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**URBAN DEVELOPMENT, CONTESTED SOVEREIGNTY,
AND PERFORMATIVE POWER IN POST-COUP
HONDURAS**

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ABSTRACT

In the years following the 2009 coup d'état, the government of Honduras partnered with transnational investors and libertarian advisers to promote and pursue an ambitious new project, the creation of an autonomous, free-market jurisdiction and new ultra-modern city. Projected as the future Dubai, Hong Kong, or Singapore of Central America, the Zone for Economic Development and Employment, or ZEDE, calls for the simultaneous production of a new urban space and the creation of a new, autonomous institution-territorial framework of governance. This paper seeks to examine this process of "development" through a focus on the micro-political moments in which relations of domination are established and re-asserted and an attentiveness to how these moments form part of broader territorializing and colonizing assemblages. Such a perspective seeks to offer a critical approach to studying the mutually entangled processes of "new cities" development and the emergence of new institutional-territorial assemblages that challenge established conceptions of sovereignty and territory.

KEYWORDS: Sovereignty, Performativity, Urbanization, Central America, Development

1. INTRODUCTION

In February 2014 President Juan Orlando Hernandez of Honduras announced plans to create the first Zone for Economic Development and Employment (ZEDE) on the country's southern coast along the Gulf of Fonseca. The ZEDE is imagined as an ultramodern city-state—with Dubai and Singapore as its aspirational models—possessing its own legal, economic, administrative, and political (LEAP) system developed and managed by an appointed board of international libertarian technocrats known as the Committee for the Adoption of Best Practices (CAMP, by its Spanish acronym).

The novelty of the ZEDE governing structure confounds much of our established political vocabulary, which is so closely tied to the assumption of the territorial nation-state and other historical forms of political organization. The “enclave libertarian” model on which the project is based is designed to disrupt the hegemony of the territorial nation-state—as both institutional-territorial assemblage and socio-spatial imaginary—in favor of smaller, more diverse, and competitive privatized jurisdictions (Lynch, forthcoming). In my fieldwork in Honduras in 2014, I encountered many conversations around how to understand *what* exactly the ZEDE is. Is it a sub-national jurisdiction within Honduras? Is it a “mini-state” or “city-state” separate from Honduras, or a private state? Is it a form of colonialism? If so, colonialism by whom? Does it represent a new form of “transnational neoliberal colonialism”?

While there is certainly value in asking these questions, and the while their provocation points to the novelty of the ZEDE project, such questions of typology perhaps obscure the more extensive forms of power through which the project operates. These questions fall back on what Foucault calls a juridical-political conception of power, based around sovereignty, at the neglect of an analysis of relations of force, or domination. For this reason, despite extensive discussion about the ZEDE project amongst Honduran and international observers, the question of *how* exactly this new institutional-territorial assemblage—formally created by the Honduran state, but purportedly separate from it—could come to exercise some form of control over a determined territory remains largely unexamined.

Based on fieldwork carried out throughout the summer of 2014 in the Gulf of Fonseca region, this paper examines the multiple modalities of power by which the promoters of the Honduran ZEDE begin to form relationships and exert influence over the area they hope to govern. Rather than focus attention on the key moments in the juridical constitution of the ZEDE—such as the passing of the law and constitutional amendments outlining its structure—I attend to the micropolitical moments through which new institutions, new relationships of power, and new political subjectivities emerge in the Gulf of Fonseca region. In doing so, I highlight the limitations of most existing literature around sovereignty and territoriality in political geography for understanding the emergence of new institutional-territorial assemblages that challenge the traditional state model. I also point toward the co-constitution of the state assemblage—and its diverse and dispersed relations of domination—and urban space.

Recent scholarship in political geography has considered the shifting structure of the state and meaning of sovereignty in the context of economic globalization. Agnew (2009) challenges the assertion that globalization necessarily means the eclipsing of state sovereignty, arguing instead for an understanding of different “sovereignty regimes” and the “geography of effective sovereignty.” Included in his notion of sovereignty regimes are the numerous other institutions that compete for authority with the state or are partially included within the state, creating complex geographies of governance that do not fit neatly into territorial boundaries.

