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Dear agrarian studies readers,

Many thanks for reading this. A little context should be helpful. This is a project I am just beginning and is designed to be a fairly brief book. It is a project that tries to contextualize historically and situate ideologically three of the more prominent libertarian 'opt-out' or 'escape' projects of the past 70 years or so. Part of the point of the work is to in fact question the degree to which such projects are 'opt-out' projects but, more concretely, the work also aims to situate the projects directly within the mainstream history of twentieth century capitalism, rather than letting them float at the margins as somewhat exceptional and strange things. Much of my interest is in the ideological project at work, rather than, say, the material question of tax evasion. I should note that part of my interest also is that the projects themselves are funky, very interesting, and offensive.

Most of my work thus far has been focused on tracking down basic information on those involved and narrating the stories. Thus, much of what you will find here is fairly descriptive. My analytical interventions are fairly limited in this piece at this point. For the book project, each of the three sections will be expanded in order to take up larger issues related to financial structures and instruments, changing political and economic contexts, and the like.

Thanks in advance for critiques, comments, suggestions.

RC

Escape geographies and libertarian enclosures

Once upon a time (in 1972), a wealthy man set out to establish his own sovereign city-state. He found a shallow reef over which the waters of a vast ocean had lapped gently since time immemorial. He hired a company to dredge the surrounding ocean floor and deposit the sand on the reef. Thus was a tiny island born, upon which the man had a stone platform built, a flag planted, and the birth of the Republic of Minerva declared. The monarch of a nearby island kingdom was not impressed. He opened the doors of his kingdom's one jail and assembled an army. The monarch, his army and a four-piece brass band boarded the royal yacht and descended upon the reef where they promptly removed the flag, destroyed the platform, and deposed the man who would be king. And Minerva returned to the ocean.



Coin minted for the Republic of Minderva. Note the date (1973) and the inclusion of points of latitude and longitude.

The story of Michael Oliver, his short-lived Republic of Minerva, and the response of the King of Tonga is not the stuff of fairy tales (although it does have a certain grim quality: in the process of deposing Oliver, one prisoner apparently murdered another, creating the strange circumstance in which a state's murder rate exceeded the size of its population.)¹ Nor is it an uncommon story. It is one example of many of efforts by modern market-libertarians to establish independent, sovereign enclaves in ocean, island, and coastal spaces. Such spaces have long been fodder for the imagination: *Utopia*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, and *Lord of the Flies* (to name only a few) have all used remote islands as means to stage arguments about the market, exchange, politics and society. Jules Verne's Captain Nemo found in the ocean refuge from the tyranny of continents; and Ayn Rand's capitalist paradise, despite its location high in the Rocky Mountains, was named *Atlantis*. The Republic of Minerva is a real-life counterpart to such imaginings and only one of the myriad initiatives undertaken since the end of World War II by

¹ See George Pendle, "New Foundlands," *Cabinet* 18 (Summer 2005) and Anthony Van Fossen, *Tax Havens and Sovereignty in the Pacific Islands* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2012).

an eclectic and powerful assortment of individuals who describe themselves as market-libertarians or anarcho-capitalists.²

Surprisingly enough, these are initiatives that have received limited attention from academics and intellectuals, despite the buzz they have generated on technology- and libertarian-oriented websites. If they have received academic attention it is largely as examples of tax havens gone awry or the problems with ‘offshore.’³ But generally such efforts have sat at the margins of intellectual and economic history. The schemes were too bizarre, the protagonists too eccentric, the plots too outrageous to be folded in to mainstream political, economic, and cultural histories. My contention is they are not: that is to say, there is plenty here that is bizarre, eccentric and outrageous but that hardly means it sits at the margins political and economic life. Just the opposite, perhaps. Such activities and fantasies are a central part of the history of twentieth-century capitalism and its reconfigurations in the wake of the global depression of 1929 and post-war decolonization. Indeed, other than perhaps the individual audaciousness of some plans and the vehement anti-statist rhetoric, at times one would be hard-pressed to distinguish between these initiatives and some of the informal colonial practices of states and capitalists in our contemporary era.⁴ And while new in some ways—for example, in the contemporary linkages between technology and market-libertarianism—in other ways they bear a striking resemblance to aspects of 19th-century filibustering and frontier expansion, whether it be William Walker in Central America or the proclaimers of the Bear Flag Republic in Alta California. Moreover, they have become, in the past two decades, surprisingly mainstream. Oliver’s 1968 *New Constitution for a New Country* (about which I will say more shortly) may have resided at the margins when first published but it reads like a fairly run-of-the-mill manifesto today. Rand, meanwhile, has been reborn as a subject of scholarly study rather than

² For studies that take up the U.S. context, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011); and Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011). For a broader perspective, see Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007). Anarcho-capitalism, as an ascription, has increasingly been avoided by many of its proponents. Instead they have opted for the language of market-libertarian or, more recently, ‘analytical anarchism.’ See, e.g., www.analyticalanarchism.net

³ For a study of Oliver in the context of the decolonization of Oceania, see Van Fossen, *Tax Havens and Sovereignty*, esp. chap. 3.

⁴ See Fred Pearce, *The Land Grabbers: The New Fight Over Who Owns the Earth* (Boston: Beacon, 2012); the recent special issues of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (including 38: 2 (2011); 39: 1 (2012); and 39: 3-4 (2012)); Joel Wainwright, *Geopiracy* (London: PalgraveMcMillan, 2013) and Raymond Craib, “The Properties of Counterinsurgency,” in *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2014). More broadly, see Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop*.

scorn.⁵ Silicon Valley has inspired an entire generation of libertarian ‘radical social entrepreneurs’ whose prophet is Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, rather than Karl Marx, and whose vocabulary is more likely to include ‘start-up’ than ‘rise up.’⁶

This essay tracks out a number of efforts—related generally in their libertarian emphases but distinct in terms of form—to create libertarian places in purportedly non-state (or unstate) spaces. Such projects are not all cut from precisely the same cloth—they range across a spectrum of liberal thought—but they share a common disdain for the state, a commitment to free enterprise, a fetishization of the unencumbered entrepreneur, and a deep faith in the promise of technology. My aim is to situate these endeavors in a broader historical context of libertarian efforts to escape aspects of the state (rather than ‘the state’ per se.) In the process, I hope to have something to say about how such efforts are linked to a broader libertarian resurgence that melds a *selective* escape from the state with new forms of territorial enclosure in the form of land- and water-grabbing.

There is a small body of work which has taken up some of these figures but largely as a means to address tax haven issues, criminality, and sovereignty and from a perspective largely culled from either political theory or international finance. In contrast, my work is intended to historicize these themes, to situate the main figures in a changing global context, and to make sense of the initiatives as more than mere efforts to escape forms of taxation. For example, there is as much political ecology as there is political economy at work here. In the era of the so-called anthropocene—a term popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen as a means to recognize an era in which humans directly impact geologic time (through dramatic climate change)—the vision of possibly escaping a collapsing planetary ecosystem has taken on new life. The Anthropocene has been taken up in recent years by a number of social scientists, including Dipesh Chakrabarty who sees in the crisis of global climate change a need for a new approach to history and contemporary theory.⁷ Chakrabarty’s assertion in part is that the crisis impacts us

⁵ For a trenchant recent critique, see Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*.

