upsides as it helped make the Foundation known and provided opportunities for its founders to expand their network (Research participants, personal communication, March 4, 2021).

I was unable to attend a summit under the theme of "Hacking Democracy" in Puerto Rico organized by the Startup Societies Foundation in July 2018, and the Floating Island Conference organized by the Seasteading Institute and Blue Frontiers in French Polynesia in May 2017. However, I watched the presentations given at the Floating Island Conference after they were uploaded on YouTube and transcribed those most pertinent to my research, such as the keynote by the then-vice president of French Polynesia, Teva Rohfritsch, and the opening presentation by the then-executive director of the Seasteading Institute, Randolph Hencken. I also watched a short documentary that includes interviews with participants at the Floating Island Conference (Hurwitz-Goodman & Keller, 2018).

I conducted ten semi-structured and informal interviews, one focus group interview, and an online survey with twenty-two respondents. I obtained approval from McGill Research Ethics Board for my research, and I obtained either signed or verbal consent to quote the participants and to record one-on-one interviews and the focus group. I also subscribed to and compiled online newsletters published by the Startup Societies Foundation and seven startup societies ventures and organizations: the Seasteading Institute (between 2017 and 2020), Blue Frontiers (2018), Ocean Builders (between 2019 and 2020), Free Private Cities (between 2017 and 2021), Pronomos Capital (2020), Bluebook Cities (2020), and Honduras Próspera LLC (2020a). These totaled 67 documents, and 270 coded segments. The uneven number of newsletters per organization can be explained by the fact that not all organizations published newsletters regularly, and some only published a few. The newsletters have similar objectives: to ask for donations, to share information (video, books, upcoming conferences), to ask supporters to share information with their networks, and to provide general updates. I also followed key start-up societies agents like Patri Friedman and Balaji Srinivasan on Twitter and compiled relevant posts that directly referred to the idea of “start-up city” or “start-up society” or to start-up societies projects using keyword searches. I listened to the podcasts of the Seasteading Institute, Blue Frontiers, the Startup Societies Foundation, and the Charter Cities Institute as well as other podcast interviews with or presentations by key actors within the movement.

This sample, although necessarily incomplete, provided rich data representative of the start-up societies discourse. In terms of quantity, the material gathered proved sufficient when no significant new information could be obtained, no new themes emerged, and further coding was not possible (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Finally, my research also builds on previous fieldwork for the master’s degree in social and cultural anthropology, for which I

attended Ephemerisle, a former annual, weeklong seasteading festival in Stockton, California, in July 2014, and Voice and Exit (now Future Frontiers), a “festival of the future” in Austin, Texas, in November 2016.

4.2.1 In-person fieldwork

As mentioned above, in-person fieldwork included attending two Startup Societies Summits organized by the Startup Societies Foundation. The first was held at the City College of San Francisco, California, in August 2017. This conference was organized in partnership with d10e, an event organizer focused on “decentralization, exploring of the future of fintech, ICOs, blockchain, the sharing economy, the future of work, and disruptive culture” (*d10e: The Leading Conference on Decentralization*, n.d.). The second was held at George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia in May 2018, where I met with proponents of start-up societies as well as with other researchers. This conference was centered on special economic zones, private cities, and rebuilding Puerto Rico in the wake of hurricane Maria using special jurisdictions, blockchain, and green infrastructure. Attendees at these events represented a varied group of people, from senior business types to more unconventional personalities. Participants were mainly white, American men, but others hailed from such European countries as Germany and Liechtenstein and such Latin-American countries as Venezuela and Colombia. The age range of participants varied between early twenties to late sixties. The main organizers, Startup Societies Foundation’s staff and volunteers, were in their twenties and early thirties.

Figure 1 Startup Societies Foundation Summit 2017, San Francisco, California. Audience in the main room. Photo credit: Louis-Philippe Amiot.



Figure 2 Titus Gebel speaks at the Startup Societies Summit 2018, Arlington, Virginia. Photo by the author.



These conferences and the side events were key sites of connection for proponents of start-up societies. They were opportunities to meet people in that space, hear about new projects, distribute promotional material, and discuss past initiatives. For example, the day after I

presented on Operation Atlantis, Jim Davidson, the eccentric co-founder of an organization called Resilient Ways Foundation, now the president of a decentralized autonomous organization (see Chapter 5) venture called Freedom Land DAO, approached me to show me his original “Deca,” a coin minted by Operation Atlantis’ team and that was to be the official currency of the new country. (He refused to sell it to me.) I also met Dennis Riness, a man who says he is working on the “completion of the American Revolution” and sells a “Civilization Engineering” educational package which “covers the basic elements of how to build the world’s first stable, durable civilization” (Riness, 2016).

Figure 3 Jim Davidson, a participant at the 2017 Startup Societies Summit in San Francisco, shows his self-published book, *Being Sovereign*. Photo by the author.



Figure 4 Mark Edgington, also known as Mark Edge, a co-founder FreeTalkLive.com, and a former member of the Free State Project, a movement to recruit 20,000 individuals to move to New Hampshire and make it a libertarian stronghold, and former ambassador for Free Private Cities, is dressed as a king to promote his online radio station at the 2018 Startup Societies Summit in Arlington, Virginia. In 1999, Edgington was convicted of second-degree murder and spent eight years in prison. Photo by the author.



I also met entrepreneurs like Michael Eliot, the founder of Vention Floathouse, a seasteading venture to “build permanent ocean communities for the masses” and “make ocean living safe, comfortable, and affordable” (*Vention Floathouse*, 2020). Vention Floathouse is listed as an “active project” on the Seasteading Institute’s website (*The Seasteading Institute*, 2021). I met representatives of the Danish blockchain company OpenLedger (2021) and the Estonian digital identity company Agrello (2020) who had heard about the event while on a business trip in the United States. Speakers at the 2017 and 2018 summits included the start-up entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan, the Seasteading Institute’s Joe Quirk, Free Private Cities’ Titus

Gebel, NeWay Capital and Honduras Próspera's Erick Brimen, Charter Cities Institute's Mark Lutter, legal scholar Tom W. Bell, SEZ consultant and scholar Mark Frazier, and economist Lotta Moberg. Brock Pierce, a former child actor, now a crypto entrepreneur, who ran as an independent for President in 2020 and led a project to build a crypto-utopia in Puerto Rico in 2018, also participated in the 2017 Startup Societies Summit.

During this summit, a group of us were invited on a tour of a vineyard in Napa Valley that included a lunch at a pizzeria (apparently all paid for using Bitcoin profits). During lunch, I sat in front of a young man dressed in casual business clothing and wearing a traditional Mongolian Jonon hat. He explained that he was of Mongolian descent and the traditional attire was part of his personal branding. Another young man, nicknamed Mr. Liechtenstein, wore a full suit despite the warm weather. When I asked why he dressed so formally for the tour, he told me that everyone who wants to be taken seriously in Liechtenstein must dress like this. This was an eclectic group and discussions ranged over a variety of topics, from ancient city-states to transhumanism to blockchain and decentralization.

4.2.2 Digital fieldwork

Online fieldwork included participant-observation on start-up societies-related social media groups on Facebook, Telegram, and on Twitter. I also conducted an online survey, shared on the Startup Societies Foundation's Facebook group, and completed by twenty-two respondents (nineteen men and three women) to get a better understanding of who the start-up societies imagination resonates with and why. The primary aim of the survey was to get a better idea of the demographics of proponents of start-up societies, inquire how respondents had heard about the start-up societies movement, if they did indeed consider it to be a movement, what their reaction had been upon learning of start-up societies projects, what city or policy models

they found most attractive and promising, and if they thought cryptocurrency and blockchain technology would play a significant role in the development of cities in the near future and how.

The small number of respondents is partially explained by the small number of active participants in the Facebook group. Although the group counts over 2,000 subscribers at the time of writing, only a few regularly post in the group and engage in active discussion. The average age of respondents was 37.54, with the youngest being 19 and the oldest 70. Eighteen respondents identified as white. Two respondents questioned the concept of ethnicity and wrote that “we are not white, just as nobody is black, but instead, like all humans, shades of tan” (Respondent 1) and that “ethnicity is nonsense at least depending too much on context” (Respondent 19). Two other respondents identified as Pacific Islander and Latin-American. Twelve respondents said they were an employee or a volunteer at a start-up society project and ten respondents said they had attended or plan to attend a start-up society event. Participants’ occupations included legal consultant, conservation policy analyst, machinist, artist, stay-at-home mother, writer, and researcher. Seventeen participants responded positively to the question “Do you think cryptocurrencies and blockchain will play a role in the development of cities in the near future?.” During an interview, one research participant suggested that now that people “had realized they could create their own money, they realized they could also build their own cities” (Research participants, personal communication, March 13, 2021). Finally, respondents’ initial reactions to learning about start-up societies projects included “Like finding a home away from home, a flood of optimism and determination” (Respondent 2); “curiosity” (Respondent 3); “excitement” (Respondents 4, 8, 10, 14); “amazed” (Respondent 7); “dazzled by the possibilities” (Respondent 18). At least one participant, however, “grew more skeptical as the failure rate of many projects increased” (Respondent 22).

4.2.3 Data analysis

I used MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, to complete a critical discursive analysis of the newsletters' texts. My aim was to identify recurring key themes and concepts, measure their frequency, and understand the goal of the newsletters themselves (ex. call to action, fundraising, dissemination of information). I attributed codes manually, first using an inductive approach to identify recurring keywords, concepts and themes, and the rhetorical strategies employed. A concept is "a single idea, or ideational kernel, regardless [of whether] it is represented by a single word or phrase" (Carley, 1993, p. 81, cited in Popping, 2017, p. 330). Themes refer to "broader classes of concepts" (Popping, 2017, p. 330). I then employed a deductive approach to identify how these coded elements could be associated with CDA analytical categories (genres, discourses, and styles).

For example, "builder," "founders," and "pioneers" were recurring concepts that fit within the broader themes of entrepreneurship and of the frontier. These concepts could be found in many genres, including not only the newsletters but also promotional documents, manifestos, and social media posts, and sometimes were simultaneously expressed as a style (i.e., as a way of being). I also applied this method to analyze such texts as public talks and public social media posts selected because they were publicly shared by proponents of start-up societies and directly engaged with the start-up societies project. When analyzing these texts, I took into consideration their origin (e.g., an individual, an organization), their intended audience (e.g., potential investors, local population), and the publication context (e.g., at a conference, online).

Table 3 Dominant Themes in Start-up Societies Newsletters (Individual Organizations)

Organization	Number of newsletters	Dominant themes / Codes frequency
Blue Frontiers	4	Blockchain (2) Climate change (2) Frontier (2) Special economic zones (2)
Bluebook Cities	2	Future (vision of) (4) Society (2)
Free Private Cities	13	Change (present/ongoing) (7) Contractual agreement (6) Future (inevitable) (5) Prosperity zones (4) Pioneers (3) Hong Kong (3) Governance as a service/product (3) Crypto (3)
Honduras Próspera LLC	3	Environment / sustainability (3)
Ocean Builders	14	Future (vision of) (5) Change (present/ongoing) (5) Crypto (4) Blockchain (3)
Pronomos Capital	2	Special economic zones (3)
Seasteading Institute	21	Environment / sustainability (7) Future (vision of) (5)

Startup Societies Foundation	8	Freedom (4)
		Building (4)
		Governance as a service / product (4)
		Broken political system (3)
		Crypto (3)
		Future (vision of) (10)
		Building (9)
		Blockchain (7)
		Governance (lagging / failing) (5)
		Special economic zones (4)

Table 4 Dominant Themes in Start-up Societies Newsletters

Dominant themes across all newsletters	Code frequency
Future (vision of)	33
Building	18
Blockchain	14
Change (present / ongoing)	14
Special economic zones	12
Crypto	10
Environment / Sustainability	10
Pioneers	9
Governance as a service or product	9

A CPE criticism of this method is that it is akin to grounded theory, which “claims to avoid preconceived hypotheses that are imposed on the data and aims instead to ground its theory in a naïve observation of ‘raw’ data gathered without prior theoretical contamination”

(Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 123). Sum and Jessop (2013) advocate instead “grounded analytics,” by which they refer to “various strategies that are used to analyse the articulation of discursual and non-discursual practices and that develop robust methodologies and techniques of analysis grounded in linguistic or semiotic theory” (p. 124). CDA is one such methodological strategy. A CPE/CDA approach overcomes the problem of “naïve observation” in how it “dissociate[s] such analytical strategies from broader sets of theoretical commitments” (p. 124). This is, as Sum and Jessop (2013) point out, “both a source of strength ([analytical strategies] are easily transferred) and a source of weakness (in for far as they play an underlabouring role in more general social science inquiry)” (p. 124). Ultimately, grounded analytics is “more useful in providing answers to ‘how’ questions and must be related to other theories to provide adequate answers to ‘why’ questions” (p. 124). Hence, my methodological approach is grounded in a CPE theoretical framework.

The start-up societies movement is not particularly well-known among both academic and the lay public and, to my knowledge, the start-up society discourse has not been analyzed in-depth elsewhere. As Dicks (2005) writes, “[t]he social world, captured – albeit imperfectly – through multiple sources and media, does not present itself in neatly framed narratives and themes” (p. 3). I proceeded as I did because to answer “why” questions, it was first necessary to establish “what” the start-up societies discourse is saying and trying to achieve and “how.” Categorizing the “raw data,” while being aware that I approached this data with the goal of identifying the various cultural influences, discursive strategies and technologies (official reports, benchmarking mechanisms, etc.) employed, both the structures which the movement embraces and those it contests, and with a particular interest in the role of cryptocurrency and blockchain technology in shaping and sustaining the movement, was a pragmatic strategy to

organize the information and prepare for analysis. Put simply, this analytical strategy let me address specific objectives without the constraint of theoretical commitments, while still allowing for self-reflexivity and awareness of my own theoretical interests.

I used Kumu.io, an online software, to create dynamic maps that allowed me to identify the connections between key concepts, projects, and individuals. My aim was to understand the relationship between different start-up societies projects and identify instances in which agents were involved in one or more start-up societies projects. The maps are too large to be reproduced here. It was particularly helpful to visualize the close connections between Honduras Próspera LLC and NeWay Capital and other projects and individuals. For example, Michael Castle Miller, the co-founder of Politas Consulting, a SEZ consultancy, and of Refugee Cities, an organization that advocates turning refugee camps into SEZs, also sits on the board of NeWay Capital; the architect Patrik Schumacher, principal at Zaha Hadid Architects, is involved with NeWay Capital, Honduras Próspera, the Free Republic of Liberland, and Titus Gebel's SEZ consultancy Tipolis. Another example: both the Charter Cities Institute and the Startup Societies Foundation are members of the Atlas Network, a non-profit organization that connects "free-market organizations [...] to the ideas and resources needed to advance the cause of liberty" (*Atlas Network*, 2021). Mapping agents, organizations, and key concepts (e.g., refugee cities, which are a variation of charter cities, themselves a variation of the special economic zone model), proved helpful to illustrate the relationships between various agents forming the start-up societies movement.

Another aspect of data analysis concerns the identification of instances of intertextuality, which "is a matter of recontextualization – a movement from one context to another, entailing particular transformations consequent upon how the material that is moved, recontextualized,

figures within that new context” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 51). To better understand what discourses the start-up societies discourse engaged with and/or recontextualized, I also read literature that directly or indirectly influenced the start-up societies imaginary.

For example, Peter Thiel, who is an important agent in the start-up societies movement through his support of the Seasteading Institute and Pronomos Capital, wrote the preface to the second edition of *The Sovereign Individual: Mastering the Transition to the Information Age* (2020 [1999]) by James Dale Davidson and Lord William Rees-Mogg, which he described as “an unusual book” that he found to be important and potentially influential (in Howard, 2014). *The Sovereign Individual* is a controversial attempt at forecasting the future. Many of the ideas presented in the book, such as the demise of the nation-state and the rise of “information societies,” cryptocurrencies and of “sovereign individuals” able to capitalize on the crisis, are also present in the start-up societies discourse.¹⁹ One of the book’s sub-sections is titled “beyond politics,” an expression also used by Thiel (2009), and enthusiastically predicts that

What mythology described as the province of the gods will become a viable option for the individual – a life outside the reach of kings and councils. First in scores, then in hundreds, and ultimately in the millions, individuals will escape the shackles of politics. As they do, they will transform the character of governments, shrinking the realm of compulsion and widening the scope of private control over resources. (p.19)

¹⁹ The authors predict that “the advent of the cybereconomy will bring competition on new terms to provision of sovereignty services. A proliferation of jurisdictions will mean proliferating experimentation in new ways of enforcing contracts and otherwise securing the safety of persons and property” (Davidson & Rees-Mogg, 2020, p. 19). Specifically, “the nation-state will be replaced by new forms of sovereignty, some of them unique in history, some reminiscent of the city-states and medieval merchant republics of the premodern world” (p.99), “[l]ocal centers of power will reassert themselves as the state devolves into fragmented, overlapping sovereignties” (p.23) and “[m]ultiple systems of law will against coexist over the same geographic area, as they did in ancient and medieval times” (p.30). The authors are adamant: “The rise of Sovereign Individuals shopping for jurisdictions is [...] one of the surest forecasts one can make” (p.298). On “voice and exit,” see p. 342, and on voting with one’s feet, pp. 242, 342, 346, 355.

Balaji Srinivasan also mentioned *The Sovereign Individual* in his presentation on the idea of a network state at the 2017 Startup Societies Summit. This is a significant instance of intertextuality that illustrates how ideas that shape the start-up societies imaginary circulate transnationally, via different media and groups of people.

Further examples of intertextuality include how the discourses of the blue economy and of the Sustainable Development Goals were recontextualized in the official and promotional texts of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, and the recurring references to the difference between progress in “the world of bits and the world of atoms,” which can also be traced back to a statement by Peter Thiel (in Cowen, 2015), and to “Bitcoin citadels” which can be traced back to a satirical post made on the social network Reddit by an anonymous user in 2013. In sum, I analyzed the various start-up societies texts described above in their own context but also in relation to other texts “external” to them, “outside [them], yet in some way brought into [them]” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 39). Identifying instances of intertextuality, with or without attribution, allowed me to identify external philosophical, political, and cultural influences that shape the start-up societies movement’s discourse.

Finally, I also tried to identify assumptions, which are “not generally attributed or attributable to specific texts” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 40). Fairclough (2003) distinguishes between three main types of assumptions:

Existential assumption: assumptions about what exists

Propositional assumptions: assumptions what is or can be or will be the case

Value assumptions: assumption about what is good or desirable. (p. 55)

Identifying assumptions and their philosophical or ideological roots helped me better understand how proponents of start-up societies conceptualize the crises start-up societies claim to solve and

how this solution itself is selected and retained. A key question driving my analysis was: “which texts and voices are included, which are excluded, and what significant absences are there?” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 47).

For example, as I discuss in Chapter 6, during the Seasteading Institute and Blue Frontiers’ short-lived project to build a floating island in French Polynesia, the promotional material designed to recruit investors and the talks at a conference meant to present the project to the local population differed significantly in which voices were included and how they addressed their respective target audience. Texts advocating the construction of the floating island also contained existential assumptions (e.g., that seasteading was, in fact, integral to the Polynesian way of life), propositional assumptions (e.g., about the imminent disappearance of French Polynesian islands and the imperative to respond to this crisis primarily through technology and foreign direct investment), and value assumptions (e.g., suggesting that the construction of a private floating island within a new special economic zone was the appropriate and desirable solution). In Chapter 7, I examine the assumptions underlying the development of Próspera, a semi-autonomous charter city under construction in Honduras. These include the existential assumption that human flourishing can only, or at least primarily, happen through privatization; propositional assumptions surrounding the idea that the city will succeed because individuals are free and able to vote with their feet; and value assumptions about individual responsibility and the negative consequences of charity.

4.3 Critical discourse analysis

My approach to CDA draws on Norman Fairclough’s tri-dimensional conceptualization of discourse and corresponding three-dimensional method of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 132). From this perspective,

Discourse, and any specific instance of discursive practice, is seen as simultaneously (1) a language text, spoken or written, (2) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (3) sociocultural practice. Furthermore, a piece of discourse is embedded within sociocultural practice at a number of levels: in the immediate situation, in the wider institution or organization, and at a societal level [...]. The method of discourse analysis includes linguistic *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and *explanation* of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes. (p. 132, emphasis in the original)

From this perspective, the “social process can be seen as the interplay between three level of social reality: *social structures, practices and events*” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 232, emphasis in the original). Analysis focuses on two dialectical roles: between structures and events, and within each, between semiotic and other elements (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 232). Semiosis relates to other elements of social practices and social events in three ways: “as a facet of action; in the construal (representation) of aspects of the world; and in the constitution of identities” (p. 232). Fairclough establishes three “semiotic (or discourse analytical) categories corresponding to these: *genre, discourse and style*” (p. 232, emphasis in the original). I describe each in turn.

4.3.1 Discourse in social practice: genres, discourse, and styles

Genres, discourses, and styles form what Fairclough (2003) terms an “order of discourse” defined as “a network of social practices in its language aspect” (2003 p. 24). Specifically, orders of discourse are “particular configurations of different genres, different discourses, and different styles” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 180). This definition also corresponds to the CPE conceptualization of imaginaries.

Genres are such semiotic ways of acting and interacting as job interviews, editorials in newspapers, or advertisements on television (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 179). Individual genres can be analysed in terms of activity (“what are people doing discursively?,” or, in other words, what is/are the purpose(s) of the genre used, if any), social relations (transformation of social relations, hierarchization), and communication technology (one or two-way, mediated or unmediated) (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 70-78). Genres play a central role in “sustaining the institutional structure of contemporary society – structural relations between (local) government, business, universities, the media, etc.” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 32). Genres of governance, for example, include “promotional genres” and “more generally have this property of linking different scales – connecting the local and particular to the national / regional / global and general” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 33). Genre chains are “different genres which are regularly linked together, involving systematic transformations from genre to genre” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 31). A genre chain functions “as a regulative device for selecting and privileging some discourses and excluding others” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 34). We can identify transformation in social practices by examining the transformations in orders of discourse and in genre chains (Fairclough, 2003, p. 30).

For example, in the case of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, the genre chain linked the project to the development of the blue economy and the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals through a conference, an environmental assessment, an architectural concept design, and official publications such as the memorandum of understanding. The genre chain recontextualized the seasteading discourse of creating extra-territorial spaces into a discourse of sustainable ocean urbanization as a solution to climate change. In the case of Honduras Próspera LLC, the genre chain links the development of a semi-

private charter city to accelerated economic development and social progress (under the key theme of “prosperity”) through promotional “guides” that also frequently refer to such knowledging technologies as the World Bank Ease of Doing Business Index, mailing list newsletters targeting potential investors, podcast interviews with and produced by Próspera staff and advisors, Facebook posts showcasing Próspera’s involvement within the local community and its support for local artisans, and architectural concept design. Here, the genre chain transformed the discourse of privatization into discourses of economic development, autonomy, and social progress. In both cases, the genre chains privilege discourses of free-market competition and re-regulation and exclude non-capitalist alternatives.

Fairclough (2003) posits that “new communications technologies are associated with the emergence of new genres” (p. 68). A Tweet, for example, could be said to represent a new genre. I argue that blockchain technologies also suggest the emergence a new genre: each block added to a blockchain contains information that can be both numerical and textual and the process through which a block is added to a blockchain represents a new way of validating truth.²⁰ As Wirth (1938) argues, new communications technologies also play a key role in shaping the development of urbanism and urban practices:

It is obviously, therefore, to the emerging trends in the communication system and to the production and distribution technology that has come into existence with modern civilization that we must look for the symptoms which will indicate the probable future development of urbanism as a model of social life. (p. 24)

Therefore, I devote considerable attention to how cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies, both the discourses around them and the narrative qualities of the technologies themselves, shape

²⁰ See Chapter 5 for a description of how blocks are added to a blockchain and how this process functions as a micro truth regime.

the start-up societies discourse and the start-up societies imaginary and its vision of the future of urbanism as a model of social life.

Fairclough describes discourses as “semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social, or mental) which can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors” (Fairclough, 2013a, pp. 179–180). Importantly,

Discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions. (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124)

Discourses can be recontextualized. They can also be operationalized: “they may be *enacted* as new ways of (inter)acting, they may be *inculcated* as new ways of being (identities) and they may be physically *materialized*, e.g., as new ways of organizing space” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 180, emphasis in the original). The start-up societies discourse promotes an economic perspective of the world and of social relations (ex. “the market of living together” (Gebel, 2018)). It assumes that modern governments are broken beyond repair, and it is tied to a project of depoliticization through privatization (e.g., of urban spaces, of governance institutions, of the rule of law). It is also, as I argue in this dissertation, shaped by the discourses of decentralization, peer-to-peer, trust-free exchanges around cryptocurrency and blockchain technology, and by the technologies themselves. This discourse is materialized, more or less successfully, in new ways of organizing space into small, decentralized, competing, and sometimes mobile private entities. Another way of organizing space could also include physical-digital hybrid spaces, for instance by offering citizenship and operation rights within a zone to individuals who have neither residing there nor ever visited.

Styles are “ways of being”; “bodily behavior in constituting particular ways of being, or social and personal identities, as well as using language as a resource for self-identifying”– for instance being a “manager” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 180). In the case of start-up societies, the dominant style is that of the entrepreneur, also the “founder,” the “builder,” and the “pioneer.” The start-up societies discourse positions entrepreneurs as individuals imbued with a particular type of agency and ability to respond to market imperatives that are more potent than, say, politicians or non-entrepreneurs and who are fundamentally different than the rest of society. Start-up societies texts actively constitute such social identities and are meant both to resonate with individuals who identify as such and foster the entrepreneurial style.

Table 5 The Start-up Societies Discourse in Social Practice

Discourse in social practice			Start-up societies discourse in social practice
Genre (ways of acting discursively)	A facet of action	Semiotic ways of acting (e.g., job interviews, advertisements, report, editorial).	Reproducing academic and corporate genres (peer-reviewed journal, reports); promotional documents; how-to guides; podcast interviews; YouTube videos, manifestos.
Discourse (ways of representing)	Construal (representation) of aspects of the world	Semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world.	E.g., Government as broken beyond repair; evolutionist approach to governance; decentralization; tokenization; ocean as a new profit frontier; privatization

			as the path to individual and societal freedom.
Style (ways of being)	Constitution of identities	Semiotic ways of being (e.g., manager, leader).	“Entrepreneurship as the new common sense” (Szeman, 2015), entrepreneur, “founder,” “builder,” “pioneer.”

Table 5 illustrates the start-up societies discourse in social practice. To summarize, the start-up societies discourse presents a vision of governments and of the idea the nation-state as broken beyond repair and democratic governance as a hindrance on technological innovation, personal freedom, and social progress. The proposed solution is the creation of competing private cities which, proponents argue, would, in a pure market environment, create incentives for governance providers to offer the best services to attract the most customers. This discourse is expressed through various genres, such as concept designs, academic publications, or reports. These genres are more normative than, say, social media posts, and are used to facilitate the institutionalization of the start-up societies imaginary. Other genres like podcasts, YouTube videos, and memes are used to reach a greater audience and help diffuse the start-up societies imaginary within mainstream discourse. This discourse is also inculcated as a style: it both prioritizes the voice of technology entrepreneurs and “founders,” and suggests that both for individuals and states, entrepreneurialism and privatization are the only ways to increase individual and societal freedom (i.e., economic prosperity). The solutions advanced in the start-up societies discourse invariably rely on the constitution of new entrepreneurial subjectivities.

4.4 Cultural political economy and critical discourse analysis

CPE and CDA are complementary approaches (Fairclough, 2013a). Both CPE and CDA are grounded in a critical realist and strategic-relational approach. Fairclough (2013a) describes CPE as incorporating a version of CDA: “both incline to critical realism rather than post-structuralism and focus analysis on the relation between discursive and material elements of social life rather than just discourse” (p. 177). Critical realism distinguishes between “construal” and “construction” and recognizes that “the natural and social worlds differ in that the latter but not the former depends upon human action for its existence and is ‘socially constructed’” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 4). Epistemologically, this means that

the world is discursively construed (or represented) in many and various ways, but which construals come to have socially constructive effects depends upon a range of conditions which include for instance power relations but also properties of whatever part or aspects of the world are being construed. (Fairclough, 2013b, pp. 4-5)

Fairclough elaborates elsewhere:

[W]e may textually construe (represent, imagine, etc.) the social world in particular ways, but whether our representations or construals have the effect of changing its construction depends upon various contextual factors – including the way social reality already is, who is construing it, and so forth. (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 8–9).

Both CDA and CPE share a common goal of understanding how the dialectical interaction of semiotic and extra-semiotic elements contribute to meaning-making and to the selection of particular construals and their transformation into constructions, and to offer a positive critique of the strategies deployed in responses to crisis.

4.4.1 Differences between critical discourse analysis and cultural political economy

CDA and CPE differ in the focus they give to discourse and their understanding of the character of semiosis. CDA's view of semiosis "sees action as primary and representation as subsumed within it, and correspondingly sees genres as primary and discourses (as well as styles) as subsumed within them" (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 182). Fairclough (2013) explains how CDA and CPE differ in their understandings of semiosis:

CDA also sees the relation between semiosis and structures as dialectical, but conceives the relation in a different way that is inconsistent with a simple differentiation between semiosis and structuration. The structuration of social interactions is not for CDA simply "extra-semiotic" – it is partly semiotic. (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 182).

But Sum and Jessop's (2013) description of CPE also considers structuration to be partly semiotic:

Because complexity reduction has both semiotic and structural aspects, we should treat the "semiotic" and the "social" as dialectically related moments of the social world. Its semiotic moment refers to meaning-making and the emergent properties of discursive formations (such as distinct discourses, genre, genre chains, styles or intertextuality) regardless of their condensation, or otherwise, in social structures. And its social moment concerns the extra-semiotic features of social practices and their role as objective conditions and results of action (such as social cohesion and institutional integration, dilemmas and contradictions, and institutional logics) that operate "behind the backs" of agents and may not correspond to their meaning-making efforts. In other words, in so far as they have different emergent properties, the semiotic (cultural) and the social (material) are ontologically as well as analytically distinct. *Conversely, in so far as the*

social is grounded in discursively constituted and meaningful action, it is also semiotic; and, in so far as semiosis is realized in/through social relations with distinctive emergent properties, it is social. (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 155, emphasis added)

Therefore, both CDA and CPE consider that the extra-semiotic is also necessarily partly semiotic. Agency, technologies, and structuration in CDA all have a partly semiotic character (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 183). This is the case in CPE as well, but with the difference that CPE is careful not to emphasize the primacy of the semiotic aspects of discourse over structuration and rather emphasizes the dialectical relation between both (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 211).

Fairclough (2013a) argues that, because CDA prioritizes action over representation, it “makes more explicit than CPE how extra-semiotic as well as semiotic factors bear upon the selection and retention of strategies and imaginaries and the production and contestation of hegemonies” (p. 192). His view is that

relations between semiotic and extra-semiotic factors affecting the selection and retention of strategies and imaginaries are anticipated in action by social agents, which is designed to achieve the selection of particular strategies and imaginaries and prevent the selection of others. (p. 192)

Fairclough (2013a) further argues that because CDA treats discourses as “providing premises in practical argument and therefore as elements in the actions of social actors, rather than analyzing them in isolation from action,” it “contributes a more satisfactory account of how discourses may have effects on social change and the production and contestation of hegemonies” than CPE and post-structural discourse analysis do (p. 192). In other words, from a CDA perspective, “Discourses [...] provide external reasons for action” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 192).