In a similar way, in examining the governance of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in China and southeast Asia, Ong (2000) discusses the existence of zones of “variegated” or “graduated” sovereignty, highlighting the ways states strategically organize territory under different regulatory regimes. Both Ong and Agnew, among others (Sassen, 2006), offer nuanced analyses of how state power is exercised differentially across space through the operation of institutional assemblages and the interactions and relations among a wide range of actors. Yet, these theories fail to fully account for the emergence of new institutional-territorial assemblages (such as that of the Honduran ZEDE) and the processes by which such assemblages form and are articulated in a particular space and time. How do such assemblages claim authority and legitimacy apart from or through the existing states from which they are created? And how do residents of the spaces territorialized by these assemblages contest their legitimacy or come to recognize themselves as subjects of a new governing regime?

2. PERFORMATIVE POWER AND COLONIZING ASSEMBLAGES

Foucault’s 1976 lectures at the College de France, published under the title *Society Must Be Defended*, considers precisely this problem: the materio-discursive foundations of modern state power and its emergence out of earlier forms of political organization. While I argue that the ZEDE represents an attempt to move beyond this modern form of state power and while contemporary Honduras represents a very different context than medieval Europe, Foucault’s insights into the diverse mechanisms of power are nevertheless quite useful. While much discussion on the Honduran ZEDE has focused around questions of sovereignty, Foucault (2003: p. 26) argues that “we have to bypass or get around the problem of sovereignty... to reveal the problem of domination and subjugation instead of sovereignty and obedience.” In order to do so, Foucault (2003: p. 28) offers the following “methodological precaution” for an analysis of state power:

We should make an ascending analysis of power, or in other words begin with its infinitesimal mechanisms, which have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then look at how these mechanisms of power, which have their solidity and, in a sense, their own technology, have been and are invested, colonized, used, inflected, transformed, displaced, extended, and so on by increasingly general mechanisms and forms of overall domination.

Following Foucault’s precaution, I frame my analysis of the Honduran ZEDE project through a consideration of such “infinitesimal mechanisms” and consider the ways in which they become articulated in broader, dynamic assemblages of domination.

While Foucault offers some insights into what these mechanisms might be, his focus on medieval Europe and the emergence of biopolitical regimes of power limits his applicability to the current Honduran context. Thus, while I take seriously Foucault’s assertion that power operates through bodies, I read his insights through the work of some of his later commentators and critics—mainly Butler (1993) and Weheliye (2014). Drawing on these other thinkers allows for a more fine-tuned analysis of exactly *how* power and discourse operate through bodies and *how* these mechanisms are articulated in broader racializing and colonizing assemblages.

Butler’s (1993) discussion of performativity as “reiterative citational practice” helps to clarify exactly how power operates as discourse—how it circulates through bodies in order to have effects. Key to her theory is the notion of citationality, by which she means that each performative utterance is necessarily situated in a discursive chain of signification; discursive moments and actions are fundamentally conditioned by the citational chains of

meaning in which they are articulated. Particular discursive formations become normalized—or ‘sedimented,’ in Butler’s words—through their repetition, thus gaining increased force and becoming “the condition and occasion for a further action” (Butler, 1993: p. 139).

Foucault’s discussion of political historicism and discourses around the legitimacy of the state demonstrates this notion of citationality quite well. In his 1976 lectures, Foucault examines how governing regimes in medieval Europe claimed sovereignty through the citation of certain established historical discourses; their supposed right to rule stemmed from their ability to situate themselves discursively as the rightful inheritors of a royal lineage. Yet, the rearticulation of historical discourse through the lens of the “race war”—that is, history constituted as the struggle between opposed groups—contested this once dominant discourse of the sovereign right.

