

## Democratic Mediums

### *Case Studies in Political Imagination*

So far I have offered a diagnosis: a story of how the design pattern of implicit feudalism and the inherited ideology of homesteading inhibit the exercise of self-governance in online social spaces. I further suggested that, as more political life moves online, a widespread lack of experience with sharing power has lent fresh appeal to authoritarian urges. As people understand themselves more through their identities as users of social media, they find little reason for faith in their capacity to self-govern with each other. When compounded on the scale of billions of people-turned-users, intimate online experiences can have world-historical consequences.

From here on, I shift from diagnosis to remedy. The remedies I explore involve rethinking the design and practice of online social spaces by treating democracy as itself a medium for struggle, play, and policy. This is a departure from more widespread calls for online platforms to better serve the legitimate functioning of representative elections among territorial governments.<sup>1</sup> While I do not object to such calls, I focus instead on remedies that match the ailment I have observed—remedies that bring democracy more deeply into everyday online life, establishing appropriate kinds of jurisdictions as sites of creative self-governance.

The cases in this chapter come from outside the kinds of institutions that typically claim the mantle of democracy. This is to be expected. Dominant political and civil-society institutions habitually resist imaginative politics within their bounds, particularly when it means unlocking power for people who have long been excluded. Historical examples are plentiful. Permit me one about a remarkable scholar who happened to pass away during this writing.

On June 4, 1993, US president Bill Clinton withdrew his nomination of legal scholar and litigator Lani Guinier, who would have been the first Black assistant attorney general for civil rights. The move followed a bitter sequence of backroom deals and attacks in the legacy press, which she later called a “low-tech lynching.”<sup>2</sup> The phrase echoes the accusation of a “high-tech lynching” leveled by Clarence Thomas on the Senate hearings that ultimately confirmed him to the Supreme Court. The treatment of Guinier was widely seen as retribution for the Thomas hearings; then-Senator Joe Biden played pivotal roles in both affairs, defending Thomas from accusations of sexual harassment and undermining Guinier. In a feat much like what the perpetrators would later decry as cancel culture, Clinton retreated before characterizations of Guinier as a “quota queen” and of her scholarship, in the words of columnist George F. Will, as “extreme, undemocratic, and anticonstitutional.” The evening that Clinton withdrew her nomination, Guinier shuddered when she heard the president, a friend since law school, repeat the “undemocratic” part on television.<sup>3</sup>

The remark was particularly painful to Guinier in light of the fact that, as is apparent to any half-serious reader of her scholarship, advancing democracy was precisely her intent. To this end, she explored practical, tested alternatives to winner-take-all voting, such as proportional representation. “I expressed reservations about unfettered majority rule,” she explained afterward, “to ensure fair representation for all substantial minorities.”<sup>4</sup> Later, she described racialized minorities as “the miner’s canary”—people whose experiences represent early warnings for social problems poised to affect everyone else.<sup>5</sup> Her academic proposals sought to imagine how existing institutions could better reflect their stated democratic values.

Ironically, many of Guinier’s critics also built their political careers on the project of defending minority rights—only, in their case, the rights of already privileged minorities, through the defense of patriarchy and racial hierarchy. Calling Guinier’s oeuvre “undemocratic” might have been just outright racism or political opportunism, but it also rested on a certain theory of democracy. The theory is shared among both the conservative and liberal branches of the US political establishment, as Clinton’s deference suggests: democracy is coterminous with whatever existing institutions happen to be.

Institutions are a precious inheritance. Even flawed ones should not be discarded recklessly, at the risk of being left with something worse. Lasting traditions of thought and practice are indispensable to a thriving political culture.<sup>6</sup> Yet unlike feudalism and autocracy, democracy cannot survive in stasis. Alexis de Tocqueville’s canonical view of “democratic revolution,” a gradual progression toward ever more deeply democratic institutions, refuses to deify any particular institutional form. During his antebellum sojourn in the United States, he wrote

to his father in France that “there is nothing absolute in the theoretical value of political institutions.”<sup>7</sup> Tocqueville scholar Barbara Allen stresses that, for him, the anchor of democracy must be transcendent, beyond the scope of any possible government; the work of politics lies in “harmonizing earth and heaven,” as he put it. Accounts of US civil religion typically associate divine favor with specific institutions. But the sort of democracy Tocqueville admired has its roots in a religion based on a covenant with the divine, one that “opposes any notion of absolute authority” on earth,<sup>8</sup> enabling a continual evolution of the power structure in practice. No institution can fully manifest human equality. Still, he observed how people could continue pursuing it through a shared belief in equality before heaven. Something is sacred, but it isn’t any particular institution.