CPE recognizes that strategies are actively selected by agents but, following Sum and Jessop (2013), it emphasizes how the conditions that operate behind the backs of agents and the uneven interaction of the agential, technological, and structural selectivities shape what action is taken, by whom, why, how, and with what degree of success. Therefore, my approach recognizes that “social actors anticipate the likely consequences of particular courses of action in terms of the likely effects of extra-semiotic (as well as semiotic) factors associated with structural and agentive selectivities” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 192), but highlights how social actors’ anticipation of the consequences of their actions is also constrained by path-shaping, path-dependent structures and by the semiotic resources available to them.

To summarize, both CDA and CPE investigate texts in their semiotic and broader social contexts (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 125), but CDA differs from CPE “in the standing it gives to language analysis – analysis of ‘texts’ in a comprehensive sense – within discourse analysis” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 177). CDA therefore provides a “methodological supplement” to CPE and reveals “the specific mechanisms through which semiotically mediated practices and social relations are reproduced” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 126). Conversely, CPE complements CDA by providing a framework to examine how “texts [not only] produce meaning and thereby help to generate social structure, but also how such production is constrained by emergent, non-semiotic features of social structures as well as by inherently semiotic factors” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 154). Fairclough (2013a) summarizes the differences and complementarity of CDA and CPE:

If CDA is faced with the problem of how to extrapolate from analysis of particular events and interactions and texts to analysis of production, reproduction, contestation and transformation of hegemonies, CPE has the problem that its generalizations are generalizations about concrete realities which themselves are not analyzed. It is

legitimate for both CDA and CPE to limit their own analytical focus and concern, but both are committed to transdisciplinary research, and within transdisciplinary research they would seem to be dependent on each other: CDA analysis needs to be framed by CPE analysis (or something similar), CPE analysis needs to be grounded in CDA analysis (or something similar) of particular social events and interactions. (p. 184)

A CPE approach to the study of the start-up societies imaginary grounded in a CDA analysis of the start-up societies discourse and events will examine texts, the conditions under which they were produced and how this production is constrained by semiotic and extra-semiotic factors, and will demonstrate why and how the start-up societies future imagination is, or is not, selected, retained and contingently sedimented into a future imaginary, and how dominant imaginaries can make the start-up societies future imaginary more resonant and likely to be selected.

4.4.2 Critical discourse analysis and imaginaries

CPE posits that imaginaries emerge in response to crises and how they are construed. CDA can help us understand how crises are construed by “problematiz[ing] problematizations” to understand “why particular social actors and agencies problematize them as they do” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 193). CDA posits that “difficulties are problematized in terms of particular discourses, so it is necessary to consider problematization not in isolation, but as providing premises in practical arguments and therefore as elements of actions” (p. 192). An examination of the start-up societies imaginary will therefore include an examination of how the dialectical relation of semiotic and extra-semiotic elements leads to a particular problematization of crisis and how this shapes its strategic response.

Using a CPE-CDA approach, we can ascertain whether the start-up society discourse is a rearticulation of the existing order of political discourse and whether its articulation materializes

a new ideological project, for whom, and for what purposes. CDA provides a method to investigate the (1) emergence and consolidation, (2) recontextualization, and (3) operationalization of the start-up societies imaginary and its interrelated discourses. This is done by examining how discourses

represent events and actions and the social agents, objects, institutions, etc., that they involve; how they narrate past and present events and action and link these narratives to imaginaries for future practices, institutions, and systems; how they explain events and actions; how they justify actions and policy proposals and legitimise imagined changed practices and systems. (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 19)

In this case, it includes examining how the start-up societies discourse engages with the discourse around cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies, and with these technologies themselves, to find a solution to the crisis of the nation-state and to formulate a particular market-centric, techno-utopian imaginary of the future in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 turns to how the Seasteading Institute, Blue Frontiers, and the French Polynesian government engaged with the blue economy discourse and the discourse of climate change to present seasteading as an adaptive solution, and how French Polynesians were presented as the “original seasteaders” to justify developing a special economic zone to host a floating island in French Polynesia. Finally, Chapter 7 examines how the start-up societies discourse connects individual freedom to entrepreneurship and competitiveness to justify proposals to build private and semi-private cities. Throughout each chapter, I show the “relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance between discourses within processes of strategic struggle” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 19). For example, in Chapter 6 I analyse the contestation between the start-up societies discourse to build a floating island in French Polynesia, which appropriated French Polynesian epistemologies, and the

French Polynesian discourse of belonging expressed through the sharing of old and recent photographs on Facebook. In Chapter 7, I examine how the discourse of Honduras Próspera LLC and its structural organizations contradicts its stated objective of offering an alternative to existing structures.

Finally, CDA allows me to examine how the start-up societies discourse is a form of “operationalisation” of particular discourses (e.g., cryptographic, neoliberal, neoconservative, neo-reactionary) as strategies, how it is implemented (i.e., enacted, inculcated, and materialized), and how this implementation is “subject to conditions which are partly extra-discursive” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 20). In this case, this means examining how the discourse around blockchain technologies and cryptocurrency offer a new way of interacting and organizing social relations (Chapter 5), how the possibility afforded by digital interaction and by mechanisms of market competition can be physically materialised as new ways of organizing space (Chapters 5 and 6), and how entrepreneurialism is enacted and inculcated as identities of the “founder” or the “builder” (Chapter 7). Throughout each chapter, I seek to highlight how neoliberal and neoconservative discourses are operationalized to support each other’s political project.

4.4.3. Critical discourse analysis and the critique of strategies

CDA is critical because its primary focus is on the effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs, and in particular on discursive aspects of power relations and inequalities: on dialectical relations between discourse and power, and their effects on other relations within the social process and their elements. (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 8)

CDA is therefore also normative: “It addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them” (p. 11). Fairclough argues that, in a time of crisis,

“the priority for critical research including CDA should shift from the critique of structures to critique of *strategies* – of attempts, in the context of the failure of existing structures, to transform them in particular directions” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 14, emphasis in the original). In this respect, CDA and CPE share similar objectives. CPE examines how

[D]iscourses and their related discursive chains can generate variation, have selective effects – reinforcing some discourses, filtering others out, and contribute to the differential retention and/or institutionalization of social relations through the recursive selection of certain genres, performances, and strategies. (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008, p. 1160)

CDA offers a normative evaluation of strategies; it is a “*positive* critique which seeks possibilities for transformations which can overcome or mitigate limits on human well-being” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 14). The aim of CDA is thus not only to critique and “merely interpret the world but [also] to contribute to changing it” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 9).

Strategies “have a strongly discursive character” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 18). They include “imaginaries for change and for new practices and systems” as well as “discourses, narratives and arguments which interpret, explain and justify the area of social life they are focused upon – its past, its present, and its possible future” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 18). A CDA analysis asks: “[W]hy it is that a particular range of strategies and discourses are emerging, why particular ones tend to become dominant, what effect they are having on the way the crisis develops, and how they may further contribute to social transformations” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 19).

Fairclough (2013b) identifies four sets of questions to examine the processes of strategic struggle in response to crises:

1. What strategies are emerging, what are their origins, and what groups of social agents are promoting them?
2. Which strategies are emerging as “winners” from strategic struggles; which strategies are “selected” as the expense of others, becoming dominant, or hegemonic?
3. Which strategies get to be implemented and actually shape social transformations and, potentially, changes in structures and systems?
4. Which strategies are, or are not, likely to lead to a progressive way out of the crisis which can bring real improvements in human well-being, and tackle major obstacles to human well-being in neo-liberal capitalism, including huge and growing inequalities of wealth and income, reduction of stability and security for many millions of people, ecologically unsustainable levels and forms of growth, and so forth? (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 18)

The start-up societies imaginary is a critique of structures: democratic structures, centralized state structures, global financial structures, modern cultural structures. My dissertation examines the strategies it proposes in response to what it presents as the crises of these structures, and questions whether these strategies offer something radically different or, on the contrary, advance a more radical version of the very conditions and configurations of power that led to these crises. This research is critical in its questioning of the consequences of such strategies on the democratization of urban futures and in its problematizing of their framing as not only possible, but also the only desirable options.

4.5 Critical futures studies and critical discourse analysis

Start-up society projects advance a particular vision of the future and of how the future is “made to happen.” They rely on emerging technologies (cryptocurrency, blockchain, and

experimental engineering) to realize this vision and on presentist explanations to explain how past futures were made to happen. This future-oriented approach shapes how these projects are conceived and materialized. For instance, start-up societies texts often invite their readers to project themselves into the future and promotional materials promise short-term economic returns and long-term social change.

CFS also employs a methodology that critically examines discourse. It “treats texts, discourses, images and ideas of the future as its primary data” and critically examines the conditions under which these texts are produced using hermeneutics, literary methods, critical discourse analysis and visual semiotics (Goode & Godhe, 2017, pp. 120–122). A study of the start-up societies imaginary will look at the texts, discourses, images, and ideas of the future, including those that present arguments about how futures are made to happen, and the conditions under which they are produced, received, and interpreted. It will ask: What claims about the future, but also about the past and how the past was transformed into a future, are being made? How do claims about the past inform claims about the future and vice versa? How do these claims shape present strategies? How are these elements constrained by processes of complexity reduction?

For example, below is an image that juxtaposes two views of Shenzhen. It appears on the Startup Societies Foundation website and circulates on start-up societies and special economic zones social media groups. According to internet research, the top photo is an undated, unattributed photo of Shenzhen Bay around Shawei, Shantou, and Huanggang that has been circulating on the internet since 2008 (Gilbert, 2008). The second photo was taken by a freelance photographer and uploaded on iStock in 2016 (yangyang1991, 2016). The first photo, in black and white, shows an aerial view of farmland in Shenzhen. The second is a high-quality image of

a nighttime skyscape from a close angle. The juxtaposition of the black and white and the high-resolution photos accentuates the contrast between the “old” and the “new” Shenzhen.

Figure 5 “Shenzhen then... and now” (Startup Societies Foundation, 2020)



This image offers a selective discursive representation of the socio-economic benefits of deregulation and free-market policies and illustrates the belief in accelerationism – the idea that radical deregulation and fast technological advances can foster rapid economic development and “human flourishing.” In terms of semiotic complexity reduction, it conveys a simplified explanation of how “the future happened” in Shenzhen. It reproduces the “fishing village into metropolis” narrative that is, according to the architectural scholar Juan Du (2020) the “most visual” misconception surrounding Shenzhen (p. 15). The result is that the image and the narrative it conveys “impl[y] that the *placeness* of Shenzhen had little bearing on its development, that the city easily could have been built elsewhere” (p.15, emphasis in the original).

The image also functions as a filtering device, suppressing important structural elements in the transformation of Shenzhen that would contradict the anti-centralized government, anti-regulation, “vote with your feet” rhetoric of these start-up societies. There is no reference here to the massive investments made by the Chinese government and the policies of expropriation that have been necessary to develop the zone nor to the regulation of access to the zone and the ongoing exploitation of rural migrants (O’Donnell et al., 2017). Moreover, the mythical story of Shenzhen as an “instant city” that has been crafted by the Chinese government, such organizations as the World Bank, and international media generally and that is reproduced in the image fails to take into consideration the role of local negotiations and practices, as well as essential factors such as the geography, history, and culture of Shenzhen (Du, 2020).

On the Startup Societies Foundation web page where this image of two Shenzhens can be found is also a short text that argues that “[a]round the world, most people are dissatisfied with their governments” and that instead of “argu[ing] about it,” individuals should “build the alternative.” But the image, in fact, ignores the extent to which Shenzhen strengthens, rather than challenges, the power of the Chinese state. In practice, this goes against the start-up societies project of reimagining sovereignty and territoriality. In *Neoliberalism as Exception* (2006), Aihwa Ong contends that Chinese special economic zones are designed for “integrating distinct political entities such as Hong Kong and Macao, and even Taiwan and Singapore, into an economic axis” (p. 98). She argues that “[t]he logic of exception deployed in the construction of the Chinese axis is marked more by a flexibility of state practices than by the unbundling or disaggregation of powers” (p. 102) and, in this context, “[z]oning technologies seem the best technical mechanism for creating controlled spaces of economic and political experimentation

that do not threaten collective and national security” (p. 113). Shenzhen is not an alternative to the Chinese government, it a project of the Chinese government.

This example demonstrates how a critical discourse analysis methodology can help deconstruct the start-up societies imaginary and identify assumptions, contradictions, and inconsistencies within its political project. The critical analysis of the story this particular image tells of how Shenzhen was propelled into the future, which entails discursive, agential, and technological selectivities (i.e., a discourse of mystical liberalization, the key role of entrepreneurs and pro-deregulation government officials as future-makers, zoning and deregulation or re-regulation as technologies of governance and memes as a tool to transmit information and promote a particular imaginary), informs us on the processes of complexity reduction that shape the start-up societies imaginary as well as its understanding of how urban futures are made to happen. Finally, it also illustrates how certain genres such as meme are used to diffuse the start-up societies discourse of social progress fast-tracked thanks to capitalist urban enclavism.

4.6 Drawbacks

CDA is “inevitably selective,” provisional, and incomplete (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 14–16). That is, “there are always particular motivations for choosing to ask certain questions about texts and not others” (p. 14).

What we are able to see of the actuality of a text depends upon the perspective from which we approach it, including the particular social issues in focus, and the social theory and discourse theory we draw upon. (Fairclough, 2003, p. 16)

Another criticism of critical discourse analysis is that it is subjective:

A critical analyst, in producing different interpretations and explanations of that area of social life, is also producing discourse. On what grounds can we say that this critical discourse is superior to the discourse which its critique is partly a critique of? The only basis for claiming superiority is providing explanations which have greater explanatory power. (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 8)

Others have conceptualized the object of research differently and studied it from legal and philosophical perspective that examined the feasibility of the seasteading, charter cities, and their moral aspects (e.g., Fateh, 2013; Freiman, 2013; Sagar, 2016) or have examined the phenomenon of start-up societies as an expression of the libertarian neoliberal imaginary (e.g., Lynch, 2017; Miéville, 2007; Peck, 2011). My contribution to the study of start-up societies, and urban entrepreneurialism more broadly, resides in my questioning of the origins, motives, and strategies of the movement, and in my examination of what the emergence, selection, and potential retention of the start-up societies imaginary can tell us about how urban futures are selected. My work does not pretend to offer the full picture, but it does make that picture fuller.

My research offers an original contribution in its critique of the start-up societies discourse and its strategies. It brings together different kinds of voices, takes them all seriously, and shows how they interact with each other. However, it will quickly become apparent that women's voices are missing. Indeed, the start-up societies movement is composed mainly of men, and virtually all start-up societies ventures were launched by men.²¹ Only three out of twenty-two survey respondents identified as women. At start-up societies conferences, female speakers were fintech entrepreneurs, researchers, and in one case, a humanoid robot ("Sophia (Robot)," 2021). I address some consequences of start-up societies urban futures as emerging

²¹ I did find one podcast launched in 2021, Build Your Own Country (Brune, 2021), that is hosted by a woman.

from a dominantly male imagination here, but more research is needed to explain this gap. Ultimately, this critical analysis can be of use to scholars, stakeholders, proponents of start-up societies and their opponents by problematizing the start-up societies imaginary's assumptions and strategies and by encouraging further reflection on the present and the future of urban governance.

4.7 Conclusion

Until now, CPE research has been applied mostly to present imaginaries, their selection, and their retention. This dissertation applies an innovative transdisciplinary framework to understand how imaginaries of the future come to be selected and retained, i.e., how what were initially “fringe” ideas come, not without power struggle, to be assimilated within mainstream discourse and policy strategies. It makes an original theoretical contribution in how it demonstrates and a CPE / CDA framework can contribute to critical studies of the future.

This chapter has explained how a CDA analytical method grounded in a CPE theoretical framework can help us understand why and how the start-up societies imaginary emerged and why and how it resonates with certain non-state and state actors as a potential solution to crises. CDA complements CPE by offering a methodological supplement to examine discourses and how discursive selectivity is constrained by agential and structural selectivities. CPE complements CDA by offering a heuristic framework that emphasizes the uneven interactions between the various strategic selectivities and avoids giving ontological primacy to discourse. CDA can also contribute to CFS by paying a particular attention to how imaginaries are shaped by interpretations of and assumptions about the future.

The chapter has also explained the advantages and challenges of such a methodology and of doing multi-sited fieldwork. It has addressed the issue of following a concept or an imaginary,

rather than an object or a single project. Gathering data both online and in-person has allowed me to paint a general portrait of whom are the non-state actors the start-up societies imaginary resonates with and why, and of the impact of overlapping digital and physical world in the formation and coordination of the start-up societies movement. A productive avenue for future research could be to further explore the state actors' perspectives, as well as the perspective of those who oppose such ventures. The next chapter examines the role of cryptocurrency and blockchain technologies, i.e., the discourses around these technologies, the narrative qualities of the technologies themselves, and the socio-technical possibilities they offer, play in shaping the start-up societies imaginary.

Chapter 5 – Encrypted geographies: Cryptography and the start-up societies imaginary

5.1 Introduction

In 2017, French Polynesia, an overseas collectivity of the French Republic, made international headlines when it announced it had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Seasteading Institute to examine the feasibility of building a floating island in the archipelago's territorial waters (The Seasteading Institute, 2017). The non-binding agreement resulted from an initiative by Marc Collins Chen, an entrepreneur with dual French and American citizenship and a former minister of tourism of French Polynesia, who had reached out to the Seasteading Institute in 2016 and suggested they consider French Polynesia as a potential location for a first seastead.

The agreement was signed in San Francisco by Jean-Christophe Bouissou, the minister of housing, land management, and urbanism, on behalf of the president of French Polynesia, Édouard Fritch, and Randolph Hencken, the executive director of the Seasteading Institute. The “Floating Island Project,” as it was called, was presented to the population and to the media as a solution to “develop new living spaces for countries threatened by rising sea levels, overpopulation, or other dangerous phenomena” (The Seasteading Institute, 2017). To seasteaders, the agreement, though non-binding, represented a significant step towards achieving their ambitious goals of colonizing the blue frontier, developing new spaces of “competitive governance” using cutting-edge technology, and creating spaces of political and economic freedom (P. Friedman & Taylor, 2012).

To the French Polynesian government, it represented an opportunity to attract foreign investments, technology transfer, and to position the archipelago as a leader in sustainable amphibious urbanism. But, as I discuss in the next chapter, the Floating Island Project gained

few followers among French Polynesians. A coalition led by Valentina Hina Cross, a member of the representative assembly of French Polynesia, denounced the project as neocolonial, elitist, and techno-utopian, formed an anti-floating island association and joined in a public protest (Chailloux, 2018; Raveino & Damour, 2018). The project became a contentious issue during the legislative election of 2018 and was soon quietly abandoned.

Figure 6 Floating Island Concept Design. Credit: Blue Frontiers, 2017.



Significantly, the successful realization of the Floating Island Project and the opening of a new techno-political frontier was contingent on the creation of geographical and digital borders. It required the development of “innovative special economic zones” on land and at sea, respectively named the “Anchor Zone” and the “Floating Islands Zone” (The Seasteading Institute, 2017) or the “SeaZone” (Bell, 2017, pp. 55–65). To develop the project, Seasteading Institute staff, investors, and interested parties founded Blue Frontiers Pte Ltd., a for-profit

company which they incorporated in Singapore because of its friendly position on cryptocurrency trading. To raise capital, Blue Frontiers organized an initial coin offering (ICO) for a cryptocurrency called Varyon, named to reference “increasing variation in governance,” at a time when there was a significant momentum for alternative cryptocurrencies and the ICO market was reaching its highest point of growth (Blue Frontiers, 2018b).²² Varyon would have been the only currency used on the floating island (Blue Frontiers, 2018b), and would have created a parallel economy within French Polynesia’s territory that would have been difficult to audit for external institutions and participants since cryptocurrencies allow for pseudonymous transactions associated to digital wallets.

This chapter argues that cryptocurrency and blockchain technology are key aspects of the discursive, agential, and technological selectivities that shape the start-up societies imaginary. Specifically, I argue that start-up society initiatives aim to transpose cyberspace onto geographical space and to realize in the material world the promises of the digital world to allow individuals to transcend geographical borders and foster the spontaneous organization of like-minded communities using digital technology. In doing so, start-up society initiatives create hybrid geographies whose invisible borders are digital and ideological. Should they prove successful, the borders will be geographical as well.

The chapter first provides a brief overview of the development of Bitcoin, the most well-known cryptocurrency, and of blockchain, the technology that allows Bitcoin mining and trading. Second, it interrogates how the conceptualization of start-up societies by their proponents is shaped by the discourses of trustless peer-to-peer networks, decentralization, and

²² The sale of Varyon raised approximately ETH 3 100, equivalent to just over US\$ 1.4 million at the time, between May and July 2018, when it was postponed until further notice (Chapman, 2018). When the project was abandoned, investors who requested it were refunded.

individual freedom around those technologies, and by their narrative qualities. Third, it explains how start-up society ventures rely on cryptography through their embrace of, and reliance on, cryptocurrency and blockchain technology and how this leads to the formation of not only a new cyberelite but also digital and semiotic borders.

Figure 7 Varyon Advertisement at the Startup Societies Summit 2018. Photo by the author.



I develop the concept of encrypted geographies to describe such hybrid spaces designed to provide an exit from the state and a path “beyond” politics (Thiel, 2009) and to allow communities to exist and act primarily around a shared ideology rather than a shared geography (May, 2001a; Srinivasan, 2017). Access to these new spaces is restricted via digital and semiotic

encryption. I distinguish between digital and semiotic encryption to explain how the formation of encrypted geographies entails processes of invisible bordering using both digital technologies and a common framework for making sense of the world. Semiotic encryption “hides” certain meanings within discourses (understood here to encompass texts and visual elements), which can easily be understood by those who possess the “decryption key,” or a particular knowledge allowing them to decrypt these coded meanings. These processes of digital and semiotic encryption simultaneously exclude unwanted regulatory entities and auditors and recruit like-minded agents. I contend that the concept of encrypted geographies can help us think about how the interaction of the material, the discursive, and the digital shapes the prospects for community and future bordering processes.

5.2 Encryption, trust, and governance

On 31 October 2008, a whitepaper that described a peer-to-peer electronic cash system called Bitcoin was shared on a little-known cryptography mailing list by one or multiple authors writing under the pseudonym of Satoshi Nakamoto. It described a digital network that “would allow online payments to be sent directly from one party to another without going through a financial institution” (Nakamoto, 2008). Proposed in the midst of the 2008 financial crisis, Bitcoin was originally conceived as a way to replace trust in central authorities and third parties, both financial institutions and human agents, through cryptographic proof of validity (Nakamoto, 2008). It can be seen as a critical response to the failures of central banks and global financial regulatory structures.²³ However, the Bitcoin proposal built on a series of attempts to create a digital alternative to state-issued currency that predated the crisis and should also be understood

²³ Satoshi Nakamoto embedded the headline from the 3 January 2009 edition of The Times of London, “Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks,” into Bitcoin’s genesis block, the first block of the Bitcoin blockchain, which was mined on that date.

as part of a long lineage of projects seeking to develop digital currencies and communities (Brunton, 2019). In particular, the Bitcoin proposal drew on the earlier work of such American cypherpunks and crypto-anarchists as David Chaum, a computer scientist and cryptographer who, in 1989, founded an electronic money corporation called DigiCash; Wei Dai, a computer engineer who published a paper on b-money, “an anonymous, distributed electronic cash system” (Dai, 1998), that describes the core concepts later implemented in Bitcoin and other cryptocurrency systems; and Nick Szabo, a computer scientist who proposed the idea of smart contracts in 1994 and a virtual currency called bit gold in 1998.²⁴

A Bitcoin is the result of computerized mathematical operations. Put simply, it is “a long string of code with monetary value” (K. Davis, 2019). Each Bitcoin transaction consists of a chain of digital signatures verified by a network of users and subsequently recorded in a distributed ledger called a blockchain. A blockchain is a continuously growing record of mathematical operations maintained across computers (nodes) that are linked in a peer-to-peer network. Each record is called a “block” and contains, in addition to information about the transactions it represents, a cryptographic hash (the product of a mathematical algorithm that reduces a complex set of information to a compressed numerical value) of the previous block which acts as a unique digital fingerprint. This digital signature ensures data integrity, authenticity, and non-repudiation. Before being added to the blockchain, each block is mathematically verified by nodes that compete to find the solution to a mathematical problem. This protocol is known as “proof-of-work” and prevents double-spending.

²⁴ The term cypherpunk was coined in 1992 by Jude Milhon, a hacker and author, and refers to “a person who advocates the use of cryptographic techniques to ensure privacy and anonymity in electronic communications” (“Cypherpunk,” n.d.) and “as a route to social and political change” (“Cypherpunk,” 2020; Hughes, 1993). Crypto-anarchism refers to “a form of anarchy accomplished through computer technology” (“Crypto-Anarchism,” 2020; May, 2001b). A smart contract is “a computerized transaction protocol that executes the terms of a contract” (Szabo, 1994).

The first node to find the solution is rewarded in Bitcoin.²⁵ This process is called “Bitcoin mining” and requires significant computer power, expensive hardware, and massive amounts of electricity to run calculations – a feature that was included on purpose in the Bitcoin protocol to discourage fraudulent users.²⁶ Because each transaction is certified by the proof-of-work protocol, it is impossible to spend the same token more than once.²⁷ Proof-of-work thus functions as “a decentralised consensus protocol using cryptography and economic incentives to encourage people to operate and simultaneously secure the network” (De Filippi & Loveluck, 2016, p. 5). Each new verified block is linked to the previous using cryptography, creating a public ledger, the blockchain, of which all network participants can hold a copy. This makes it impossible for one node to alter the information contained in the blockchain without a majority consensus. Bitcoin is therefore “trustless” in the sense that, thanks to its blockchain-based distributed consensus mechanism, its monetary value is not dependent on the performance of an issuing state, but on the successful solving of complex mathematical problems (De Filippi & Loveluck, 2016, p. 11; Greenfield, 2017, p. 122).²⁸

When the value of Bitcoin spiked from US\$800 to almost US\$20,000 in 2017, cryptocurrencies became a hotly debated topic. Cryptocurrencies were described both as a get-rich-quick scheme that appealed to techno-optimist libertarians who claimed to see an

²⁵ At the Bitcoin launch, the reward for mining a block was BTC 50. As of January 2021, it is BTC 6.25. This is because there have been three “halvings” so far, a process integrated in the original Bitcoin protocol that cuts the supply of new Bitcoins in half and decreases the block reward over time. Halvings happen every four years.

²⁶ Bitcoin has been called “digital gold” because it is scarce (only 21 million bitcoins can be mined in total, a decision that was made by Nakamoto) and because it must be “extracted” from mathematical operations via computational means.

²⁷ Tokenization is the process of replacing data with unique identification symbols. A Bitcoin is a fungible digital token, meaning that it is a digital asset built so that each individual token is equivalent to the next and has the same value. In other words, each Bitcoin is equal to all other Bitcoins. A non-fungible token is a digital asset that represents a unique value.

²⁸ Bitcoin is the best-known product built on a blockchain (the Bitcoin blockchain), but there are many others. They can be public, private, or permissioned. A blockchain can be used to store, share, and track all kinds of information from banking, environmental, and genomic data to the rules of distributed applications and autonomous organizations and the contracts they enforce (Rogers, 2018; UNICEF, n.d.; *WWF-Australia and OpenSC*, 2018).

opportunity to “decentralize power and wealth” and “chang[e] the world order” (Bowles, 2018a), and as a potential threat to national security as cryptocurrencies could also be used by rogue states, terrorists, and criminals to bypass international sanctions and launder money (Panda, 2018). In both cases, cryptocurrencies promised to disrupt the processes through which money is created and transacted and to challenge governments’ regulatory power over those processes. In December 2018, the price of Bitcoin, which is notoriously volatile, briefly dipped below US\$3,300, but the questions it raised and the political speculations it generated remained.

The literature on the sociology and the politics of Bitcoin demonstrates how the Bitcoin community is characterized by contradictory implicit assumptions and power struggles. Bitcoin and blockchain do not eliminate the issue of trust, but rather “shift” and “extend” trust in elite-led governance by according more governance power to mining pools (groups of miners who combine their computational resources), developers, and particularly active cryptocurrency advocates to ultimately reflect the pathologies of global financial integration (Campbell-Verduyn & Goguen, 2019; see also De Filippi & Loveluck, 2016; Dodd, 2018; Karlstrøm, 2014). These unresolved trust issues reveal how blockchain was originally “conceived as a space disconnected from the society from whence it came” and illustrate the “disconnect between the rhetoric of the disruptive power of algorithmic governance and the reality of practice” (Zook & Blankenship, 2018, pp. 250, 253).

Whether blockchain technology is actually useful is therefore subject to debate. It has been described both as a “revolution” (Tapscott & Tapscott, 2016) and as “the amazing solution for almost nothing” (Frederik, 2020). But blockchain is significant in its capacity to make us rethink the ways we organize and govern ourselves. As Greenfield (2017) suggests:

If the blockchain can be extracted from Bitcoin, perhaps the idea of a networked, self-sustaining framework for the development of consensus can be further elaborated, beyond the constraints imposed by the blockchain itself. [...] In principle, this infrastructure is something we might use to organize ourselves in entirely new ways, opening up approaches to collaboration that none of our previous institutions could have supported. And just as clearly, its advent would present profound implications for the way we assemble ourselves into groups at any scale beyond the strictly local, and with any degree of structure beyond the most ad hoc and informal. (pp. 143-144)

These possibilities have led cryptosecessionists and cryptoanarchists to embrace cryptocurrency and blockchain to create alternative economic and governance structures. They interpret these new technologies as a way to open up new techno-political frontiers beyond the reach of governments.

5.2.1 Decentralized Autonomous Organizations

The development of such mechanisms of digital governance as decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) illustrate one possibility for the blockchain-based restructuration of society. DAOs are a new form of social organization represented by rules encoded as a computer program relying on blockchain technology. A DAO could comprise a digital community or corporation with its own sets of rules, courts of law, smart contracts, and cryptocurrency. Greenfield (2017) describes DAOs as a “model of transhuman assembly” in which “one or more of the parties involved in steering a group might themselves consist of code” (p. 164). As a DAO exists outside any terrestrial jurisdiction, it is “very hard to suppress, and poses particular conceptual difficulties for state organizations that might be interested in regulating its conduct” (p. 163). Unlike Twitter, Facebook, and other applications that have been seen as liberating

technologies, but which states are successfully monitoring, regulating, and blocking, DAOs' web hosting could be decentralized so that blocking one website would not necessarily limit access to it.

The best-known example of DAO is The DAO, a project launched in April 2016 that intended to provide a platform run on the Ethereum blockchain, which, unlike the Bitcoin blockchain, permits the creation and execution of smart contracts. The goal of The DAO was to allow cryptocurrency holders to directly fund and manage new enterprises (DuPont, 2018). An estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people invested in The DAO to raise about US\$250 million in funding, the highest amount ever crowdfunded at that time (DuPont, 2018, p. 158). However, the code was rapidly "exploited" by an unknown individual who was able to extract millions of dollars from The DAO. This prompted Ethereum leaders, cryptocurrency exchanges, and informal technical leaders to intervene. The DAO, DuPont (2018) explains, "was supposed to represent a turning point in legal authority, where code really does form a new legal regime" but its hack "helped expose the tension necessarily present in the space between algorithmic and existing, juridical legal authority" (p. 169). Those same hierarchical social structures that control the cryptocurrency ecosystem had to be mobilized to resolve The DAO's crisis. This well-documented example suggests that DAOs likely cannot function without human oversight.