⁶ De Soto I doubt would refer to himself as a libertarian. It is his radical fetishization of property rights that attracts their readership. De Soto, *The Other Path* and idem., *The Mystery of Capital*. The critiques of de Soto’s purported panacea for poverty—property titling and formalization—are numerous. For a concise critique, see John Gravois, “The de Soto delusion,” *Slate* (Jan. 29, 2005) at:

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/hey_wait_a_minute/2005/01/the_de_soto_delusion.html For an excellent analysis of how ‘informality’ is changing the law in Peru, rather than vice-versa, see Daniella Gandolfo, “Formless: A Day at Lima’s Office of Formalization,” *Cultural Anthropology* 28: 2 (May 2013), 278-98.

⁷ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009), 197-222.

all—regardless of class, for example. “There are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged,” he claims.⁸ Projects such as sea-steading (discussed below) suggest otherwise, as do current private efforts to travel to, and investigate colonization of, outer space. Richard Branson—self-styled radical entrepreneur whose profits have been utterly dependent on the largesse and complicity of Westminster—is only the most prominent example of a basic fact: there may indeed be an escape for those whom Mike Davis has aptly termed “earth’s first class passengers.”⁹

That is in part why a distinction too often elided needs to be reaffirmed: that between market-libertarians and anarchists. In an era in which anarchist politics has become remarkably visible and vital again, a myopic misrepresentation persists that anarchism is, and has historically been, primarily anti-statist in its orientation rather than antagonistic toward both the state and capitalism.¹⁰ The libertarian escape projects discussed in this essay are, in contrast, capitalism on steroids, the logical extreme of laissez-faire liberalism a la *Robinson Crusoe*. In fact, one might go further and suggest they are more akin to the company-state and the joint-stock corporation—financial monopolies—than they are to Smith’s vision of an invisible hand.¹¹ Regardless, the point is the initiatives and ideologies discussed in this paper are a form of libertarianism that is markedly distinct from anarchist politics. Even the temporalities and the geographies point toward a necessary distinction: if anarchist politics have a simultaneous temporal horizon (freedom and equality must happen together), libertarian politics are a form of classical liberalism with its sequential temporal horizon (freedom first, equality later, if at all). If anarchist geographies can at times include refuge from state capture and the maintenance of

⁸ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 221. Compare with Simon During, “Empire’s Present,” *New Literary History* 43: 2 (Spring 2012), 331-340.

⁹ Mike Davis, “Living on the Ice Shelf: Humanity’s Meltdown,” at <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/174949> [last accessed September 4, 2013]. The film *Elysium*—despite poor execution—smartly conveys precisely this, as does, in a different way, Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012 [1945])

¹⁰ For a detailed and trenchant argument, see Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame* (Oakland: AK Press)

¹¹ See the brief but excellent discussion in Timothy Mitchell, “Dreamland,” in Davis and Monk, eds., *Evil Paradises*. In a recent book, Peter Thiel, one of the subjects of this paper, declared that market competition is over-rated and that monopolies are more efficient and innovative. Thiel (with Blake Masters), *Zero to One: Notes on Start Ups, or How to Build the Future*.

acephalous and fugitive societies, libertarian geographies are exclusionary but hardly independent from the state and they tend toward forms of hierarchy and top-down engineering.¹²

The locations of libertarian escape experiments are obvious, but also curious, ones. The oceans and their islands have long served as refuge. “For as long as humans have been persecuting and killing one another, hunted men have sought salvation on the seas [...] and it is surely fugitives, rather than conquerors, who led the way to new worlds...”¹³ So wrote Victor Serge, himself a fugitive from Stalin’s agents, who would soon arrive on the shores of Mexico, along with Trotsky. But Michael Oliver, as well as other protagonists in this paper, were hardly “hunted men.” What were once safe havens for the marginalized have now become tax havens for the powerful.¹⁴ These individuals’ initiatives are ideologically linked to radical free marketeer perspectives that share little with those seeking autonomy from persecution and searching for alternative sites for the construction of an egalitarian—or at least anti-capitalist—future. Oliver’s idea for Minerva was “to attract a population of 60,000 to a fancy sea resort, called Sea City, which was to be constructed on the reefs, where residents would have no taxation, welfare, subsidies, or any form of economic interventionism.”¹⁵

The New Filibusterers

Michael Oliver is also Moses Olitsky.¹⁶ Born in Lithuania in 1928, he emigrated to the United States in 1946 after four years in two Nazi concentration camps. Fearful of what he saw as an encroaching communism in the U.S., he wrote a libertarian and laissez-faire manifesto, published in 1968, entitled *A New Constitution for a New Country*, in which he imagined a territorial configuration freed from the constraints of overbearing, taxing, and moralizing

¹² On refuge and acephaly, see James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009) and Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State*. More broadly, see Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (Freedom Press, 1982) and David Graeber, *Possibilities: Essays on hierarchy, rebellion and desire* (Oakland: AK Press, 2007)

¹³ Serge, *Unforgiving Years*, 92

¹⁴ “A tax haven is a jurisdiction which allows residents or foreigners to minimize their tax payments”; in contrast, “an offshore financial centre is a tax haven jurisdiction which has at least one significant institution primarily oriented towards accepting deposits and investment funds, and where intentional government policy is oriented towards attracting the business of foreigners by creating legal entities and structures, or facilitating immigration, naturalization, residence, or the acquisition of passports to allow foreigners to minimize taxes, regulation, loss of assets, unwanted financial disclosure and forced disposition of property. All offshore financial centres are tax havens. Not all tax havens are offshore financial centres.” Anthony Van Fossen, “Secessionist Tax Haven Movements in the Pacific Islands,” *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, 90.

¹⁵ Peoples Almanac #2 (ed. David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace, 1978), cited on http://flagspot.net/flags/to_min.html [accessed April 6, 2012]

¹⁶ Oliver and his history appear in various brief publications but the most thorough history of Oliver, and from which this paragraph draws, is in Anthony Van Fossen, “Secessionist Tax Haven Movements”

bureaucracies. Oliver drafted the new constitution in part because he saw in the constitution of the United States “enough collectivist clauses to ensure a steady drift toward totalitarianism,” although he did not identify said clauses.

A disciple of Ludwig von Mises, Oliver saw only a bleak economic future ahead in the 1960s. He had become a successful coin dealer, specializing particularly in gold, and real estate developer in Carson City, Nevada. In the mid-1960s he began to convert his substantial wealth in to gold, a move which soon made him all the wealthier when global economic retrenchment saw the value of gold dramatically increase. Regardless, Oliver carried with him a complex feeling of economic persecution and began to seek out possibilities to create his own country. Just how powerfully his vision—and his fears—resonated are evidenced by the fact that he was able to get close to 2,000 investors for his project, in the process creating the Ocean Life Research Foundation.¹⁷ These were the origins of the Minerva project which was envisioned as a 400-acre island, built from poured concrete atop the reef and sand. On Minerva, according to Morris Davis, its temporary President, “people will be free to do as they damn well please. Nothing will be illegal so long it does not infringe on the rights of others. If a citizen wishes to open a tavern, set up gambling or make pornographic films, the government will not interfere.”¹⁸ This modest triad of concerns could have just as likely flowed from the pen of a flower child, a progressive Democratic Party member, Larry Flynt, or a participant at Burning Man.¹⁹ No surprise: there was, in fact, a close historical linkage between U.S. sixties counter-culture and post-sixties cyberculture.²⁰

With the failure of Minerva, Oliver shifted his emphasis from creating an island to colonizing one. Decolonization made such an effort appear all the more plausible, as he had already emphasized in his self-published 1968 book *A New Constitution for a New Country*:

A surprising number of nearly uninhabited, yet quite suitable places for establishing a new country still exist. [...] The exact location of the new country cannot be revealed at this time. [...] Many such places are scarcely developed colonies whose governmental or other activities are of little or no concern at all to

¹⁷ Blutstein, <http://harryblutstein.com/history/seasteading/> [accessed September 24, 2012]

¹⁸ Quoted in Ashes to Ashes, *The New Internationalist*

¹⁹ It is important here to recognize that largely in the United States only does ‘libertarian’ generally refer to a kind of pro-capitalist, anti-statist ideology—what Murray Rothbard would call ‘anarcho-capitalism.’ In most other parts of the world—and certainly in Europe—libertarian still carries with it a strong historical tradition from the Left.