As Foucault (2003: p. 138) writes, the French monarchy founded a ministry of history precisely “as a way of reestablishing the link, of making history part of the workings of monarchic power and its administration.” He thus demonstrates how struggles over political legitimacy in medieval Europe revolved around by the ability of competing discourses to situate themselves in particular citational chains of signification. Drawing on Foucault’s example and Butler’s discussion of citationality, I thus attend to the ways competing discourses around the Honduran ZEDE seek to articulate or contest the authority of the transnational Committee for the Adoption of Best Practices by situating it in different political-historical discourses. ZEDE promoters cite the authority of the National Congress and the President to manage and organize Honduran territory and amend the constitution to delimit new jurisdictions. They thus seek to establish a link between the ZEDE authority and the broader historical authority of the Honduran state, while they simultaneously—and contradictorily—declare their autonomy from that state. In contrast, opposition groups in the Gulf of Fonseca seek to citationally link the ZEDE project and the CAMP to the break in constitutional authority with the 2009 coup d’état and to a long local history of exploitation, colonialism, and land struggle.

Butler’s discussion of performativity also offers a way of understand how these discourses circulate in practice and come to have effects. She does this by highlighting individual *acts* of materio-discursive practice. Butler (1993: p. 171) writes:

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements with not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked to performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts *as* discourse.

Thus, for Butler, performativity is the modality of power which operates through reiterative, citational, and embodied discursive practices. In examining the politics around the establishment of the ZEDE in the Gulf of Fonseca, I not only attend to the citational articulation of the ZEDE within competing political-historical discourses, but also the embodied and spatially and temporally situated moments in which such discourses are cited, enacted, or reproduced. Such moments not only allow discourses to circulate—through their reception and potential reproduction by others—by they also constitute one of the processes by which the speaking, acting subject comes to position themselves in relation to the ZEDE authority.

Weheliye (2014) sheds light on the ways these individual performative acts and moments—what Foucault might refer to as the “infinitesimal mechanisms”—become articulated in broader colonizing and racializing assemblages. The author describes assemblages as “continually shifting relational totalities comprised of spasmodic networks between different entities (content) and their articulation within ‘acts and statements’ (expression)” (Weheliye, 2014: p. 46). Categories of race are produced and reproduced through the work of racializing assemblages—which have authorized practices of colonialism, slavery, and other forms of subjugation for centuries.

In Mollett’s (2006) work on the north coast of Honduras, she exposes the historic and ongoing racializing assemblages that seek to differentiate two afro-indigenous peoples—the Garifuna and the Miskito. Despite both groups possessing African and Amerindian ancestry, the Garifuna are racialized as black, while the Miskito are racialized as indigenous. Attached to each of these categories are a number of racialized narratives that get reproduced through daily interactions between the Garifuna and Miskito themselves, and in interactions with the Honduran state, mestizo settlers, and international conservation projects. Mollett (2016) shows how these racial discourses—and their intersection with gendered discourses that erase female labor—are employed in order to paint certain areas of the north coast of Honduras as “empty space,” and thus able to be appropriated and colonized.

While Gulf of Fonseca residents are primarily mestizo and the ZEDE project has not been pursued through the same kinds of *explicit* racial discourses seen on the North Coast, a similar racializing and colonizing assemblage can be seen at work. Mark Klugmann—a former Reagan administration official, the intellectual architect of the ZEDE project, and member of the CAMP—has described the Gulf of Fonseca region as “too small and too empty to fight over” (Klugmann, 2013). This discourse of “empty space” is produced and reproduced through a variety of techniques, including the collection and analysis of data on the region’s demographics, economics, property regimes, culture, and physical geography, among others.

ZEDE promoters present the region as empty, underutilized, poor, and ungoverned. Discussing the role of the local municipal governments, which would be dissolved with the implementation of the ZEDE project, one project leader claimed “they don’t have any control anyways... They can’t grant titles, they don’t have any control over the educational system, of the police, of the judges. It’s just a fiction. The fact is they have no influence” (Octavio Sanchez, 2014, personal communication). Such descriptions of the region are used to justify and authorize its colonization by the ZEDE. While there are few, if any, *explicit* mentions of race in these discourses, they are nonetheless employed in a project by which an international committee composed primarily—though not exclusively—of white men from the United States and Europe comes to govern a region inhabited by mestizo Hondurans. The assumption implicit in this discourse is thus that these communities are incapable of governing themselves and require the knowledge and expertise of white foreigners in order to successfully “develop”.