The patterns of democratic erosion worldwide, which this book opened with, suggest that centuries-old institutions are increasingly inadequate for confronting ascendant authoritarians. Merely defending a certain sort of democracy is no way to help democracy as an ideal. Permit me a cliché: the best defense is offense. Authoritarianism today takes different forms than it did in the past, adapting its tactics against those of democracy. For democracy to thrive, its institutions must be vulnerable to continual reinvention. Its traditions must be alive enough to permit that. The task of making online spaces governable, therefore, should begin with imaginations radical enough to transcend existing institutions, together with the playfulness to hone imagination in practice.

In what follows, I consider two very different cases of mediated democratic experimentation currently underway: transformative justice, a movement to abolish policing as we know it through participatory processes, and cryptoeconomics, a project of reimagining economics and governance through internet-native blockchain protocols. They are subcultures that do not typically see each other or speak with each other, and they rest on often-diverging sets of values. But I have been drawn to them both, despite and because of what distinguishes them. Both share the radical premise, notably, of attempting to organize self-governing infrastructures that do not rely on state violence to establish order. I present them as starting points for the reimagining the design of technologies as *democratic mediums*—mediums in the sense of both enabling self-governing communication and serving as meeting points for the transcendent and the everyday. These starting points offer insights for the making of truly governable online spaces.

Both cases reject the widespread preference for holding dominant quasi-democratic institutions as sacred, choosing instead the quest for more deeply accountable institutions and more lively encounters with tradition. They are both intensely contextual. They seek to design processes that are appropriate to the problems at hand. Both also expect people to gain and cultivate political skills, to be participants in crafting their own democratic futures. Their media production meanwhile reveals how they craft transcendent visions, which are both anchoring and always provisional.

For each case, I profile its political imagination followed by an analysis of lessons from its design practices for governable spaces. The chapter ends with a consideration of how imagination can take form in political play.

### ABOLITION DEMOCRACY

When a wave of outrage surged across the United States in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, key organizers in the Black Lives Matter movement were ready with a demand: “Defund the police.” Liberal politicians seemed poised to act on the call, at least until the street protests faded and an apparent crime wave moved them to reverse course. The call to “defund” received blame for Democratic Party defeats in the 2020 election, securing its loss of favor among liberal elites.<sup>9</sup> The advocates for defunding or outright abolishing police soon found themselves in a position not unlike that of Lani Guinier: to explore deeply the question of what might make society more democratic is to risk being labeled a traitor to democracy.

Underlying “defund” was a legacy of community-based organizing to address violence and conflict without policing, known as transformative justice. Although Black Lives Matter has often appeared in mass media through images of Black men facing police violence, many of the community leaders behind it identify as women, queer, or non-binary. Chicago-based activist Mariame Kaba became a mainstream voice for defunding with a *New York Times* opinion article, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police”; for many years before that, she had been a leading participant and teacher in community accountability processes, aimed at addressing both interpersonal harm and its root causes.<sup>10</sup> These signify a struggle to address interpersonal harm with participatory processes among affected people that address root causes. “People like me who want to abolish prisons and police,” Kaba wrote in the *Times*, “have a vision of a different society, built on cooperation instead of individualism, on mutual aid instead of self-preservation.”

For Kaba and other Black Lives Matter leaders, transformative justice work had been all along embedded in their advocacy for the abolition of police and prisons. More than a fixed method, it is a practice of exploration among many paths toward safer communities. A seminal textbook summarizes this practice in its title, the *Creative Interventions Toolkit*. The authors, who formed a purposely temporary organization to produce the book, explain, “We call ourselves Creative Interventions because creativity is often just what is needed.”<sup>11</sup> Kaba and collaborators have also developed a website cataloging abolitionist and transformative efforts, with a name reflecting that creative urge: One Million Experiments.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of referring incidents of harm in a community to the arbiters of state violence, transformative justice equips community members to build their own skills for facilitating conflict resolution and accountability. The goal is not to punish and coerce, like police and courts do, but to repair harm and enable people