Nonetheless, multiple DAOs are in development. Even if they have an opaque legal status and questionable usefulness, they offer intriguing thought experiments about how cryptography could challenge accepted understandings of sovereignty, territoriality, and citizenship, and to restructure society. Bitnation is an organization developing what it calls the Pangea Blockchain Jurisdiction, which it claims is "the world's first Decentralized Borderless Voluntary Nation (DBVN)" (*Bitnation*, n.d.) The Pangea Blockchain Jurisdiction aims to

“outcompete existing [governance] systems” and to this effect offers a “decentralized market for legal services” including smart contracts and dispute resolution (*Bitnation*, n.d.). In reality, Bitnation is nothing more than a concept, but it points to a broader trend in the rise of virtual citizenship as a “commodity that can be acquired through the purchase of real estate or financial investments, subscribed to via an online service, or assembled by peer-to-peer digital networks” (Bridle, 2018).

Another DAO, Aragon, creates tools for other DAOs and invites users to “build the community of your dreams” (Aragon, n.d.). Aragon was founded in 2016 by two internet entrepreneurs to address “the emergent society crisis, and failure of democracy” (Aragon, *About*, n.d.). It proposes using DAOs to “change our relationship with governance: from something that is imposed upon us by others, into something we choose to opt into” (Aragon, *Aragon Manifesto*, n.d.):

Building tools to create and manage decentralized organizations will unleash a Cambrian explosion of new governance forms, and the competition among them will raise the bar globally.

It will finally allow us to experiment with governance at the speed of software. (*Aragon Manifesto*, n.d.)

The text of the Aragon manifesto echoes the start-up societies discourse. For instance, the idea of a “Cambrian explosion in government” is also the slogan of a collective blog dedicated to discussing seasteading and other “innovations in governance” that could offer an alternative to democracy (*A Thousand Nations*, 2019). The analogy of governance as a software is also a recurring theme in the start-up societies discourse.

Aragon's token is the Aragon Network Token (ANT). It is used not only as a medium of exchange, but also as a "governance token" that users can buy to become jurors in the Aragon Court. When drafted, a juror must perform certain actions to earn tokens as a reward for their participation and avoid penalties. Aragon thus offers users the possibility of creating alternative communities with their own laws and a financial incentive to participate in the judicial and governance systems. Although the Aragon court has no legal validity, it points to another important trend in the financialization and privatization of judicial systems, namely the rise of private arbitration centers (Kuttner & Stone, 2020).

Blockchain technology and "the rhetoric about autonomous agents and organizations" at its core, Greenfield (2017) argues, "are conscious steps toward a trans- or even entirely posthuman ordering of the world [...] because they conceive of humanity as something to be transcended" (p. 180). Blockchain, Greenfield (2017) explains,

presents new ways of thinking about organization itself – about what it means to associate with others, how joint intention might be harnessed, and parties unknown to one another yoked in effective collaboration, across all the usual barriers of space and time. (p. 147)

Start-up societies also embrace the notion that blockchains and cryptocurrencies can reorganize and recombine social and economic formations at different scales. This could be accomplished by the creation of decentralized communities that function through distributed consensus and parallel cryptographic economies. In other words, software could reorganize and recombine social and economic formations by replacing the social contract with the smart contract, trust with distributed consensus, and cash and analog proof of ownership with cryptocurrencies and tokens.

Although it is true that, so far, cryptocurrencies and DAOs have been rather unsuccessful in creating viable alternatives to existing systems, they are relevant in how they open up new possibilities in terms of cryptosecession, “the phenomenon of individuals seceding from state-run institutions [...] by using cryptographic technologies such as Bitcoin and other blockchain applications to exit to virtual ‘states,’” and cryptostatecraft, “the practice of political entrepreneurs building new institutions using cryptographic technologies” (MacDonald, 2019, pp. 63–64). Start-up society initiatives draw on such digital practices but differ from cryptosecessionist projects in that they also entail a geographical component.

5.3 Coding an exit from politics

Proponents of start-up societies conceptualize the partition of geography and its governance by the state and the power of the state over individuals as crises from which they seek an exit. The idea of “exit” can be traced back to Hirschman’s (1970) treatise *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* that examines the interplay between exit and voice and the role loyalty plays in retarding exit and permitting voice to play its role in the contexts of firms, organizations, and states. The binary of “voice” versus “exit” has been appropriated by several libertarian-oriented organizations and texts that do not necessarily directly engage with Hirschman’s work. Examples include Voice and Exit: Festival of the Future, now called Future Frontiers, an annual event that aims to “transcend the ‘impossible,’” “criticize by creating,” and “maximize human flourishing” (Future Frontiers, *Our Philosophy*, n.d.). The event, which I attended in 2016, is described as the “baby” of “Burning Man and TED” and brings together entrepreneurs and “visionaries” who advance Future Frontiers’ “optimistic futurism” philosophy (Future Frontiers, *About*, n.d.). Among its advisors are Joe Quirk, from the Seasteading Institute, Tom W. Bell, an advisor to

multiple seasteading and start-up societies projects, and Michael Strong and Zach Caceres, two long-time advocates of charter cities.

Hirschman's book is also mentioned in *The Sovereign Individual*, by James Dale Davidson and Lord William Rees-Mogg (2020). The authors cite Hirschman to justify their argument that, in the future, "sovereign individuals" empowered by technology, especially digital cash, will "exit" and shop for competitive jurisdictions and private city-states:

Sovereign Individuals will no longer merely accede to what is imposed upon them as human resources of the state. Millions will shed the obligations of citizenship to become customers for the useful service governments provide. Indeed, they will create and patronize parallel institutions that will place most of the services associated with citizenship on an entirely commercial basis. (p. 263)

Such ideas are also echoed within the neo-reactionary (NRx) movement that opposes democratic forms of governance and advocates "construct[ing] a patchwork of (city-)state forms in which 'exit' is the only 'human right'" (Burrows, 2019, p. 253; P. Friedman, quoted in Land, n.d.; Moldbug, 2017). The two main theorists of NRx are the philosopher Nick Land and the software engineer Curtis Yarvin, who writes under the *nom-de-plume* Mencius Moldbug. Both Yarvin and Land have referred positively to Thiel's (2009) (in)famous essay in *Cato Unbound*, in which he writes that he "no longer believe[s] that freedom and democracy are compatible" and, for this reason, focuses his efforts "on new technology that may create a new space for freedom" including cyberspace, outer space, and seasteading, as well as to Hirschman's treatise (N. Land, n.d.; Moldbug, 2017). Yarvin is a proponent of what he calls "neocameralism," based on Prussian cameralism, "in which a state is conceptualized as a business that *owns* a country"

(Burrows, 2019, emphasis in the original).²⁹ Yarvin is also the founder of Urbit, a peer-to-peer network that aims to provide an alternative to corporate-controlled internet as well as a “decentralized digital identity system” (*Urbit*, n.d.), for which he received funding from Peter Thiel, and which Smith and Burrows (2021) describe as a form of “architecture of exit” that “captures how post-neoliberal politics imagines notions of freedom and sovereignty through a micro-fracturing of nation-states into ‘gov-corps’” (p. 1).

The Startup Societies Foundation synthesizes the idea of “exit” and of voting with one’s feet in what it calls “the principle of exit,” described on its website as an “ethical principle” according to which “startup societies must not unduly increase the cost of exit and prevent experimentation and improvement” (“Ethical Code: The Exit Principle,” 2017). The small scale of start-up societies makes this possible: “While there is still a monopoly of government, startup societies are so small that the cost of exit is drastically reduced. One can simply vote with their feet” (“Ethical Code: The Exit Principle,” 2017). Proponents of start-up societies argue that individuals should be free to leave unsatisfactory societies much like vacationers select the cruise ship operator they like best. This very analogy is used by seasteaders (Quirk & Friedman, 2017, pp. 16–25). Indeed, the “principle of exit” is also at the core of the seasteading project:

In the seasteading worldview, any set of rules is okay, *as long as the residents consent to it voluntarily and can leave whenever they choose*. We believe that citizens must opt into a society with informed consent to an explicit social contract, and they must have the

²⁹ Both Curtis Yarvin and the economist Paul Romer were scheduled to speak at a conference organized by the Seasteading Institute in 2009, but Romer withdrew from his speaking engagement due to “reasons related to the content” of Yarvin’s blog, in particular one post in which Yarvin accuses Romer of intellectual plagiarism. Yarvin also characterizes Romer’s proposal for charter cities as a form of colonialism, which Romer argues in his TED Talk they are not. Yarvin does not oppose colonialism, only Romer’s claim (Moldbug, 2009a). Yarvin was also subsequently disinvited from the Seasteading Institute’s conference (Moldbug, 2009b).

freedom to exit if they no longer believe that society is serving them. (Quirk & Friedman, 2017, p. 31, emphasis in the original)

Cryptography plays a key role in the start-up societies movement's strategy to resolve what they conceptualize as a crisis of the monopoly of the state over governance and to take capitalism in new directions. To make it possible to exit unsatisfactory societies and accelerate the processes of building new institutions and of reinventing society, proponents of start-up societies rely on such emerging technologies as cryptocurrency and blockchain, to raise capital to finance their ventures, create parallel economies where capital is protected from taxation and auditing and that can facilitate peer-to-peer transactions, and develop new models of decentralized governance. Start-up societies' embrace of cryptocurrency and blockchain technologies can therefore be understood as a strategic way to work toward realizing their paradoxical political ambition to go beyond politics, to present their ventures as urban and technological accelerators, and to code their way to political exit. Conversely, the discourses around these technologies and the particular ways in which they create meaning and validate truth also shape how start-up societies are conceptualized.

What is significant in terms of the discursive selectivity is how the conceptualization of start-up societies as geographical and technological alternatives to the state is shaped by the discourses of trustless peer-to-peer networks, encryption, and decentralization around cryptocurrency and blockchain technologies. These are selectively reproduced in the start-up societies' discourse on websites, in promotional documents and formal speeches, and at social events. For instance, the 2017 Start-up Societies Summit, whose official hashtag was #disruptgov, was described as a "decentralized governance trade show" and included a

“decentralized dance party,” as did the 2020 summit (McKinney, 2017a; *Tom and Gary’s Decentralized Dance Party*, n.d.).

Cryptocurrency and blockchain are also included in most start-up societies development strategies. Conversely, cryptocurrency and blockchain events offer venues to promote the projects. Blue Frontiers claimed its founders worked with “teams of engineers, researchers, biologists, aquaculture farmers, special economic zones experts, blockchain specialists, environmentalists, and many others to develop SeaZones and seasteads” (Blue Frontiers, newsletter, June 26, 2018). Randolph Hencken, then the Seasteading Institute’s executive director, presented the Floating Island Project at the Free the Blockchain conference series. Ocean Builders, a venture launched by two cryptocurrency enthusiasts and seasteading supporters, claimed that “Owners that wish to have blockchain based ownership” would be able to do so through “[Ocean Builders’] innovative partner that will implement a decentralized system for controlling shares of an Ocean Builders home” (Ocean Builders, newsletter, December 10, 2019). In October 2020, Ocean Builders also announced the purchase of a cruise ship, *MS Satoshi*, named after Satoshi Nakamoto, the pseudonymous inventor(s) of Bitcoin. Also known as the Crypto Cruise Ship, the vessel would welcome 1, 500 people onboard the “first operational seastead community” and provide a “gathering place and incubator for crypto enthusiasts, entrepreneurs, researchers, and digital nomads” (Ocean Builders, 2020a, 2020c). However, in December 2020, the company announced it had been unable “to get insurance to use the ship as a stationary residential cruise ship” and that it was being sent to a scrap yard in India (Ocean Builders, 2020d).

Figure 8 Promotional image for MS Satoshi, Ocean Builders (2020)



In reproducing the discourses around cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology in its own discourse and events, the start-up societies movement inscribes itself within the genre chain, the linkage of different genres that function “as a regulative device for selecting and privileging some discourses and excluding others” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 34), of crypto-secessionism and of digital economic and political decentralization. This genre chain is articulated in the Bitcoin (Nakamoto, 2008) and the Ethereum (Buterin, 2013) whitepapers, books (e.g., Borders, 2018; Dale Davidson & Rees-Mogg, 2020), blog posts and online forums (e.g., *A Thousand Nations*, 2019), speeches and presentations (e.g. Friedman, 2020; Srinivasan, 2017), media articles (e.g., Srinivasan, 2013), manifestos (e.g., *Aragon Manifesto*, n.d.; Barlow, 1996; May, 2001b), conferences (e.g., *d10e*, n.d.; *Future Frontiers*, n.d.) and social events (e.g., *Tom and Gary’s Decentralized Dance Party*, n.d.). Engaging with the discourses around cryptocurrency and blockchain links the start-up societies movement to the broader political project to use these

technologies to provide an alternative to central banks and government's control over monetary policy and, more broadly, to disrupt the democratic nation-state model of governance and escape beyond, or exit, politics or, more accurately, the political.

Simply using the discourse around blockchain and cryptocurrencies is sometimes used as a strategy to entice governments into welcoming start-up society projects. In a podcast interview on the topic of "Bitcoin Citadels as Free Private Cities," Titus Gebel, the founder of Free Private Cities, an organization that advocates the development of private cities, and of Tipolis, a special economic zone consultancy, explained how such keywords as "blockchain" and "crypto" could be used strategically to convince potential host nations to welcome private city ventures:

As always, it's a trade-off, right, for the host nation. It's... if they can get something out of it. And that's my offer. I say: "Here's the deal: we bring good, qualified, high-performing people, we bring Bitcoin technology," or just mention the word "blockchain." They say "Oh blockchain!" They don't know what it is, but they have heard that it is something new and... "We can bring something new, technology, in your backward country. [...] And here's the deal, you give us some internal autonomy, and we bring some investors and hire high-potential people, and new technologies. That's the deal." [...] The other thing is that we already have a door, and it's called special economic zones. [...] We say it's nothing special, we don't call it Free Private City, it's a special economic zone plus, or prosperity zone, or Bitcoin zone. I think the last hype was, what was it? A crypto-zone. Malta was chasing this, Cyprus, even Monaco wanted to have her own crypto, Gibraltar, they all want to make crypto stock exchanges. [...] We will be pragmatic and say, "okay, whatever, you name it, and we fill it with content." (in Livera, 2020)

Blockchain and cryptocurrencies, and the hype around them, can be strategically used discursively by proponents of start-up societies familiar with them and who, as I explain below, position themselves as intermediary experts who can translate for government officials who are less tech-literate. They aim to trade jurisdictional autonomy in exchange for their expertise and promise to bring not only new technology, but also young, “high-performing” and “high-potential” entrepreneurs who could potentially help to position host countries as techno-political leaders. Another strategy is to invoke the model of the special economic zone, already well-established globally. I examine how both these strategies were used in the case of the floating island in French Polynesia (Chapter 6) and in the case of Honduras Próspera (Chapter 7), a “prosperity hub” under development in Honduras, and for which Gebel, who is an investor in the project, acted as chief legal officer. However, engaging with cryptocurrency and blockchain technology is more than a marketing strategy. The conceptualizations of society and of the future that are embedded in these technologies also shape the start-up societies imaginary.

The start-up societies imaginary is shaped not only by the discourses around blockchain and cryptocurrencies technologies, but also by the narrative qualities of these technologies. In other words, how blockchain and cryptocurrency structure and regulate interactions also shapes the start-up societies imaginary. Reijers and Coeckelbergh (2019) show how blockchain is a “narrative technology” that “can actively shape our social world” (p. 104). Blockchain and cryptocurrencies are “not merely shaped by narratives that are constructed *about* them” but also have “‘narrative’ qualities themselves” that have normative implications (p. 112, emphasis in the original). They argue that, at an ontological level, blockchain technologies “configure the narratives through which we understand our social reality” (Reijers & Coeckelbergh, 2019, p. 123), and that “[b]y time-stamping transactions and adding them in a fixed, irreversible order

to the public ledger, cryptocurrencies enforce the chronological time dimension in the narrative structure of transactions” (p. 121). This means that once structured via blockchain technologies, “our social relations are transformed in such a way that they become rigid, irreversible and non-negotiable” (p. 121). Ultimately, this “consequent decrease of a dynamic understanding of temporality reduces the freedom and the responsibility of humans interacting with the blockchain” (p. 121). This is significant because it indicates that the application of blockchain “might have disempowering effects” (p. 121).

These findings contradict claims that the technology is a new mechanism of decentralized, autonomous governance that necessarily frees individuals from the state structures and allows them to experiment with more equalitarian forms of governance. For instance, if a smart contract is formally breached

the blockchain protocol functions as the arbiter: its acceptance or rejection of a transaction functions as the final verdict without a question being asked as to whether the transaction is desirable in the first place, given the social context in which it took place. (pp. 121-122)

This example illustrates how blockchain “brings about an abstraction from the world of action it represents” (p. 122) and demonstrates “an important normative implication of the narrative configurations of blockchain technologies, namely that they result in a *forgetting* of the complex significations that exist in the world of action that they configure” (p. 123, emphasis in the original). Thus, blockchain is not only “conceived as a space disconnected from the society from whence it came” (Zook & Blankenship, 2018), but its functioning depends on forgetting the connections that form this society.³⁰ Similarly, the start-up societies imaginary is largely

³⁰ As David Golumbia (2016) puts it: “As objects of discourse, Bitcoin and the blockchain do a remarkable job of reinforcing the view that the entire global history of political thought and action needs to be jettisoned, or, even

premised on “forgetting” or reformatting the connections that form society and on the contradictory notion that code can be more effective, or more objective than politics, even though code itself is the product of human effort and includes human biases. Just as blockchain and cryptocurrency shift rather than replace trust and power, so do start-up societies.

5.4 Software country

Despite these contradictions, the notion of virtual community powered by blockchain and cryptocurrency increasingly shapes how the future of governance and of society is envisioned. Start-up society ventures seek to harness the opportunities offered by cryptography to create new governance mechanisms, institutions, and economies as the foundation for new trustless, decentralized communities. One example is that of “software countries.” This concept was described in a presentation by Balaji Srinivasan at the annual Startup Societies Foundation’s summit in August 2017. I attended this presentation in person, and it is also available on YouTube. Srinivasan is a Silicon Valley venture investor and entrepreneur, a former general partner at the prominent venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, former chief technology officer at the cryptocurrency exchange Coinbase, and an advisor to the Startup Societies Foundation and to Pronomos Capital.

An outspoken advocate of cryptography and cryptocurrencies, Srinivasan (2017) argues that “digital currency is part of a fundamental shift in human organization, from shared geography to shared ideas” that will lead to “every country becoming a Network State or Software Country.” He suggests that the network state or software country will emerge from an increased belief that “encrypted computer networks are the most powerful force in the world” as

worse, that is has already been jettisoned through the introduction of any number of digital technologies” (p. 60, emphasis in the original).

“strong cryptography can resist an unlimited application of violence: no amount of coercive force will ever solve a math problem” (Srinivasan, 2017). Srinivasan reiterated this point on Twitter, where he has over 331,000 followers as of the time of writing, in 2019: “means of encryption > means of production,” implying that with the emergence of cryptocurrency and the new political possibilities that cryptography offers, the ability to encrypt and decrypt a file is superior to the ability to produce goods and is creating a shift in power relations.

Srinivasan’s description of the software country echoes a suggestion made two decades earlier by Timothy C. May, an electronic engineer and early advocate of internet privacy and crypto-anarchism. In a paper on the topic of crypto-anarchy and virtual communities originally published in 1994, May argues that virtual communities, in which “the ‘virtual’ is meant to imply a nonphysical linking but should not be taken to mean that these are any less community-like than are conventional physical communities,” are “in their ascendancy, displacing conventional notions of nationhood” (May, 1994/2001a, p. 77). “Geographic proximity is no longer as important as it once was,” May explains, and Internet users increasingly consider themselves “more as members of various virtual communities than as members of locally governed entities” (p. 77). Those views are also shared by Satoshi Nakamoto (2009) who, in an email dated 13 February 2009, wrote that he “love[d] the idea of virtual, non-geographic communities experimenting with new economic paradigms.”

May (1994/2001a) writes that these virtual communities are “typically ‘opaque’ to outsiders,” meaning “not transparent, not visible” (pp. 67-68). They are secret, encrypted, and protected by their own invisible borders. Both May and Srinivasan also draw attention to how virtual communities’ opacity applies to the identification of community members through “digitally authenticated reputations”, whereby someone can successfully use a pseudonym and

gain a reputation of trust and credibility (May, 1994/2001a, p. 71). On Twitter, Srinivasan (2019, 2021) has been predicting the rise of pseudonymous and “synthetic” identities created with realistic photos and videos of persons who do not exist. If these predictions prove true, we could, in a near future, witness the emergence of software countries with such physical outposts as urban hubs or common-interest communities, populated by real and pseudonymous and synthetic citizens, and governed by humans and algorithms.

The idea of virtual communities is not new (e.g., Boellstorff, 2008; Rheingold, 1993; Stephenson, 1992). In fact, it could be argued that start-up societies are heirs to the systems thinking and cybernetic cities of the 1960s and 1970s (Wakeman, 2016, pp. 151–201). Compare, for instance, Balaji Srinivasan’s description of the network state to the urban designer and theorist Melvin Webber’s description of “non-places urban realms” that would emerge with the transformation of communication technologies, what he called a “community without propinquity” (in Wakeman, 2016, p. 170). With cybernetics, “The city would instead become a virtual space of information streams and electronic traffic” (Wakeman, 2016, p. 170). This is what May and Srinivasan argue is happening with cryptography.

Srinivasan (2013) argues that “cloud formations of mind,” the digital and cultural association of like-minded individuals, increasingly supersedes the association with geographically proximate neighbors. The technology that connects remote peers also makes them more mobile and thus more likely to meet in person, so that “these cloud formations of mind are beginning to take physical shape, driving the reorganization of bodies” in “the form of long-term friendly communities that are geographically collocated” (Srinivasan, 2013). Thanks to technology, such communities could easily scale at an accelerated pace and “we may begin to see cloud towns, then cloud cities, and ultimately cloud countries materialize out of thin air.”

Srinivasan (2013) calls this emerging phenomenon “the reverse diaspora: one that starts out internationally distributed, finds each other online, and ends up physically concentrated.”

One such reverse diaspora, Srinivasan argues, is Silicon Valley. But now that Silicon Valley has become less attractive to start-up entrepreneurs due to rising homelessness, housing prices and a perceived rising crime rate (socio-economic phenomena not unrelated to the impact of the start-up industry and culture), a proposed solution is to relocate the reverse diaspora. Ryan Rzepecki, the founder of JUMP Bikes, which was acquired by Uber in 2018 for approximately US\$200 million, announced in June 2020 that he would use the profits from the sale to develop a plan for a self-governing private city in an undisclosed location in anticipation of an exile of tech workers from Silicon Valley. Although Rzepecki admits that “it is very tricky to build an economy and convince tens of thousands to relocate,” he believes that “there are going to be a variety of approaches and a variety of founders tackling the problem” (cited in Murphy, 2020). The same technology that incentivized the creation of a like-minded, ideologically oriented community in a particular place can recreate it elsewhere. The network state or software country is encrypted, mobile, and so are its borders.

5.5 Encrypted Meanings

Encrypted geographies are also semiotically encrypted, a term I use to refer to the coding of a space into a particular ideological project through discursive and technological selectivities so that agents with a particular ability to “read conjunctures and identify potentials for action” will obtain a better understanding of, and more power over, that space (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 219). This means that such spaces are shaped by, and bordered by, a particular worldview including its own meanings and assumptions, and the technologies of governance and agency it

employs. Whereas digital encryption protects information from unwanted auditors, semiotic encryption restricts access to those who share a common worldview.

Semiotic encryption, realized through discursive and technological selectivities, is powerful because it allows the start-up societies movement to implicitly advocate a radical authoritarian project in which the central authority is that of the market. They employ superficially apolitical but deeply ideologically terms to advance a worldview that blends technodeterminism and social Darwinism. The start-up societies political project is couched in the rhetoric of digital and personal freedom and innovation already palatable to its main audience. In this way, it can not only selectively recruit individuals more sympathetic to privatization, deregulation, corporate rule, but also exclude those who are not. In fact, through discursive selectivity, those individuals who would potentially disagree with such an imaginary are practically expunged from it. Except for the self-employed, digital nomads, entrepreneurs, e-citizens, and investors who will populate these new private cities, there is seldom mention of the laboring working class and food producers who would be required for the functioning of the city, both in terms of production within the city, and those outside the city producing the goods and extracting the raw materials the city would import. When they are mentioned, as in the case of Honduras Próspera, they are presented as underutilised labor power, a standing reserve waiting to be tapped.

The start-up societies discourse is semiotically encrypted as agents select a particular vocabulary and metaphors that will be more accessible to, and resonate more strongly with, a certain group of agents. These features of vocabulary “‘word’ or ‘lexicalise’ the world in particular ways” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 129). Such “covert semantic relation[s]” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 130) allow start-up societies’ discourses to convey particular meanings without

explicitly asserting their political project. For instance, the keyword “decentralization” is a hyponym of “freedom” from the centralized state, a use of “freedom” that is itself a hyponym for individual economic freedom through deregulation. Unlike “dog whistle” words, which are generally obvious easy to understand for both those with whom they are meant to resonate and those with whom they are not, semiotic encryption emphasizes the role of software and cryptographic technologies in facilitating or restricting access. In other words, “semiotic encryption” emphasizes how texts will not necessarily be understood by those whom they do not target, and the role that code plays in shaping both cryptographic imaginaries and spaces.

To understand how start-up societies are semiotically encrypted, it is helpful to recall Hall’s (2006) encoding/decoding model of communication, which refers to determinate moments of a communicative process whereby “the structure employs a code and yields a ‘message’” which, at another determinate moment, “via its decoding issues into the structure of social practices” (p. 165). The codes of encoding and decoding may be asymmetrical, so the degree of understanding and misunderstanding depends on the relations of equivalence established between encoder-producer and decoder-receiver (p. 166).

Proponents of start-up societies employ existing discourses that resonate with a particular techno-optimist worldview and evolutionist approach to both competition and governance. They use certain codes that appear to have been “profoundly *naturalized*,” i.e., appear to have been “naturally” given, a condition that has an “(ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present” (S. Hall, 2006, p. 167, emphasis in the original). Proponents of start-up societies can act as encoder-producers and create messages that will be more accessible to and easily decoded by certain agents. How the message is successfully decoded and issues into the structure of social practices depends on the sense- and meaning-making and discursive

competences of the receivers.³¹ For example, as I explain in Chapter 6, the Floating Island Project promotional material targeting French Polynesians and that targeting seastealers reflected different goals. While the former emphasized cultural continuity and engaged with Polynesian epistemology, the latter drew heavily on techno-deterministic, evolutionist, and free market and crypto-anarchist concepts and vocabulary (Blue Frontiers, 2017a, 2018b). The promotional material thus presented two different political and economic projects, each carefully crafted to appeal to their respective audiences.

5.6 New cyberelites

If start-up societies are digitally and semiotically encrypted, who will inhabit and govern them? In his examination of elite power under advanced neoliberalism, Davies (2017) characterizes the neoliberal project “as an effort to elevate ‘unconscious’ processes over ‘conscious’ ones, which in practice means elevating cybernetic, non-human systems and processes over discursive spheres of politics and judgement” (p. 227). Davies argues that in a system of advanced, financialized neoliberalism, elite power consists “in acts of translation rather than judgement” (p. 227). He identifies two types of such elites, namely cyborg and diplomatic intermediaries. “Cyborg intermediaries,” such as stock market traders, mediate between “two non-human semiotic systems” and perform “acts of translation [...] from one esoteric code into another, rather than from code into narrative” (p. 241). Drawing on Lazzarato’s work on signifying versus asignifying semiotics, Davies argues that cyborg intermediaries employ non-discursive, “asignifying semiotics” to govern and enact decisions (p. 241).

³¹ Of course, all encryption can potentially be cracked, but that requires time and effort.

In contrast, “diplomatic intermediaries” are agents who move “between spheres of ‘signifying semiotics’ (explanations, justifications, proposals, etc.) and ‘assignifying semiotics’ (codes, data, processes, etc.)” and are in a position to “translate[e] the mood of ‘the markets’ to political agents and states” (pp. 242-243). Importantly,

The premise for both of these elite forms is that the “ultimate” judgments or collective decisions will not be taken by “conscious” human actors at all but by the cybernetic, unconscious, non-human force of market machinery and other real-time feedback technologies. (p. 240)

In the case of start-up societies, this premise is reflected in the assumption that individuals may make the decision to move with their feet consciously, when in fact, the ultimate judgments or collective decisions are made by market forces. This raises questions about whether there is any room for human agency at all in a system completely governed by market forces.

Davies (2017) would argue that this is precisely the type of “unconscious,” cybernetic agency Friedrich Hayek would have wanted, one that characterizes “a new form of elite power which lacks the aspiration to acts on behalf the public” (p. 230). This resolves what Hayek saw as the problem of elite having conscious objectives for society in mind (p. 231): in the start-up societies imaginary these objectives are provided by market forces and technology. Even neoconservative values (family, faith, tradition) often praised by proponents of start-up societies are subsumed under market forces and reframed as “the market of living together” (Gebel, 2018). Of course, as we have seen with cryptocurrency, blockchain, and the case of DAOs, software and markets are always dependent on some form of human agency, meaning that “new opportunities for conscious manipulations and disruption will [inevitably] arise” (Davies, 2017, p. 246).

In the case of start-up societies, the new cyberelites of which inhabit and interpret an encoded semiotic system drawn largely from such new technologies as blockchain and cryptocurrency, political and juridical discourses are still derived from and replaced by machines' encoded semiotic systems. Governance is conceptualized from an inherited social contract to a "software" that can be updated by rewriting its code or rules (P. Friedman, 2020). Moreover, start-up societies' diplomatic intermediaries can position themselves as translators for government officials. As Titus Gebel's quote on using blockchain to entice governments to welcome start-up societies projects illustrates, proponents of start-up societies can "reconfigure themselves as 'diplomatic intermediaries'" (Davies, 2017, p. 243) who interpret what blockchain and cryptocurrency and other hitherto unseen new technologies are "saying" about the future of borders, sovereignty, citizenship, and entrepreneurialism.