While these discourses circulate through Honduran national and transnational networks linking ZEDE promoters, the Honduran state, foreign governments, international investors, and libertarian activists, how do they circulate and become articulated in the Gulf of Fonseca region itself? How are these discourses reproduced, reworked, or contested among the residents of the region who are set to become the subjects of this new governing regime? The following section addresses these questions, using interview and participant observation data to highlight particular moments in which the ZEDE discourse is performed and to trace the citational chains to which these performatives are linked.

Through this, I consider how particular individuals come to understand themselves as subjects of the ZEDE regime, while others resist.

3. ZEDE TERRITORIALIZING: COLONIZING THE GULF OF FONSECA

On 10 June 2014, the mayors of Amapala, Nacaome, and Alianza, three municipalities on the coast of the Gulf of Fonseca, left town unannounced, traveling to Seoul, South Korea as part of a government delegation to discuss the creation of the first Zone for Economic Development and Employment. Over the next several days, as residents learned of their departure, speculation began to circulate that the mayors had gone to sell their municipalities to the Koreans.

The mayors' departure made visible for residents one moment in the long ongoing process of planning, organizing, and studying involved in the development and constitution of the ZEDE assemblage that had previously gone unnoticed by most residents, many of whom dismissed the plan as empty political rhetoric. This event sparked increased discussion and movement among local residents, with three separate organizations taking the lead to educate and organize the communities: a group of Catholic nuns living on Amapala, a peasant group with a history of organizing around land access on the Zacate Grande peninsula, and CODDEFFAGOLF, a local environmental NGO.

In this section, I discuss events occurring in the Gulf of Fonseca between May and August 2014. This time is significant, as it was the period in which residents became increasingly aware of the plans for ZEDE development, educated themselves, formed opinions on the matter, and began to act in relation to it. I do not wish to present the actions of local residents simply as reactions against the ZEDE plans, but also as a set of complex local entanglements that the broader ZEDE assemblage necessarily has to confront and navigate in order to exert authority over the territory, and produce a ZEDE space and ZEDE subjects.

I focus specifically on a series of *cabildos abiertos* (town hall meetings) held in different parts of the municipality of Amapala—one on the island of Amapala itself, and two more on the peninsula of Zacate Grande. I examine these meetings in particular as they represent the primary moments in which multiple disparate groups were brought together and competing discourses and political subjectivities were performed. While these represent only a small fraction of the many performative moments involved in promoting, developing, or contesting the ZEDE, they allow me to highlight the importance of considering the embodied nature of performativity (who speaks), and the entanglement of performative acts in space and time (where and when is the act performed).

Beginning with their “training mission” in South Korea—if not before—the mayors of the three municipalities became incorporated as fundamental segments in the broader ZEDE colonizing assemblage. This broader assemblage was already quite extensive, consisting of sectors of the Honduran state and military, the twenty-one members of the CAMP and their associates, the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), multiple large multinational corporations, and international networks of libertarian activists and think tanks. The enrollment of the mayors in the process represented the establishment of a key link between the broader ZEDE assemblage and the space it seeks to territorialize.

The mayors possessed a lifetime of experience in the communities in the Gulf of Fonseca, extensive connections and relationships with diverse interest groups in the area, and were generally accepted by most residents as their legitimate representatives. Yet, according to the ZEDE law, the establishment of the ZEDE would dissolve the existing municipalities

and thus the mayors' ability to effectively cite established law to assert their position and authority. As Faustino Manzanera (2014, personal communication), the mayor of Alianza, expressed in the summer of 2014, the mayors were faced with the options of either cooperating with the ZEDE project and potentially maintaining some ability to influence its impact on the communities, or fighting the ZEDE project and risk being sidelined from the process altogether. Accounts of the mayors' first meeting with the President and other ZEDE promoters make clear that this represented an important performative moment in the establishment of the ZEDE. The President cited his supposed authority under the constitution, the ZEDE law and constitutional amendment, and the wide, transnational reach of the ZEDE assemblage (mentioned above) in order to convince the mayors to participate in the project.