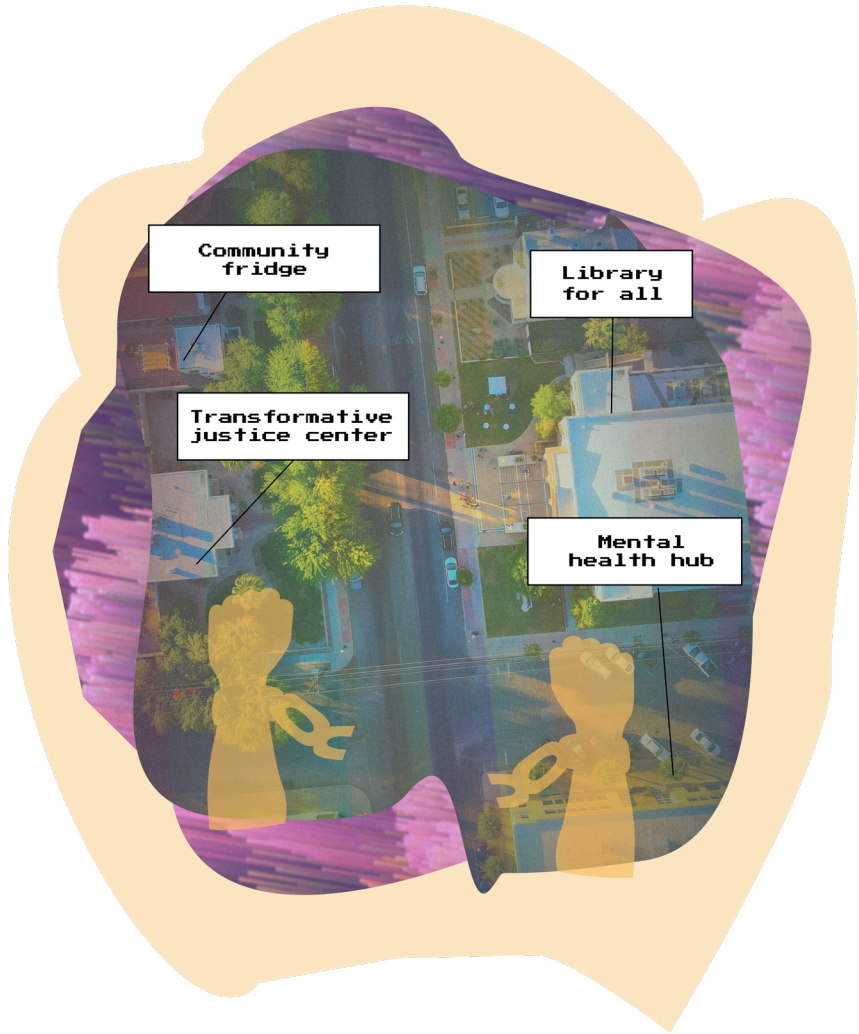


FIGURE 8.

involved in it to establish healthier relationships. The call to “transform” also goes further: it means not merely resolving a given incident, but recognizing how wider injustices might have helped cause it.

For instance, while the legal system would respond to a case of partner abuse by charging one party or both with a crime and seeking to punish accordingly, a community accountability process would begin with conversations. How did each partner experience what happened? Along with a trusted facilitator and allies, they might meet in a circle, where the person who caused harm agrees to take responsibility for it and apologize. Forgiveness may or may not be involved. The process might further reveal that an unjust eviction had been exacerbating tensions

in the relationship. Together, the participants develop a strategy for publicizing the landlord's behavior and making exploitative evictions less likely in their community.

A process like this is not straightforward; it requires art and skill. Kaba co-authored a workbook for advanced practitioners,<sup>13</sup> which includes techniques for running accountability processes alongside exercises to help practitioners reflect on their personal development. Eschewing the temptations of institutionalization, she reminds readers that she does not do community accountability work for hire.

"Safety is not a product that we can package and market," writes another transformative justice activist, Ejeris Dixon. "We are invited to practice community safety skills with one of our most precious resources, our lives."<sup>14</sup> A checklist in the *Creative Interventions Toolkit*, asking "Is This Model Right for You?" expects that readers affirm all of the following:

- Want to address, reduce, end or prevent a situation of violence (violence intervention)
- Seek solutions within your family, friend network, neighborhood, faith community, workplace or other community group, organization or institution
- Can think of at least one other person who may be able to work with you to address this situation
- Want to find a way to support people doing harm to recognize, end and be responsible for their violence (accountability) without giving them excuses (without colluding) and without denying their humanity (without demonizing)—if possible
- Are willing to work together with others in your community
- Are willing to work over a period of time to make sure that solutions stick (last a long time)<sup>15</sup>

Despite its centrality in the experience of prominent Black Lives Matter activists, transformative justice only rarely surfaced in popular narratives following the 2020 wave of protest. In most public discourse about the call to defund police—and this is in part attributable to the slogan itself—the focus was on the existing institutions of policing, rather than on what other institutional arrangements could replace it. Perhaps most importantly, far too few people had knowingly experienced alternatives to policing in their everyday lives; the experiments were still too contained, their stories too little told. Thus, when anxieties about crime rose after the protests—resulting at least in part from police withdrawing their labor—politicians could claim they had no recourse but to further fund the only institutional option available to them for reducing crime: the police.<sup>16</sup>

Since the choice appeared to be police or nothing, the advocates of defunding could be portrayed as being opposed to public safety, even a threat to it. Media narratives tolerated a debate only within the bounds of current institutions, not one about how institutional arrangements might be rethought. Many Americans did not support the call to defund police because they could not envision an alternative to policing, for both addressing crime and providing the many other kinds of social services that police have come to control.<sup>17</sup>

The writings of transformative justice practitioners tend to be far from the language of policy prescription. They assume an audience that inhabits the streets rather than the halls of power. Kaba called for moving police budgets to education and other basic needs in her *Times* article, but this is a literature that overwhelmingly prefers forms of exchange that nourish dialogical thinking and ongoing reinvention. Activists' books intersperse essays with interviews, suggesting that the movement privileges conversational thinking over dogmas. Kaba stresses that her workbook is not "a dictate or THE LAW."<sup>18</sup> Her co-author Shira Hassan describes the discovery that "always reinventing the wheel was a feature and not a bug of doing this work."