The complementary roles of cyborg and elite intermediaries described by Davies are key to the construction and dissemination of blockchain technology. As Crandall (2019) argues, despite its discourse of transparency, distribution, and peer-to-peer sharing, "blockchain whitepapers are filled with jargon that is opaque to most people, even those with technical backgrounds" (p. 282). Those who wish to use blockchain or to create or trade cryptocurrencies must rely on those engineers and developers who can translate the meaning and potential of the technology for them. In this context, "there is a risk of a new, privileged class being formed – the technologist class – and those who can pay them" (Crandall, 2019, p. 286; see also Wark, 2019 on the rise of the "vectoralist" class). Timothy C. May (2001a), in his writings on crypto-anarchy and virtual communities, acknowledged that the ability to understand and translate digital knowledge would lead to a "new kind of elitism": "Those who are comfortable with the

[cryptographic] tools [...] can avoid the restrictions and taxes that others cannot. If local laws can be bypassed technologically, the implications are pretty clear” (p. 74).³²

Access to and power relations within encrypted geographies will be limited to those elites who possess not only a certain type of technical knowledge, but also the semiotic capacities to decrypt a community’s encoded meanings and practices. For example, in 2018, a project to develop a crypto-utopia using “blockchain infrastructure” was proposed as a way to renew urban development in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria (Bowles, 2018b; Watlington, 2019). What this meant in practice is unclear, but dozens of crypto-entrepreneurs, attracted by Puerto Rico’s absence of federal personal income tax or capital gains tax, relocated themselves and their businesses to the island. The unstructured initiative, initially named Puertopia but rebranded as Sol, comprises a group of crypto-investors led by Brock Pierce, introduced in the previous chapter, who had set up base in a four-star hotel in San Juan.

This crypto-utopia has achieved nothing substantial for Puerto Ricans. It did, however, create an encrypted geography whose physical center was the 20, 000-square-foot hotel occupied by the crypto-utopians, and access to which was restricted both digitally and semiotically. As Crandall (2019) argues: “Although there are no physical walls gating the crypto-utopia in San Juan, there are digital walls and gates that keep anyone out unless they are high net-worth ‘accredited investors’ [...], and on the inside in the ‘blockchain space’” (p. 286). In this example as in that of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia described at the beginning of this

³² In *The Sovereign Individual*, Davidson and Rees-Mogg (2020) predict that “[a]n entirely new realm of economic activity that is not hostage to physical violence will emerge in cyberspace. The most obvious benefits will flow to the “cognitive elite,” who will increasingly operate outside political boundaries” (p. 16). The authors repetitively compare this new elite to gods: “At the highest plateau of productivity, these Sovereign Individuals will compete and interact on terms that echo the relation among the gods in Greek myth. The elusive Mount Olympus of the next millennium will be in cyberspace [...]” (p. 18). “The new Sovereign Individual will operate like the gods of myth in the same physical environment as the ordinary, subject citizen, but in a separate realm politically. [...] [T]he Sovereign Individual will redesign governments and reconfigure economies in the new millennium. The full implications of this change are all but unimaginable” (p. 20).

chapter, encrypted geographies create new bordered spaces to which access is restricted to a new kind of diplomatic intermediary elite with a high level of technical literacy and with the ability to decode the description of a greater post-political project. The success of the project itself depends on the work of the cyborg intermediaries coding an escape from politics.

5.7 Spatialities of encrypted geographies

Encrypted geographies are a particular type of “code/space,” a concept developed by Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge (2011) to describe instances when “software and the spatiality of everyday life become mutually constituted, that is, produced through one another” such as the check-in area at an airport or a supermarket checkout (pp. 16-17). The term code/space illustrates the “dyadic relationship” that exists between code and spatiality: “spatiality is the product of code, and the code exists primarily in order to produce a particular spatiality” (p. 16). In contrast, coded space is a space “where software makes a difference to the transduction of spatiality but the relationship between code and space is not mutually constituted” (p. 18). What makes start-up societies code/space is how software shapes the start-up societies imaginary’s discursive, agential and technological selectivities and how it shapes how they are conceptualized, realized, and governed.

5.7.1 Ulex – An open-source legal system

Encrypted geographies illustrate how code/space, “the mutual constitution of software and sociospatial practices” (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011, p. 16), can take multiple and radical forms. For instance, socio-spatial governance can be conceived as a software or an operating system. Ulex is an open-source legal system proposed by Tom W. Bell, a professor of law and a legal advisor to multiple start-up society ventures including the Seasteading Institute, Blue Frontiers,

and Pronomos Capital, and the academic director of the Institute for Competitive Governance, a Startup Societies Foundation offshoot that launched the peer-reviewed *Journal of Special Jurisdictions* in 2019. In 1988, under the pseudonym of T.O. Morrow, Bell co-founded the magazine *Extropy: Vaccine for Future Shock* along with philosopher and futurist Max More. Extropianism, which developed as a philosophical movement in the 1990s, is arguably the “first actionable incarnation of modern-day transhumanism” and refers to “a philosophy of the future to pro-actively advance the human condition using strategic applications of science and technology” (MacFarlane, 2020, p. 28).

Bell (2014) has written extensively on his theory of “polycentric law” which “regards the legal services that governments provide – defining rules, policing their application, and settling disputes – as a ripe field for competition.” Bell (1998) defines polycentric law as “law arising from a variety of customs and private processes rather than law coercively imposed by a single state authority.” It proposes a new legal structure in which “providers” of legal systems would compete between each other, an idea that echoes Murray Rothbard’s (1973) and David D. Friedman’s (2014) descriptions of an anarcho-capitalist system in which police, courts, and laws would all be subject to free market competition. Under anarcho-capitalism, “systems of law would be produced for profit on the open market, just as books and bras are produced today. There could be competition among different brands of law, just as there is competition among different brands of cars” (D. D. Friedman, 2014, p. 63).

Ulex is a software “developed by an open network of programmers and legal experts” to realize Bell’s vision of an open-source legal system and that many believe could make competition among legal systems possible (Startup Societies Foundation, 2018a). Its name comes from the combination of the letter “U” and *lex*, the Latin word for law (Bell, 2020, p. 7).

Its slogan is “You be the judge” (*Ulex*, n.d.). The stated purpose of Ulex is to give users whose “local governments are badly governed or unjust” the “ability to use a different legal system” (Institute for Competitive Governance, n.d.). Ulex would function as a jurisdictional service not tied to any nation. It would source legal standards and laws from around the globe and offer users the opportunity to subscribe to a legal package of their choice, effectively bypassing the geographical borders of local and national governance.³³ To settle a dispute, each party would choose a judge. Those two judges would, in turn, select a third judge. The judges could be “professional judges, reputable persons, an AI, or even a crowd-based oracle network” (Startup Societies Foundation, 2018b). The decision of the third judge would select one of the resolutions proposed by the two parties, and the losing party would pay the winner’s legal fees.³⁴

The Startup Societies Foundation won a EUR 5,000 grant from the European Resource Bank, a branch of the Austrian Economics Center, to promote Ulex’s development Ulex (Bell, 2020, p. 7). In its August 2018 newsletter, the Foundation asked readers to help support Ulex by donating to a crowd-funding campaign:

This is not some impossible utopian dream – this is a call-to-action to do more than just talk about building a better society. Ulex can provide the bedrock upon which new ways to govern can be built, powered by the people who adopt it, and offer oppressed people an alternative to corrupt government justice systems. (Startup Societies Foundation, newsletter, August 15, 2018)

³³ “Ulex resolutions draw on established practices from reputable private, nongovernmental, and international organizations. By default, the substantive rules of Ulex 1.1 originate in the American Law Institute’s Restatements of the Common Law, the Uniform Law Institute’s Uniform Business Organizations Code and other notably fair and open law codifications” (Startup Societies Foundation, 2018c).

³⁴ As Dr. Benjamin Forest remarked in a personal communication, “alternative dispute resolution (ADR) has long flourished without digital aids and is (potentially) available in most cases.” To my knowledge, Ulex documentation does not address this. However, we can surmise proponents of Ulex want to offer a private alternative to those individuals dissatisfied with ADR and who would prefer using the legal standards and laws from a particular country or a mix of international legal standards and laws.

As Ulex would not be tied to any government it would, it is argued, “offer a true alternative to corrupt civil court systems” and “provide a legal framework for startup societies, breakaway nations, seasteads, and other experimental communities” (Startup Societies Foundation, newsletter, August 15, 2018). However, it is unclear how judgments would be enforced. If Ulex is used “within a traditional territorial geographic monopoly on violence such as a seastead or charter city,” those entities would be responsible for enforcing judgments (Burmazovic, 2018). In the case of voluntary contracts, collateral could be required as part of the contract (Burmazovic, 2018).

In his book *Your Next Government? From the Nation State to Stateless Nations*, Bell (2017) envisions “the rise of a community of open source programmers-*cum*-lawgivers giving the world an opt-in, distributed form of government” (p. 205). In Bell’s proposal, cyborg and intermediary elites become one and the same. Ulex’s open-source legal system is modeled on open-source software, would be accessible through software, but even more fundamentally, it suggests that governance is itself a software. Software, in this case, is “not necessarily code [...], rather they are rules that a legal system can operate under” (*Ulex*, n.d.-b). But texts promoting Ulex also compare it to software:

If local governments are badly governed or unjust, users have the ability to use a different legal system! [...]

Like choosing between Mac OS or Linux, citizens can now choose their legal system based on the quality of service they provide. (*Ulex*, n.d.-b)

Ulex illustrates how, in the start-up societies imaginary, software, both as a “thing” and as concept, transforms and reorganizes society. The legal system is conceptualized as an operating system that can be downloaded, reprogrammed, marketed, and sold to users.

However, although Ulex is framed as a bottom-up initiative independent from governments, it glosses over the role of democratic institutions and political and legal debates in developing the legal standards which it will source from and offers no explanation as to how “oppressed people” living under authoritarian regimes could enforce Ulex-based regulations. It also assumes that these oppressed people most in need of a fair legal system have unrestricted access to the internet. Although Ulex reproduce the rhetoric of peer-to-peer decentralization, in which technically any “node” or user is free to join the network, in practice the network is open only to those users who share a common worldview and have access to the digital knowledge, computer power, and capital required to access it. To be free to choose, individuals must have access to the electronic frontier.

5.7.2 The electronic frontier

Start-up societies’ political project of exit depends on the existence of somewhere to exit to, a new frontier to explore, colonize, and exploit. This new frontier is found in extraterritorial geographies such as the ocean and special economic zones, but also in cyberspace. In a document originally published in 1994 by the now defunct Progress and Freedom Foundation, futurists Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth, and Alvin Toffler argued that a Third Wave economy was emerging, marked by the emergence of a “new ‘electronic frontier’ of knowledge” that would require redefining “the meaning of freedom, structures of self-government, definition of property, nature of competition, conditions for cooperation, sense of community and nature of progress” (Dyson et al., 1996, p. 296). The authors called for the

liberation from Second Wave rules, “regulations, taxes and laws laid in place to serve the smokestack barons and bureaucrats of the past” (p. 308), and for the “creation of a new civilization, founded in the eternal truths of the American Idea” (p. 296). This new civilization would develop in cyberspace which they described as “the latest American frontier” (p. 301). Srinivasan (2020) also suggested on Twitter that “the Internet [is] the successor to America;” “With virtual reality and virtual currency, the digital frontier becomes more than a metaphor. Gather in online communities with mutually-agreed-upon governance. Eventually, crowdfund to materialize cities in physical spaces.”

The Third Wave economy would emerge, Dyson and her colleagues argued, from developments in cyberspace, which they described as “a bioelectronic environment” omnipresent in infrastructure and “‘inhabited’ by knowledge, including incorrect ideas, existing in electronic form.”

The bioelectronic frontier is an appropriate metaphor for what is happening in cyberspace, calling to mind as it does the spirit of invention and discovery that led ancient mariners to explore the world, generations of pioneers to tame the American continent and, more recently, to man's first exploration of outer space. (pp. 296-297)

They explained that, although most of the knowledge in cyberspace is temporary and ephemeral, people work to build “cyberspatial ‘warehouses’ of data” in physical forms and hardware (p. 296). The knowledge contained in those warehouses, however, “is accessible only to those with the right kind of portal and the right kind of key” (p. 296). The key in this case is software, “a special form of electronic knowledge that allows people to navigate through the cyberspace environment and make its contents understandable to the human senses in the form of written language, pictures and sound” (p. 296). The authors predicted software would “play an important

role knitting together in the diverse communities of tomorrow, facilitating the creation of ‘electronic neighborhoods’ bound together not by geography but by shared interests” (p. 302).

“There is more ‘space’ in cyberspace,” May (1992) wrote in an essay on “Crypto Libertaria.” It is therefore more “colonizable,” and could allow “an arbitrarily large number of separate ‘nations’ [to] simultaneously exist.” Whereas a seastead could easily be torpedoed, a cyber, distributed system would “have no nexus which can be knocked out” (May, 1992). This, May (1992) wrote, “allows for rapid experimentation, self-selection, and evolution. If folks get tired of some virtual community, they can leave.” These are the same arguments put forward by the Seasteading Institute, Blue Frontiers, the Startup Societies Foundation, and other start-up society ventures for whom start-up societies, formed first in cyberspace and then assembled in geographical spaces, are colonial outposts on this new hybrid frontier.

The emergence of a new frontier in cyberspace was also at the core of John Perry Barlow’s *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (1996), which was directed to the “governments of the industrial world”:

You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. [...] You do not know us, nor do you know our world. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. [...] You do not know our culture, our ethics, or the unwritten codes that already provide our society more order than could be obtained any of your impositions. [...] We are forming our own Social Contract. This governance will arise according to the conditions of our world, not yours. Our world is different.

This is also the message of proponents of start-up societies who aim to establish themselves in physical locations, but whose governance frameworks are anchored in cryptographic governance and software programmed by cyborg elites and translated by intermediary elites. As they are

envisioned today, start-up societies would extraterritorial encrypted geographies overlapping both the digital and physical world, with their own, possibly blockchain-based, social contracts. Cryptographic technologies and semiotic encryption would create borders that would both selectively recruit individuals and exclude those who are not welcome.

Start-up societies represent the materialization of cyberspace and blockchain rhetoric into new urban forms: they are conceived as spaces disconnected from the society whence they came, premised on “exiting” and forgetting this society and most of its institutions, with their own smart social contracts and decentralized governance frameworks. As they work to establish partnerships with governments, start-up society initiatives simultaneously draw new borders around their communities to ensure that host governments have no sovereignty over their space. Start-up societies enthusiasts “know a better world is possible” (“Ethical Code: The Exit Principle,” 2017) and this new world, they claim, will be different. However, although they reproduce the rhetoric of peer-to-peer decentralization, in which technically any “node” or user is free to join the network in which they are willing to participate, in practice the network is open only to those agents who share a common worldview.

5.8 Conclusion

Cyberlibertarians and crypto-anarchists have been trying to use cryptography to develop alternatives to modern forms of citizenship, nationhood, and governance mechanisms for decades. These ambitions are now shared by a broad group of entrepreneurs, political ideologues, and even state actors (e.g., Estonia digital citizenship program; Próspera e-residency program modeled on the latter). Bitcoin’s political project of “getting rid of politics by relying on technology” (De Filippi & Loveluck, 2016, p. 3) and the possibilities offered by blockchain to create new decentralized communities and governance systems, particularly resonate with

proponents of start-up societies who reject conventional politics, or “folk activism” (P. Friedman, 2009), and argue that efforts should concentrate on building new communities from scratch using emerging technologies rather than engaging in political debate.

This raises new questions about issues of deterritorialization, secessionism, and extra- and cryptostatecraft. This chapter examined how cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology, the discourses around them and their own narrative qualities, shape the start-up societies discursive and technological selectivities. It has proposed the concept of encrypted geographies to help us understand how cryptography is used to create alternative and parallel political economies and communities and how, conversely, such new technologies as blockchain and cryptocurrencies shape how these alternatives are conceptualized and with what potential consequences. It has shown how encrypted geographies are shaped by processes of digital and semiotic encryption that selectively seek to recruit certain agents and exclude others. They restrict access to a cyberelite that possesses a certain type of technological knowledge and share a common semiotic framework for making sense of the world.

In terms of technological selectivity, the start-up societies future imaginary is shaped by code. Code is understood as a technology in the Foucauldian sense and defined as an assemblage of knowledge and a disciplinary rationality that has the capacity to transform how social relations are organized. Code has material effects on the built environment and epistemological effects in that it positions itself as a truth regime that is more reliable than human judgment (see Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 218). Thus, in addition to a digital and a “narrative technology” (Reijers & Coeckelbergh, 2019) that shapes discursive selectivity both in terms of what is enunciated, how, who can enunciate it, and who can validate what is enunciated, blockchain software code also

functions as a knowledging technology. It constitutes objects, subjectivities, and identities, and is also a technology of governmentality that can restructure the conduct of conduct.

In using blockchain technologies to transact in cryptocurrency, encrypted geographies subvert the dominant banking system. In creating software that allows individuals to subscribe to regulation packages or to form virtual communities and DAOs, proponents of start-up societies seek to subvert the system of courts of law by creating new, privatized arbitration models. The concept of encrypted geographies sheds light on a new aspect of the social politics of software and highlights new ways in which it “works in the world to produce new subjects, practices, mobilities, transactions, and interactions” (Kitchen and Dodge, 2011, p. 12). Encrypted geographies fit into a broader set of societal trends that includes the emergence of citizen-consumers or citizen-shareholders, new cyberelite intermediaries, new practices of algorithmic and private governance, new mobilities of individuals and capital including digital assets, and new types of transactions and interactions such as contractual citizenship, all accelerating the shift towards commodification not only of governance but of community.

Start-up societies proposals face the same challenges of market concentration, technical vulnerabilities, and trust in elite-led governance that cryptocurrencies do. Ultimately, start-up societies rely on cyborg and intermediary elites who, thanks to their ability to read conjunctures and identify potential for action and their technical abilities, are best positioned to exploit discursive, agential, technological, and structural selectivities (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 219) to advance their political project. Although they reproduce the rhetoric of peer-to-peer decentralization, in which technically any “node” or user is free to join the network, in practice the network is open only to those agents who share a particular ideological vision and have the capacity to decrypt a broader, complex political project. As they work to establish partnerships

with host governments and form communities of like-minded individuals, start-up societies' cyberelites simultaneously erect invisible borders around these communities to ensure that governments have no sovereignty over their space. In this way, encrypted geographies create invisible borders that are both ideological and digital. The next chapter further illustrates this with a case study of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia.

Chapter 6 – “A brilliant future of floating islands”: Sea level rise as a new profit frontier

6.1 Introduction

On 3 April 2019, the United Nations held its first Round Table on Sustainable Floating Cities at its headquarters in New York. In her concluding remarks, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed (2019) declared that “sustainable floating cities” could offer an adaptive solution to climate change.

Floating cities are a means of ensuring climate resilience, as buildings can rise along with the sea. And when entire floating communities are designed from scratch, they can be designed as climate-neutral from the onset.

She stated that “innovators, researchers and private sector leaders can develop technologies that allow floating cities and buildings to be constructed in a manner that is sustainable, resilient and liveable.” Governments would play a key role, too, in helping to materialize this sustainable, oceanic urban future by

creat[ing] an environment and incentives for innovations to thrive. And local authorities can facilitate the construction of pilot projects. They can work with architects, engineers and stakeholders to identify where floating buildings and communities are a useful element of urban and climate planning.

Although the Deputy Secretary-General claimed the round table showed “how different” the world was since the founding of the United Nations in 1945, her remarks echoed both the anxieties and the techno-optimism of the 1960s and 1970s, a period during which multiple proposals to build floating cities to address issues of climate change and urban crowding were put forward (Chapter 2). The Deputy Secretary-General described the round table as a gathering of individuals sharing “a commitment to a better future,” but underlying the enthusiasm of the

participants was the vision of a bleak future in which refugee populations displaced by climate catastrophe and growing inequality might be relocated to floating settlements in the “urban offshore” (I. Land, 2017, p. 38), in zones of exception partly disconnected from the mainland.³⁵ The solution to urban crises on land, the round table suggested, was to urbanize the ocean and to do it in a not only sustainable but also profitable manner.

The co-convenors of the round table included Marc Collins Chen, the entrepreneur who brokered the memorandum of understanding between the Seasteading Institute and the government of French Polynesia and now the co-founder and chief executive officer of Oceanix, a private company that “designs and builds floating cities for people to live sustainably on the ocean” (Oceanix, 2018), Nicholas Makris of the MIT Center for Ocean Engineering, and Richard Wiese, President of the Explorers Club. To understand how the round table came to be and how the United Nations came to endorse the idea of floating cities as an adaptive solution to climate change, we must travel to French Polynesia, where Collins Chen is originally from, and back in time to January 2017, when the French Polynesian government announced the signature of a memorandum of understanding with the Seasteading Institute to explore the feasibility a first floating island in the archipelago’s territorial waters.

³⁵ One disturbing recent proposal that previews such a floating urban future would relocate migrant workers in Singapore onto a cluster of four hexagonal concrete floating platforms. It would accommodate “up to 2, 295 people in 765 container cabins [...] modified for residential use” (Floating Island for Foreign Workers, 2020). The proposal was put forward by Lim Soon Heng (2020), the founder of the Society for Floating Solutions, based in Singapore, in The Strait Times. It argued that the floating island would provide better housing conditions for foreign workers. It would also make it easier to control and quarantine the foreign workers population during health crises like the Covid-19 pandemic (“We need [the foreign workers] but they present a health risk to the nation. So how do we deal with this conundrum?”), as well as to relocate them near work areas as needed. The floating island would “allow them space to socialise, while being sufficiently distant from urban centres to avoid over-stressing urban infrastructure.” The floating island would thus allow Singaporeans to recover land (and land-value) currently occupied by dormitories and to segregate and isolate the migrant worker population. Its author explicitly references the United Nations’ interest in exploring floating cities.

The Seasteading Institute had initially overlooked French Polynesia because of its colonial status. Nevertheless, its temperate weather, modern market, high-speed internet, stable government, and relative jurisdictional autonomy made it an attractive location for the construction of a first floating island and “uniquely suited to collaborate with [seasteaders] on creating a semi-autonomous zone for the Floating Island Project” (Hencken, 2017). The venture’s stated goal was to develop floating habitats for populations of the South Pacific threatened by rising sea levels. Significantly, the realization of the project was contingent on the development of a “special governing framework” and the creation of “innovative special economic zones” comprised of both land (the “Anchor Zone”) and sea (the “Floating Islands Zone”) (The Seasteading Institute, 2017, p. 7).

To the Seasteading Institute and its supporters, the agreement represented a concrete step toward the development of a first seastead and eventually a whole “seavilization” on the “blue frontier” (Quirk & Friedman, 2017), where entrepreneurs and individuals could experiment with private governance models, “lower the barriers to entry” to the governance industry (P. Friedman & Taylor, 2011), and challenge the status quo of the nation-state. Seasteading would “maximize entrepreneurial freedom to create blue jobs to welcome anyone to the Next New World” by developing a “vibrant startup sector for governance” (The Seasteading Institute, *About*, 2019). To the French Polynesian government, the Floating Island Project represented an opportunity to develop French Polynesia’s blue economy, a concept that has emerged over the last decade from within the global discourses on green growth, green economy, and sustainable development, and to assert Polynesian leadership in climate change adaptation within the South Pacific (The Seasteading Institute, 2017).

This chapter provides a discursive analysis anchored in a CPE theoretical approach of the Floating Island Project as an exercise in “extrastatecraft,” a portmanteau theorized by the architect Keller Easterling that refers to infrastructure spaces that support “undisclosed activities outside of, in addition to, and sometimes even in partnership with statecraft” (Easterling, 2014, p. 23), in cryptostatecraft, “the practice of political entrepreneurs building new institutions using cryptographic technologies,” and in cryptosecession, “the phenomenon of individuals seceding from state-run institutions [...] by using cryptographic technologies such as Bitcoin and other blockchain applications to exit to virtual ‘states’” (MacDonald, 2019, pp. 63–64). To understand how the Floating Island Project and its underlying objectives, or its disposition (Easterling, 2014, p. 34), were rationalized, and floating islands came to be praised as an innovative solution at the U.N. panel, it is essential to consider how it was strategically situated in the broader discourse of “green growth” and “blue-green economy” by both seasteaders and the French Polynesian government, how this discourse was used to make the development of innovative special economic zones acceptable and desirable, and how the model of the zone was leveraged as a technology that could help position French Polynesia as a leader in sustainable climate change adaptation.

The chapter first offers a brief review of blue economy conceptualizations and how the blue economy discourse has been used by Pacific actors. It examines how the blue economy opens up all kinds of opportunities for “speculative urbanism,” which Goldman (2011) describes as a state of constant negotiation and leveraging between state and non-state actors, and for “ocean grabbing” (Bennett et al., 2015). Second, it provides a brief overview of the seasteading movement and discusses how seasteading, first proposed as a way to experiment with “competitive governance” (P. Friedman & Taylor, 2012) and to escape “beyond” politics (Thiel,

2009), came to strategically engage with the discourse of climate change and the blue economy. Third, it explains how seasteading functioned as a form of extrastatecraft that appealed to both seasteaders and the French Polynesian government. Fourth, it explains how approaching sea level rise as a blue business opportunity made the Floating Island Project attractive to the French Polynesian government, how it was designed to fit within national objectives of developing French Polynesia's blue economy, and why it was opposed by the population who saw in the project a form of ocean grabbing. Fifth, it explains how the Floating Island Project offered opportunity for cryptostatecraft. Sixth, it explains how the local population responded to the project, and why ultimately it was incompatible with Polynesian ontologies of living with the ocean.

6.2 Blue economy

Blue economy imaginaries and development plans have emerged within the context of a global turn to the oceans prompted by a renewed interest in oceans not only as a space for capitalist expansion, but also as a space where climate change is directly observable and quantifiable in rising sea levels. The blue economy discourse emerged over the last decade from within the global discourses on sustainable development, and blue economy strategies generally focus on fisheries and aquaculture, marine pollution, oceanic sectors, and seascape management (World Bank, 2019). Green growth, green, blue, and blue-green economies terminologies were scarce prior to 2008, but are now widespread in discourse about global governance and consumption if also often used interchangeably (Dornan & al., 2018; Silver & al., 2015). Such transnational organizations as UN agencies, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and such conservation organizations as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have played a key role in developing and disseminating the rhetoric of

green and blue economies and linking them to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through international conferences, official reports, and direct assistance in developing policies and conservation programs (Benjaminsen & Bryceson, 2012; Dornan et al., 2018; Silver et al., 2015).

Despite its formalization by powerful non-state actors and its adoption by state actors, what makes an economy “blue” lacks a precise definition. Different and often incompatible and contradictory meanings are used to support the respective agendas and worldviews of various groups of state and non-state actors alike (Dornan et al., 2018; Silver et al., 2015). For instance, Silver et al. (2015) examine how “blue economy” emerged and circulated in preparatory meetings for the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio + 20) and identify four competing discourses articulated at the summit: oceans as natural capital, oceans as good business, oceans as integral to Pacific SIDS, and oceans as small-scale fisheries livelihoods. In the case of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, on the one hand, the discourses of the blue economy and of the oceans as natural capital, good business, and integral to Pacific SIDS were used by both the government and seasteaders to advocate the development of new governable spaces and new legislations. On the other hand, a discourse of “traditional blue economy” and small-scale fisheries’ livelihoods was used by the population to oppose such initiatives and preserve local access to the material and immaterial resources of the oceans.

In the Pacific region, governments, regional organizations, and development agencies all use the terms green growth, green economy, blue-green growth, and blue-green economy (Dornan et al., 2018). The adoption of green growth and blue-green terminologies in the Pacific region has involved the vernacularization of global terms “so that they are appropriate in a local context” (Dornan et al., 2018, p. 423) and “shaped by regional, and national, debates about

appropriate development policy” (p. 419) such that the use of blue-green terminology by Pacific island states is also aligned with special national social objectives and policies as well as economic initiatives. Most importantly, there are instances to suggest the adoption of green and blue growth terminology is also linked with opportunities to access climate finance (Dornan et al., 2018, p. 416).

The blue economy, however, is not just a governmental project. It is also the project of private entities. Whereas entrepreneurs and corporations aim to capitalize on the global oceanic turn and a new “oceanic gold rush” (Merrie et al., 2014), coastal and fishing communities, small-scale producers, and Indigenous people who engage in “*alternative forms* of ocean grabbing and alternative access relations and strategies” mobilize the idea of adjacency rights to influence state authority and shape access resources regimes in the context of climate change (Foley & Mather, 2019, p. 311). In the case of the Floating Island Project, French Polynesians mobilized the idea of adjacency and ancestral rights to assert their claim over the lagoon where the island would be built.

Pacific actors understand and deploy competing meanings of green and blue-green growth terms in ways that both reflect their worldviews and support their agendas. Some Pacific actors use the terms to focus on new technologies while others present green and blue-green growth primarily to reinvigorate the region's commitment to sustainable development, focusing on alternative development models that might support the traditional economy (Dornan et al., 2018, pp. 419–420). The Floating Island Project was cast as consistent with these initiatives by those French Polynesians who supported it. In particular, the French Polynesian government saw in the Floating Island Project an opportunity to attract direct and indirect foreign investments; import knowledge and expertise through new partnerships with technology industry pioneers and

leading research institutions; solve the unemployment crisis (the unemployment rate in 2018 was 14.7% (Institut de la statistique de la Polynésie Française, 2018)); and assert Polynesian leadership and competitiveness in climate change adaptation within the South Pacific. It argued that the project would bring “new technologies, new research horizons, and new economic activities” to French Polynesia and positioned its participation in the project as part of a larger commitment to the Polynesian Against Climate Threat (PACT) Taputapuātea declaration, the “preserv[ation of] the Polynesian natural and cultural heritage” and protection of its inhabitants and their “precious way of life” (The Seasteading Institute, 2017, pp. 6–7).

The development, both conceptually and practically, of the blue economy not only reaffirms the key role of coastal environments in the fight to maintain healthy and resilient oceans, but also positions them as the new profit frontier. The critical analysis offered in this chapter supports Choi’s (2017) argument that the blue economy creates new spatialities and opens new “governable spaces” that “fundamentally change how we perceive sea space and dispose things and relations in that space” (Choi, 2017, pp. 38-40). As a “governmental project through spatial interventions,” the blue economy rationalizes particular ways of governing without coercive force operating “through law and subsequent changes in people’s subjectivities and their relation with the seas” (pp. 39-40).

What is particularly interesting in the case of the Floating Island Project is how the discourse of the blue economy was used to rationalize the creation of a new special economic zone to host a floating island which would have had its own governing framework. The discourses (blue economy, SDGs, sustainability, resilience) and the technologies (documents, environmental and economic studies, special governance frameworks) through which the venture was promoted presented the sea as first and foremost a space to exploit both economically and

politically. Conversely, the role of the sea in French Polynesians' cultural life was leveraged to present the project as a "logical" and desirable next step.

6.3 Seasteading

The Seasteading Institute was co-founded in 2008 by Patri Friedman, a software engineer, political theorist, and the grandson of the neoliberal economist Milton Friedman and son of the economist and anarcho-capitalist theorist David D. Friedman, and Wayne Gramlich, a computer engineer who published plans on his personal website for "homesteading the high seas" with floating islands built with two-litre plastic bottles (Gramlich, 1998).³⁶ The Seasteading Institute advocates the creation of sovereign ocean colonies to allow entrepreneurs, or "aquapreneurs," to build new societies and challenge the nation-state model of governance (Quirk & Friedman, 2017). Seasteads could host aquaculture farms, healthcare and medical research facilities, and residential and commercial spaces, but most importantly they would allow individuals to escape "beyond" politics (Thiel, 2009). The ancestry of Patri Friedman and the Institute's association with Peter Thiel garnered the Floating Island Project significant media coverage, and both seasteaders and the government of French Polynesia tried to capitalize on Thiel's initial endorsement of seasteading.

