



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

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# Starting points...

A common assumption regarding universities is that they can be mapped onto what Quinn Slobodian (2023: 2) describes, as a “jigsaw of nations” which in turn make up a coherent global system.

“The modern world is pock-marked, perforated, tattered and jagged, ripped up and pin-pricked”.

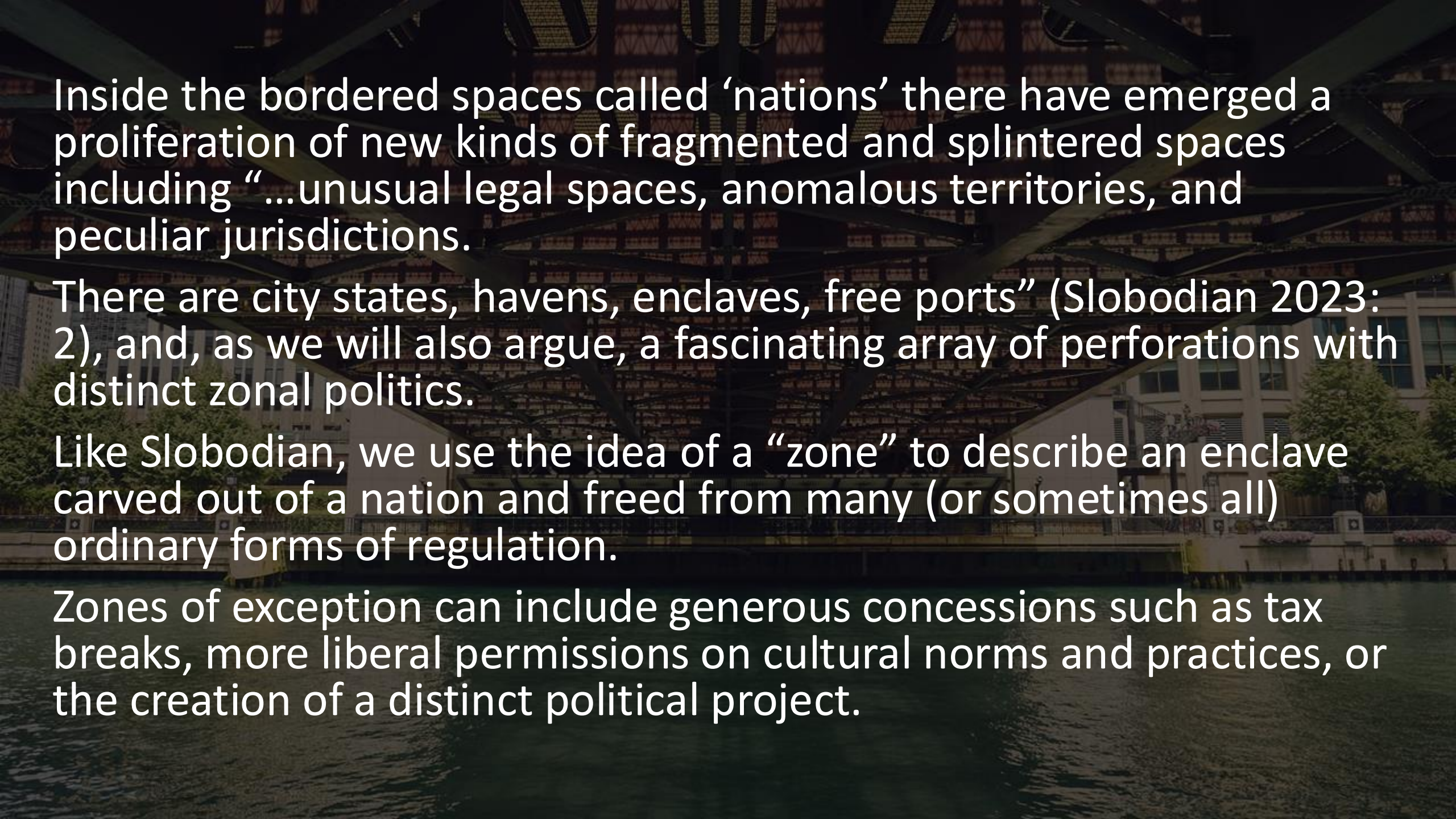
Yet as he and others (see Sassen 2006) point out, capitalism has always worked by “punching holes in the territory of the nation state, creating zones of exception” (Slobodian, 2023: 3).

That said, the university has historically claimed a state of exception...

Drawing on Giorgio Agamben (2003), the university as 'camp/us' is both a space of exception from ordinary sovereignty and at the same time that exception constitutes sovereignty (Minca 2015).

In this light, whilst universities are crucial for national projects of economic development as well as building social and economic identities, they are also nodes of nonconformist thinking and sites of protest that are secured through claims to academic freedom but which can also threaten hegemonic power.





Inside the bordered spaces called ‘nations’ there have emerged a proliferation of new kinds of fragmented and splintered spaces including “...unusual legal spaces, anomalous territories, and peculiar jurisdictions.

There are city states, havens, enclaves, free ports” (Slobodian 2023: 2), and, as we will also argue, a fascinating array of perforations with distinct zonal politics.