As if to hold the uncertainties, an assemblage of spiritualities accompanies the practicalities of this literature. Kaba and Hassan's workbook, *Fumbling Towards Repair*, has on its cover three people, connected with constellations, cultivating a flower that emits star-pollen into the sky. The text encourages introspective habits such as journaling and self-care. Activists speak of ancestral bonds, rituals, magic, breath, the natural world, and mystical cosmologies alongside political visions and practical tips for accountability work. Adrienne maree brown, a leading thinker on transformative justice, celebrates the religion of Octavia Butler's science fiction novels in which "God is change," a divinity standing against the temptation to place one's trust in a stable world.<sup>19</sup>

Together these gestures organize a shared rhetoric of "harmonizing earth and heaven," in Tocqueville's sense—a transcendent orientation for political imagination that can see beyond now-reigning institutions. But more than calling on a fixed referent like Tocqueville's Christian God, they draw on multiple reference points. Their transcendence is tied to community practice. Constellations, whether in the sky at sea or on the cover of a guidebook, help people locate themselves when what they see below the horizon is insufficiently trustworthy. Just as the Big Dipper led escaping slaves north in the Underground Railroad, *Fumbling Towards Repair's* stars point toward a future at odds with the terrestrial institutions of the present. In a nod to that earlier struggle against the once-unshakable institution of chattel slavery, transformative justice activists often refer to their broader movement simply as abolition. But for them abolition is never merely a negation.

A godmother of the defund movement is the philosopher Angela Davis. Her experience with incarceration resulting from her activism in the 1970s established her as a leading abolitionist against police and prisons. In a later series of interviews, Davis echoes W. E. B. Du Bois's call for "abolition democracy."<sup>20</sup> For Du Bois, this meant rendering slavery finally obsolete by ensuring the place of former slaves in democratic institutions—voting rights, cooperative economic power, and access to education, for instance. For Davis, achieving abolition democracy means establishing the conditions in which police and prisons are no longer necessary, because more democratic practices have replaced them. Transformative justice is self-consciously a project of abolition democracy.



"Abolition is a fleshy and material presence of social life lived differently," writes Ruth Wilson Gilmore, another abolitionist godmother, paraphrasing Du Bois. Indigenous musician and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson offers a further phrasing: "abolition unfolding."<sup>21</sup> But this more expansive view of abolition, the call to self-governance, rarely makes headlines.

A further challenge to the visibility of transformative justice is that activists have taken care to keep their accountability practices out of corporate-controlled online spaces. They stress that community accountability must inhabit a temporality distinct from that of social media, allowing processes to proceed at their own speed as opposed to fitting into the attention span of virality. They resist social media even though they practice it expertly; Kaba, brown, and others have large followings online and participate actively. Yet brown warns, "Real time is slower than social media time, where everything feels urgent."<sup>22</sup> Kaba's workbook has prefatory warnings about who should not use the book, which includes anyone "not planning to engage participants in person."<sup>23</sup> She elsewhere adds, in an interview: "I pretty much hate a lot of social media. I use it as a tool, but I'm not a fan of the way it can flatten people and can flatten issues, and sometimes allows people to remain anonymous in very harmful ways. That said, I've actually tried to think through with other people what are some potential guidelines that we might agree to, some rules of the road around engagement on social media if you're doing community accountability work and transformative justice work."<sup>24</sup>

Despite her reservations, Kaba thus recognizes that the kinds of processes she has tended cannot remain solely in-person forever. Community accountability is as much needed online as off because harm is happening online, and anyway the lines between the virtual and the real no longer hold. The virtual is also real. As far back as the famous case of sexual assault on LambdaMOO in the 1990s, discussed in chapter 1, the need for self-governing online often stems from the need to address and repair harm.<sup>25</sup> If online communities cannot self-govern, they cannot resolve conflicts as they see fit.

Online spaces need abolitionist imaginations. Intersecting experiences of oppression and marginalization run rampant there, along with the habits of punitive enforcement. Governments and technology companies offer to solve problems with rules and punishments, but those institutions represent the racial capitalism that abolitionists want to make obsolete with their own solutions. Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie quote Grace Lee Boggs: "We need to exercise power, not take it."<sup>26</sup> Change of this sort cannot happen by replacing who is in charge, only by altering how power flows.

Boggs also frequently reminded her disciples to prioritize "critical connections" over "critical mass"—a conviction that the germ of seismic change lies in the thick relationality of how people choose to self-organize day to day, rather than in a mass of faceless participants.<sup>27</sup> This is not a retreat from large-scale social change but a reorientation to it. For her, abolition begins with a theory of society in which



there is no need for “the masses” anymore, because the center of our attention has turned to people, their relationships, and their communities.