Due to both prohibitive costs and technological and legal challenges, the Seasteading Institute has sought to partner with "host nations" for the construction of a "coaststead," a seastead located within the territorial waters of a host country (P. Friedman and Gramlich, 2009; The Seasteading Institute, 2014). In 2015, it attempted to take advantage of the passing of a new law in Honduras authorizing *Zonas de empleo y desarrollo económico* (ZEDE), a form of special economic zone, to build a first coaststead near Trujillo, traditionally the land of the Garifuna

³⁶ Gramlich left the organization during its first year of operation.

Indigenous people. A partnership with the government of Honduras ended abruptly partly due to controversy surrounding the title of an event, “Disrupting Democracy - Creating Zones for Economic Development and Employment (ZEDE),” co-organized by the Seasteading Institute in San Francisco and to which Juan Orlando Hernández, the president of Honduras, was said to be scheduled to speak (Harkinson, 2015). After protesters gathered outside the San Francisco venue, the government of Honduras published a statement distancing itself from seasteaders (ZEDE Committee / Government of Honduras, 2015). The Seasteading Institute’s efforts to build a first floating island stalled until 2016, when it entered into discussions with French Polynesia.

The Seasteading Institute’s original goals did not include offering a solution to climate change, rising sea levels, or the flooding of urban coastal areas. In its early years, efforts focused on creating extraterritorial jurisdictions where private entrepreneurs could market governance services to citizen-customers wishing to “exit” the nation-state and subscribe to a private jurisdiction of their choice. Its engagement with ocean space is in large part a practical solution to the fact that all land has been claimed and it is nearly impossible to create new independent countries without armed conflict. In a podcast recording, Mark Lutter, the executive director of the Charter Cities Institute, points out that the discourse of presenting seasteading as a potential solution to environmental problems has “substantially improved” the Seasteading Institute’s and the seasteading movement’s “branding”:

First, it was let's build floating cities, mostly targeting high-income, high-productivity people. Now they're focusing on Pacific islands. They're focusing on how to fight global warming, how to help Pacific islands that otherwise might see challenges with higher sea levels, to provide solutions to them. (in Lutter & Lockhart, 2020)

This strategic ecological framing has helped seasteading ventures gain government attention and generate collaboration with leading architects. For example, Ocean Builders, a company that anchored a single-family seastead within Thailand's exclusive economic zone in January 2019, collaborates not only with the Seasteading Institute but also with architect Koen Olthuis from Waterstudio, which specializes in urban amphibious architecture, to design seapods. Ocean Builders' current projects include the construction of residential seapods in the Linton Bay Marina to create a seasteading community called Satoshi Village, and a proposed seapod development in New York's Lincoln Harbor Yacht Club (*Ocean Builders*, 2020b). Both the Seasteading Institute and Ocean Builders make strategic use of the discourses of sustainable, blue-green urbanism and tourism to win governments' approval and support.

6.4 Seasteading is extrastatecraft

The realization of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia was contingent on the creation of "innovative special economic zones" consisted of a part of land (the "Anchor Zone") and of sea (the "Floating Islands Zone" or the "SeaZone" (The Seasteading Institute, 2017; Bell, 2017, pp. 55–65)). The "SeaZone" would have functioned as "a floating legal entity designed to maximize personal and economic freedom, to empower island communities to adapt to sea level change on their own initiative" (*The Seasteading Institute*, 2019).

Easterling (2014) explains how "in keeping with its maritime history, the zone often gravitates to island retreats" (p. 91) and some zones "merge the island resort with the offshore financial center" (p. 93). Whether they are located on islands or on the mainland, special economic zones always offer physical and legal insularity to investors and state actors and a spatiality permitting both experimentation and the secure accumulation of capital. For seasteading promoters, the archipelagic geography of French Polynesia made it possible to

capitalize not only on the “islandness” and the boundedness associated with island spatiality (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2016), but also on the environmental challenges the collectivity faces. French Polynesia was presented as a “natural” environment for man-made islands, an ideal site for experimenting with solutions to the crisis of climate change, but also with new political framework.

Pacific islands not only invite aesthetic and scientific speculation (Gugganig, 2021; Schulenburg, 2003), but political speculation as well. The seasteaders’ capitalization on the islandness of French Polynesia should be situated within a broader historical perception of islands as “places in which to construct social and spatial ideologies, reconfiguring landscapes and people” (Connell, 2003, p. 573). The Floating Island Project also reproduced the colonial myth of the “Polynesian dream” in which Tahiti, and in this case its territorial waters as well, functions as “an experimental site where capitalism and civilisation might be reconstructed by the (usually) lone hero” (Connell, 2003, p. 563). By building a legally autonomous floating island in French Polynesia’s territorial waters and capitalizing on its need to develop its blue economy and address sea level rise, seasteaders could reconstruct capitalism by developing new, extraterritorial spaces of accumulation, and a new “seavilization.”

To the French Polynesian government, experimenting with new types of zones and urban amphibious developments was also a means to expand its own power. Indeed, special economic zones can often strengthen the power of the national state “by serving as its proxy or camouflage” (Easterling, 2014, p. 25). For example, zones that have limited protections for workers and the environment can camouflage or hide the violence and exploitation that result from what are, in fact, decisions of the state. In the case of the Floating Island Project, the creation of the Anchor and Sea zones would mean that although the Polynesian government

would have regulated the floating island only to a limited extent, it would nevertheless gain further independence from the French Republic by expanding the scope of economic and governance services offered.

Overall, the discourse deployed by seasteading advocates to support the floating island presented the initiative as participating in the ongoing solution to rising sea levels and the development of the blue economy and new governable spaces or special economic zones. As such, the Floating Island Project is an example of how urban sustainability is often deployed “as an argument for special zones in which sustainability discourse can be aligned with economic growth” and how “[p]aradoxically and invidiously, this often becomes an argument in favour of sustainable development by deregulation” (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2016, p. 12). When, in 2017, Marc Collins Chen participated in a United Nations high-level event on innovation and technology (a different event than the panel described at the beginning of the chapter), he presented the Floating Island Project with the key message that

In one year, we were able to get a government completely behind the idea that we can bring innovation from Silicon Valley and we have been able to prove that Silicon Valley is interested in looking for jurisdictions that are willing to be light-handed on the regulations. (Collins, 2017)

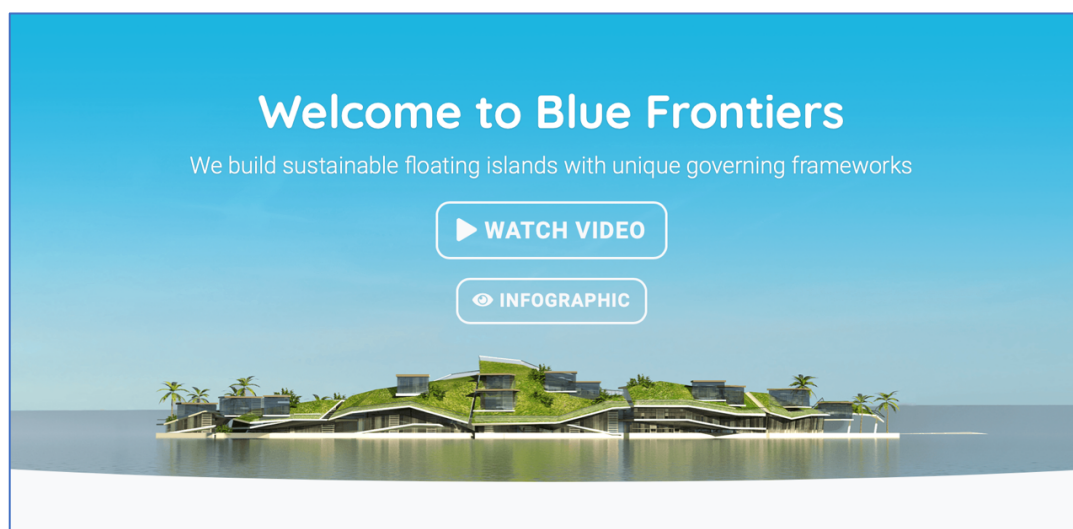
This statement highlights the speed at which eccentric techno-utopian blue urban futures can be embraced by governments. It also reveals a disturbing assumption that innovation and the development of adaptive solutions to climate change require the creation of special economic zones where tax and labor laws are drastically relaxed to attract technology entrepreneurs and direct and indirect investment. In other words, climate change adaptation strategies must also be profitable in the short-term and their realization often depends on the participation of technology

entrepreneurs and private sector actors. Such an approach positions climate change and sea level rise as a new profit frontier.

6.5 Sea level rise as a new profit frontier

To develop the Floating Island Project, Blue Frontiers, a for-profit corporation, was incorporated by seasteaders in Singapore in 2017. It developed a cryptocurrency, Varyon (which refers to “increasing variation in governance”) traded on the Ethereum blockchain, to raise capital (*Varyon*, 2018). Blue Frontiers’ slogan, “We build sustainable floating islands with unique governing frameworks” (*Blue Frontiers*, 2018a), and the image on its homepage of a small, green residential island illustrates how the discourse of the Floating Island Project was anchored both in broader discourses of “green” or sustainable urban growth and blue economy and in the seasteading discourse of political disruption through technology. In addition to presenting sea level rise as a new profit frontier for investors and developers, Blue Frontiers’ website also presents it as an opportunity for political experimentation.

Figure 9 Blue Frontier's Homepage (Blue Frontiers, 2019, removed)



Blue Frontiers sought to address two crises: a crisis of governance whereby “societal innovation hasn’t kept pace with technological innovation, leaving a vast majority of perpetual discontents who disagree not only on what to try but also on the goals,” and a crisis of urbanization and a lack of land on which to build (*Blue Frontiers*, 2018a). The proposed solutions were to “secure legal frameworks from partner governments to allow decentralized and self-directed societal experimentation by our customers” including “blockchain-based societal tools,” and to develop “ever better and cheaper floating technologies, and new sustainability practices” (*Blue Frontiers*, 2018a). The new land Blue Frontiers proposed to build would be mobile “pieces of real estate” that would allow for recombination and reconfiguration, what it calls, using Patri Friedman’s term, “dynamic geography” (*Blue Frontiers*, 2018a; P. Friedman, 2002). These “piece[s] of floating land” would also be politically autonomous, each operating “under its own special governing framework, allowing for flexible and reconfigurable parallel experimentation” (*Blue Frontiers*, 2018a).

Blue Frontiers organized a “First International Conference on Floating Islands” in Tahiti in May 2017 to present the project to the Polynesian population and potential investors. I was unable to attend this conference, but I was able to watch and transcribe the presentations once they were uploaded on YouTube by the organizers. The discourses of the oceans as natural capital, oceans as good business, oceans as integral to Pacific SIDS were repeatedly evoked to rationalize the Floating Island Project. Such presentations as “Blue jobs on the blue frontier,” “The importance of special economic zones,” “Environmental framework for floating islands – Think globally, float locally,” “The future of humanity underwater,” and “Leaving no one behind: Seasteads as hubs of humanitarian action” all linked the construction of the floating island and the development of innovative special economic zones to the development of the

Polynesian blue economy, sustainable blue urban development, and the realization of the SDGs. The project was presented as bolstering French Polynesian self-sufficiency by positioning the archipelago at the forefront of sustainable adaptation in the South Pacific.

The conference also presented the Floating Island Project as a way to propel French Polynesia into the future while, at the same time, reclaiming its pre-colonial history. Tua Pittman (2017), an internationally acclaimed traditional seafarer, compared Polynesian canoes to floating islands and said that Polynesians, having “learned from the mistakes of the past,” were offered an opportunity to travel on a canoe and “raise a new island from the sea” – “seasteading is offering us an opportunity to start all over again.” The conference presented Polynesians as the “original seasteaders” and seasteading as inherent to Polynesian culture while, at the same time, suggesting Polynesians were in dire need of help from American venture technologists to face the challenges of rising sea levels in their environment. Both seasteaders and those Polynesians who supported the Floating Island Project deployed a “proprietary vision” of colonial appropriation, one which:

effaces its own mark of appropriation by transforming it into the response to a putative appeal on the part of the colonized land or people. This appeal may take the form of chaos that calls for restoration of order, of absence that calls for affirming presence, of a natural abundance that awaits the creative hand of technology. (Spurr, 1993, cited in Schulenburg, 2003, p. 539)

Lelei LeLaulu, a blue economy consultant and entrepreneur, advisor to the World Bank and the United Nations, and a team member of Blue Guardians, an initiative sponsored by the Clinton Global Initiative that “assist[ed] SIDS by sustainably developing their blue economies while increasing their resilience to climate change” (DigitalGlobe, Inc., 2015), was one of many

speakers to describe Polynesians in this way.³⁷ LeLaulu's talk painted an image of the South Pacific as a wilderness to conquer and of French Polynesia as a nation whose economic development was dependent on the help of foreign investment and technologies. He described French Polynesia as a new, blue frontier to California technologists and visionaries who, having reached "the pinnacle of technological advancement," were now "looking for another place to go" (LeLaulu, 2017). He emphasized the project's, and more broadly the development of the French Polynesia's blue economy, reliance on Silicon Valley's technological solutionism. LeLaulu went so far as to compare the Polynesian's "spirit of exploration" to the conquest of the Western Frontier.

6.6 Seasteading is cryptostatecraft

Although LeLaulu's description of the Polynesian frontier spirit dabbled in American libertarianism, it was nonetheless cast as consistent with the model of blue-green growth in the Pacific and extolled the development of aquaculture and food sovereignty. Seasteading would bring French Polynesians "more complete freedom," presumably from the French Republic, and more control over "resources, money, and social structures" (LeLaulu, 2017). He further predicted that seasteading would "bring brains and bucks" to the South Pacific, in part through the development or adoption of blockchain technologies that would "increase control over a new form of money" (cryptocurrency) that would be "free of bureaucracy." Seasteading in French Polynesia would lead to "seas of excellence and archipelagos of enlightenment." "We must not look at sinking islands," LeLaulu concluded, "but at a brilliant future of floating islands" (LeLaulu, 2017). Such a future imaginary, however, is representative of a form of "wishful

³⁷ Patri Friedman and Brad Taylor (2012) also describe the "sea nomads" of Southeast Asia as "perhaps the greatest proto-seasteaders" (p. 226).

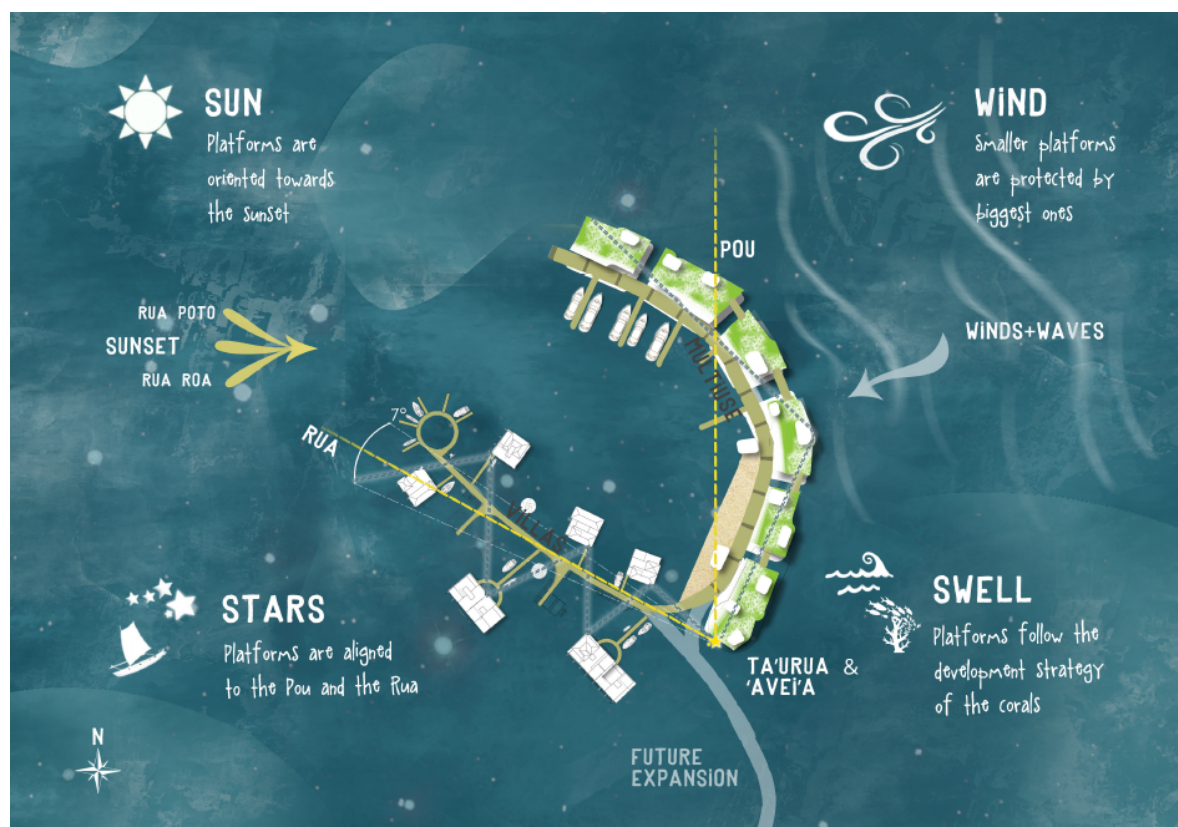
sinking” (Farbotko, 2010) that implies climate catastrophe can be a profitable business opportunity.

There is much evidence of this strategy of presenting seasteading as inherent to Polynesian culture and the blue economy as essential to the survival and advancement of Polynesian traditional way of life in Blue Frontiers’ promotional documents. Although this may not be surprising, what is interesting and noteworthy in terms of discursive, agential, and structural selectivities is how French Polynesians’ ontologies and epistemologies were leveraged to present the Floating Island Project as a logical and even “natural” next step in their history. A proposed design of the floating island and environmental assessment were commissioned by Blue Frontiers and produced by Blue21 (formerly DeltaSync), an architecture firm based in the Netherlands that specializes in floating architecture and urban development that helped create the Floating Pavilion in Rotterdam, a floating structure used for exhibition and events commissioned by the Rotterdam Climate Proof Initiative. One promotional booklet, titled the “Floating Development for French Polynesia Concept Design” (Blue Frontiers, 2017a), describes the floating island as “a green island with living, working, and recreational space” (p. 12). The island would consist of small, modular platforms with private villas and larger platforms with mixed-used buildings with green roofs used for water and solar energy collection, initially be powered by Tesla technology, and built with traditional and local materials.

The Floating Island design inserted Polynesian epistemologies into the seasteading project to cast the floating island as a continuation of Polynesian history. The platforms are described as “inspired by the many legends about a mystical floating island appearing at a distance (Mokulana)” (p. 4) and aligned according to celestial paths traditionally used for navigation. One image shows the overall shape of the proposed Floating Island in the shape of a

fishhook, evoking the demigod Maui who set out to find new land for the next generation (pp. 4-5). The platforms would also include such appropriation spaces as a fare pote'e (traditional meeting house). In addition, the proposed design promised to advance blue urbanism and bring humans closer to the sea with underwater windows in the "underwater observatory (located in the basement)" and in the "jacuzzi integrated in the terrace" (p. 20).³⁸

Figure 9 Floating Development for French Polynesia Concept Design (Blue Frontiers, 2017)



³⁸ I had the opportunity to discuss the Floating Island Project with Rutger De Graaf-van Dinther, the co-founder and director of Blue21, at the third International Conference on Amphibious Architecture, Design and Engineering, in Warsaw in October 2019. This conversation demonstrated the importance of selectivities to me. First, engineers are primarily interested in the technical challenges and innovations of urban amphibious architecture and design, rather than in the political aspects. Second, Rutger mentioned that Blue21 hosted a Polynesian student intern to work on the project who felt that if the floating island had had something to offer to French Polynesians, such as ice to distribute to fishermen, for instance, it would have been more positively received by the local population. Even within the same architecture firm's project team, agents approach start-up societies projects, whether they are floating island or private cities, from a certain perspective shaped by their professional background and personal experience and interests.

In addition to relying on cryptocurrency and blockchain technology to raise capital through the launch of Varyon and to secure economic and political extraterritoriality, the discourse used to promote the Floating Island Project was also semiotically encrypted to selectively recruit like-minded individuals. The following excerpt is taken from the text published on Blue Frontiers' website and in the description of the company's YouTube video to promote the sale of the cryptocurrency (Blue Frontiers, 2018b):

Seasteading brings decentralization beyond the digital world of bits and into the world of atoms by providing modular, floating structures – seasteads – on which the evolution of new societies and forms of governance can occur. Promising solutions can branch off at any time by physically separating to create new seasteads – enabling a high level of evolvability and quick rate of adaptation. Mimicking nature's time-tested method of variation and selection, the process of decentralizing governance through seasteading will spark the creation and evolution of new advancements in civilization.

When our homes and businesses can float to locations we choose, we can relatively easily rearrange our cities and sail our residences to other locations. Governments will no longer have a monopoly on the space where citizens live and businesses can conduct their commercial activities. Instead governments will need to act like service providers, competing to attract citizens and businesses. Consequently, we will have an ever-evolving marketplace for government in a decentralized world.

The first sentence of text refers to a quote from Peter Thiel who said in 2015 that while many breakthroughs are happening in the world of bits, that is in information technology software and hardware, the world of atom is slow, with space travel, high-speed transit, and new medical devices still largely lagging in terms of innovation. Thiel accounts for this stagnation with the

fact that “we live in a world in which bits were unregulated and atoms were regulated” and partly due to “the hysteresis of non-software industries” (in Cowen, 2015). In the quote above, this intertextuality is used to legitimize the seasteading project and presented as a solution to a problem identified by a leading Silicon Valley technologist and venture capitalist who was until 2014 the main financial backer of the Seasteading Institute. The use of evolutionary theory lexicon (“evolution,” “branch off,” “evolvability,” “adaptation,” “mimicking nature’s time-tested method of variation and selection,” “spark the creation and evolution”) to describe the proposed solution suggests a socio-political Darwinism approach to governance.

The second part of the text assumes a sympathetic audience and invites readers to project themselves into an imagined future, one in which the “market civilization” (Gill, 1995) has been realized. The use of “we” has two effects. First, it includes the readers in this vision of political disruption and invites them to project themselves into a decentralized future, one in which they are free to move and operate businesses without regulatory restrictions. This is a future in which entrepreneurship has become “the new common sense” (Szeman, 2015) to the extent that governments are reduced to service providers competing for customers. Second, it excludes those who do not have “homes and businesses” from this future.

The excerpt conveys a deeply ideological vision of the future, one in which governance structures and social interactions are determined by market forces, technological power and the survival of the fittest. The Varyon sales pitch does not address rising sea levels or any other of the socio-economic concerns to which the Floating Island Project was presented as a solution. The text is carefully semiotically crafted to appeal to readers who already share or are receptive to particular techno-utopian, libertarian, and anarcho-capitalist worldviews. This may not be surprising to the reader, but it is relevant in terms of semiotic encryption. It highlights how the

vision behind the project was shaped by a particular strategic discursive selectivity, which the promotional material reproduced to attract certain people and to help realize a particular vision of the future.

The promotional brochure designed to win the support of politicians and public opinion presents seasteading as a sustainable solution to rising sea levels, one that is respectful and even admiring of Polynesian culture. In contrast, the text targeting potential cryptocurrency buyers and seasteading supporters presents an ideological discourse of cryptosecession and cryptostatecraft. It makes no mention of the Floating Island Project and its claim to offer a solution to rising sea levels. A comparison of the seasteading discourse in these two promotional texts suggests that the narrative targeting the French Polynesian population centers around “enhancing Polynesian culture” (Blue Frontiers, 2017a, p. 4) through sustainable technology and green urbanism, whereas the narrative to attract investors strongly draws on evolutionist and technological and political disruption discourses. The two texts do not complement or engage with each other. They are semiotically encrypted using particular vocabularies and intertextual references so that agents sympathetic to the seasteading vision will read between the lines and decode a broader political project. Ultimately, the floating island would function as a space where to deploy a cryptotrad political rationality; one where neoliberal structures and values of entrepreneurship and individualism could be superimposed over French Polynesian culture while claiming to safeguard it. Conversely, Polynesian history and way of life were used to promote the creation of a deregulated special economic zone that would, supporters argue, expedite the archipelago’s integration into the global and the crypto economies through benevolent capitalist intervention.

Promotional discourses of the Floating Island Project went to great lengths to integrate Polynesian culture and epistemologies. Yet French Polynesians, although welcome to invest in the project, were strikingly absent from it. The first floating island would be designed to host young professionals, researchers and entrepreneurs, visitors, time-shares or “families that want to move out of their current county [sic] in order to settle in a nicer environment” (p. 12). How it would directly benefit French Polynesians and other Pacific Islanders threatened by rising sea levels is never explained. What the future residents would have in common is a desire “to co-exist on beautiful floating islands” (p. 12). The proposed concept design resembled a luxury eco-enclave resort and said nothing about how the floating island would accommodate a population threatened by climate change. In fact, an ecological assessment produced by Blue21 admitted the project would have significant risks and uncertainties about how the environment would behave in the presence of floating infrastructure and the need for constant monitoring and adaptive management (Blue Frontiers, 2017b, p. 61).

6.7 Polynesians’ pantry, seasteaders’ backyard

Despite the ways in which the Floating Island Project engaged with Polynesian cultural narratives and was promoted as consistent with the development of the blue economy, it was rejected by its opponents as a commodification of Polynesian heritage and culture which they, the “original seasteaders,” would observe from their own endangered islands. Opposition gained momentum after Sam Amaru (2018), a resident of Papeari, shared a video on Facebook in which he denounced the project and spoke of his fear of the lagoon being privatized by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. Valentina Hina Cross, a local politician from the Tavini Huiraatira party that favors greater independence from the French Republic, became the main spokesperson against

the Floating Island Project. It became a contentious topic during the Polynesian legislative elections of 2018.

On an anti-floating island Facebook group, French Polynesians shared information they learned about the Seasteading Institute and its proponents, libertarianism, and neo-reactionary philosophy, all of which were topics they had little or no knowledge of prior to the project. The Floating Island Project was perceived as an attempt by seasteaders at ocean grabbing and the local population feared it would dispossess them of use, control, and access to the ocean space and resources around the floating island. In addition to potential ecological damage, a key concern was the preservation of fishing rights in the lagoon of Mataiea, one of the proposed locations for the construction of the floating island. Access to and fishing in the lagoon would be limited via the imposition of a *rāhui*, a traditional Māori practice temporarily restricting access to a space and forbidding or restricting exploitation of its resources, which in this particular case would be employed as a framework for the SeaZone (Urarii Pambrun, 2018). In practice, this would mean Polynesians could not access the space around the floating island, or the SeaZone, for fishing or leisure. Opponents of the projects argued that this went against Polynesian cultural values of communal sharing (Chailloux, 2018).

One photo shared on Facebook by seasteaders of their team standing in the Atimaono lagoon sparked strong criticism from French Polynesians who saw seasteaders posing as proud colonizers. On the anti-floating island Facebook group, French Polynesians responded by sharing old and recent photos of themselves and their families fishing in or posing in front of the lagoon and of people selling the fish they caught in the lagoon to reaffirm the community's strong socio-spatial and emotional connection to their ancestral lands and waters. An anti-floating island association, *No to'u Here ia Mataiea*, was formed, and on 7 April 2018 at least 300 people joined

a demonstration organized by another newly-formed association of fisherfolk, Te feiā rava'ai nō Mataiea, to denounce the project (Raveino & Damour, 2018). At the anti-floating island protest, people held cardboard signs reading, “The lagoon is our pantry.” Seasteaders argued the Floating Island Project would help develop French Polynesia’s blue economy, but Polynesians, in particular fisherfolk, feared it would destroy the local and traditional economy and threaten their livelihoods.

At the seasteading conference in Tahiti, Randolph Hencken (2017), then executive director of the Seasteading Institute, tried to reassure the population:

Our commitment to the people of French Polynesia is that our floating islands are elegant, that they complement their surroundings. We want to live in something that’s beautiful, we want you to see something that’s beautiful. And it’s the same for the environment. We’re going to take care of the environment around us. We do not want to pollute our own backyard.

Seasteaders conceptualized the territorial waters of French Polynesia as an empty space, which they already thought of as their “backyard.” By using possessive pronouns, “*our* floating islands” and “*our* own backyard,” Hencken’s speech reinforced the dichotomy between seasteaders and French Polynesians’ respective conceptualization of the oceans. Hencken’s statement also strongly diverged from the stated goals of the Floating Island Project to develop floating habitats for populations of the South Pacific threatened by rising sea levels.

The seasteading blue economy imaginary is one of ocean as natural capital and good business, and as a space open to colonization. Although it claimed seasteading would benefit the economic development of SIDS and the relocation of their population, the seasteading blue economy imaginary conflicted not only with the Polynesian conceptualization of the blue

economy as essential to small-scale fisheries and its economic development, but also with the Polynesian ontology of living with the ocean. Seasteaders' conceptualization of the blue economy was purely economical, reproduced a land-sea dichotomy, and ignored the non-material benefits and cultural significance of the ocean in French Polynesian's cultural practices and daily life. By seeing the ocean space as completely distinct from the land space, seasteaders failed to appreciate that to Polynesians, ocean space is also a public space whose ontology extends and exceeds on land (Peters & Steinberg, 2019; Winder, 2019).

6.8 Conclusion

The Floating Island Project raises important questions about the role of entrepreneurs, consultants, and politicians who engage with the blue economy discourse in shaping the imaginaries and futures of coastal urbanity and pushing for innovative infrastructure and extrastatecraft, cryptostatecraft, and cryptosecession. Examining the Floating Island Project from a cultural political economy / critical futures studies approach and using a critical discourse analysis methodology demonstrates how seasteaders and the French Polynesian government understood the crises differently, the former primarily as an ongoing crisis of governance and the latter as not only an economic crisis but an imminent existential crisis, and how the construction of a floating island came to be selected by both as a solution.

Both seasteaders and the French Polynesian government engaged with the discourse of the blue economy to present the threat of rising sea levels as an economic opportunity. In terms of discursive selectivity, seasteading entrepreneurs leveraged French Polynesia's reliance on the blue economy and its traditional relationship to the ocean to convince the government to engage in extrastatecraft, and the French Polynesian government used the blue economy and climate emergency as a justification for the project. Ultimately, the Floating Island Project in French

Polynesia was marketed as a libertarian political venture steeped in evolutionary economics on the one hand, and as smart, blue-green territorial fix for island nations and coastal cities threatened by the effects of climate change on the other.

Both seasteaders and French Polynesian supporters of the Floating Island Project used this framework to present the development of special economic zones as an imperative. They promised a low ecological impact and produced assessment studies but made no practical suggestions to improve the resiliency of the archipelago. In terms of technological selectivity, in addition to concept design and environmental studies, the special economic zone model was presented as a technology of agency (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p.316) to reorganize French Polynesian space and policies and foster the development of a French Polynesian start-up state (Moisio & Rossi, 2020).