²⁰ See the superb analysis in Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

their ‘mother’ countries. There will be little problem in purchasing the land, or in having the opportunity to conduct affairs on a free enterprise basis from the very beginning. Though the ‘mother’ country may show unwelcomed interest when the new country prospers, time for imposing its edicts will by then have passed. The land will be bought from a colony whose ‘mother’ country is not powerful; yet even the larger colonial powers are diminishing control and interference over lands outside their boundaries, thereby providing a wider choice of locations for the new country.²¹

He would elaborate briefly in a subsequent newsletter that the “basic qualifying requirements” for a new country would include not only a small population in “a relatively large land area,” but also a “weak colonial government, not closely tied to a ‘mother’ country.”²² Even prior to the Minerva experiment, Oliver or one of his associates had made visits to the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos, Curacao, Surinam, and New Caledonia to gather information on climate, taxation, and land quality, among others.²³ They would additionally identify the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), French Guyana, and Honduras as potential sites.²⁴ While in the Caribbean he made note of the possibilities of land reclamation through the construction of Dutch-style polders on top of coastal reefs and sand banks, an observation that evidently inspired the subsequent Minerva project.

To push the project along, Oliver created “The Vanguard Corporation” with a Board of Directors consisting of Oliver; Morris Davis, an electrical engineer with the Rockwell Corporation in Anaheim, California; Robert R. Johnson, a San Francisco-based gold coin dealer; Robert Meiers, a psychiatrist with practices in Belmont and Palo Alto and a teaching position at Stanford University; and Theodore Stokes, the former DA of Ormsby County, Nevada, in which Carson City was located.²⁵ As the quest for a location continued, Oliver also laid out the desirable traits for potential settlers, including “the personal philosophy of the prospective immigrant.” Individual freedom had its limits and Oliver’s readers appeared to need tutelage, particularly in distinguishing between his libertarian ideals and those of anarchists:

²¹ Oliver, *A New Constitution for a New Country*

²² Oliver and Harold G. Jindrich, *The Capitalist Country Newsletter*, vol. 1 no. 1 (July, 1968), 1.

²³ Oliver, *The Capitalist Country Newsletter*, 1: 2 (Sept. 1968), 3

²⁴ Oliver, *The M. Oliver Newsletter* (Dec. 1969/Jan. 1970), 1 and *The M. Oliver Newsletter* (April 1970), 1.

²⁵ Oliver, *The Capitalist Country Newsletter*, 1: 4 (Oct. 1968), 2; and Oliver, *The Capitalist Country Newsletter*, 1: 5 (Nov. 1968), 1.

Naturally we will not knowingly accept collectivists in our new country. Nor do we want criminals, nihilists, or anarchists. While at this point, we have found that a few persons (fortunately, a very few) who wrote to me failed to understand an important point made in the book. I made a few rather strong remarks against anarchy on pages 23 and 24 of the book, and again on pages 118 and 119. I showed conclusively that anarchy has always led to tyranny. Hitler came to power when the Weimar Republic permitted his hoodlums to run wild. Before the communists came to power in Russia, it was necessary to destroy the existing Russian government. And now, the hippies, yippies and communists are joined in a foul alliance to destroy the existing government in the United States. [...] But whereas I find a great number of things terribly wrong with our government, still I do not wish to see its destruction, for it will only be replaced by a dictatorship of incomprehensible evil.²⁶

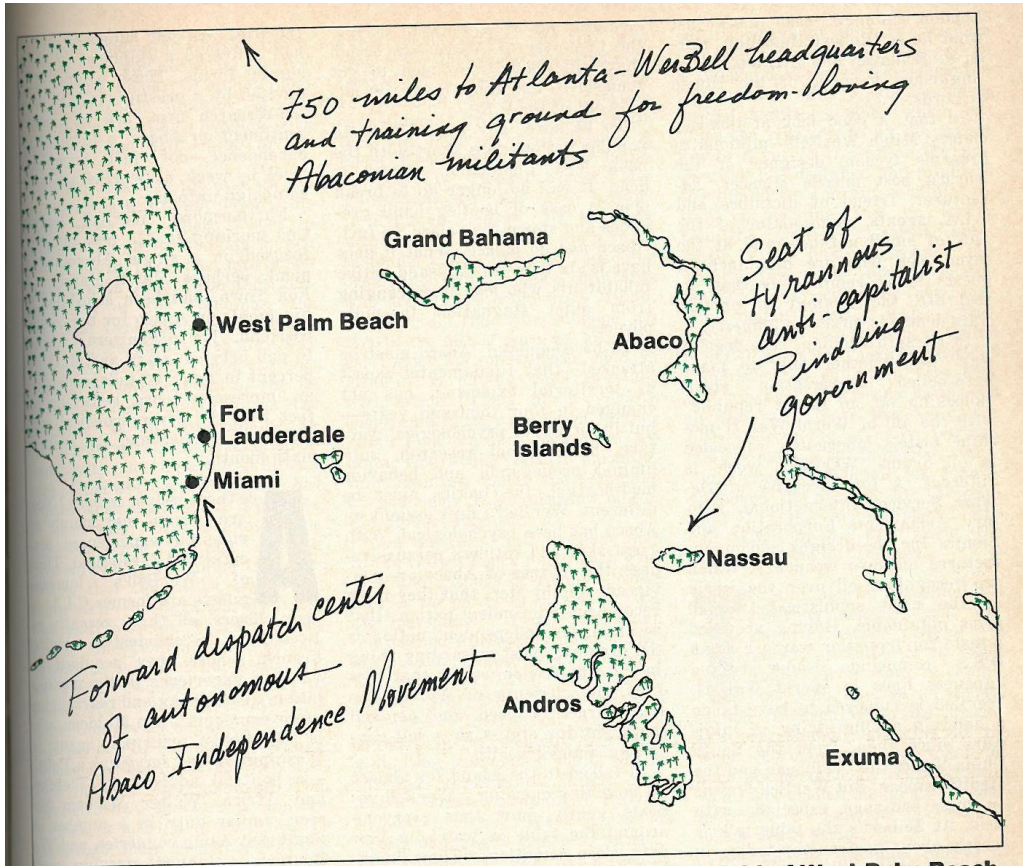
In hedging his libertarian bets and fretting about communists, Oliver revealed himself to be much more aligned with the perspectives of, say, Ayn Rand—who had little patience for libertarians and argued that a minimal state was necessary to protect property rights and jail communists—than those of Murray Rothbard, a founding figure of post-war U.S. anarcho-capitalism.²⁷ Indeed, throughout his various efforts Oliver would repeatedly ensure that the Vanguard Corporation had been properly and legally established, meet with government representatives in locations where he looked to establish his country, and patiently await approval from the Securities and Exchange Commission for the Corporation's joint-stock activities. But with the failure of the Minerva gambit, his patience ran thin.