*Subsidiarity, Scalability, and Accountability*

What would it take to make online spaces work for community accountability? How might lessons from transformative justice begin to inform the design of social media? Amy Hasinoff and I have argued that doing so would require a shift in the design of dominant social-media platforms: a shift from *scalability* to *subsidiarity*.<sup>28</sup>

Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing defines the aspiration of scalability as “the ability to expand—and expand, and expand—without rethinking basic elements.”<sup>29</sup> She warns that “scalability never fulfills its own promises.” As the biologist J. B. S. Haldane wrote decades earlier in his whimsical essay “On Being the Right Size,” “a large change in size inevitably carries with it a change in form.”<sup>30</sup> Also between the world wars, while observing the advent of new mass-communication technologies, Walter Lippmann concluded that democracy could not translate from local town halls to the scale of large nations connected only by their broadcasts; in his view, control by a small elite would be inevitable.<sup>31</sup>

Scalability has become the business model for the venture-capital investment that underwrites nearly all corporate social media. The payoff for investing millions of dollars in an unproven startup is the prospect of a business that can add large numbers of new users at ever-declining per-user cost.<sup>32</sup> Platforms therefore seek to govern harm and conflict through software-enabled automation: global rule books, algorithmic enforcement wherever possible, and opaque human decision-making when necessary. The result is a regime that provokes continual complaints of both overreaction and underreaction to apparent bad behavior, born of blindness to context and lack of due process. Tarleton Gillespie has suggested, in sum, “Maybe we should not automate.”<sup>33</sup>

This modest suggestion has far-reaching consequences. The less automated a system becomes, the less it can participate in the economics and design practices of scalability. But there is another way. Taking inspiration from transformative justice activists, Hasinoff and I show how participant-centered systems can adopt subsidiarity: a principle that prioritizes appropriately local control wherever possible, within a larger system.

Subsidiarity was first articulated in Calvinist and then Catholic theology—for instance, stressing the relative autonomy of each congregation or region in a wider church.<sup>34</sup> It has since been incorporated into secular politics, including the founding documents of the European Union. But well outside this Western lineage, the basic idea manifests in virtually any durable form of social order, from common-law judicial systems and bands within tribal nations to the distributed authority structure of Sunni Islam. When institutions lose context-sensitivity and local control, they risk being perceived as illegitimate. Residents of a newly established town may expect to have their own post office, library, schools, law enforcement,

garbage collection, and elected council. That is subsidiarity. In comparison to almost any other kind of institution that claims to serve civic interactions, the faith in scalability among social-media companies appears peculiar.

I have seen subsidiarity at work with particular clarity in cooperative business. Near where I live, there are two large hardware stores a few blocks from each other. One is part of a national, investor-owned chain; it is like every other store of its kind, wherever you go. Help from employees is scarce because they are stretched as thinly as possible. The other store is locally owned but part of a national purchasing cooperative, a business owned by local stores, designed to make them more profitable. The co-op pushes value and control to the edges of the network—to the store owners—rather than accumulating both at the center, on behalf of distant investor-owners. That store is an anchor of our community. Helpful employees are everywhere. This is subsidiarity again: scale where necessary, such as in joint purchasing with other stores, but local control everywhere it matters.<sup>35</sup>

What transformative justice activists call for can be understood as a radical subsidiarity. They want to enable accountability not just at the level of cities or regions, but among neighborhoods and friend groups—a scale similar to that of many online communities. Accomplishing this requires the widespread cultivation of political skills so that people have the capacity to organize accountability processes wherever harm occurs. Online, this would mean that any community must have the tools and interfaces to develop processes that are right for its culture. Facilitators should have the tools to carefully manage a process. A process should not be exposed to the gusts of some algorithm's viral winds or to rules set in a distant corporate office. To be felt as legitimate, the process must be voluntary and sensitive to context, not imposed from above. According to one study of online moderation practices, "People's sense of being treated with dignity and respect appears to have the strongest correlation to overall fairness."<sup>36</sup> An experience of fairness lowers the likelihood of repeating bad behavior.

Subsidiarity, to be clear, is not a demand for limitless local autonomy. Alongside autonomy it involves relationships to larger systems. It is not scalability, but it does enable scale—composed of spaces small enough to be governable. While transformative justice happens primarily at the level of local communities, those communities do not act in isolation. Communities need to learn from each other, working in concert to transform systems beyond themselves. The root of *subsidiarity* is the Latin word for help—meaning the mutual help among communities that constitute a larger whole.