Many SIDS, disproportionately vulnerable to the effect of climate change relative to their carbon footprint, have laid out strategic plans of adaptation and mitigation, but in the cases of Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Maldives, and the Marshall Islands, relocation may be inevitable.³⁹ In this context, a key selling point of the Floating Island Project was its potential creation of “new living spaces on the sea” for “countries threatened by rising water levels, overpopulation, or other dangerous phenomena” (The Seasteading Institute, 2017). It was even suggested that French Polynesia could generate revenue by exporting floating islands to neighboring SIDS and coastal nations constrained by rising sea levels to relocate their population (Hencken, 2017). However, the project ignored the colonial past of French Polynesia and the three decades of atomic testing

³⁹ In March 2021, the Maldives announced its own project to build a floating city. The architect in charge of the project is Waterstudio, who also works with Ocean Builders. The project’s discourse is highly similar to that used to promote the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia. For instance, the venture’s website claims that “the Maldivians will rewrite their destiny from climate refugees to climate innovators.” But in this case, too, it is unclear who the island will be built for. House prices will start at US\$ 250,000, and foreign buyers will be able to apply for a residence permit. In 2016, the average monthly household income in the Maldives was MRV 26, 395, approximately US\$ 1, 708 (National Bureau of Statistics & Ministry of Finance and Treasury, 2018)

by the French government. Climate justice and human rights were seldom part of the discussion (Ranganathan, 2019). Seasteaders and the French Polynesian government engaged with the discourse of the blue economy and climate change adaptation as a new profit frontier and an opportunity for political disruption. This was not an opportunity for “transformative mobilities” (Farbotko et al., 2018) for Polynesians, Pacific islanders, and climate refugees.

The project failed to address how SIDS could afford to purchase floating islands and whether the development of floating habitats would necessarily entail extrastatecraft policy design and practices. Although French Polynesians were repeatedly presented as the “original seasteaders,” it was unclear how the project would benefit them directly. In fact, they argued that privatizing part of their land via the creation of the “Anchor Zone” and part of their territorial waters via the “SeaZone” would threaten their livelihoods and way of life. Seasteading, initially a project to create experimental political communities, became a potential solution to rising sea levels because the discourse of the blue economy opened new possibilities for the creation of new governable spaces, in this case “innovative special economic zones.”

The lack of attention and funding dedicated to developing adaptive strategies to changing sea levels, the competitive nature of the blue economy, and the challenges to local economies make SIDS and archipelagos like French Polynesia more susceptible to reliance on foreign investments and the expertise of non-state actors, in particular NGOs and entrepreneurs. In the case of the floating island in French Polynesia, it was stipulated many times by supporters of the project that French Polynesia needed the technological expertise and the financial help of Silicon Valley technology entrepreneurs to develop its blue economy and become more, if not fully, self-sufficient. Yet it seems it is those entrepreneurs who are most likely to benefit from such ventures. Although the project failed, it did allow Marc Collins Chen, who has now completely

disassociated himself from Blue Frontiers and told me in an interview that Oceanix would “not be using the word ‘seasteading’” and would work with governments, not against them (personal communication, May 17, 2019), to host a round table at the United Nations’ headquarters. This, in turn, helped consolidate this particular imaginary of sunken futures covered with sustainable floating islands. Who will get to live on them is still unclear, but we can surmise that what the future residents will have in common is a desire “to co-exist on beautiful floating islands” (Blue Frontiers, 2017a, p. 12).

Chapter 7 – Charter cities: The special economic zone as a dispositive and its appropriation by non-state actors

7.1 Introduction

Projects to build floating islands entail significant technological and legal challenges. Another option explored by proponents of start-up societies and deemed more realistic are semi-autonomous charter cities. These new cities built “from scratch” would address economic and political crises which, their proponents argue, are due to overregulation and a lack of entrepreneurial opportunities and would offer a profitable alternative to official development assistance. This conceptualization of charter cities was initially proposed by the Nobel-prized and former World Bank chief economist Paul Romer in a TED Talk in 2009. It differs from California charter cities which, following the 1879 home rule amendment to the California constitution, can exercise “additional authority or supremacy” that prevails over general state law in matters related to municipal governance (League of California Cities, 2021). Charter cities as envisioned by Romer are designed to fast-track development in economically struggling countries. They would be erected on uninhabited land in partnership with the governments of advanced economies and function as experimental “start-up jurisdictions” (Fuller & Romer, 2012, p. 5) where free-market reforms could be tested before being adopted nationally.

The concept of charter cities is gaining traction among both state and non-state actors as a vision for the future of cities and of governance. Romer’s controversial proposal has been picked up by the government of Honduras and by Günter Nooke, the German chancellor’s personal representative to Africa, who suggested charter cities could help stem migration to Europe (*BBC News*, 2018), as well as by entrepreneurs and academics around the world. It is getting attention in Brazil, where Titus Gebel, the founder of Free Private Cities, participated to a round table on the topic organized by National School of Public Administration in February 2020 (Escola

Nacional de Administração Pública, 2020). Titus Gebel was initially inspired by Romer's concept of charter city (Gebel, 2015) and, in his book *Free Private Cities: Making Governments Compete for You* (2018), he lists Honduras' Law on Economic Development and Employment Zones (ZEDE is their Spanish acronym) among "the project to come closest to the ideal of a Free Private City" (p. 359). The concept of charter cities is also gaining traction in some African countries where at least one project to develop a charter city, Nkwashi, is supported by the Charter Cities Institute (formerly the Center for Innovative Governance Research), a non-profit organization that supports charter cities initiatives through research and such technical assistance as the development of toolkits, events, and digital advocacy (Charter Cities Institute, 2019).⁴⁰ In May 2021, Vitalik Buterin, a co-founder of Ethereum, gave ETH 500 (worth approximately US\$1,215,000 at that time) to the Charter Cities Institute. In December 2019, Patri Friedman also launched a venture fund, Pronomos Capital, which invests in charter city projects in emerging economies.

In their book *Founding Startup Societies: A Step-by-Step Guide* (2020), Mark Frazier and Joe McKinney include charter city initiatives in their list of "sub-jurisdictional startup societies" (Loc. 519). This chapter examines the growing popularity of the concept of charter city among entrepreneurial non-state actors and how it informs the start-up societies imaginary. It draws attention to three key aspects of the start-up societies imaginary: the influence of the special economic zone model of economic development in shaping the start-up societies imaginary; the emergence of a radical form of privatized start-up urbanism and how the uneven interaction of strategic selectivities contributes to its selection and retention as a promising solution to

⁴⁰ Not to be confused with the Institute for Competitive Governance, a non-profit organization founded by members of the Startup Societies Foundation network "to promote the study and development of special jurisdictions" and which launched its own peer-reviewed, open-access journal dedicated to the topic, the Journal of Special Jurisdictions.

economic, political, and environmental crises; and how this imaginary is likely to constrain the possibility of democratic urban futures.

The chapter examines the ways in which the special economic zone functions as a dispositive, a “thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic proposition” (Foucault, 1980, p. 194, cited in Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 113) deployed in response to crises. From a CPE approach, a dispositive comprises

a problem-oriented, strategically selective ensemble or assemblage of (1) a distributed apparatus, comprising institutions, organizations and networks; (2) an order of discourse, with corresponding thematizations and objectivations; (3) diverse devices and technologies involved in producing power/knowledge and (4) subject positions and subjectivations. (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 208)

Through an examination of the appropriation of the special economic zone model by entrepreneurial non-state actors, I demonstrate how the interaction between these elements and in particular the zone’s technologies (in the Foucauldian sense) involved in producing power/knowledge create a normative vision of privatized urban futures and offers a template for both territorial and social restructuring. I argue that the zone functions as a dispositive that disciplines both the state and its citizens into becoming entrepreneurial. Through this process, it relieves the state from some of its responsibilities, normalizes the transfer of key aspects of legislative, executive, and judicial powers to non-state actors, and advances the commercialization of sovereignty and citizenship. The argument is based on a critical discourse analysis of public talks, podcast interviews, opinion pieces, websites, promotional documents,

and newsletters written and published by organizations and individuals supporting the development of entrepreneurial charter cities, as well as participation both in person and online in start-up societies conferences and events between 2015 and 2021 and semi-structured and informal interviews with start-up societies advocates.

The chapter first situates the concept of charter city within recent developments in start-up urbanism and examines how the zone is promoted as a replacement to development aid. Second, it explains how the zone functions as a dispositive and how, through the development and circulation of the charter city concept, it has been appropriated by technology entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, and conservative ideologues. Third, it illustrates how the zone functions as dispositive that disciplines the states and its citizens and sustains the neoliberal hegemony while simultaneously reaffirming neoconservative values through an examination of Honduras Próspera LLC, a project to develop a semi-autonomous charter city in Honduras.

7.2 Charter cities as urban entrepreneurialism 2.0

Chapter 2 reviewed how the increasing influence of start-up companies and start-up culture over the development and management of urban space have been theorized as manifestation of urban entrepreneurialism 2.0 (Rossi & Wang, 2020). Conceptualizations that fall under the theme of urban entrepreneurialism 2.0 include start-up city (McNeill, 2017), start-up urbanism (Rossi & Di Bella, 2017), and start-up state (Moisio & Rossi, 2020). I argued that the city-as-a-start-up represents the depoliticization of urban space as it strategically “reshuffles the practices of urban politics” by “remov[ing], displac[ing] or obstruct[ing] urban conflicts as/from the political” (Beveridge & Koch, 2017, p. 40) and presents technology entrepreneurship and privatized governance as a productive and profitable alternative to political debate. I explained how the city-as-a-start-up draws on existing urban development models and offshoring

practices, in particular common-interest developments and the special economic zone, and how the zone functions as a form of enclave urbanism (Geglia, 2016; Kleibert, 2018) and as a technology of land-grabbing (Cowaloosur, 2014; Martin & Geglia, 2019). In this chapter, I examine a third function of the zone as a profitable alternative to official development assistance. But first, I describe the concept of charter city and its origins, and how it has been appropriated by entrepreneurial non-state and state actors and proponents of start-up societies.

7.2.1 Charter cities

A charter city is “a new type of special reform zone” that “extends the concept of a special economic zone by increasing its size and expanding the scope of its reforms” (Fuller & Romer, 2012, pp. 3–4). Inspired by the economic success of the Hong Kong special administrative region under British rule, Paul Romer has suggested that the governments of emerging economies could harness rapid global urbanization and the “poverty-reducing potential” of cities by partnering with “credible allies,” preferably the governments of advanced economies such as Canada, to build new cities on unoccupied land and that would have their own semi-autonomous jurisdictional frameworks (Fuller & Romer, 2012; Romer, 2009, 2010). Such cities, he argued, would accelerate institutional reform at the national level by providing a model to emulate, attracting foreign direct investment, and offering an alternative to emigration (Fuller & Romer, 2012).

Charter cities differ significantly from “traditional” SEZs both in their primary aim and in their structure. Both SEZs and charter cities are developed through partnerships between state and private actors and function as a strategy of “graduated sovereignty” (Ong, 2006) that allows states to engage in experiments of localized economic liberalization to support broader national economic objectives. Whereas SEZs are used by entrepreneurial states to fast-track economic

development by facilitating investment in the industrial, technology, and tourism sectors, charter cities are developed primarily “for the purpose of changing rules” and experimenting with “rules-that-change-rules” (Romer, 2010). In Romer’s conceptualization, charter cities rely on foreign actors to facilitate not only economic development, but also deep institutional reform: “Rules in this context encompass what academics often refer to as ‘institutions’ – the social norms and the formal laws (together with enforcement systems) that determine how people interact” (Fuller & Romer, 2012, p. 5). While the primary aim of SEZs is regional and national economic development, the primary aim of charter cities as conceptualized by Romer is foreign-led socio-institutional restructuring.

In terms of legal structure, charter cities are “new start-up jurisdictions” (Fuller & Romer, 2012, p. 5) that operate semi-autonomously from the legal framework of their host nations. While the charter city’s legal system “might be given instant credibility of enforcement by a partner country” (Fuller & Romer, 2012, p. 7), the “legitimacy” of the city itself would stem from the fact that people would be free to “opt-in” by moving into the newly built city (Fuller & Romer, 2012, p. 6). The success of charter cities therefore relies on the idea that people can “vote with their feet” (Romer, 2010, p. 7), also a core notion of the start-up societies imaginary. By offering the possibility of voluntary opt-in, charter cities would provide a legitimate alternative to emigration and create a mechanism to let people express their personal preferences. In this way, as Geglia (2016) argues, Romer and charter cities advocates can “rebuk[e] claims of colonialism by invoking the idea of ‘choice’” and “asser[t] the neoliberal idea that even models of governance should be selected in a market-based, rather than democratic, setting” (p.356). Ultimately, the concept of charter city also relies on the assumption that they will attract mobile individuals who have both the desire and the means to relocate. However, the positioning of

cities as the locus of technological and institutional innovation disregards the role the countryside plays in creating new technologies and sustaining an urban way of life (Wang, 2020).

Romer (2010) suggests charter cities “could offer an important supplement to familiar democratic or authoritarian mechanisms for changing the rules” (p. 7). However, it is unlikely that the endorsement of a charter city project by an authoritarian state would signify a shift in governance. Critics argue that charter cities “would not weaken and decentralize nation-state governments,” as more libertarian-oriented proponents of charter cities suggest, but would instead “strengthen the legitimacy and resiliency of those states able to provide a secure platform and the will to carry them out” (Milton, 2018). By creating legal framework for charter cities and SEZs to host them, the state strengthens its hold over territory and territoriality, but delegates its governing authority to private sector actors. Moreover, success in attracting foreign investments, or at least the promise of investments, could be used to justify anti-democratic or anti-constitutional measures.

Another key issue with the concept of charter city concerns the idealization and the replicability of specific entrepreneurial (and often authoritarian) models like Hong Kong, Shenzhen, or Singapore, whose economic success is due to particular geographic, historical, political, and cultural conjunctures (Cheong & Goh, 2013; Du, 2020; Jessop & Sum, 2000; Pow, 2002). The recent passing of laws to crush the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, ironically the city that inspired the concept of charter city in the first place, also illustrates how “the charter city would always have its interests subordinated to that of the developed country that provides the management where their interests conflict” (Cheong & Goh, 2013, p. 103).

Nonetheless, the charter city imaginary resonates strongly with proponents of start-up societies. Charter cities could potentially allow the formation of new types of common-interest communities based on voluntary association, and the conceptualization of rules as a technology that can be programmed, downloaded, updated, and marketed to citizens-consumers appeals to new cyberelites. Echoing Romer's (2010) remark that "like technologies, rules can be shared and copied" (p. 3), Patri Friedman (2020) suggests that "laws are code" and that a legal system can be compared to "software infrastructure that can be open source." We should, Friedman (2020) argues, "copy the laws from the countries that have the best laws" and "build cities as product the way an app developer would develop an app." From this perspective, infrastructure is hardware, governance is software or the operating system, and citizens are users or consumers. Unlike Romer, however, technology entrepreneurs invested in charter city ventures reject the idea that charter cities should entail the participation of foreign governments (Doherty, 2013). Instead, they advocate privately managed charter cities that would function as model enclaves of innovation and catalysts of economic prosperity.

7.2.2. The zone as profitable alternative to development aid

An aspect of the zone that has yet to be further explored in the literature concerns the zone as a replacement for official development assistance. Both SEZs and charter cities are presented as profitable strategic alternatives to development aid and as a means to help achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Success in attracting foreign investments and in SDGs compliance are used as benchmarks to measure the success of zones. For instance, a recent UNCTAD discussion paper states that "the success of SEZs will be increasingly defined in terms of how they can contribute to [the SDGs] and to sustainable urbanization in particular" (Wessendorp et al., 2020, p. 1). Despite the existence of benchmarks,

the economic performance of SEZs has not been systematically demonstrated. Nevertheless, they are proliferating under various forms and scales. A UNCTAD (2019) report states that there are nearly 5,400 SEZs today operating under different names, more than 1,000 of which were established since 2014 (p. 128).

Hardaker (2020) suggests that the zone should be understood as “a process rather than as a fixed set of guidelines,” meaning that SEZs’ performance is ultimately determined by their embeddedness in the regional context and their cohesive integration within the surrounding economy (p. 423). Guidelines can help facilitating such processes, and UNCTAD is developing structured frameworks for Sustainable Economic Zones (UNCTAD, 2015) and more recently for “Model SDG Zones” that would focus on attracting investment in SDG-relevant activities that would comply to environment, social, and governance (ESG) standards, and that would promote “inclusive growth through linkages and spillovers” (UNCTAD, 2019, pp. 202–205; Wessendorp et al., 2020, p. 5).

Easterling (2014) posits that such spaces of extrastatecraft as SEZs could be “hacked” by activists who could “redesig[n]” zones’ “disposition” by “reconditioning a transnational network already in place [to] encourage alternative urban dispositions and political goals” (p. 107) and “exposing enclaves to richer forms of urbanity” (p. 417). However, Model SDG Zones do not challenge zones’ disposition. Rather, as I explained in the previous chapter with the case of the Floating Island in French Polynesia, engaging with the discourses of the SDGs helps legitimize the use of zoned-based developments as new spaces of exception, exclusion, extraction, and accumulation. The discourse obscures the zone’s economic function and its potential uses as a tool of territorial and social restructuration by attributing them a primarily social purpose. In providing a structured framework that fits within accepted developmental discourses, guidelines

like those proposed by UNCTAD facilitate the selection of the zone as an entrepreneurial urban development strategy.

The charter city model is anchored in the idea of the zone as a profitable replacement to development assistance. It is also heavily influenced by the concept of effective altruism (Mason, 2019, 2020), a controversial rationalist and utilitarian approach to philanthropy that uses “evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as possible” (*Centre for Effective Altruism*, n.d.; Gabriel, 2017).⁴¹ Overall, charter city proposals are framed as a form of benevolent capitalism that seeks to help the most vulnerable. One proposal that illustrates this is the concept of “refugee cities,” envisioned as “special-status settlements in which refugees would be legally allowed to engaged in meaningful, dignifying, and rewarding work” (Refugee Cities, n.d.; Moberg & Reil, 2018).⁴² A non-profit and non-governmental organization, the Sustainable Development Zone Alliance (SDZ Alliance), brings together organizations and networks that advocate the creation of refugee cities, defined as “new urban communities with special legal and administrative institutions that further sustainable development in line with the UN Agenda 2030” (SDZ Alliance, n.d.). The SDZ Alliance’s mandate is to develop “the physical and institutional structure of SDZs, including their legal, policy, administrative, financial, masterplanning and operational needs” (SDZ Alliance, n.d.).

41 However, a report published by The Centre for Effective Altruism in June 2021 concludes that “it is unlikely that charter cities will be more cost-effective than [the effective altruism-focused organization] GiveWell top charities in terms of directly improving wellbeing” and the authors are “uncertain” about the possibility of replicating Shenzhen’s success and about the “the value of information from experimenting with new policies and governance structures in charter cities” (Bernard & Schukraft, 2021).

42 The urbanist Alain Bertaud, author of a book on market urbanism (Bertaud, 2018), has also suggested that the Middle East was the part of the world most likely to develop charter cities “[b]ecause they will have to deal with their refugee problem, and it’s not going to vanish. Probably a charter city will be the only way to solve it. Also, because the Middle East has a lot of desert. It will be difficult to establish a charter city, let’s say, in Bangladesh, for instance, where every land is cultivated. But if you have a large piece of desert which has no alternative use, I think it will be a good way of starting a charter city, and the demand is really the refugees” (in Cowen, 2019)

SDZ Alliance is described as being “at the vanguard” of an “SEZ Plus” movement that submits that zones can fulfill broad mandates “encompassing social and environmental dimensions” and even “support political peace and reconciliation processes” (SDZ Alliance, n.d.). Its proposal that refugee cities could accelerate the integration of refugees into the formal sector of the camps’ host countries is not without merit. However, the emphasis on economic pragmatism and profitability that underpins refugee cities, according to which displaced persons “should be perceived as citizens, consumers, and producers rather than as objects of care” (SDZ Alliance, n.d.), not only prioritizes turning displaced populations into depoliticized, economically productive entrepreneurial workforces and consumer bases, but also avoids addressing the structural and political causes of forced migration. Moreover, refugee cities could strengthen exclusionary and exploitative practices by turning refugee camps not into refugee cities but into workers camps.

Thanks to their discursive-material flexibility, zone-based developments are increasingly perceived as a cure for all contemporary ills, from socio-economic development to environmental protection to refugee relocation to post-pandemic economic recovery. In the summer of 2020, Ivan Ko, a Hong Kong real estate tycoon, proposed building “international charter cities” in Ireland and elsewhere to welcome Hong Kong refugees fleeing the new dictatorial laws imposed by the Chinese government over the special administrative region. Media report that Ko has downscaled his project from private cities with their own borders, official language, and political system to “just the development of a new city in a host country” (cited in Haugh, 2020).⁴³ Mark Lutter, the founder and executive director of the Charter Cities

⁴³ Participants in an online discussion group on SEZs and charter cities of which I am a member also raised concerns about how the project could potentially be a covert Chinese operation. The evidence to support this claim is that Ko is the founding chairman of the Chinese Real Estate Chamber of Commerce Hong Kong and International Chapter Limited, which in May 2020 released a statement in support of the controversial National Security Law (CRCCHKI,

Institute, advises Ko's Victoria Harbor Group "in his personal capacity and has a financial interest in their success" (Lutter and Ko, 2020).

As governments organized their response to the Covid-19 pandemic, proponents of SEZs and charter cities also seized the opportunity to present them as vehicles to restore national and global economies and held online conferences on the subject (e.g. FDI Center, 2020; Startup Societies Foundation, 2020). Their argument finds support in the aforementioned UNCTAD discussion paper, which argues that "the role of SEZs to contribute to sustainable urbanization will be increasingly challenging but also more critical" in a post-pandemic context and that SEZs that focus on health and bio-tech sectors in particular and are oriented "towards fostering innovation and promoting high-value activities, including in digital sectors" may be "catalyzers for innovative solutions to the new challenges of a post-pandemic recovery" (Wessendorp et al., 2020, pp. 1, 3). The zone increasingly features in public and official discourses as the most promising imaginary to address economic recovery, institutional restructuring, and even climate change. But as a dispositive, it seeks to accomplish a lot more.

7.3 The zone as a dispositive

The zone functions as dispositive comprising a distributed apparatus of institutions, private and transnational organizations and networks (e.g., *Adrianople Group*, n.d.; *AFZA*, 2017; *FDI Center*, 2021; *FEMOZA "The World Free & Special Economic Zones Federation,"* 2021; *Tipolis*, 2019; *WEPZA*, n.d.; The World Bank; UNCTAD), an order of discourse, devices and disciplinary technologies (i.e., its zoning / enclavism features, preferential tax regimes, tools to calculate performance, best practices models), and entrepreneurial subject positions and

2020), as well as a member of the advisory committee of the Grand China Fund, which invests in property development in China and supports its Greater Bay Area Plan.

subjectivations. What the zone does, its “disposition” (Easterling, 2014), is create new extra-territorial or offshore “spatio-juridical enclosures” and “jurisdictional ambiguities that can be exploited to advance a particular political program” (Palan, 2003, p. 182). The zone creates a normative vision of privatized urban futures realized through the commercialization of governance regimes and the development of entrepreneurial subjectivities on the part of both the state and citizens.

In the case of charter cities, this political program is shaped by an ideology of technology that prioritizes attracting high-technology industries as engines for urban economies. In other words, a charter city “reframe[s] urban problems into technological problems to be addressed by technological solutions” (Alvarez León & Rosen, 2020, p. 497). This ideology of technology is “a specific expression of the more widespread drive to rely on the convergence of private industry, digital technologies, and market logics to address (or, more narrowly, to solve) social problems” and to transform cities into “digitized environments tailored for capital accumulation” (Alvarez León & Rosen, 2020, p. 499). How technology is “mobilized by urban power holders to advance specific urban futures” and “has come to embody a particular set of ideas and ideals, as well as a corresponding urban governance vision, legitimized in public discourse and mobilized beyond democratic debate” (Alvarez León & Rosen, 2020, p. 501) is explicit in the charter city’s discourse. Advocates contend that complex institutional processes can be replaced by entrepreneurial activities and equate governance to software or code that can be copy-pasted or reprogrammed. What is particularly significant about charter city proposals, however, is how their multiplication foregrounds the increasingly authoritative position of technology, and non-state actors and political entrepreneurs’ role in advancing entrepreneurial urban futures and their agential power as urban power holders.

7.3.1 *Founders and builders*

What makes the zone-based model of development particularly attractive not only to all levels of governments around the world, but to non-state actors as well is not only its replicability (Easterling, 2014), but also its creation of a new stage for encounters between global actors and national states, a new “frontier zone” of “politico-economic interaction that produces new institutional forms and alter some of the old ones” (Sassen, 2000, p. 164). This frontier zone creates “operational and conceptual openings for actors and subjects outside the formal political system” (pp. 166-167).⁴⁴ As a model of urban development anchored in an ideology of technology, the charter city particularly favors start-up “founders,” individuals who have founded a start-up company and emerged as an elite class and who, after having successfully realized their business exit strategy, have come to consider founding cities and “exiting” political systems the next logical step in their career.

Patri Friedman’s latest venture, Pronomos Capital, launched in December 2019, is a fund backed by leading Silicon Valley personalities including Peter Thiel, Roger Ver, Marc Andreessen, and Balaji Srinivasan to develop charter cities in emerging economies. Pronomos Capital claims it is “using the lessons of Silicon Valley to create **a model for urban development where the city is the product**” and aims to develop innovative governance frameworks that could “emulate the economic success of Dubai, Hong Kong, Shenzhen and

⁴⁴ In recent years, collaboration between proponents of start-up societies and special economic zones experts has increased through partnerships and the creation of new organizations. Titus Gebel, the founder of Free Private Cities, also founded a SEZ consultancy, Tipolis, and is the chairman and chief executive officer of FEMAC, a venture created by FEMOZA to “support and guide SEZs throughout the globe” (FEMOZA “The World Free & Special Economic Zones Federation,” 2021). Thibault Serlet and Preston Martin, who co-founded the Startup Societies Foundation, have founded their own SEZ consultancy and research think tank, Adrianople Group. Dr. Nathalie Mezza-Garcia, who worked with the Seasteading Institute and Blue Frontiers to develop and promote the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, founded Seaphia, a SEZ consultancy specialized in “floating special economic zones, floating architecture, and zone projects” (Seaphia, 2020).

Singapore” (Pronomos Capital, 2020, emphasis in the original). To this effect, the fund seeks to invest in projects to build charter cities led by entrepreneurs and founders. When Elon Musk tweeted in early March 2021 that he was “creating the city of Starbase, Texas,” Patri Friedman’s (2021) retweeted Musk and interpreted it as evidence that Pronomos’ idea of “founder-led new city” was “catching on.” This anecdote illustrates how Pronomos Capital, and the start-up societies movement more broadly, prioritize an entrepreneurial vision of urban futures where, as in the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, technology entrepreneurs and wealthy investors are called upon to rescue humankind.

Ventures Pronomos Capital has invested include Talent City, a firm that wants to build a charter city in Nigeria; and Honduras Próspera, a “prosperity hub” under construction in Honduras (Alexander, 2021; Dettoni, 2020b), both which I discuss below. Pronomos has also invested in Bluebook Cities (Dettoni, 2020a), the project of two young former hedge fund employees to develop a charter city in Ghana. This project failed and Bluebook Cities’ co-founders have now pivoted to what they call “Praxis,” “a society of founders, engineers, artists, researchers, and young aspirants building towards a shared vision for the future through the pursuit of heroic projects” (Bluebook Cities, 2021). On the previous version of their website, they claimed that Bluebook Cities is “building the city Silicon Valley deserves,” and that its founders want to “build the future on the frontier” and to build a “herofuturist world and realize humanity’s destiny” (*Bluebook Cities*, 2020). Their thesis echoes Peter Thiel’s comments on the world of bits versus the world of atoms and Balaji Srinivasan’s description of cloud cities (see Chapter 5): Bluebook Cities wants to materialize “digital cities” into “a city made of atoms” and organized “around the warmth of tribe and the growth propelled by a unified vision for the future” (*Bluebook Cities*, 2021).

Figure 10 Twitter Thread by Bluebook Cities' Co-Founder (Brown, D., 2021)





On social media, the founders and their followers share images of classical and futurist architecture as well as clothing and music that reflect their “herofuturist aesthetics.” Bluebook’s

co-founder, Dryden Brown, advocates what he calls “tradhumanism,” using technology to return to traditional values. The group discusses and shares ideas, books, and images on a Discord group, which I joined, and that includes Patri Friedman and Trey Goff, Próspera’s chief of staff, among its participants. Overall, Bluebook Cities’ discourse is a collection of classical antiquity and neoclassicist imagery, frontier narrative, and techno-optimist futurism designed to attract like-minded “pioneers” and “builders.”

The technology industry’s emphasis on the imperative to “build” was particularly salient in an essay by Marc Andreessen (2020), a prominent venture capitalist and the co-creator of Mosaic and Netscape, titled “It’s Time to Build.” Written during the Covid-19 pandemic, it argues that the United States’ lack of preparation and unsatisfactory response to the pandemic is due to a “failure of imagination,” “inertia,” “lack of desire,” “regulatory capture,” and “cho[sing] not to *build*” (emphasis in the original). This situation, Andreessen argues, extends “throughout Western life, and specifically throughout American life.” To resolve this crisis, both the right and the left should “build” better healthcare, housing, education, and industries. “Building,” Andreessen writes, “is how we reboot the American dream.”

Every step of the way, to everyone around us, we should be asking the question, what are you building? What are you building directly, or helping other people to build, or teaching other people to build, or taking care of people who are building? If the work you’re doing isn’t either leading to something being built or taking care of people directly, we’ve failed you, and we need to get you into a position, an occupation, a career where you can contribute to building. There are always outstanding people in even the most broken systems — we need to get all the talent we can on the biggest problems we have, and on building the answers to those problems. (Andreessen, 2020)

Andreessen's criticisms are not unfounded and the call to action laudable. But the essay does not address the socio-economic and political conditions that might prevent some people from "building." It ignores the causes of "inertia" and of a "lack of desire" or what more appropriately might be called individuals' incapacity to fulfill their ambitions. Neither does it address the question of who we should prioritize building for and why. Andreessen writes that he agrees with the British economist Nicholas Stern that "capitalism is how we take care of people we don't know." A counterargument can be made that capitalism, be it extractive or surveillance capitalism, is how owners, producers, and consumers, knowingly or unknowingly, prevent people they do not know from building.

The call to build has long been shared among proponents of start-up societies. The slogan on the homepage of the Startup Societies Foundation (2020a) is "Don't argue. Build." Similarly, Andreessen (2020) writes that "[w]e need to separate the imperative to build [...] from ideology and politics. Both sides need to contribute to building." Building, from this perspective, also entails depoliticization and the creation of new entrepreneurial subjectivities. "Founder-led" charter cities are an ideal vehicle for such socio-institutional restructuring.

7.3.2 Building cities for builders

In June 2016, Y Combinator, a renowned start-up accelerator, announced the launch of its "New Cities" initiative to study how to plan, design, and build cities from scratch (Rhodes, 2016) that would draw inspiration special economic zones like Shenzhen (Cheung, 2016). The project was to be headed by Adora Cheung, a software developer, and Y Combinator's president Sam Altman. To help with the launch of the project, they hired Ben Huh, the founder and former chief executive officer of The Cheezburger Network, a company that facilitated the creation and sharing of internet memes (Mannes, 2016). The initiative developed two main ideas. First, that

“it’s possible to do amazing things given a blank slate,” and second that “smart people [...] with strong interests and bold ideas in architecture, ecology, economics, politics, technology, urban planning, and much more,” were needed to address the challenge of accelerated urbanization (Cheung, 2016). Its goal was to “design the best possible city given the constraints of existing laws” (Cheung, 2016). It would address the issues through a process of optimization, namely measuring its effectiveness, identifying the values that should or should not be embedded in a city’s culture, how to help “residents be happy and reach their potential,” how to “encourage a diverse range of people to live and work in the city,” and ensuring citizens’ participation in government to “make sure a city is constantly evolving and always open to change” (Cheung, 2016).