Enter the Abaco archipelago. In 1974 Oliver and his associates took a different tack. Frustrated by the lethargic pace at which country-making had thus far proceeded, they resurrected the ghosts of William Walker and various nineteenth century filibusterers by attempting to foment a secessionist movement amongst the 6,500 residents of the Abaco islands of the Bahamas, which had garnered its independence from Britain in 1973. Oliver had received

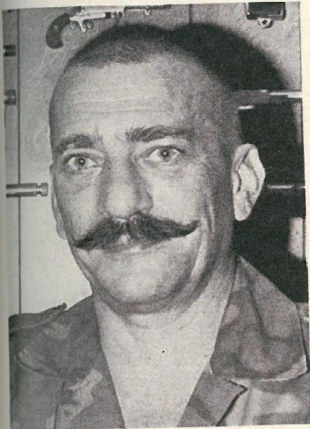
²⁶ Oliver, *The Capitalist Country Newsletter*, 1: 5 (Nov. 1968), 2

²⁷ On Rand's disdain for libertarians—including some sharp exchanges with Rothbard—see Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market* (New York: Oxford University Press). Rothbard's signature work is *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto*.

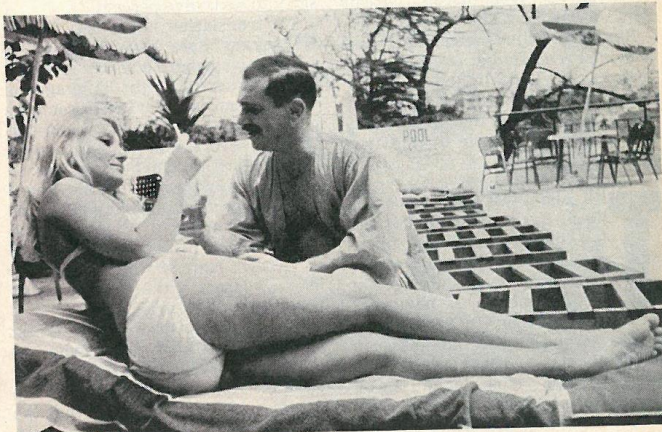
assurances from the Thirteenth Baron of Belhaven and Stenton (aka Robert Anthony Carmichael Hamilton) that the UK government would not intercede if the residents of Abaco seceded.



Abaco, site of the Abaco Independence Movement, lies to the right of West Palm Beach. With seven hundred square miles of tropical land and only seven thousand native inhabitants, it may be an ideal place for Americans to start a brave new inflation-proof country.



The Simón Bolívar of the new Abaco: Mitchell Livingston WerBell, firearms maker.



If WerBell and his friends succeed in their revolution, life on Abaco (for the ruling classes) may resemble this 1965 photo of WerBell at ease. Native inhabitants not shown.

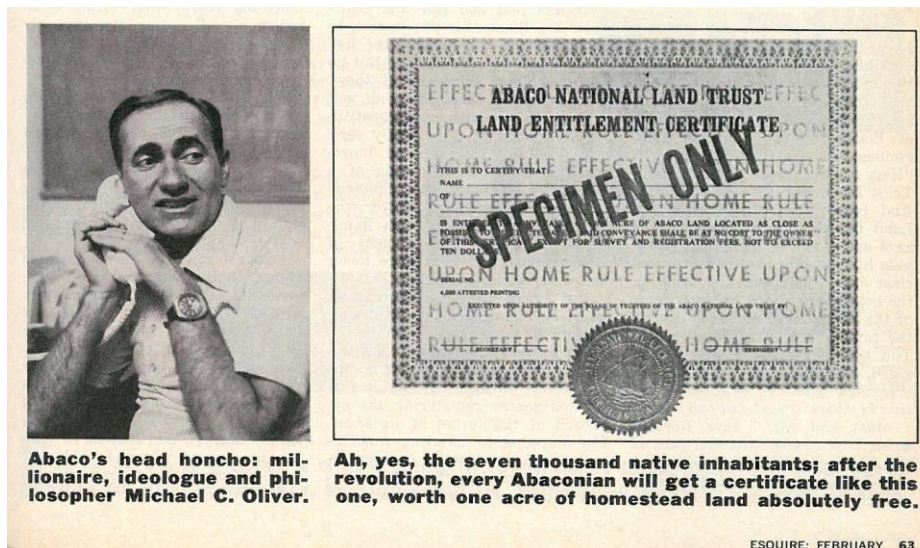
A map the location of Abaco and Werbell's operations; Werbell himself (bottom left, and wryly

compared to Simón Bolívar); and Werbell “at ease.” Esquire (Feb. 1975)

Oliver’s right-hand man in the scheme, set to take place on January 1, 1975, was a former OSS officer Mitchell Livingston Werbell, described in 1981 by one author in the following terms:

OSS veteran of Indochina, millionaire firearms tycoon, head of Military Armaments Corporation (MAC), trainer of mercenary armies and inventor of the best muzzle silencer for the world's deadliest hand-gun - the Ingram ME machine gun pistol capable of firing 14 shots a second, weighing about 1.5 kilograms and costing less than \$100. From MAC, naturally.²⁸

Werbell lived on the conspiratorial fringes of political life. He had served a stint as a paramilitary advisor to Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic; he had been connected to illegal wiretaps of Senator Howard Baker’s office in Washington, D.C.; and had linkages to fugitive financier Robert Vesco. Werbell and Oliver aimed to privatize the vast majority of the Abaco archipelago (some 98% of the land), persuading Abaconians to support the plot with the promise of direct shares in the other 2%. Werbell planned in addition to build a new factory on the island to manufacture weapons, thereby bypassing the restrictions laid out in the U.S. Omnibus Crime Bill of 1969.²⁹



(Left) One of the only images of Oliver I have been able to find.

²⁸ Ashes to Ashes. See also the large FBI file on Werbell.

²⁹ Von Fossen.

(Right) A “sample” of an Abaca land entitlement certificate

The plot failed. Residents of Abaco wanted more autonomy but not Oliver’s time-share-company-state. Things went from bad to worse for Oliver when a reporter at *Esquire Magazine* investigated the Abaco fiasco and published a full exposé—“Surefire inflation dodge: Start your own country”—in the February 1975 issue. (Cher adorned the cover [“Whose man enough for this woman?”] and futurist Alvin Toffler adorned its interior.) The report came to the attention of the U.S. Attorney General’s office and subsequently to the desk of the Director of the FBI who investigated whether or not the plotters had violated U.S. law. Of additional concern was that Werbell was training mercenaries at his encampment outside of Atlanta (the Cobray International War School, in Powder Springs), with a forward headquarters in Miami. The FBI in fact had been tracking both Werbell and Oliver for some time. Copies of Oliver’s newsletter—in publication since 1969—had been circulated among FBI agencies.