The mayors' trip to South Korea as part of a "training mission" served to further incorporate them into the ZEDE colonizing assemblage and expose them to the broader discourses of history and development in which official ZEDE discourses are citationally situated. These broader discourses include a particular idealized narrative of South Korea's rapid economic development over the second half of the twentieth century. Despite substantial differences between the development model of the "Asian Tigers" (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong) and that pursued under the ZEDE project, their economic success is cited as an example of what the ZEDE could do for Honduras.

Upon their return to Honduras, the mayors began to reproduce these discourses through their interactions with Gulf of Fonseca residents. The most public reproduction of these official discourses occurred at the *cabildos* hosted by Amapala mayor Alberto Cruz. Recognizing the unrest among municipal residents and the effective grassroots organizing strategies underway, Cruz purportedly called the meetings to inform residents about the ZEDE project and the preliminary stages of development underway. In each meeting, Cruz sat in front of a crowd of residents with the municipal *regidores*, or councilmembers representing the different parts of the municipality, as it his side. Also present, were several uniformed police officers and other aides to the mayor. The spatial arrangement of the mayor and municipal officials in relation to the crowd immediately reminded attendees of the mayor's supposed authority and status as their official representative.

One of the *cabildos* took place in the town of La Pintadillera, a village on Zacate Grande composed primarily of tenant farmers with little history of political organizing. Opening the meeting, the mayor spoke about his meetings with the President and other ZEDE officials and about his trip to South Korea. He tried to assure residents that he did not go to sell the municipality to foreign investors but to learn about potential investment opportunities that would bring jobs, education, health care, and other needed services to the municipality. Cruz cautioned residents not to reject the project before they knew exactly what kind of investment the ZEDE might bring—something to be determined when the feasibility studies were completed in a few months.

Yet, many residents in attendance contested both Cruz's discourse and his authority to perform it. While Cruz's speech discussed the ZEDE as a simple investment project, residents had for several weeks been gathering together to collectively read and discuss the text of the ZEDE law and the profiles of the members of the CAMP—both of which had been printed and distributed by a local group of Catholic nuns. One by one, residents rose to speak against the ZEDE, not as a potential investment project, but as a new institutional-territorial assemblage led by foreign capitalist technocrats with no mechanism for democratic oversight. The project, many residents claimed, threatened to both dispossess them of their land and disenfranchise them from the political process. Often, the residents would quote articles of the ZEDE law or aspects of individual CAMP

member profiles directly in their statements, highlighting the conflict between these documents and their understanding of themselves as citizens of a purportedly democratic, sovereign nation-state. Cruz repeatedly sought to reject residents' citation of the ZEDE law, stating "I am not here to discuss a law that I didn't write" and insisting that they postpone judgment of the project until it was clear what kind of *investment* might be involved.

Further, residents cited the article of the ZEDE law that dissolves the authority of existing municipal governments, thus calling into question the very authority of the mayor to act as their representative. Other attendees openly accused Cruz of corruption and of colluding with Miguel Facusse—Honduras' largest landowner, with whom many Gulf residents are involved in longstanding conflict over land—in order to expel them from the land where they live and produce. His attempt to challenge these accusations—claiming that he has never even met Miguel Facusse—were immediately struck down by the attendees, who began passing cell phones through the audience with photos of Cruz smiling and shaking hands with the landowner. The propagation of these discourses questioning the mayor's authority threatened to undermine his crucial role in the broader ZEDE colonizing assemblage—namely to obscure the dramatic political changes the project entails and to use his perceived authority and social and political position to quell unrest and create passive acceptance of the project.