Cheung (2016) claimed the team was “seriously interested in building new cities and we think we know how to finance it if everything else makes sense.” Perhaps “everything else” aside from financing did not make sense after all; Y Combinator’s New Cities initiative fell through, and no updates were ever provided. Sam Altman stepped down as president of Y Combinator in 2019 to focus on OpenAI, a research laboratory he co-founded with Elon Musk and others. In June 2020, he announced a new venture capital fund, Apollo Projects, that would fund “moonshot” companies such as “rapid response vaccines,” “biological manufacturing,” and “charter countries” (*Apollo Projects*, 2020).

More projects have been launched since by technology entrepreneurs aiming to turn city-building into an entrepreneurial start-up venture. At least thirteen were launched since 2016, but most have not gone beyond the conceptual stage (see Appendix 1). In 2018, Jeffrey Berns, a lawyer and cryptocurrency millionaire, purchased 67,000 acres at the cost of US\$170 million in Storey County, Nevada. The land is a designated “opportunity zone” and as such offers tax

incentives to investors. Berns' company, Blockchains LLC, is developing, with disputable results, an experimental community for 10,000 residents and whose governance structure, which Berns calls a "distributed collaborative entity," will be based on a blockchain (Popper, 2018). The company has been strongly criticized for its role pushing for a state legislation to establish "innovation zones" in Nevada that would allow technology companies to create their own cities (Silverman, 2021). This example highlights how charter cities entrepreneurs rely primarily on the support of start-up industry networks, but also on the entrepreneurial, start-up state whose role includes creating "opportunity zones," a process facilitated in the United States by the creation of the Opportunity Zones Program through the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, a federal initiative administered by the U.S. Department of Treasury (*Opportunity Now*, n.d.). The aim of these venture is more than a tax reduction strategy. It is to use the zone and emerging technologies to restructure how we organize and govern ourselves, and to foster the development of entrepreneurial subjectivities.

Charter cities project have found support among other start-up and crypto entrepreneurs as well. In January 2020, Brian Armstrong, the co-founder of the leading cryptocurrency exchange Coinbase, tweeted: "I think we'll see more startup cities (charter cities, special economic zones, etc) in the 2020's. Likely with some using crypto as the primary currency" (Armstrong, 2020). More recently, he said in an interview with the economist Tyler Cowen that he is "interested in charter cities" and pointed out to Honduras Próspera as a project "that seems to have gotten an exception from the government for this area of land to run its own legal system and court system." Armstrong also hinted at the idea of cloud communities and the difficulties they entail: "[O]nce you have a critical mass happening, you might be able to go do collective

bargaining and negotiate with a sovereign to get a little piece of land, but that feels like the hard part to me” (in Cowen, 2021).

The phenomenon of technology entrepreneurs turning to city-building as a means to challenge the status quo by developing entrepreneurial spaces of exception is not limited to the United States. Talent City, in Nigeria, is the project of Iyinoluwa “E” Aboyemi, the co-founder of Flutterwave, a payment solutions company backed by Y Combinator, and of Andela, a talent accelerator headquartered in New York with campuses in Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya that recruit software developers. Aboyemi aims to take advantage of Nigerian free trade zone laws which, he claims, gives his team “a blank canvas to develop policies that are data-driven and evidence-based – free of complex socio-political or economically protectionist considerations” (Aboyemi, 2020). Talent City will be a “charter city focused on attracting the talent that drives technology, innovation, and the digital economy” and on “creating technology-enabled jobs” (Aboyemi, 2020). It will be “managed within a free trade zone with its own productivity-focused, entrepreneurial centered regulations and bylaws” (Aboyemi, 2020). In the summer of 2021, it was announced that the city will be in the Lekki Free Trade Zone. Talent City “will be a chain of charter cities” that aim to “replicate the success stories of Shenzhen, Dubai, and Bangalore” and, although it is still at the conceptual stage, it is possible to apply to become a resident on its website (*Talent City*, 2021).

Nkwashi is a US\$1.5 billion, 3,100 acre mixed-used development and aspiring charter city launched in 2017 near Lusaka, Zambia. developed by Thebe Investment Management (Thebe Investment Management, 2016). The project, “designed to function as a fully self-contained modern city” (*Nkwashi*, 2019), is financed through the sale of commercial properties over extended payment plans ranging between five to twenty years (Charter Cities Institute,

2020). Both Thebe Investment Management and Nkwashi were co-founded by Mwiya Musokotwane, a young entrepreneur and property developer, and his father Situmbeko Musokotwane, a monetary economist who served as minister of finance of Zambia between 2008 and 2011 and who has worked at the World Bank and the IMF. Mwiya Musokotwane is also the author of an essay that explores “how private cities could use blockchain (and crypto) to enhance the quality of life of their residents.” He wonders: “Could blockchain and crypto be the software to charter cities’ hardware? Are charter cities the means through which cryptocurrencies could achieve broader everyday use or mainstream adoption?” (Musokotwane, 2018). The Charter Cities Institute supports this project by “negotiating memorandums of understanding with the Zambian government to create a special jurisdiction granting Nkwashi, as well as other future Zambian charter cities, broad authority over commercial law” (*Nkwashi, Zambia*, n.d.).

Celebrities want to build charter cities, too. In September 2019, the English actor Idris Elba signed an agreement with Sierra Leone, where his father is originally from, to build a “smart” charter city on the island of Bonthe (Government of Sierra Leone & Sherbro Alliance Partners, 2019).⁴⁵ In July 2020, Sierra Leone announced it was also planning to develop a seaport and free-trade zone on the island. According to John Tambi, the chairman of the Presidential Infrastructure Initiative, Elba’s project would complement the seaport scheme (“Sierra Leone Reveals Plans for \$1.4bn Port and Industrial Zone,” 2020). No further update on the projects were provided since their announcements. In 2020, the Senegalese-American singer Akon finalized an agreement with Senegalese officials to develop Akon City, a multi-billion dollar futuristic smart city to be built near Dakar on 2,000 acres of land gifted to him by the Senegalese

⁴⁵ Idris Elba obtained Sierra Leonean citizenship in 2019.

President Macky Sall and that will run on its own cryptocurrency, Akoin.⁴⁶ On its website, the city is described as “an extension of the sea into the land with waves diving deep into the roots of each building, making it dance on [sic] the music of AKON [and] reflecting nothing but happiness and bringing no less than success” (*AKONCITY*, 2021). The city will consist of multiple districts including business, residential, education, technology, and media districts, as well as a “recreational enclave for the surrounding area to address the market need for the development in Senegal” (*AKONCITY*, 2021). As of September 2021, construction has not yet started.

The multiplication of charter city proposals by African entrepreneurs in their home country or the home countries of their parents and targeting a primarily African customer base, as opposed to proposals from foreign investors targeting mainly foreign residents and investors, suggests that these new cities are conceived with particular societal goals in mind and inscribed within broader ambitions to contribute to the African economy and to African countries’ competitiveness. An enriching avenue for further research would be to examine these projects within their own geographical, historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts.

These various charter city projects illustrate the popularity and rapid spread, both discursively and materially, of start-up urbanism (McNeill, 2017; Rossi & Di Bella, 2017) across both hemispheres. Each of these cities rely on technology and on the digital economy, whether in terms of their proposed designs, the residents they seek to attract or the economy they aim to develop. They also indicate that an increasing number of states are becoming “start-up states” (Moisio & Rossi, 2020) willing not only to “generat[e] economic activities [...] infused with an

⁴⁶ In April, 2021, the Ugandan Minister for Urban Development, Isaac Musumba, announced that Uganda has agreed to identify “a place suitable [...] that has not less than one square mile, which will be made available to [Akon] and his team so he can harness resources and [...] attract investors” (*NTV Uganda*, 2021).

urban mentality for the sake of national economy and competitiveness” (p.548), but to actively seek partnerships with non-state actors who can accelerate this process. These proposed mixed-used charter cities also all draw on the model of the special economic zone. They rely on free trade zone laws, are conceived as zones, envisioned as a complement to zones, or are made of multiple smaller zones. This supports Kleibert’s (2018) remark that there is a rise in “spaces of exception 2.0” that merge the SEZs as production enclaves and the gated communities as consumption enclaves. Yet, these may also become new spaces of exclusion that accept only a certain type of entrepreneurial citizens, or that are too expensive or unable to welcome middle- and lower-income populations.

These projects also illustrate how, via the appropriation and reformulation of Romer’s charter city concept, the zone function as a dispositive that is being appropriated by technology entrepreneurs and other non-state actors in both the North and the South. The charter cities imaginary is anchored in an ideology of technology and shaped by a discourse of technology entrepreneurship and a free-market philosophy. The imaginary is given credence by the agential capacity of technology entrepreneurs, public personalities, and government officials, and ultimately functions as a dispositive that fosters the development of entrepreneurial subjectivities. Charter city ventures aim not only to stimulate national reforms, but also to reform subjectivities; they turn everyone into an entrepreneur. The next section further illustrates this argument with the case of Honduras Próspera LLC, a charter city project under development on the island of Roatán in Honduras.

7.4 Honduras Próspera LLC

Since 2010, Honduras has been working to develop the legal framework to attract and host charter city ventures. After Romer’s 2009 TED Talk caught the attention of Octavio

Sánchez, then the chief of staff of former Honduran president Porfirio Lobo Sosa, Romer was invited to advise the Honduran Congress on the development of charter cities (Doherty, 2013; Reynolds, 2012). This collaboration resulted in the passage of the Law of Special Development Regions (REDs in their Spanish acronym) in early 2011. This law was overturned in October 2012 by four out of five Supreme Court justices on the grounds that the reforms it entailed were unconstitutional.

A month prior to the court decision, Romer and four other members of the Transparency Commission set up to oversee the development of a first charter city in Trujillo had resigned after the Honduran government signed a memorandum of understanding with Grupo MGK, a private consortium led by Michael Strong. Strong is an American libertarian entrepreneur with ties to the Seasteading Institute who was working at the time with Shanker Singham (Doherty, 2013), a political consultant and former managing director of Babson College's Competitive and Enterprise Development Project to develop "enterprise cities," or semi-autonomous urban spaces that could as easily be called charter cities (Singham, 2015). Singham now serves as advisor to Honduras Próspera. Patri Friedman had also launched his own charter city venture in Honduras in 2011, Future Cities Development Inc., that he dissolved in 2012 after the RED law was overturned.

The judges who opposed the constitutional amendments necessary for the creation of charter cities were removed in a late-night congressional session in 2012. The RED law was replaced by the Law on Economic Development and Employment Zones (ZEDE is their Spanish acronym) passed in 2013. ZEDEs differ from SEZs in that they "are entitled to their own laws, police forces, currencies, tax collection procedures, social services, and most importantly, their own common-law courts" (Geglia, 2016, p. 355). Significantly, while Romer's initial proposal

suggested that the Transparency Commission tasked with overseeing the development of charter cities would “recede in the background by managing a transition to local democratic selection of the governor and the local legislature” (Fuller & Romer, 2012, p.10), the ZEDE Law “includes no requirement that representative democracy be reinstated in a particular area after a Zone is established” (Geglia, 2016, p. 357).

A ZEDE’s governance powers are transferred to an unelected Technical Secretary and an oversight committee called the Committee for the Adoption of Best Practices (CAMP) named by the president. The CAMP is “where the ZEDE project transfers powers normally held by Congress to a largely unaccountable group of foreign and national neoliberal ideologues” (Geglia, 2016, p. 357). Of the twenty-one members of the CAMP that was to supervise the charter city in Trujillo in 2013, only four were Hondurans. The others were free-market fundamentalists including many individuals connected to the Reagan administration like Michael Reagan, Ronald Reagan’s son, and Mark Klugmann, Reagan’s speechwriter and a long-time advocate of charter cities and what he calls “LEAP Zones” (the acronym stands for legal, economic, administrative, and political), as well as the American anti-tax activist Grover Norquist and Barbara Kolm, the co-founder of the Austrian Economics Center who was formally accused in 2019 of illegally funneling money to high-profile, European right-wing populist parties (Geglia, 2016, p. 358; Slobodian, 2019).

Since their inception, ZEDEs have been strongly opposed by Garifuna groups who fear being expelled from their ancestral lands (Brondo, 2013; Konforti, 2015). Still, the passing of the ZEDE law has attracted several foreign groups and individuals who would like to develop charter cities. Daniel and Katerina Morin, a Canadian couple working to develop a charter city they named Mariposa, have enlisted the help of Michael Strong (Mariposa, 2020). Seasteaders,

too, saw an opening for the construction of floating cities in Honduras' territorial waters (Harkinson, 2015). One of the start-up societies projects that has managed to begin construction is Honduras Próspera, a “prosperity hub” under development on the touristic island of Roatán (population approximately 60,000) and in which Pronomos Capital has invested (Alexander, 2021).⁴⁷

Beginning in 2017, Honduras Próspera LLC has partnered with the government of Honduras to develop the Próspera ZEDE (formerly the ZEDE Village of North Bay), “a semi-autonomous jurisdiction encompassing one or more physical locations within Honduras” (Honduras Próspera, LLC , 2020c). Honduras Próspera LLC is a Delaware limited liability company affiliated to NeWay Capital LCC, a Wyoming limited liability company (both are headquartered at the same address in Washington, DC) that operates as a boutique asset management firm “investing to alleviate poverty profitably” (*NeWay Capital*, 2019). Both companies' executive teams and advisory boards are composed of the same group of individuals with backgrounds in start-up entrepreneurship, development, finance, and law, some of whom have been involved in the development of SEZs and master-planned cities in the global South.

The venture is a complex knot of individuals and legal entities that ultimately concentrate rather than decentralize power. The Technical Secretary for the Próspera ZEDE, who by law must be Honduran and is appointed by the CAMP, is Tristan Monterroso, a pastor and real estate developer who resides in Roatán and who is a high school friend of Erick Brimen, a graduate of Babson College and NeWay Capital and Honduras Próspera LLC's executive director. The Próspera Council, a private and for-profit enterprise that functions similarly to a city council and is in charge of setting rules and providing oversight (Brimen, in Lutter, 2020), includes Tristan

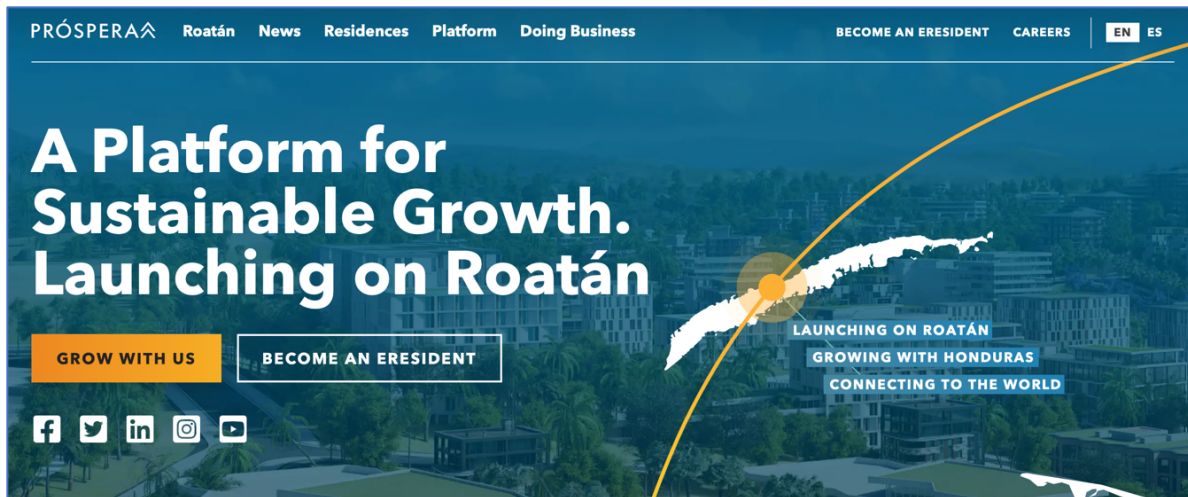
⁴⁷ Two other ZEDes are under development at the time of writing, Ciudad Morazán and ZEDE Orquidea.

Monterroso and seven members who are private sector and constitutional law consultants as well as one observer, all of whom are part of or related to Honduras Próspera LLC and/or NeWay Capital (Honduras Próspera, LLC, 2020b). Another private entity, the Próspera General Service Provider (GSP) is “the main contractor of the [Próspera] Council” and has “delegated authority to make hiring and firing decisions for the delivery of services on the ground” (Brimen, in Lutter, 2020.) The GSP “is the entity with which firms and individuals operating inside of the Próspera ZEDE will interact for the administrative aspects of creating entities, complying with regulations, etc.” (Honduras Próspera, LLC, n.d., p. 2). These administrative tasks “will be automated through an e-Governance platform” developed with former members of the E-Estonia team (Honduras Próspera, LLC, n.d., p. 2).

As mentioned earlier, charter city ventures such as Próspera have found support among technology entrepreneurs. Joe Lonsdale (2020), a co-founder of the secretive data company Palantir Technologies and of OpenGov, published an essay on the website of the Cicero Institute, a think tank he founded in 2018 to develop “entrepreneurial solutions to public problems” (*Cicero Institute*, 2020), in which he argues that “we need more charter cities” and endorses the work of Patri Friedman, Balaji Srinivasan, the Charter Cities Institute, and others with the “conviction that the concept of a charter city is revolutionary.” “Imagine, for a moment,” Lonsdale writes, echoing *The Sovereign Individual* (Davidson & Rees-Mogg, 2020), “a world in which hundreds of legally independent city-states compete to attract citizens.” Such cities, he argues, would have powerful incentives to “guarantee and protect individual liberties, have a fair legal system with clear and just laws and decisions based on precedent, and treat businesses and workers fairly with a transparent regulatory structure.” Considering the consolidation of legal,

judicial, and executive powers within the Honduras Próspera LLC / NeWay Capital team, it is unclear how truly revolutionary, fair, and transparent the Próspera Hub will be.

Figure 11 Honduras Próspera LLC Website (2021)



Honduras Próspera LLC claims the Próspera ZEDE governance institutions “have been developed by and for local and global entrepreneurs and businesspeople” and will have “a common law legal framework, familiar and flexible regulations, a bill of rights, low taxation, and protections for the environment” that will “enable entrepreneurs to solve problems structurally and responsibly for the people of Honduras and the rest of the world” (Honduras Próspera, LLC, 2020c). It also has its own work agency, Próspera Employment Solutions (PES) (n.d.), that helps staff companies wishing to operate within the ZEDE. For foreign investors, forming an entity requires applying for e-residence, obtaining the required industry permit type, complying with regulations (either the regulatory code of any OECD country, or injunctive relief and enhanced liability exposure from litigation, or a new Safe Harbor regulatory code proposed by the entity to the Próspera Council), and signing an “Agreement of Coexistence,” (Honduras Próspera, LLC,

n.d., p. 3).⁴⁸ Titus Gebel, the founder of Free Private Cities, a project to develop privately governed cities described as “SEZs plus” (in Livera, 2020), is the former chief legal officer of Honduras Próspera LLC and an investor in the project. According to Gebel, the “Agreement of Coexistence” signifies “the first time in history that there is a real social contract, not a fictional one” (Gebel, 2020). How local residents and businesses will be integrated into the ZEDE legal framework through the “Agreement of Coexistence” is not mentioned on Honduras Próspera LLC’s website.

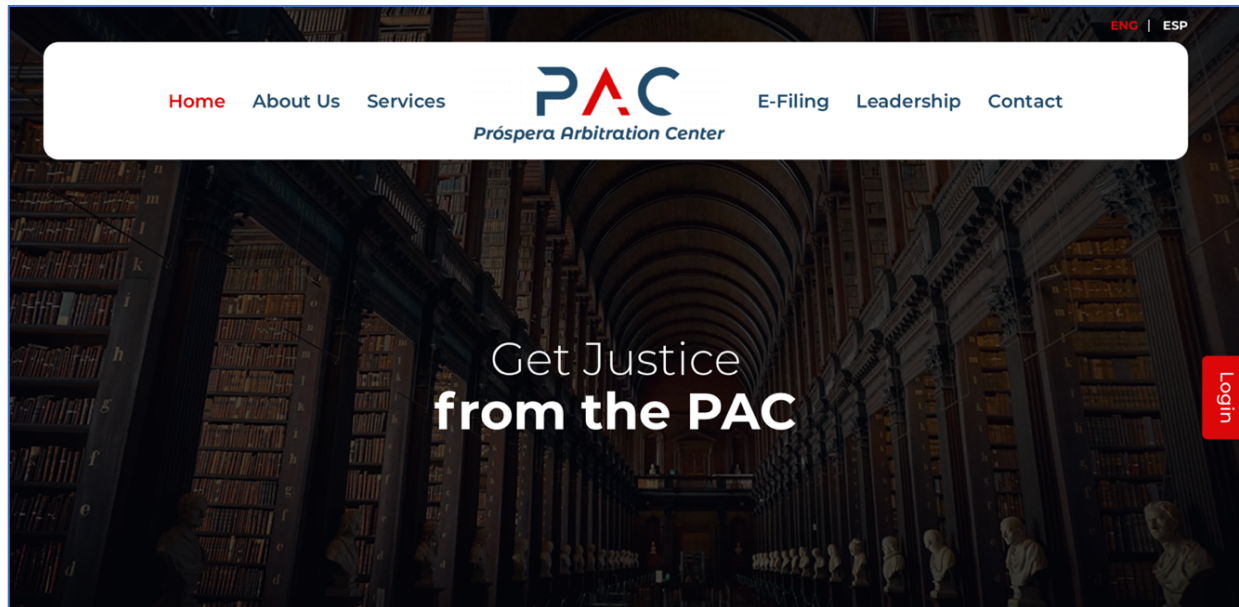
All private disputes in the Próspera ZEDE, including labor disputes, will by default be decided by arbitration by the Próspera Arbitration Center (PAC), a Texas limited liability company, “unless specifically stipulated otherwise” (*Próspera Arbitration Center*, 2020). The chief executive officer of the PAC, Humberto N. Macias, is also the deputy general counsel of Honduras Próspera LLC. The PAC’s chief legal officer, Nick Dranias, is on the executive teams of both Honduras Próspera LLC and NeWay Capital.⁴⁹ There is no separation between the legislative, executive, and judicial powers within the Próspera Hub. At the time of writing, the three senior arbiters of the PAC are retired judges from Arizona and only one of them speaks Spanish. Other arbiters include Susanna Dokupil, the chief executive officer of Paladin Strategies LLC, a legal consultancy firm, and a trustee of the Seasteading Institute; and Ilya Shapiro, a director at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute. The PAC is overseen by a Standing

⁴⁸ It was reported that Honduras Próspera would use a modified version of Tom W. Bell’s Ulex (Gebel, 2020; Lutter, 2020). Erick Brimen confirmed in a podcast interview for the Charter Cities Institute that Honduras Próspera’s team has created what they call the “Roatán Common Law Code [and] a good chunk of it was curated by Tom Bell through his Ulex system” (Lutter, 2020).

⁴⁹ Erick Brimen and Nick Dranias have been trying to develop “prosperity zones” based on the SEZ model and to create a coalition of “prosperity states” in the United States for years, without success (Dranias, 2016). The aim was to fix the “fundamental societal problem” of centralized government and the downgrading of the private sector “as a source of civic order” which, according to Dranias, leads to people “forget ... what freedom and responsibility look like” (Dranias, 2016).

Competence and Ethics Committee, whose members include former American justices, one Australian lawyer, and Ilya Shapiro.

Figure 12 Próspera Arbitration Center Website (2021)



Honduras Próspera LLC claims that the project will have a major economic impact on the island, whose economy is dependent on tourism and has been seriously affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, and in Honduras more broadly. It aims to attract US\$500 million in foreign direct investment to Roatán and create at least 10,000 new jobs by 2025 (*Próspera ZEDE*, 2020). Official Próspera ZEDE documentation states that the zone will offer competitive salaries and working conditions (Honduras Próspera LLC, n.d.), but it is unclear if those are permanent jobs, where they will be offered, and what sectors they will be in. On its website and in promotional documents, Honduras Próspera LLC employs data and metrics from the World Bank Doing Business Index to demonstrate the advantageous conditions it offers, but this is a controversial ranking tool. Indeed, in August 2020, the World Bank suspended the publication of its Doing

Business report after irregularities in the 2018 and 2020 reports were reported (The World Bank, 2020).⁵⁰

The Próspera Hub will be developed in three phases: the Próspera Village, “an initial 58 acres footprint dedicated to the first homes, entrepreneurial training, and business acceleration,” the town of Próspera which will be developed over the next ten years, and finally the city of Próspera (*Honduras Próspera*, 2020).⁵¹ The Hub will include an upscale residential development designed by Zaha Hadid Architects, whose controversial principal, Patrik Schumacher, is known for advocating the privatization of urban space and the abolition of welfare services.⁵² Apartments in the Próspera Hub will be designed according to Schumacher’s theory of parametricism which relies on computer technology and algorithms (Zaha Hadid Architects et al., n.d.). The homes, starting at around US\$150,000 (Gebel, 2020), are “designed for owner occupation” but “can also be adapted easily to be managed as a rental pool” (Zaha Hadid Architects et al., n.d.). An “Entrepreneurs Village” is also planned. Units, starting at US\$ 75,000, will be fifty square meters (Brimen, in “Próspera Project,” 2020). On its website, Honduras Próspera LLC assures that “[t]he people of neighboring settlements will take part in construction and management and part of the purchase of each residence goes toward the construction of a sister residence in the neighboring community.” How many “sister residences” will be built, by whom, where they will be located, or who will get to live in them are all strikingly not mentioned.

⁵⁰ Paul Romer resigned from his position as World Bank’s chief economist in 2018 after questioning changes to Chile’s order in the Doing Business report (Chaudhary, 2020).

⁵¹ Roatán Próspera Hub will be the first geographical point launched by his group, but there are plans for Hub in Honduras near the city de La Ceiba. A “Doing Business Guide” produced by Honduras Próspera LLC indicates plans for an additional six hubs in Honduras.

⁵² Schumacher is also collaborating with the Free Republic of Liberland, a self-declared seven square kilometer libertarian micronation between the borders of Serbia and Croatia, and Free Private Cities.

Figure 13 Próspera Residence Design. Credit: Honduras Próspera and Zaha Hadid Architects.



Promotional emails sent out by Honduras Próspera LLC emphasize the competitive legal and regulatory framework of the project, whose regulations and taxation rates are distinct from the rest of Honduras to “empower businesses to grow profitably within a free market” (Honduras Próspera, LLC, 2020d, 2020e). Indeed, the material boasts that “part of what makes Próspera special is that the legal and regulatory environment maximizes liberty and justice for all” (Honduras Próspera, LLC, 2020d). These emails target entrepreneurial individuals that self-identify as “trailblazing pioneers from all over the world who are eager and able to create value while pursuing exciting and new frontiers” and want to create “purposeful communities” (Honduras Próspera, LLC, 2020d). Those investors (“community leaders”) who wish to create their own “community cluster” within the hub can use the online design software provided by Zaha Hadid (“think Tesla configurator... on steroids”) to “curate membership, define the mix and use of common areas and amenities, and even explore community-specific governance models for voluntary consideration by other potential community members” (Honduras Próspera,

LLC, 2020d). This language parallels that of DAOs and their model of blockchain-based distributed governance (see Chapter 5)

An example of “space of exception 2.0” that merges the special economic zone as a production enclave and the gated community as consumption enclave (Kleibert, 2018), the Hub will also include a private hospital focused on medical tourism in partnership with Hospital CEMESA, a private hospital based in San Pedro Sula that opened a facility in Roatán in 2016. Another company Próspera approached is Minicircle, a small start-up working on an HIV vaccine and a “superlongevity cocktail.” Machiavelli Davis, Minicircle’s chief executive officer, was introduced to Próspera’s chief development officer Gabriel Delgado by Michael Strong. Davis says Minicircle wants to develop “an offshore clinical network of crypto investors to fundraise for clinical trials or medical tourism” in places such as Próspera, Costa Rica, Mexico, and the British Virgin Islands (M. Davis, personal communication, February 16, 2021). Minicircle is considering opening a first clinic in Próspera to do experimental trials on gene and life-extension therapy. A benefit of being located within Próspera is that it could set its own legal framework and could also potentially import drugs that are not approved in the United States, but still be located close to the American market.

A partnership with TUM International, a subsidiary of the Technical University of Munich (TUM) to open a technical school focused on entrepreneurship was suspended after TUM learned of the anti-democratic aspects of Próspera (*Amerika21*, 2021). Both Daniel A. Gottschald, the now former managing director of TUM International who brokered the partnership, and Shanker Singham were signatories on a submission to the UK’s freeport consultation that advocates using zones to fast-track the post-pandemic recovery and to “ensur[e] the delivery of national level reforms” (Singham et al., 2020). This is significant as it suggests

that Próspera Honduras is part of a broader, decentralized apparatus comprising institutions, organizations, and networks that advocates the creation of zones as one-fits-all solution to economic and governance crises.

The success of the Próspera Hub is premised on the assumption that the creation of a semi-private governance framework will attract foreign investors and that resulting employment opportunities will attract Honduran workers. Yet, there is also a risk that the upscale residential development pushes local people away from the Hub. Próspera has already acquired 58 acres of land and the community of Crawfish Rock, Próspera's closest neighbor, is particularly concerned that they will either get expropriated by the state or that the community will find itself surrounded by the Próspera enclave (Perdomo, 2020). Próspera staff affirm they are actively trying to connect with and help the residents of Crawfish Rock. They have launched an after-school program and an artisan workshop (Brimen in "Próspera Project," 2020). But their community engagement often includes presenting themselves as benevolent capitalists coming to the rescue of economically struggling Hondurans. For example, when the drinking water infrastructure in Crawfish Rock broke, Próspera built another and installed a sign that indirectly implied it had generously brought such infrastructure to the community. Residents paid water fees to The Institute for Excellence, S.A., (Perdomo, 2020) a corporation owned by Tristan Monterroso. The previous service has now been re-established.

In a two-hour television interview with a local news channel in September 2020, Erick Brimen was careful to distinguish between the Honduran ZEDE program and the Próspera platform, which he described as a "platform for sustainable and diversified economic development" (Brimen, in "Próspera Project," 2020) The former, he argued, was a means for Próspera to accomplish its goal to "lift people up": "It's one of the tools, it's not the only thing,

but it's one of the tools." Próspera is not, Brimen insisted, "a ciudad modelo" (the Spanish name for charter city), "a country within a country," and does not equal "the sale of sovereignty." Yet, Próspera would not be possible without the Honduran ZEDE law, and Próspera is very much inspired by the concept of charter city which led to the ZEDE law in the first place.

In fact, Brimen was a guest on the Charter Cities Institute's podcast in an episode on the topic of "Próspera and the Birth of the First Charter City in Honduras." In the interview, he says that the Honduran government "has gone the furthest when it comes to creating the enabling legal conditions for our vision and largely *a* vision for charter cities to be possible." He also claims that if Próspera is successful, "the investments we have done as a platform will enable rapid growth directly by us, or in partnership with third parties that want to develop their own charter cities" (in Lutter, 2020). In this case as in the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, the developers' discourse is adapted to the audience and conveys radically different and contradictory messages.