Forced to rework his plans yet again, in 1975 Oliver and a number of monetarist associates—among them Harry Schultz, at the time the “world’s highest paid investment advisor” and whose newsletter counted Margaret Thatcher as a subscriber; Nathaniel Branden, former acolyte and paramour of Ayn Rand; and John Hospers, a University of Southern California philosophy professor, candidate for U.S. president on the Libertarian Party ticket in 1972, and purported guru to Ayn Rand—formed the Phoenix Foundation.³⁰ The Phoenix Foundation spoke of colonized peoples yearning for freedom but fearing “socialism/communism.” Such peoples and their leaders “sincerely want to build their country around the individual instead of creating a monolithic government. Surprisingly, there are several such embryonic potential nations around the world. And for all their spunk, they are having a tough struggle to repel the advances of marauders, for example, neocolonialists like Russia who care not a fiddle for basic human rights. We in Phoenix are actively giving these countries the encouragement, support, physical and technical advice they require.”³¹

If the Republic of Minerva and the invasion of Abaco were farce, the Phoenix Foundation was tragedy. In March 1979, Oliver met with a group of German, Australian, French and English investors at a house in Melbourne, Australia. Plans were hatched and within a year brought to fruition when they armed and funded a secessionist rebellion on the island of Espiritu Santo in

³⁰ Ashes to Ashes, *The New Internationalist* (July 1981)

³¹ Cited from Ashes to Ashes.

the New Hebrides islands (the Independent Republic of Vanuatu).³² The secessionist rebellion was led by the Nagriamel movement headed by Jimmy Moses Tubo Pantuntun Moli Stevens. Stevens championed a conservative, culturalist vision of society based on village life and *kastom* (or custom). Opposed to the nationalism of the leaders of the decolonization movement, disparaging them as collaborators with the west, he paradoxically allied himself with French colonial officials and the Phoenix Foundation.

For French officials, the incentive to ally with Stevens was clear enough: a possible impediment to independence movements on the islands. And for the the Phoenix Foundation? Besides wanting to help, as Oliver put it, “the most disciplined people I have ever seen, not like those hippies in Berkeley,” Oliver and the Phoenix Foundation armed the insurgents because of the promise of a libertarian, autonomous free trade zone on 4000 hectares of ocean-front real estate. The foundation would sell lots to ‘investment-settlers’ who would come together in a space which would be entirely privatized—from the landscapers, to the doctors, to the police. It would all be subject to market mechanisms. Potential settlers included many of the French colonials with vested interests on Espirtu Santo, but it also included others. Oliver had formed a business relationship with Hawaiian business mogul Eugene Peacock. Peacock had, beginning in the mid-1960s, begun to purchase large swathes of land in the future country of Vanuatu, part of an increasing boom in land speculation. He developed plans to subdivide his myriad land purchases for settlement by American immigrant families as well as soldiers serving in Vietnam who did not wish to return to the U.S. (Peacock evidently preyed on the fears of soldiers with Vietnamese wives that they would not be welcomed back in the U.S.) French and British authorities in the early 1970s put an end to the land speculations with new regulations but Peacock refused to admit defeat and instead allied himself with Oliver and his associates. The Foundation’s efforts in Vanuatu failed, but only after the fledgling government called in assistance from Papua New Guinea.

Oliver and his associates did not retreat. Oliver allied with the Israeli Mondragon group in an effort in the 1990s to create a free trade zone on 80,000 hectares of land on the island of Santo in Vanuatu. In a subversive twist, the group took its name from the highly successful Mondragón cooperatives of the Basque region in Spain but with vastly different aims in mind:

³² See Howard von Trease, ed., *Melanesian Politics: Stael Blong Vanuatu* (Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1995), and Ashes to Ashes.

rather than creating workers' cooperatives that provide an array of economic and social services, the Israeli Mondragon group sought a 99-year lease to create an economic and cultural enclave free of taxes, customs duties and import and export regulations. This effort too failed and an ombudsman's report was emphatic in its conclusion: the deal was dirty.³³

A coda: Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, September 2006. When you read the cable, you can almost see U.S. Ambassador Robert Fitts rolling his eyes, shaking his head, and letting free no small amount of invective under his breath.

The Vanuatu Minister of Lands [Maxime Carlot Korman] recently signed an MOU with an obscure group of American investors to consider establishing a free port with an autonomous government. This closely parallels a 1980 attempt by the Phoenix Foundation which was only ended by bringing in PNG troops (ref A). The 1980 version would have had the powers to issue currency, passports, and was supposed to have featured untaxed and unregulated free flow of capital. (C) Ambassador learned Sept 6 from the Vanuatu Deputy Prime Minister that many of the same American figures are behind the current effort.³⁴

The Age of Aquarius: Silicon Ocean

A signal moment in what will become the history of climate change took place in 2008. Kiritabi President Anote Tong, speaking at a United Nations environmental forum in New Zealand, left the assembled participants with a sobering point: "To plan for the day when you no longer have a country is indeed painful but I think we have to do that." It was a poignant and solemn declaration of what the future most likely held for the thousands of inhabitants of the I-Kiritabi archipelago in the Pacific. The very same year, the *Sea-Steadying Institute* (TSI) would host its inaugural annual gathering in San Francisco, where investors and engineers and

³³ Republic of Vanuatu, Office of the Ombudsman, Public Report on the Improper conduct by Government Officials in dealing with Mondragon's proposed free trade zone in Big Bay, Santo.

<http://www.pacii.org/vu/ombudsman/2001/3.rtf>

³⁴ <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2006/09/06PORTMORESBY369.html>

I have not had the time yet to go in to the history of Korman, who has been plagued with corruption allegations, including pocketing some \$1.1 million U.S. in French aid after a cyclone hit the island while he was president. See the World Bank report at: <http://star.worldbank.org/corruption-cases/node/18646>

dreamers—many linked to Silicon Valley’s digerati or “digital overclass”—would gather to plan for the day when a country would appear on the ocean.³⁵

It should come as no surprise that Silicon Valley—with its heady mix of technological innovation, financial accumulation, and California-capitalist excess—has generated some of the most powerful recent efforts to bring anarcho-capitalist visions to fruition. In some instances these have taken shape in the form of plans for floating laboratories, moored twelve miles off the coast of Half Moon Bay, where one can import foreign engineers and bypass—or ‘hack’—U.S. immigration laws (and, evidently, create a feudal class of scientific serfs) and still link to the ‘Silicon Valley eco-system.’³⁶ But the most well-known of such efforts has been the establishment of *The Seasteading Institute*, heavily funded by Peter Thiel, founder of PayPal, Inc., one of the earliest investors in Facebook, and on the Forbes list of the 400 richest Americans in 2011.³⁷ Ideologically Thiel is an ardent libertarian. He cites Rand as an inspiration (despite, again, Rand’s hostility toward radical anti-statism) and his start-up ventures have a libertarian bent: PayPal sought to potentially create a web-based currency that would escape or undermine tax systems associated with government while Facebook promised the possibility of “supra-national communities.”³⁸

Thiel makes no bones about his loyalties: “You can’t have a workers’ revolution to take over a bank if the bank is in Vanuatu.”³⁹ (There is something remarkable here—and that I plan on pursuing further—about how frequently Vanuatu appears in the minds of 20th century

³⁵ “Digital overclass” comes from Anand Giridharadas, “Silicon Valley Roused by Secession Call,” *New York Times* (Oct. 28, 2013).

