

Simon Denny

Blockchain Future States

What would a future geopolitics powered by the technology behind Bitcoin look like?

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In 2008 a mysterious figure(s) released a paper under the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto describing blockchain protocol, a peer-to-peer system of trade underpinning the digital currency Bitcoin. Since then, it has come to light that the applications of the blockchain protocol are potentially far-reaching.

For one thing, it could render "trusted third party" verification (currently facilitated by governments, banks, accountants, notaries, and fiat currencies) obsolete with direct peer-to-peer transactions, disrupting huge swaths of the financial services industry. But even beyond disrupting how transactions are carried out, some people see in blockchain technology a blueprint outlining the digital infrastructure for an entirely new model of nationhood.

Blockchain nationhood could amount to a post-geographic alternative to the nation-state system, whose infrastructure has the striking quality of being developable alongside (i.e. without being an immediate challenge or obvious threat to) current nation-state governments. As a result, such initiatives are in a uniquely advantaged position for takeover if certain, specific factors align.

This slide show uses sculptures as visual metaphors to define some of the more radical visions of a blockchain future, and describes the conditions of possibility for their implementation.

[It's a possible technologist's answer to some of today's urgent problems. Take a look »](#)

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Detail of painting depicting Ethereum blockchain founder in front of a fantasy world powered by their token Ether. Overlaid on earth, the spirits of Austrian economists Friedrich A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises.

Blockchain's origin: Satoshi Nakamoto and the peer-to-peer answer to a seemingly corrupt financial world

In October 2008, in the wake of the Lehman Brothers crash, a mysterious figure named "Satoshi Nakamoto" released a white paper describing a peer-to-peer electronic money system. The money system, known today as the crypto-currency "Bitcoin," is based on a distributed network that prevents double spending and replaces the need for "trusted third party" verification. Verification of transactions instead occurs automatically by using a single ledger distributed across the entire network, which timestamps all transactions and creates the infrastructure for consensus across all nodes; a chain of identical blocks – the "Blockchain." In the following years, the idea scales to an unignorable number of users, propelled in part by the gripping founder narrative. To this day the identity of the person(s) behind the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto, a reference to a Pokemon character and a Japanese iconoclast merchant from the 1700s, remains unclear.



"Our current system needs to be burned down and remade. Cryptocurrency is the phoenix, and Satoshi is ash from which the phoenix rises... and the name of a silly Pokemon character. In Japan the name of Ash is Satoshi." – Craig Wright, one of many figures allegedly behind Bitcoin creator Satoshi Nakamoto.

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Blockchain's potential and classical economic liberalism

As has been noted by both critics and proponents alike, the blockchain is a multi-faceted instrument – a story and a technology – that resonates with a political history. The after-image of thinkers like Friedrich Hayek is preserved in visions of market systems as self-regulating totalities.

What could the blockchain threaten? part 1: trusted third-party elites

Entrepreneurs in the banking industry are exploring the use of the blockchain as a way of automating much of the labor involved in the most fundamental operations of capital markets. From settlement to security, the blockchain could replace many of the services currently provided by banking industry professionals and make the sector leaner with lower overhead costs – continuing the tendency in the industry towards accelerating trade and consolidating power.



What could the blockchain threaten? part 2: the nation-state model

The blockchain protocol has the potential to rein digital currencies outside of the jurisdiction of a central bank – the institution that the state has vested with the authority to issue and regulate money. However, the disruptive potential of the blockchain need not only apply to creating alternative systems for money. The blockchain also has the potential to index and protect what could be called a kind of proprietary identity – the mechanism used to identify individuals and legitimize their participation in economic and legal subjects in a state system. Establishing proprietary identity enables people to own property or be taken to court, for example, and is typically associated with citizenship. By giving people the capacity to establish and enact alternatives, the blockchain as a tool could be seen to challenge existing sovereignty models.



The emergence of post-geographic nationhood, part 1

As commentators have long claimed, we are seeing the beginnings of a schism between community and location. Since the growth of the internet in the early 1990s and more recently with fiber capable of generating social media people have been able to form international communities based on mutual affinity. Community is no longer necessarily borne out of geographic proximity.



The emergence of post-geographic nationhood, part 2

The blockchain affords location independent communities the infrastructure to realize new, post-geographic models of nationhood. If the fundamental components of a state are a legal apparatus and financial infrastructure, the blockchain has the potential to technologically subvert both. Initiatives like Ethereum have built digital ecosystems addressing exactly this potential. Ethereum has given rise to projects like BitNation, the DAO (Decentralized Autonomous Organization) and other self-organizing groups who are able to define their own rules and automate compliance, using immutable encrypted code distributed across all nodes in an opt-in network, people have reinforced agency in their ability to choose and/or construct new systems of governance.



The perilous (nation) state

The blockchain's potential for disrupting governance emerges at a time when many urgent forces can be seen threatening the stability of existing sovereignty models. Scientific predictions around the impact of climate change suggest the possibility of a refugee crisis at a scale we as a civilization have yet to have seen. The re-emergence of nationalist movements and a resurgent appetite for authoritarianism has led a volatile geopolitical climate prone to escalating conflict. Mission states of arms, recently understood as largely symbolic or dormant, now seem more likely to be called from the arsenal. Not only do these threats mark instability, but also a perception that the systems in place are corrupt and in need of radical change. At a time when national identity nationalism and trust in strong men in leaders are being proposed as fixes to a broken sovereignty system, one can understand the interest in alternatives.



Blockchain future states

If the blockchain emerges and scales up enough, it could provide a viable alternative to existing economic and legal infrastructures and become a default protocol for future power. If there continues to be a disenfranchised voice calling for radical change to the world's existing sovereignty models – if reactionary forces legislate in the face of inflammatory border conflicts and destabilizing ecological inevitabilities – then the blockchain's adaptive solutions may provide, by default, the most robust answer to the specialized investment class. A technocratic solution to governance like the visions proposed by blockchain-based dreams could be seen as a way of circumventing the nation-state system and all of its geographical inevitabilities. It could also, by the same token, be seen as a way of circumventing its checks and balances and pave the way for an extended reinvestment in the unabated power of the self-regulating free market.



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Superhumanity, a project by e-flux Architecture at the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial, is produced in cooperation with the Istanbul Design Biennial, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Zealand, and the Ernst Schering Foundation.

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