Próspera is an example of encrypted geography under construction – one that may in the future rely on blockchain and cryptocurrency and whose discourse is strategically encrypted according to the audience. Oliver Porter, a member of NeWay's advisory board and of the Próspera Council, is revered in libertarian circles for privatizing most government services in the Atlanta suburb of Sandy Springs in 2005. This proved more expensive than planned and, in 2019, Sandy Springs rehired the bulk of its government-service contractors as municipal employees. In an interview with an Atlanta newspaper, Porter has claimed that although the fact that ZEDEs are "still Honduran" must be emphasized, they offer "many attributes that are country-like, such as our own laws, our own taxation, customs agreements. Our own property registry. It goes on and on" (quoted in Ruch, 2020). Próspera "almost amounts to a new country

in Latin America,” (Porter, quoted in Ruch, 2019). However, “[t]his is a contract city,” Porter explains, one that wants to “be involved with the community, not to take it over” (quoted in Ruch, 2020). But Porter also describes it as “a government within a government. [...] Eventually we’ll have our own money, a blockchain-type of money, I would expect. [...] And it will be privately run. Not only the services... the entire thing is privately owned. It’s funded by venture capital” (quoted in Ruch, 2019). The Próspera ZEDE Code of Rules (2019) has a provision “to allow the introduction in the future of new transaction systems for land and severed rights transaction systems, for example blockchain-based transactions” (p.50). In 2021, the Próspera ZEDE passed a resolution authorizing payment by qualifying cryptocurrency (Próspera ZEDE, 2021).

7.5 Próspera and the cryptotrad political rationality

Honduras Próspera LLC claims it will create a profitable, business-friendly urban development that will benefit foreign investors and local residents equally. But in developing a new governance structure, a new sets of rules and institutions “by and for local and global entrepreneurs and businesspeople” (Honduras Próspera, LLC, 2020c) and its own private arbitration center, it also aims to transform “the social norms and the formal laws (together with enforcement systems) that determine how people interact” (Fuller & Romer, 2012, p. 5). The project’s emphasis on entrepreneurship, for example through the partnership with TUM and through its efforts to attract a population of entrepreneurs and encourage the development of entrepreneurial subjectivities, further illustrates “the importance of remaking subjectivities as part of the structural transformation and actualization of objects” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 194). In the case of the Próspera Hub, entrepreneurial subjectivities are conditioned by a discourse anchored in an ideology of technology and promoted through such discursive apparatuses as

signifiers of the free-market discourse and metaphors that associate concentrated economic growth to accelerated social development (e.g., competitiveness, empowerment, creating value, catalyzing prosperity, unleashing innovation, human flourishing).

The Próspera platform disciplines both the individuals within it and the state that hosts it into becoming the entrepreneurial subjects of the market. As Erick Brimen explains in an interview: “We don’t believe in charity as a primary source of support [because] it creates dependencies” (in “Próspera Project,” 2020). Brimen also claims that they chose this particular location in Roatán in part because they “

got a sense that this community [Crawfish Rock] did have enough people that wanted a better future for themselves, and that there was enough overlap, they weren’t there asking for freebies, and we were not there to give them freebies either, because in some ways when you give somebody something for free, you also [inaudible] they can’t earn it. And a lot of people have good intentions and work through charities and, God bless their souls, [...] but you create dependency. You don’t think they can earn it. (in “Próspera Project,” 2020).

Transforming every individual into a self-reliant entrepreneur relieves the state of some of its responsibilities. It makes individuals solely responsible for their success or failure while simultaneously legitimizing the state’s retreat from its role as welfare provider. In these ways, the idea of “entrepreneurship as the new common sense” (Szeman, 2015) is “naturalized and materially implicated in everyday life” (Sum and Jessop, 2013, p. 183). The Próspera platform is a manifestation of cryptotrad political rationality. Its goal to accelerate economic development through neoliberal reforms conceals another objective of safeguarding neoconservative values of individual initiative, ambition, and responsibility. Its neoliberal rationality, detailed at length in

promotional documents, in fact enables the moralism, statism (in a private form), and authoritarianism of neoconservatism (W. Brown, 2006).

As it seeks to abolish the borders that hinder the circulation of capital and individuals through its program of e-residency, Honduras Próspera creates new digital and physical borders around its budding community. As it opposes government intervention in markets and in private lives, the Próspera platform itself relies on intervention by the Honduran government for its success and is presented as a form of benevolent capitalism that will lift people up and address economic and governance crises by radically transforming people's lives. Honduras Próspera's founders and architects reject charity, which includes the welfare state, and advocate a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" approach which, incidentally, requires the help of foreign investors and developers. This approach ignores the long history of enclave colonialism (Palma Herrera, 2020), extraction, and exploitative labor that characterizes Honduras and many other Latin American countries' history. It assumes that the cause of crises is the regulatory framework which hinders entrepreneurship and discourages foreign investors, but it ignores how this framework was in part shaped by foreign actors often to serve their own interests and the complex sets of circumstances that lead to widespread corruption and poverty. Finally, Próspera's approach precludes any non-capitalist alternatives. It does not challenge power structures; it seeks to capture power within its own private structure.

7.6 Conclusion

Through an examination of the charter city concept and its transformation and promotion by entrepreneurial non-state actors, this chapter has demonstrated how the uneven interaction of particular structural, discursive, agential, and technological strategic selectivities contributes to the selection of the zone imaginary as a solution to political, economic, and environmental crises.

Specifically, I argued that the zone functions as a dispositive, a “structurally inscribed strategic selectivity and strategically calculated, structurally oriented action aimed at the definition and resolution of an *urgence*” (Sum and Jessop, 2014, p. 114, emphasis in the original). This urgency is problematized by proponents of start-up societies in terms of overregulation, lack of entrepreneurial opportunities, and a failure to “build.”

I have shown how the zone, favored by global and national economic structures, is characterized by a distributed apparatus comprising transnational and private institutions and networks and an order of discourse promoted through various media and centered around the themes of entrepreneurship, institutional innovation, deregulation, and economic prosperity. The zone not only privileges entrepreneurial subjectivities, but offers new opportunities for non-state agents to use particular technologies of governance (such as business indexes, algorithmic software, and decentralized governance platforms) to advance the development of new entrepreneurial subject positions and subjectivations whereby both the state and its citizens must respond to the demands of the market (Szeman, 2015). As a dispositive, the zone facilitates the transition towards a market civilization (Gill, 1995) in which the social contract is replaced by a spatial contract, an “agreement of coexistence,” and entrepreneurship becomes “the new common sense” (Szeman, 2015).

The case of Honduras Próspera LLC demonstrates how the zone opens new avenues for the commercialization of sovereignty and of the rule of law by agents outside the formal political system. The enthusiasm for charter cities among non-state and state actors reveals how the model of the special economic zone is being appropriated for purposes that go beyond economic development and ultimately seek to restructure society by imposing the adoption of neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivities and neoconservative morals both on individuals and states. Projects

to build charter cities and the venture funds and techno-entrepreneurial networks that support them point to a new development in urban entrepreneurialism: the productization of cities and of governance regimes and the formal contractualization and privatization of society and of everyday life.

Ultimately, Honduras Próspera LLC does not “innovate” as much as it claims. Rather, it sustains and furthers the hegemony of neoliberalism, with the underlying goal of preserving neoconservative values, because its economy and polity are dominated by neoliberal orthodoxy. As Crouch points out, “a fully neoliberal *society* [...] would lose its capacity for change. Change comes through challenge and the confrontation of opposed, or at least different, background and perspective” (Crouch, 2014, pp. 115–116, emphasis in the original). Charter city ventures are designed to create homogeneous societies of founders and builders who re-fashion themselves to respond to the demands of the market and reject democratic politics as the tyranny of the majority and as a hindrance to the private sector structuring civic order. Under the pretense of leap-frogging economic development, creating prosperous communities, and advancing individual freedom, charter cities initiatives in fact advance a neoconservative, techno-feudal model of urban governance in which freedom itself is a product.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the emergence of the start-up societies imaginary and how it can be contextualized within the development of urban entrepreneurialism. It addressed four key questions. First, when, why, and how did the concept of start-up societies emerge? Second, how is the start-up societies imaginary shaped by the imaginaries of urban entrepreneurialism, competitiveness, special economic zones, and cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies? Third, why and how does the start-up societies imaginaries resonate both with non-state and states actors? Fourth, what does the selection and retention of the start-up societies imaginary suggest about the emergence of new political rationalities and how do these shape the relationship between city and society, and between society and technology?

I argued that the contemporary start-up societies movement should be situated within a longer tradition of libertarian ventures to build new countries and cities that began in the 1960s and 1970s, and that the contemporary start-up societies imaginary emerged in response to both semiotic and structural crises, or crises of the cultural, political, and economic orders. Specifically, I argued that the contemporary start-up societies movement can be understood as a response to a dissatisfaction not only with neoliberal reforms, but with the power of the centralized state over geography and its partition and over the mobility both of individuals and capital. I further argued that the start-up societies imaginary can be understood as a response to a perceived failure of the neoliberal state to preserve neoconservative values and, more broadly, to the perceived decline of Western culture and influence.

A key argument of my thesis, which I make in Chapter 5, is that the start-up societies imaginary is shaped both by the discourse of trust-free, decentralized, peer-to-peer networks around cryptocurrency and blockchain technologies, and by the technologies themselves. Not

only does the start-up societies movement selectively reproduce such discourses, but also does it actively reproduce such decentralized, encrypted governance structures. Specifically, I argued that the contribution the start-up societies imaginary seeks to make to crisis resolution is a new cultural political economic imaginary that can be conceptualized as encrypted geographies. I distinguished between digital and semiotic encryption to explain how the formation of encrypted geographies entails processes of invisible bordering using both digital technologies and a common framework for making sense of the world. I posited that start-up society initiatives seek to create hybrid geographies whose invisible borders are digital, ideological and, should they prove successful, geographical as well.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I demonstrated how the idea of new cities located within zones with their own laws and regulations are perceived by investors and venture capitalists as a way to create extraterritorial spaces where they can experiment with radical forms of market governance, which they believe would accelerate economic development and technological. Conversely, such proposals are perceived by some governments as a way to attract foreign investments and to position themselves as leaders in innovative urban entrepreneurialism and sustainable development. In Chapter 6, I showed how seastealers conceptualized the ocean-space as a frontier to exploit both politically and economically, and the government of French Polynesia saw the Floating Island Project a way to position the archipelago as a leader in oceanic urban entrepreneurialism in the South Pacific and as a promising and profitable solution to the crisis of climate change and rising sea levels. In Chapter 7, I explained how the government of Honduras came to embrace Paul Romer's concept of charter cities, albeit with significant modifications, and how the idea of zones of experimental economic and legal frameworks appeals to developers and investors and to the government, all of whom saw charter cities not

only a way to attract foreign investments and boost employment opportunities, but also as a way to outsource some of the state's responsibilities in terms of social services and to foster the creation of entrepreneurial subjectivities.

An overarching argument running through my dissertation is that the start-up societies imaginary is a result of the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, and an expression of what I theorize as a cryptotrad political rationality which uses neoliberal strategies to reaffirm neoconservative values and, conversely, uses neoconservative strategies to advance the neoliberal project. This term emphasizes the influence of and the reliance on cryptography and how, ultimately, the start-up societies imaginary seeks to promote "traditional" neoconservative values of family (tribe), individual freedom, limited government, self-sufficiency, and private enterprise as the source of civic order. Whereas the liberal response to the disruption brought about by rapid technological developments and globalization is to embrace social diversity and a future imagined as borderless and equalitarian, the conservative response, and also that of start-up societies, is a future imagined as a return to a "better" past, a techno-pastoral way of life that these would-be city-builders imagine is simpler and offers more certainty. High-tech, privatized urban environments are envisioned as the solution both to what proponents of start-up societies conceptualize as the political economic crisis of the centralized state and the cultural crisis of modernism.

Two overarching objectives of my dissertation were to (a) add empirical data and offer a critical analysis that can contribute to the literature on start-up societies and related themes and concepts and, (b) demonstrate how a CPE theoretical framework can contribute to critical futures studies and help us understand why some futures come to be selected over others. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the literature on key concepts essential to understanding the start-up societies

movement: (de)territorialization and extra-territoriality, urbanization of the ocean space, secessionism, and urban entrepreneurialism and the development of new forms of enclave and privatized urbanisms including the special economic zone. I reviewed how both the conceptualization and the material features of ocean-space played a key role in shaping modern notions of territoriality, and how urbanization on land shapes urbanization at sea and vice-versa. My dissertation contributes to this literature by offering original empirical data and a critical analysis of emerging trends within urban entrepreneurialism, including ocean urbanization, that seek to disrupt accepted notions of sovereignty and territoriality, and how these shape the start-up societies imaginary. I also offered a new perspective on the particular role of entrepreneurial non-state actors in shaping urban policies and governance through their appropriation of the model of the special economic zone.

In Chapter 4, I described how I gathered and analyzed data through multi-sited fieldwork, the methodology I employed, critical discourse analysis, and how it complements a CPE approach. A CPE approach posits that the world “is too complex to be grasped in all its complexity in real time” and therefore agents must engage in processes of complexity reduction to be able to make sense of it (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 3). It distinguishes between two basic forms of such reduction, namely semiosis and structuration (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 24). Whereas semiosis “is a dynamic source of sense and meaning,” structuration “sets limits to compossible combinations of social relations” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 148). Semiotically, the start-up societies imaginary can be understood as an attempt to make (new) sense of community and trust in a globalized, networked, modern world. This semiotic process of complexity reduction is constrained by extra-semiotic factors, meaning that the particular structural,

historical, and geographical conjuncture in which the start-up societies imaginary emerged also shapes how it is conceptualized.

Structurally, the start-up societies imaginary is grounded in the contestation of the power of the sovereign, territorial nation-state over the partition of geography and its governance and over the mobility of both individuals and capital. This imaginary does not contest the reproduction of capitalist structures, only their specific instantiation in certain institutional orders (e.g., the democratic state), organizational forms (e.g., the government) and interaction contexts (e.g., liberal democracy). The start-up societies imaginary claims it offers a means to challenge the “pattern of constraints and opportunities” (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 214) that allows some groups to pursue the creation and regulation of geopolitical entities and the regulation of economic activities and prevents others from doing the same. However, it is this structure of the sovereign, territorial state, shaped by the land-sea dichotomy and the paradoxical need for capital mobility and fixed spaces of accumulation that creates a conjuncture for start-up societies agents to advocate, more or less successfully, the creation of private cities, the commodification of sovereignty, and the commercialization of governance. Therefore, the path-dependency of the start-up societies imaginary on the very structure it contests, as well as on its semiotic resources, limits its scope for path-shaping.

An overarching objective of my dissertation was to demonstrate how a CPE approach can contribute to the field of critical futures studies. Specifically, I sought to explain why and how certain imaginaries of the future emerge and why and how they come to be selected over others. As such, I was particularly interested in the assumptions about the future and how futures are made to happen underpinning the start-up societies imaginary. For instance, in the case of the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia, I examined how assumptions about submerged

futures were leveraged to present the construction of a floating island, and the creation of special economic zones to host it, as an innovative and desirable solution that would lead to a “brilliant future of floating islands.” In the case of Honduras Próspera LLC, I explored how deregulation and reregulation, privatization, and the fostering of entrepreneurial subjectivities both among the states and citizens was perceived as a way to accelerate urban and economic development.

Start-up society ventures are touted as economic initiatives that will primarily benefit the poor but fail to deliver on that noble promise. Ultimately, the problems at the core of the start-up societies imaginary are two-fold. First, it posits that empowerment is possible only through capitalist expansion and entrepreneurial subjectivation, and second, it refuses to address or even acknowledge the structural conditions that cause economic and social inequalities. The projects conspicuously avoid questioning why certain populations are so deeply affected by poverty and rampant corruption and so vulnerable to natural disaster and climate change. The multiple, complex, and inter-related causes of social and economic inequality are reduced to a simplistic explanation: “bad rules,” or, in more sophisticated terms, regulatory framework. These would-be political innovators ignore how these bad rules came to be in the first place and how they may be the result of previous or ongoing foreign intervention, extractive capitalism, and exploitation.

The two case studies discussed in this thesis, the Floating Island Project and Honduras Próspera, illustrate how the start-up societies imaginary fails to imagine a radically different future and, in fact, intensifies the structural constraints that have led to the issues it promises to solve. It is an imaginary of the future that is dependent on forgetting how we arrived at the present. It finds hope not in society, but in a post-social ethos; in technology and financial futures (Knorr Cetina, 2005, p. 3), and in the story it tells about the past and how futures were made to happen. There are many positive aspects to the start-up societies imaginary. For example, a

shared conviction that individuals coming together can create positive change in the world and that it is possible and desirable to experiment with alternatives that challenge the status quo is a key component of any successful, positive social reform. But change is not possible without debate and compromise and navigating our points of conflict with each other, which the start-up societies imaginary rejects in favor of “diversity through segregation” (Winner, 1997, p. 18).

I hope this research will be useful to scholars, researchers, stakeholders, and anyone interested in exploring how technology and ideology shape modern society and conceptualizations of territoriality and sovereignty. It is but the first step in a comprehensive examination of how new economic and political imaginaries derived from cryptographic technologies and the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in the United States and elsewhere shape urban futures and strategies of adaptation to climate change. Avenues for future research include the impact of cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies, including the new power relations crypto wealth creates, on urban spaces and urbanism; further critical exploration of the circulation of the special economic zone model as a new urban utopia and the earlier models and proposals it draws on, why and how it has become a preferred urban entrepreneurial strategy, and how it restructures scalar relations; the mobilization of the concept of the frontier to advance urban entrepreneurialism and start-up urbanism; the selection and retention of the concept of charter city in the global South; the emergence of market urbanism and its embrace among both academic and practitioners; and the role, ambitions and agency of women within these movements and trends.

Appendix 1 – Lists of start-up societies ventures and related organizations

Note: These tables do not include the multiple projects to build libertarian countries since the 1960s (e.g., Grimmelmann, 2012; Strauss, 1979; Taylor-Lehman, 2020).

Organization	Description	Mission	Location	Years active	Website
Akon City	Project of the Senegalese-American singer Akon to build a city with its own currency, the Akoin.	“[T]o become the beacon of innovation and human development by providing the best education solution, to lead the economy of the country creating the most revolutionary industry, rewarding Senegalese hard work for making Senegal the leading country in technology innovation and natural resources best used by providing the best housing with at [sic] most futuristic design comforting the daily life with mixed use of entertainment and services for all types of residential buildings (social, middle class and high end).	Senegal	2018 – not started	https://akoncity.com/
Blockchains, LLC	Project of cryptocurrency	“Our goal is to show how blockchain	Storey County, Nevada	2018 – ongoing	https://www.blockchains.com/

	millionaire and lawyer Jeffrey Bern to build a community in the Nevada desert that will use blockchain-based governance mechanisms.	technology can change the way we interface with technology, infrastructure, and each other.”			
Blue Frontiers	For-profit seasteading company created to develop a first floating island in French Polynesia.	“We build sustainable floating islands with unique governing frameworks”	Incorporated in Singapore. French Polynesia	2017 – 2018	https://www.blue-frontiers.com/ (No longer available.)
Bluebook Cities	Project of two former hedge fund employees in their 20s to build communities of like-minded individuals.	Described as a “full-stack city builder” that “partner[s] with communities to develop beautiful, energetic, resident-owned cities.”	Austin New York San Francisco	2019 – ongoing	https://www.bluebookcities.com/
Blueseed	Project to create a start-up community on a vessel in international waters.	N/A	International waters, near Silicon Valley	2011 – indefinitely on hold	N/A
Bonthe Charter City	Project between the actor Idris Elba and the	Unclear.	Bonthe, Sierra Leone	(2019) – not started	N/A

	government of Sierra Leone to build a charter city on the island of Bonthe.				
Fort Galt	Initially described as a start-up village for entrepreneurs, now as “seaside rainforest properties.”	Real estate development.	Chile	2017 – 2021	https://www.fortgalt.com
Free Private Cities	Project of German entrepreneur Titus Gebel to develop private cities.	To “further [the] development of human coexistence.”	Offices in Zürich, Switzerland	2017 – ongoing	https://www.freeprivatecities.com
Free Society	Project of Roger Ver and Olivier Janssens to create a “free society.”	“[P]urchasing sovereignty from a government to create the world’s first free society.”	N/A	2017 – ongoing	https://www.freesociety.com/
Freedom Ship	A project to build a massive luxury ship that would host a city. The ship was to be built in the Bay of Trujillo, in Honduras (“Honduras Approves ‘Floating City,’” 2001).	“[A] a unique place to live, work, retire, vacation, or visit.”	Based in Palm Beach, Florida Honduras (construction)	2001 – ongoing	http://freedomship.com/
Future Cities Development, Inc.	Project of Patri Friedman to	“The mission of Future Cities Development, Inc. was	Honduras	2011 – 2012	N/A. Citation from Patri Friedman’s LinkedIn profile (2021).

	develop charter cities in Honduras.	to benefit humanity by creating free societies. We envisioned a world where cities with innovative legal systems eradicate poverty, elevate human rights, and create unprecedented prosperity for the human race.”			
Honduras Próspera LLC	Project to develop a charter city in Honduras.	<p>“An island hub for sustainable development.”</p> <p>“Economic Development Platform Enabling Sustainable, Profitable Growth In Partnership with Governments and Communities”</p>	Honduras	2017 – ongoing	https://prospera.hn/
Laissez Faire City	Project of a group of entrepreneurs to build a libertarian city.	“Establishing and promoting a great new world-class city based on the ideals and principles of Ayn Rand.”	N/A	1995 – 1998?	N/A – advertised in the 10 June 1995 edition of <i>The Economist</i> .
Liberstad	Long-term project “which aims to establish Norway’s first private city.”	“A little piece of freedom.”	Norway	2017 – ongoing	https://www.liberstad.com
Mariposa	Project of a Canadian couple, Daniel and	“[T]o create a startup city that will provide the highest quality of	Honduras	2020 – ongoing	https://mariposa.hn

	Katerina Morin, to build a charter city.	life through a polycentric system of governance.”			
Nkwashi	Project to develop a charter city in Zambia.	“Nkwashi is a satellite town designed to function as fully self-contained and modern city.”	Zambia	2017 – ongoing	https://nkwashi.com/
Ocean Builders	Project to build seapods and develop seapod communities.	‘Life above the waves!’	Thailand (2019-2019) Panama (2020 – ongoing)	2019 – ongoing	https://oceanbuilders.com
Oceanix	Project to design and build floating cities for people to live sustainably on the oceans.	“Leading the next frontier for human habitation.”	N/A	2018 – ongoing	https://oceanix.org/
Talent City	Project to build a charter city in Nigeria	A charter city “focused on creating technology-enabled jobs and managed within a free trade zone with its own productivity-focused, entrepreneurial-centred regulations and bylaws.”	Nigeria	2020 – ongoing	https://www.future.africa/home/talent-city https://www.talentcity.ng
Terra	Start-up project to develop “live-work” spaces and to build “a brand-new decentralized startup city.”	“The U.S. has lost its sense of community that binds us all together toward a common purpose. Due to this, our goal is to bring like-minded individuals together	Dallas, Texas	2020 – ongoing	https://buildterra.city/

		within our communities to build the future they deserve” (Terra, 2021).			
The Blue Estate	A project by unknown individuals to develop “the world’s most exclusive community.”	“The world’s first floating luxury real estate development.”		2021 – abandoned?	https://theblueestate.com/ (removed)
The Foundation	A project to build “cities for dreamers, lovers, and friends.”	“From designing crypto networks to launching new cities in Africa, The Foundation is a full stack operation to seed thriving societies by building great new cities.”	N/A	2021 – not started	https://thefoundationcorp.com/
The Seasteading Institute	Leading proponent of seasteading.	“Reimagining civilization with floating cities.”	San Francisco, California	2008 – ongoing	https://www.seasteading.org/
Y Combinator Startup City Initiative	Project of Y Combinator to build new cities.	“We want to build cities for all humans – for tech and non-tech people. We’re not interested in building ‘crazy libertarian utopias for techies.’”	N/A	2016 – 2016	https://blog.ycombinator.com/new-cities/

Organization	Description	Mission	Years active	Website
Charter Cities Institute (formerly the Center for Innovative Governance)	Non-profit organization dedicated to building the ecosystem for charter cities.	“Building the future of governance for the cities of tomorrow.”	2018 – ongoing	https://www.chartercitiesinstitute.org/
Institute for Competitive Governance	Research think-tank founded by Startup Societies Foundation staff.	“[E]ncouraging the research and development of relatively small but deeply innovative special jurisdictions.”	2019 – ongoing	https://instituteforcompgov.org/
Politas Consulting	Founded by Michael Castle Miller, the Executive Director of Refugee Cities.	“[P]rovides legal and policy solutions to help cities and special-status jurisdictions achieve inclusive economic growth.”	2018 – ongoing	https://www.politasconsulting.com
Pronomos Capital	Venture fund to support the development of charter cities.	“[T]o build prosperous cities to lift entire regions.”	2019 – ongoing	https://www.pronomos.vc/
SDZ Alliance (formerly Refugee Cities)	Non-profit organization working to contribute to the development of “sustainable development zones.”	“Sustainable solutions for migration and urbanization.”	N/A – ongoing	https://sdzalliance.org/ https://refugeecities.org/
Startup Societies Foundation	“Studies, promotes, and connects startup societies.”	“[T]o connect, educate and empower small territorial experiments in government – all over the world.”	2015 – ongoing	https://www.startupsocieties.org/
Tipolis	Consultancy founded by Titus Gebel.	“[B]uilding the world’s most advanced Special Economic Zones.”	2020 – ongoing	https://www.tipolis.com/

Appendix 2 – List of interviews

Organization	Identification / Role	Number of participants	Types of interviews
Startup Societies Foundation	Co-founders, staff, volunteers	6 men 1 woman	Semi-structured, informal, chat.
Free Private Cities	Employee	1 man	Semi-structured, informal, chat.
Blue Frontiers	Volunteer	1 woman 1 man	Structured, informal, chat.
Adrianople Group	Staff (includes former co-founders and employees of the Startup Societies Foundation)	1 woman 5 men	Focus group on the idea of start-up societies and on special economic zones.

Appendix 3 – Consent form and interview questions

CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF START-UP SOCIETIES

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Isabelle Simpson
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Project: Cultural political economy of start-up societies

This project benefits from funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada and from Mitacs Globalink Research Award For Research Abroad.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to understand contemporary floating cities and start-up societies initiatives, the motivations behind such projects, and how such projects help crafting emerging forms of urban governance.

Study procedures

By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in a semi-directed interview led by the researcher on the topic of floating islands and start-up cities. The duration of the interview will be between thirty minutes and one hour. If you consent, the interview will be audio-recorded. Your participation is voluntary and you may decline to answer any question, and may withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason. You may also request that all or portions of your comments remain unattributed in future publications by asking the researcher at any point throughout the interview or at any point in time afterward. If you decide to withdraw completely, all the information you have provided will be destroyed unless you give permission otherwise. You may choose that your identity remains confidential, in which case your name and your location (city) will be changed.

Potential Risks

There are no anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

Potential Benefits

Your participation will help researchers get a better understanding of floating cities and start-up cities initiatives.

Compensation

Participation is voluntary. There is no monetary or other form of compensation for your participation.

Confidentiality

You have the right to ask that your identity remains confidential. If you prefer that your name not be cited in the research, the information collected will be coded and you will be attributed a fictive name.

All interview notes and/or recordings are solely for the use of the researcher and will not be disseminated in public. The researcher's home university is McGill University, Montréal, Canada, and as such the interview notes and/or recordings will be removed from the European Union upon the researcher's return to her home university. You will have the right to request a transcript of the interview free of charge.

The information collected and all the documentation pertinent to this research are saved on the researcher's personal computer with multiple password-restriction layers securing the data.

The data will only be accessible to the researcher and her supervisor. The researcher will not share your information and the interview data with transcriptions services. The researcher may use a software such as MAXQDA for the purpose of qualitative analysis but will not import any identifying information in the software. Access to the researcher's MAXQDA account is password-protected.

Under no circumstances will your personal identifying information be shared with or sold to a third party. All data will be destroyed seven (7) years after the researcher has submitted her dissertation.

Research participants based in the European Union have the right to file a complaint with the data protection authority (https://edpb.europa.eu/about-edpb/board/members_en).

Yes:___No:___ You consent to be identified by name in reports.

Yes:___No:___ You consent to have your organization's name used.

Yes:___No:___ You consent to be audio-recorded.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, you can reach the researcher at isabelle.simpson@mail.mcgill.ca or her supervisor, Dr. Sarah Moser, at sarah.moser@mcgill.ca

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights or welfare as a participant in this research study, please contact the McGill Ethics Officer at +1 514 398 6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca

Please sign below if you have read the above information and consent to participate in this study. Agreeing to participate in this study does not waive any of your rights or release the researcher from her responsibilities. A copy of this consent form will be given to you and the researcher will keep a copy.

Participant's name: (please print) _____

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

City: _____

Please save or print a copy of this document to keep for your own reference.

Interview questions for startup societies activists and conference attendees

Isabelle Simpson, McGill University

Isabelle.simpson@mail.mcgill.ca

Startup societies activists individual interviews

General information about interviewee

- Gender
- Age
- Location
- Profession / Industry
- Job title

General questions on startup societies initiatives

- When and how did you first hear about startup societies and/or specific startup society project(s)? (Social media, news, word of mouth?)
- What information did you hear? What was your initial reaction to the project?
- Are you an employee or a volunteer within a startup society initiative?
- Have you attended other startup societies related events?
- Would you say there is such a thing as a ‘startup societies movement’ and, if yes, can you describe it in your own words?

Rationale

- What attracted you to the concept of startup society?
- What do you think of the proposed design(s) for the startup society project / startup society initiatives? Is there one that speaks to you more than the others and why?
- Are there any particular startup society/ city / policy models that have inspired your view of startup society?

Governance

- What results do you anticipate startup societies projects will have on local / national / international governance?
- Do you think cryptocurrencies and the blockchain will play a role in the development of cities in the near future? How so?

Interview questions for startup societies entrepreneurs

Isabelle Simpson, McGill University

Isabelle.simpson@mail.mcgill.ca

Startup societies entrepreneurs individual interviews

General information about interviewee

- Gender
- Age
- Location
- Profession / Industry
- Job title

General questions on startup societies initiatives

- When and how did you first hear about startup cities and/or specific startup societies project(s)? (Social media, news, word of mouth?)
- What information did you hear? What was your initial reaction to the project?
- Have you attended other startup societies related events?
- Would you say there is such a thing as a ‘startup societies movement’ and, if yes, can you describe it in your own words?

Rationale

- Can you describe your startup society project?
- What motivated you to launch this project?
- Are there any particular startup society / city / policy models that have inspired you?
- What was the process (or where are you in the process) of launching your startup society project?
- What strategies have you used to obtain funding?
- Do you have employees and/or volunteers working for your organization?
- What are your organization short and long-term goals?

Governance

- What results do you anticipate startup societies projects will have on local / national / international governance?
- Do you think cryptocurrencies and the blockchain will play a role in the development of cities in the near future? How so?

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