At each meeting, Cruz asked residents to elect representatives from the community to form a committee to work with the municipality to monitor the development of the ZEDE plans and actions of ZEDE officials. Many residents in attendance rejected this idea, saying it would only lend legitimacy to the ZEDE project, while what they needed to do was actively contest the project's existence. After heated discussions, La Pintadillera residents elected representatives to a ZEDE monitoring committee, while residents in Puerto Grande did not. When a vote was taken at the Puerto Grande *cabildo*, residents voted overwhelmingly not to participate in the committee. The announcement of the vote tally prompted loud cheers from the crowd and led to the mayor to abruptly end the meeting, despite several items left on the original agenda. The controversy over the formation of a committee and Puerto Grande residents' eventual rejection of it demonstrates the contingent and contested process by which the ZEDE colonizing assemblage succeeds or fails in extending its reach into the communities it seeks to govern.

4. CONCLUSION

The above discussion of the mayors' role in the ZEDE colonizing assemblage and the resistance they faced from residents of the Gulf of Fonseca municipalities demonstrates several important points about the process of establishing new institutional-territorial assemblages. Much of the recent literature in political geography and related disciplines around the changing nature of the state and sovereign power fail to account for the emergence of new institution-territorial assemblages with limited or ambiguous ties to existing states. This work tends to maintain the purportedly sovereign state as a primary object of analysis—though perhaps a partially decentered and defuse one.

In the case of the Honduran ZEDE project, it is precisely the structure, existence, and legitimacy of the assumed territorial nation-state that is called into question. In this context, significant questions arise concerning the relationship between the Honduran state and the ZEDE committee, the relative legitimacy or illegitimacy of both governing bodies, the extent of their relative territorial and institutional authority, and their relationship to citizens. This crisis arises both from the nature of the ZEDE project, which grants unprecedented formal autonomy to an appointed committee of international technocrats,

and from the emergence of the project out of post-coup Honduran politics—riled by questions of political legitimacy and the limits and separation of state powers.

I instead focus on relational theories of power developed and employed by Foucault (2003), Butler (1993), and Weheliye (2014) to consider the micro-political moments in which questions of authority, legitimacy, and political subjectivity are contingently negotiated and contested. I examine the discursive practices by which the broader ZEDE colonizing assemblage seeks to extend its reach into the communities it seeks to control. Through my description of the town hall meetings between the Amapala mayor and local residents, I highlight how Mayor Cruz's performative acts situate him as a subject and actor within the broader ZEDE assemblage. I also show how Gulf residents contest the official ZEDE discourse performed by the mayor, as well as the very authority of the mayor to enact it.

This scene demonstrates the embodied nature of performative moments and their necessary entanglements in time and social space. Important to this scene is not only what was said, but who was saying it, and when, where, and to whom the speech act was uttered. While the mayor's formal position and assumed authority in Amapala constitutes an important linkage in the ZEDE assemblage, he is also fully entangled in a number of complex historical, social and political relationships that allow his authority to be questioned or directly challenged.

The outcome of the mayor's reproduction of the ZEDE discourse was also dependent on the context of its reproduction. By the time of the *cabildos* local resident had already spent several weeks organizing and informing themselves about the project and came to the meeting ready to contest the mayor's official discourse with the text of the ZEDE law and profiles on all twenty-one members of the CAMP. Further, while Cruz's interaction with the residents of La Pintadillera was tense, it was far more productive in quelling unrest and extending the reach of the ZEDE assemblage than it was in Puerto Grande. This is in large part due to the complex history of the mayor's relationship with this particular village, and a long history of political organizing and land occupations amongst its residents. This observation points to the constitutive role of social space in determining the outcome of any particular performative act.

While the theories of sovereignty developed and employed in political geography may indeed be useful in contexts where political relations and institutional assemblages are relatively stabilized, I believe the approach outlined in this paper is far more adept at considering how questions of sovereignty and authority are negotiated in moments of institutional crisis and change and high levels of uncertainty.

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