Subsidiarity is not everywhere alike. It can be federalist (with smaller units nested within bigger ones) or polycentric (with smaller units connected laterally across a network).<sup>37</sup> Both forms already appear in online spaces to an extent. The office-oriented chat platform Slack, for instance, is more federalist. A particular employee might manage a small "channel" within a "workspace" controlled by the

company where they work, hosted on servers owned and managed by Slack, which is in turn a subsidiary of Salesforce. Implicit feudalism and corporate ownership limit the capacity for participant self-governance at each of those levels, but some degree of local control is real. In contrast, email is a more polycentric network, enabling communication across multiple servers that might each be governed differently. Another example of a polycentric network is Mastodon, an open-source microblogging platform that users can host on their own servers, while connecting to users on other servers. Even in the absence of a central company or other enforcer, Mastodon communities have shown the capacity to carry out large-scale enforcement actions against incursions from the Islamic State and Gab, a Mastodon-based platform friendly to White supremacists.<sup>38</sup>

Subsidiarity involves the capacity to hold communities themselves accountable, not just their members. Transformative justice activists warn against considering “community” an unmitigated good; harm often occurs because of, not just despite, its host community.<sup>39</sup> The purpose of a community can be precisely to support harmful behavior. The call for transformative justice, again, does not mean transforming only individuals’ relationships but their social contexts when necessary. For instance, the documentary film *Hollow Water* depicts an accountability process in an Ojibway village where sexual abuse had become endemic. Carrying out a transformative process required pressure on the village from both the federalist Canadian legal system and the polycentric networks among fellow First Nations communities.<sup>40</sup> Designing governable spaces should similarly involve not just self-governance within a particular community but accountability among communities, across networks.

Any attempt to apply lessons from transformative justice must take seriously its practitioners’ skepticism about bringing their practices online. But if the affordances of social media they recoil against are bound up in scalability—the inhuman pace, the context collapse, the lack of community control—perhaps online spaces crafted with strenuous subsidiarity could be more amenable to context-sensitive accountability processes. This cannot occur through a quick, superficial fix to the user interface. Subsidiarity requires duplication and customization of systems at a local level—exactly what investors want to avoid paying for in their pursuit of scalability and market dominance. Community accountability is friction from the perspective of an investor’s profit margins. It all looks like costs: training facilitators, supporting diverse power structures, and imposing limits on external control.

An abolitionist orientation sees things differently. Scalability, enforced through coercion, is no basis for real problem solving. Societies and networks where people can govern themselves are places where the ever-expanding cost of policing and punishment is no longer the only option available. The resources once spent shoring up a dehumanizing system can go toward investing in the people who will participate in an abolition democracy. As W. E. B. Du Bois recognized in the wake of chattel slavery, abolition is not complete unless it comes with the rights and the skills to co-govern.

Designing networks with deep subsidiarity may be possible only through regimes that reorganize the flows of platform ownership, so that power ultimately lies with users themselves. The next case arises from subcultures very different from those of transformative justice activists. But it presents an opportunity for reorganizing flows of control and value that online accountability processes could build on. It could be a way out of scalability. Getting there, once again, involves not just a technical or economic feat but leaps of imagination.

### CRYPTOECONOMICS AND POLITICS

Moloch, an ancient Levantine god whom the Hebrew Bible accuses of abetting child sacrifice, has found a new cult. It began with a blog post by Scott Alexander, “a psychiatrist on the US West Coast”: an interpretation of the Moloch portions in Allen Ginsberg’s midrashic poem “Howl.”<sup>41</sup> Alexander recasts Moloch as representing the soul-crushing establishmentarian systems that plague us only because no better means of coordination exists for replacing them. To him, passages from Ginsberg like this are actually about breakdowns of signal and shared intent:

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless  
jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are  
judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned  
governments!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running  
money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a  
cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!

Gone is the standard interpretation of “Howl” as a retort to technocratic capitalism. Gone also is Karl Marx’s reading of Moloch as capital’s claim over “all surplus-labour which the human race can ever perform” and money, “to whom everything must be sacrificed.”<sup>42</sup> To Alexander the trouble is inadequate technology. According to his post, “Every single citizen hates the system, but for lack of a good coordination mechanism it endures”; in turn, “technology has the potential to seriously improve coordination efforts.”

Alexander’s heterodox reading of Ginsberg has since spread among certain clusters of entrepreneurs and engineers building blockchain-based technologies. In the headlines, blockchains have become widely associated with fraudulent pseudo-banks and spectacular meltdowns, with libertarian ideologues hiding assets away from regulators’ reach. But in certain subcultures of entrepreneurs, the longer story of what they are doing is transforming the social order through new mechanisms for coordination.