³⁶ This is Blue Seed. See <http://www.blueseeds.co/faq.html#visa>. On ‘hacking’ immigration law, see Timothy B. Lee, “Startup hopes to hack the immigration system with a floating incubator,” <http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2011/11/startup-hopes-to-hack-the-immigration-system-with-a-floating-incubator.ars>

³⁷ Steinberg, et al., *Atlas Swam*, 2. Such efforts have been subjected to limited academic study. The most cogent study is Philip Steinberg, Elizabeth Nyman and Mauro J. Caraccioli, “Atlas Swam: Freedom, Capital and Floating Sovereignties in the Seasteading Vision.” More generally on the ocean and islands, see Epeli Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6: 1 (1994), 148-61; Margaret Jolly, “Imagining Oceania: Indigenous and Foreign Representations of a Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 19: 2 (2007), 508-545; Arif Dirlik, “There Is More in the Rim Than Meets the Eye: Thoughts on the ‘Pacific Idea,’” in Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 129-145; Paul D’Arcy, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity and History in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), esp. the conclusion; and David Hanlon, “The Sea of Little Lands: Examining Micronesia’s Place in ‘Our Sea of Islands,’” *The Contemporary Pacific* 21: 1 (2009), 91-110. On the ontological separation of water and land in the spatial imaginary, see Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Steinberg, “Insularity, Sovereignty, and Nationhood: The Representation of Islands on Portolan Charts and the Construction of the Territorial State,” *Geografiska Annaler B* 87: 4 (2005), 253-265.

³⁸ Steinberg, et. al., *Atlas Swam*, 6; Jacob Weisberg, “Turn on, start up, drop out,” *Slate* (Oct. 16, 2010). The qtd text comes from Weisberg.

³⁹ Thiel, qtd in *The Guardian* (January 14, 2008), qtd from Von Fossen, vi

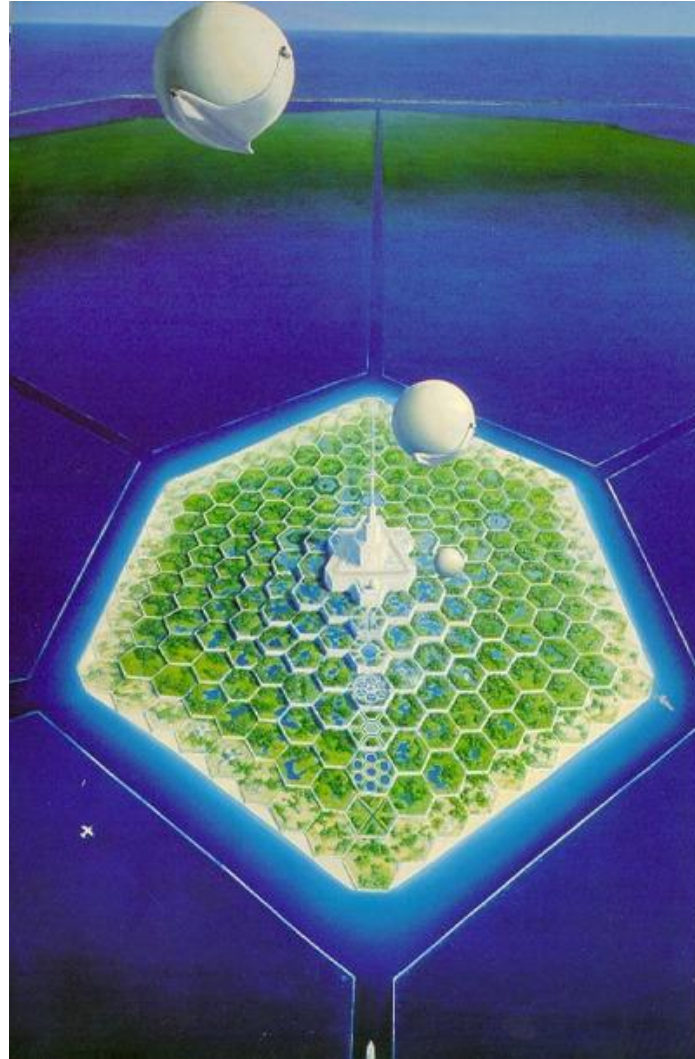
libertarians.) To punctuate the point, Thiel, in a personal manifesto, argued that “freedom and democracy” are not compatible. Instead, he advocated that libertarians “find an escape from politics in all its forms — from the totalitarian and fundamentalist catastrophes to the unthinking demos that guides so-called “social democracy.””⁴⁰

Such a position was not new. Thiel here was repeating in many respects the mantra of his immediate techno-libertarian and counter-cultural predecessors who similarly compared dropping out with being the vanguard of social, technological and scientific change. For all its rhetoric of community, networks, and sociability, this is a fiercely individualist position built, first and foremost, on a radical elision: the necessity of millions of laborers to assemble and disassemble—at meager wage scales, in toxic environments and under precarious circumstances—the sources of wealth. “Like the communards of the 1960s,” Fred Turner writes, “the techno-utopians of the 1990s denied their dependence on any but themselves.”⁴¹ No wonder they love Ayn Rand: titans of nothing, when confronted with politics in its most meaningful sense, the most they can muster is a shrug.

Escape from politics meant escape to certain locations. Thiel identified three: cyberspace, outer-space and the ocean. In the short term, at least, the ocean appeared as the most practical option. Earlier writers had developed similar perspectives, most notably Marshall Savage who, in 1992, published his *Millenium Project* with a foreword by Arthur C. Clarke. With a decidedly self-helpish subtitle (*Colonizing the Galaxy in Eight Easy Steps*), Savage argued that the initial step involved colonizing Earth’s ocean spaces as a kind of trial run. This age of Aquarius would be followed by subsequent phases of space stations, moon colonization, the terraforming of Mars (termed Elysium) and then beyond.

⁴⁰ Peter Thiel, “The education of a libertarian,” *Cato Unbound* (April 13, 2009), at <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/education-libertarian>

⁴¹ Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 261



Elysium. A vision of a sea-pod community. Savage, *Millenium Project*.

The ocean might seem, of the three, the most practical in the short-term but it does come with substantial challenges. This is why thus far such hydro-colonization efforts have been limited at best. Houseboats, and any floating apparatus less than twelve miles out to sea from the coast-line, do not escape the reach of state political sovereignty. Small, uninhabited islands far from large land masses are not free of state control. For example, as of the writing of this essay, if you had 6,900,000 euros at your disposal you could buy the atoll of Taiaro in the Pacific (1,500,000 acres of land surrounding a 3,000,000 acre lagoon some 350 miles northeast of Tahiti and declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve protected area in 1977), but the island is a part of French Polynesia and comes under political control. Michael Oliver's disastrous Minerva

expedition revealed additional limitations. Other possibilities might be the Residentsea project, with its cruise liner *The World*. *The World* is, according to its owners, the “largest privately-owned yacht in the world.”⁴² Launched in 2002 it has 165 private residences on the yacht, which itself is collectively owned by those who purchase one or more of the private residences. A certain percentage of those shareholders actually live year-round on the yacht, but even then they are dependent on ports of call, flags of convenience, and state apparatus for much of their livelihood.