Like Slobodian, we use the idea of a “zone” to describe an enclave carved out of a nation and freed from many (or sometimes all) ordinary forms of regulation.

Zones of exception can include generous concessions such as tax breaks, more liberal permissions on cultural norms and practices, or the creation of a distinct political project.



Slobodian (2023) describes these zonal practices of establishing 'exception' as **a form of 'soft secession'**; what gets enclosed is often a different set of laws, and in some cases no or at best weak democratic oversight.

Acts of departure



Four cases in our WYB 2026 chapter (Global Schoolhouse, Singapore, KAUST -Saudi, Greater Bay in China, and Alt-Right - USA) ...three explored here today...





# SINGAPORE GLOBAL SCHOOLHOUSE







East Core

Science Center

Residential College 1

Campus Green

Residential College 2

Main Entry

West Core

Yale-NUS  
Future Expansion

Residential College 3







# Zonal politics

- World Class university programme in 1998 following Asia Financial Crisis, morphed into Global Schoolhouse narrative in 2002
- Deliberate pockmarking strategy inserting foreign HEIs through a range of articulation arrangements
- Negotiations around the deterritorialisation of academic freedom – so that different ‘freedoms’ arrangements in place
- The state closely manages these soft-secession arrangements and these can and do falter, including Yale-NUS, so that Yale now folded into NUS (accession).





KAUST









KAUST  
Inauguration Ceremony  
September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009  
Thuwal - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**Dream  
becomes  
Reality**

KAUST  
King Abdullah University of  
Science and Technology









# Zonal politics

- Launched in 2010, KAUST – The House of Wisdom - has an endowment of some US\$20 billion, to become the MIT of the East.
- KAUST an effort to separate it as an institution from the rest of Saudi life, but to also have a boomerang effect back.
- Argued to be the outcome of King Abdullah shoring up power in relation to the more conservative social forces in Saudi.
- It is a co-educational university (though in effect distinctly male) organized around the sciences, international faculty and international students, with some Saudi national presence.
- Created tensions inside Saudi regarding who benefits from access to KAUST.





# USA HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ALT RIGHT







# Thiel Fellowship™

What are you currently obsessed with that is totally unrelated to your project?

How do you feel about money?

What are you scared of?

## Thiel Foundation Reveals 2024 Class Of Thiel Fellows

*Luke Farritor (Lincoln, NE)*

The Vesuvius Challenge is accelerating the reading of the Herculaneum Papyri, the last surviving library of the Roman Empire.

*Pavel Asparouhov (Salt Lake City, UT)*

Silna is streamlining patient intake and building more efficient infrastructures to enable providers to focus on world-class care and to ease the trillion-dollar tax burden that is the US healthcare system.

*Peter Hansen (Chester, England)*

Januus is mapping cryptowallets for physical locations and people on a global scale.

*Tarun Amasa (Manhattan, NY)*

Endex is building the first autonomous and super-intelligent financial analyst.





# There is so much left to build

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# Luke Farritor

- **Thiel Fellow (2024)**
- **Musk Connections:** Intern at SpaceX; Intern at Starlink; winner of Vesuvius Challenge, to which Musk subsequently became the largest donor
- **DOGE Deployment:** Consumer Financial Protection Bureau; State Department; USAID; General Services Administration; Education Department; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Energy Department

• <https://therevolvingdoorproject.org/doge-agent-luke-farritor/>



# Zonal politics

- In this case, the state is not attempting to leverage the zone, but instead, powerful private actors are attempting to create a new zone by perforating, deflating and denying the lifeblood of the university in the dominant territory.
- Silicon Valley billionaire - Peter Thiel – and alt-Right – critique of the university, as corrupt, parasitic, and slowing technological development and science. Funded exit projects – such as those promoted by the Seasteading Institute funded by Thiel.
- Thiel Fellowships – funded to drop out of university to join the crypto-‘academy of start-ups’.
- This project aligned with the liberterians who argue what is at stake is the American mind and way of life to an unaccountable ‘deep state’ and a parasitic self-styled left elite who dominate the academy.
- Yarvin typical of the politics; the only way to overturn this state of affairs is to take absolute power and rule.



# Secession (+ Accession)

## Zonal Politics of Different Kinds

So, what does this case tell us about perforations and their distinct zonal politics? In our view it brings into view perforations in a national system of a different kind. In this case, it involves puncturing a hole in a system, such as the US university system, with the hope that its life blood oozes out and causes it to collapse.

JD Vance (22 February 2024)

“You know, the closest that conservatives have ever gotten to successfully dealing with left-wing domination of universities is Viktor Orbán’s approach in Hungary. I think his way has to be the model for us: not to eliminate universities, but to give them a choice between survival or taking a much less biased approach to teaching.”



# Taken together, these cases:

1

Highlight the **complexities**, involved in creating zones of exception

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2

**Get beyond non-relational binary accounts** of inside/outside, zone/nation,

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3

Offer a processual account of **secession and accession**,

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4

**Strategies shift over time** in relation to wider geopolitical and cultural spheres.

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Thank you...