Five years after its publication, the blog post’s exegesis took financial form with MolochDAO, a software contract on the Ethereum blockchain devoted to the slaying of this new Moloch: the “god of coordination failure, who consumes our future potential for perverse immediate gain.”<sup>43</sup> As a DAO, or decentralized autonomous

organization, it is a creature composed of contracts written in computer code rather than legalese, funneling human inputs through its software. MolochDAO was meant to help move the world toward a new economic infrastructure in which networks and code, rather than police and armies, would be the basis of social order. In its more mundane practice, MolochDAO is a collective grant fund, a pool of digital money that participants contribute to and then allocate to projects they deem worthy. It was first “summoned” at the ETHDenver conference in 2019 by entrepreneur Ameen Soleimani. Appearing during a market downturn, its purpose was to provide funding for people to keep experimenting and building, along with a galvanizing mythology. The MolochDAO website invites visitors into a cosmic confrontation: “This demon god of coordination failure, who consumes our future potential for perverse immediate gain, will be slain. Pledge your oath to his demise, or go down with him.”<sup>44</sup>

Concocting elaborate mythologies is common in the cultures surrounding blockchain technology. The original cryptocurrency, Bitcoin, began in 2009 with a Promethean “Genesis Block” and then adopted the idiom of metallurgy. Among its central technical concepts are “mining” and “minting” for instance, and then there is “wallet” to describe whatever medium happens to record the gibberish strings of characters that provide access to a user’s holdings. While Bitcoiners implore each other to hold their tokens during a sudden price decline with the call to “HODL,” the Moloch slayers remind each other to “BUIDL,” to keep building useful things. Among DAOs, language helps obscure the degree to which apparent novelty is reproducing much more familiar organizational patterns. Proxy voters are now “stewards” practicing “liquid democracy.” The banal quarters of corporate temporality—Q1 to Q4—become the more ecological “seasons.” Committees are “pods.” Clubs and collectives are “guilds” and “covens.” Initiating a vote means issuing a “spell.” Shares, money, and multitudinous other financial instruments can be programmed into digital “tokens.” For some, part of the appeal of the DAO idea itself is the name’s affinity with Daoism, as if that ancient philosophy were being rediscovered in code.<sup>45</sup>

It would be too convenient to dismiss what is going on as mere disguise or wholesale recapitulation. A new name invites the breaking of old norms or at least fresh iteration with them. Names matter. Tokens can resemble preceding financial instruments, but they nearly always break those molds in some way; the old distinctions between money and equity, or labor and capital, are not so clear and seem to be evolving toward new sorts of distinctions.

The new names enable participants to tell each other, at least, that the strictures of securities law and labor law no longer apply, inviting fresh abuses and innovations. But not all renaming is so cynical. Calling proxy voters stewards has occasioned new kinds of Web interfaces for evaluating stewards’ behavior. The one-share-one-vote norm of corporations is meanwhile beginning to wane in the imaginative universe of crypto in favor of algorithms that balance a voter’s stake with dimensions such as temporal commitment or the number of other voters;

these forms of tallying preference have little precedent in corporate governance.<sup>46</sup> Since crypto projects tend to avoid reliance on state identity systems, the meaning and basis of identity becomes an open question, both social and technical.<sup>47</sup> And while a season might correspond temporally with a quarter, the language evokes a blurry duration that, through its ecological and ritual associations, seems to alter the flow of time.

With crypto-tokens come distinct experiences of organizational belonging and internet browsing alike. Rather than logging into websites with a username and password, one shows them what tokens are in one's wallet with a browser plugin. One's identity lives in that wallet, not in the database of the website. With certain tokens might come the ability to trade or to vote on a proposal. Debates about proposals live across various chat threads and online forums, depending on the community—largely out in the open, in public, rather than in a closed boardroom. If there is a vote, it is likely on a futuristic website, in hacker-friendly dark mode, meeting the cultural habits of the early adopters where they are. When ownership and governance are a matter of points and clicks, they are intuitive and expected for users who live their lives in apps. They become part of flows in daily life like stock certificates and Bloomberg terminals never were.

To reimagine what is basically a giving circle as slaying Moloch through coordination does something to the nature of the giving. (Giving in MolochDAO is called making "tributes.") The point becomes less the gift than the art of orchestration that made it happen, the coming together of the disparate agents involved. There is a special term in MolochDAO, with corresponding software code, for when someone leaves in frustration: "ragequit," a term derived from gaming culture. Unlike the usual charity or early-stage investment, contributors can withdraw their stake at any time. Other DAOs have since adopted the feature. The platform DAOHaus enables users to easily start new entities on the MolochDAO template, complete with the same vernacular of summoning and tributes.

The working theory underlying this experimentation has come to be known as *cryptoeconomics*—a synthesis of economic incentives with cryptographic technology.<sup>48</sup> The term is widely associated with Ethereum founder Vitalik Buterin, who has written about cryptoeconomics as a nearly universal engine for social and technical processes. As Buterin puts it, cryptoeconomics allows software "to reduce social trust assumptions by creating systems where we introduce explicit economic incentives for good behavior and economic penalties for bad behavior."<sup>49</sup> For example, Bitcoin's cryptographic math protects the scarcity of units on its ledger; the perceived value of those units, in turn, motivates users to expend computing energy to perform expensive cryptographic math problems to win rewards. The math secures the economy, which in turn motivates people to use the math.<sup>50</sup> With the advent of Ethereum and its programmable "smart contracts," such a carrot-and-stick design extends from not just the management of an asset but also to the governance of countless applications, from financial contracts and art markets to social-media networks and philanthropic ventures.