Thiel’s Seasteading Institute initiative, until recently directed by Patri Friedman, grandson of University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman, looks to change that. Inspired by the economics of von Mises and the fictions of Rand, Thiel has devoted portions of his money and time to funding the development of sophisticated engineering plans—both mechanical and social—for privately-owned, autonomous ocean communities (or seasteads, ballasted and supported with new energy technologies) in ocean spaces beyond the 12-nautical mile political zone and potentially the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone.⁴³ Seasteads would serve both economic and ideological purposes: taxes would be non-existent while the possible successes—whatever those might be, and however they might be measured—would confirm for the creators the libertarian thesis regarding the benefits of the unfettered market: a truly private world. It is a place where inhabitants can enact and put to the test the premises of radical liberal thought: *Robinson Crusoe* meets Milton Friedman on a time-share oil rig in the ‘open’ ocean.

Despite substantial investment, hope and hoopla, sea-steads are still far off in the future. Indeed, it is unclear if they will come to pass at all and the most ambitious aspects of the initiative have had to be scaled back. For one, it is unclear if there is anything at this point one could call the “high seas” or “open ocean.” The United States, for example, asserts authority not only over the 12-nautical mile zone of political sovereignty but, generally, also the contiguous zone which extends to 24 miles from the coastline. More problematic still is that even the 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone cedes a certain jurisdictional authority to the

⁴² http://aboardtheworld.com/our_story

⁴³ Wayne Gramlich, Patri Friedman, and Andrew House, Getting Serious About Seasteading at <http://gramlich.net/projects/oceania/seastead2/index.html#Introduction>. [accessed April 6, 2012]. Such efforts have been subjected to limited academic study. The most cogent is Philip Steinberg, Elizabeth Nyman and Mauro J. Caraccioli, “Atlas Swam: Freedom, Capital and Floating Sovereignties in the Seasteading Vision,” *Antipode* 44: 4 (Sept. 2012), 1532-1550. See also China Mieville, “Floating Utopias,” in Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, eds., *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (New York: New Press, 2012).

government under whose control it falls.⁴⁴ The best scenario for maximum autonomy of seasteads is for them to be fixed-location rather than floating, due to the jurisdictional authority governments can assert over the latter. The difficulties of course are how to create a fixed-location seastead on the open ocean given the depths. Moreover, even some of the most vocal proponents of seasteading have had to admit that initial success of any such venture would require a location close to a major port city—due to labor and material needs. Finally, to what degree in fact the ocean can be considered ‘open’ or unclaimed is an open question. The question is as old as Grotius, someone to whom the seasteaders look for inspiration but who repeatedly reversed himself on the issue.⁴⁵ Or let us take seriously the words James Cook penned in his journal when writing about ocean-going native societies in Oceania (“How are we to account for this *nation* spreading itself across the Vast ocean?”). Double-hulled outrigger canoes have carried oceanians seasonally to fishing grounds, to lagoon settlements, and across a broad plain that is hardly *aqua nullius*. Determining questions of territoriality, sovereignty and possession become further complicated.⁴⁶ The perspective of the seasteaders is politically and epistemologically continental—linked to notions of property rooted in feudal tenure—and their initiatives seem at times to largely resemble a technologically-innovative form of settler colonialism.

Shore leave: Imperial comfort zones

Until recently, The Seasteading Institute was directed by Patri Friedman. Friedman is the grandson of famed free market champion Milton Friedman, who served as invisible intellectual hand of the radical and violent privatization of Chile’s economy under dictator Augusto Pinochet, and son of anarcho-capitalist intellectual David Friedman. Patri Friedman has followed in his father’s footsteps, inspired by a heady mix of new wave of libertarian thought, Silicon Valley start-up culture, and Burning Man.⁴⁷ After his stint with TSI, Friedman left to start Future Cities Development, Inc. The purpose of FCD is to create private, new cities with their

⁴⁴ See O. Shane Balloun, “The True Obstacle to the Autonomy of Seasteads: American Law Enforcement Jurisdiction over Homesteads on the High Seas,” *U.S. Maritime Law Journal* 24: 2 (2011-12), esp. 452-3.

⁴⁵ China Mieville, “Floating Utopias,” in Davis and Monk, eds., *Evil Paradises*.

⁴⁶ For a remarkable and poetic intervention, see Epele Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *Contemporary Pacific* (1994).

⁴⁷ Steinberg, et. al., *Atlas Swam*, 6. Friedman talks about freedom and immediacy, as many do with regards to Burning Man. The vocabulary brings to mind Hakim Bey’s “immediatism” which itself straddles the libertarian right and anarchist left. For a trenchant critique of Bey’s “lifestyle anarchism,” see Murray Bookchin, *Social anarchism or lifestyle anarchism* (Oakland: AK Press)

own legal systems and run as kinds of free enterprise freeports.⁴⁸ Similar initiatives to create ‘start-up cities’ are being worked through in neighboring Guatemala at the Francisco Marroquín University, whose campus auditoriums and lecture halls are named in honor of Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand, and whose founder was a member of the right-wing MLN (Movement for National Liberation, Guatemala’s “self-proclaimed party of organized violence”) and eventually served twice as president of the Mount Pelerin Society, whose members include von Mises, Hayek, and Friedman.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, fellow travelers set up shop outside Santiago, Chile, with the formation of a gated community where one could purchase shares with bitcoin. Its name? Galt’s Gulch, after Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* protagonist John Galt, although founder Ken Robinson admits to never having finished the book. He saw the movie. Regardless, as of August 2014, Galt’s Gulch has collapsed amid a welter of accusations and in-fighting.⁵⁰

But perhaps the brainchild of charter cities is Paul Romer. Romer, an economist formerly at Stanford and now at NYU, has argued that traditional aid and development strategies have failed poorer countries. In this, of course, he is not alone. Commentators, officials, academics and prognosticators across the political spectrum have argued at length for changes in the structure of how aid and development operates. The devil is in the details. Romer’s suggestion is that countries—such as Honduras, say—lease swathes of their national territory to foreign investors who would take the lead in building ‘charter cities.’ While not gated communities—Romer shares more in common with de Soto than Friedman or Rothbard—such cities would be akin to colonial enclaves, a characterization which Romer does not seem able to adequately refute: in a TED talk some years ago Romer suggested that these are not forms of colonialism because they involve choice rather than coercion. Exactly what range of ‘choices’ many

⁴⁸ “Former ‘Seasteaders’ Come Ashore to Start Libertarian Utopias in Honduran Jungle,” www.fastcoexist.com

⁴⁹ Luis Solano, “Development and/as Dispossession: Elite Networks and Extractive Industry in the Franja Transversal del Norte,” in Carlota McAllister and Diane Nelson, eds., *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Post-Genocide Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 126-128.

⁵⁰ For those interested in a blow-by-blow account, see <http://galtsgulchchile.com/wsb/data/documents/GGC-Website-Update-Blog-11.06-2.14-English.pdf> ; and <http://www.thedailybell.com/editorials/35591/Wendy-McElroy-The-Fate-of-Galts-Gulch-Chile/> . Some of the investors identify themselves as anarchist individualists, such as Wendy McElroy who, after buying an option in Galt’s Gulch in 2013, blogged about U.S. totalitarianism and then contrasted that with Chile: “There is no question about it; Chile is still a government. But it does not have the imperial ambitions that send its military to conquer and kill, all the while militarizing the society at home. There is no NSA, TSA or many of the most egregious alphabet agencies whose sole purpose is to violate rights.” About Chile she is deeply mistaken. Rarely, it seems, does this new breed of colonizer have any clue about the societies and worlds they settle in. Part of Galt’s Gulch’s problem stemmed from not understanding environmental and property regulations and laws in Chile. For McElroy’s comments, see her blog at: <http://www.wendymcelroy.com/news.php?extend.5554.19> [last accessed on February 3, 2015]

displaced by or dependent upon a city built from scratch with imported legal structures and foreign governing boards would have remained unspecified.

His model is the classic freeport and especially Hong Kong, or the idealized image of Hong Kong, with no duties on imports, sales, or exports; minimal customs control; free entry to foreign capital; freedom from industrial regulations and closed shop labor unions; and some form of relative political autonomy. Two things are noticeably missing from the equation: first, the history of Hong Kong and how it came to be the entity it came to be. This absence of historical context is common in many of these initiatives. And second, missing from the ‘charter city’ literature is any recognition that in fact the ‘empty land’ upon which such entities would be built may not be empty at all. Empty lands, empty pasts, blank slates: the spectre of colonialism hovers.

Romer explored his idea first in Madagascar, starting in 2008, where the government was considering a leasing a plot of land the size of Connecticut to South Korean Daewoo corporation. Romer’s plans for charter cities captured the president’s attention but a coup d’etat soon snuffed it. Ironically, it was a coup d’etat that opened up the possibilities for charter cities in Honduras (much as a brutal coup d’etat in Chile allowed for the imposition of Milton Friedman’s shock-treatment privatization of the country’s economy). In the early morning hours of a Sunday in June of 2009, Honduran troops escorted democratically-elected president Manuel Zelaya across the tarmac of Tegucigalpa’s airport and on to a plane bound for Costa Rica. He would not return anytime soon. He had just been deposed in a military *coup d’etat*. When he disembarked in Costa Rica, Zelaya was still in his pajamas. His arrest and expulsion came on the heels of a battle over Zelaya’s efforts to hold a non-binding referendum regarding revisions to Honduras’s constitution. But the broader context was one in which Zelaya, in his cowboy boots and brash populism, had alienated Honduran elites by focusing on the social problems confronted by Honduras’s poor and his admiration for Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Zelaya’s successors charted a different course, one which included charter cities.

In early 2011 the Honduran congress amended the country’s constitution to allow the development of so-called ‘model cities’ on the country’s coast. The cities would be self-governing private enclaves, not subject to Honduran law or taxes, and would import their own legal systems. One advisor to Friedman’s Future Cities Development corporation capture the ethos succinctly: “To make legal systems better, we must make them compete against each

other.”⁵¹ Romer, meanwhile, in a co-authored article, hailed the post-coup leadership in Honduras as committed to ending the “cycle of insecurity and instability that stokes fear and erodes trust.”⁵² Never mind that they came to power through dubious elections in the wake of a coup that has subsequently engaged in widespread human rights violations. With a dismal lack of irony, a New York Times reporter, in a gushing piece on Romer, claimed no one disputed that Honduras was in dire need of “shock therapy.”

“Who wants to buy Honduras?,” asked the *New York Times* in a front-page article. Soon enough, memorandums of Understanding were signed with two entities: Patri Friedman’s Future Cities Development corporation and the Free Cities Institute, founded and directed by Michael Strong and Kevin Lyons.⁵³ Strong is also the head of FLOW (Freedom Lights Our World)—with mottos such as Peace Through Commerce and Conscious Capitalism—along with John MacKey, CEO of Whole Foods. In both cases—FCD and FCI—the rhetoric is one of entrepreneurship and innovation, frequently with Silicon Valley and its practices touted as a model for alleviating poverty.⁵⁴ The first cities were to be developed on Honduras’s northeastern coast near Trujillo, on land traditionally held by Garifuna people.

The projects soon stalled. Human rights leaders challenged the constitutional amendments and their challenges were substantiated by a majority of Supreme Court Justices who declared the amendments unconstitutional. Subsequently, one of the lead attorneys—Antonio Trejo—opposing the amendments was gunned down in Tegucigalpa and four supreme court justices fired. In March of 2013 the Honduran Congress approved a reworking of the constitution in order to allow for, among other things, the creation in the country of special zones such as “international financial centers, international logistical centers, [and] autonomous cities” that would be exempt from local and federal laws.⁵⁵ In the meantime, Romer has withdrawn from the project due to concerns about transparency in negotiations with various partners, including Strong himself. As of this writing, various projects appear to be going forward. The

⁵¹ Tom W. Bell, “What is polycentric law?,” in *The Freeman* (Feb. 24, 2014) at: <http://fee.org/freeman/detail/what-is-polycentric-law>

⁵² Keane Bhatt, “Reporting on Romer’s Charter Cities: How the Media Sanitize Honduras’s Brutal Regime,” NACLA Report on the Americas, at: <https://nacla.org/news/2013/2/19/reporting-romer%E2%80%99s-charter-cities-how-media-sanitize-honduras%E2%80%99s-brutal-regime>

⁵³ Keri Vacanti Brondo, *Land Grab: Green Neoliberalism, Gender, and Garifuna Resistance in Honduras*, 174-75.

⁵⁴ Brondo, *Land Grab*, 175

⁵⁵ “Honduras: CN conoce ahora otra versión de ‘ciudad modelo’” in *El Heraldo* (Tegucigalpa, March 15, 2013), available at www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Vuelven-las-ciudades-modelo-a-Honduras#.UZUbQkvWI2w.email My thanks to Marc Edelman for forwarding the article to me.

initiatives are growing exponentially, in true ‘iterative’ start-up fashion. The Garifuna, in the meantime, have continued to mobilize against the displacement. Among other things they have organized the appropriately-named Forum Against the Usurpation of Territories in Latin America and Africa.



For better or for worse, it would seem there are few places to which one can escape. Serge wrote in the 1930s that “there are no more islands to discover [...] the urban labyrinth is a safer bet than any distant archipelago.”⁵⁶ For those fleeing persecution and exploitation, it was underground, not toward the horizon, where one should turn. There were no more islands to discover.

The escape geographies of U.S. libertarians—many linked to California’s Silicon Valley extravagance—are of a different ilk. They are, in their own words, “opt-out” spaces. Their own vocabularies and positions champion “choice” over “voice,” consumption over production, freedom over equality—an anemic and radically individualized freedom. To be sure, the desire to find ways to live beyond what currently passes for the nation-state holds a range of possibilities; the imagined alternatives can inspire. But the most compelling conclusion to be drawn from many of these projects is that they are neither an escape from the state nor much of an alternative. They are in many instances deeply complicit with contemporary state structures,

⁵⁶ Serge, *Unforgiving Years*, 92

which hints at why from Oliver, to Thiel, to Friedman, they find inspiration in Rand, not Rothbard. (That is not, by the way, a defense of Rothbard.) Capitalism's ties to the state form are too inextricable to be untangled. The puffery that promotes freeports, charter cities, and the like sounds suspiciously like ideological cover for a much more rudimentary and age-old practice: land- and ocean-grabbing. The net of enclosure draws itself ever closer. There are no more islands to discover.