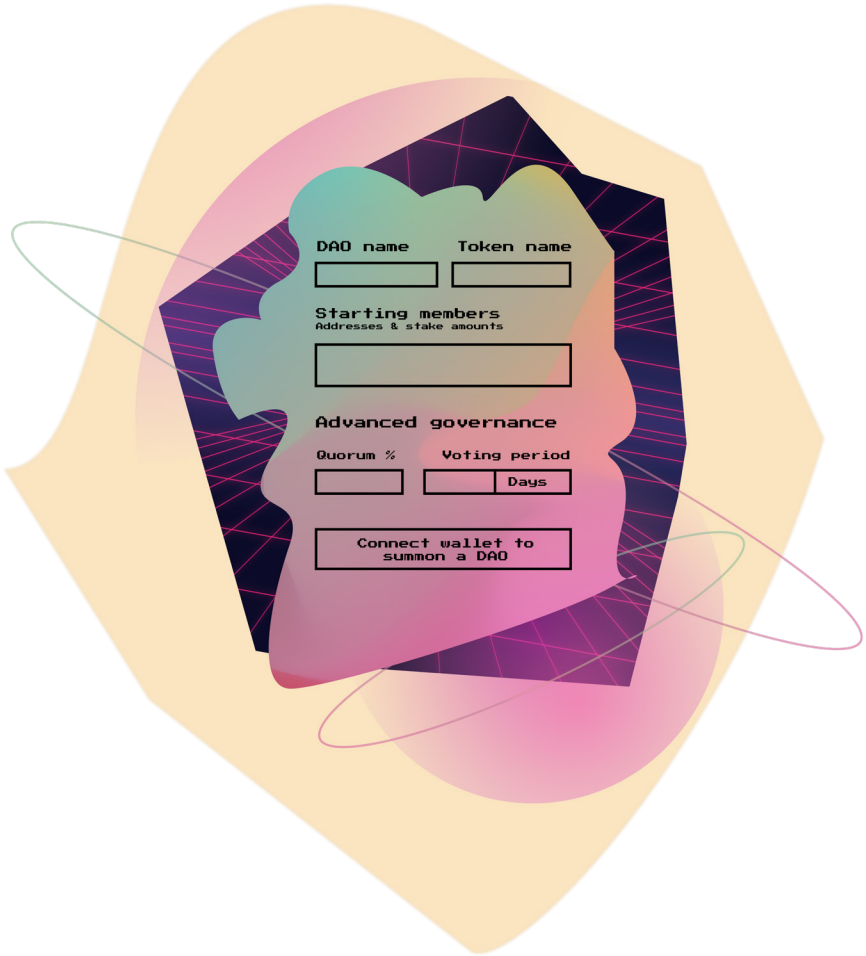


FIGURE 9.

Participants differ over the meanings they ascribe to their cryptoeconomic media. A nonscientific survey of political views in crypto<sup>51</sup> identified not just “leftist” and “libertarian” tendencies but also positions that have nowhere to live on conventional political spectrums, such as the “Zamfirist” and “Walchian”; each is a matter of opinion specific to how power should flow on and around blockchains. They are high-stakes positions, as billions of dollars’ worth of tokens may hang in the balance. Although crypto has drawn on certain earlier political lineages—particularly anarcho-capitalism and libertarianism<sup>52</sup>—as time passes, its ideological space becomes less reducible to those and more fecund for its own breeds of politics. The politics seem to evolve quickly in a world whose memetic repertoire spans transcendent registers from the Genesis Block to the hoped-for slaying of Moloch.



Crypto enthusiasts at times describe themselves as LARPing, or live action role-playing, like the hobbyists who dress in medieval costumes and hit each other with foam swords in a park. There are many promises among crypto's true believers that the technology's actual usage has fallen well short of: banking the unbanked, undermining financial elites, and defeating authoritarian censorship, for example. The technology doesn't exactly work as intended yet and maybe never will. Still, it is a medium and a gateway. Inhabiting a distinctive mythological, symbolic universe provides a license to dispense with foregoing constraints, which arose for a world connected with different sorts of media. The mythology then permits a transition from economics to cryptoeconomics, from politics to coordination, from representation to decentralization.<sup>53</sup> Moloch and his ilk are Tocquevillian gestures toward a provisional and only half-serious heaven, one bearing transcendent commitments that hold the early adopters together while their new technology aids in reshuffling the institutional tables here on earth.

*Democracy* doesn't feature prominently in the idiom of many crypto subcultures, perhaps out of fear that it will shake away the necessary reverie and bring everyone back to the still-looming regimes of territorial governments. Lately, *coordination* is the nearest surrogate, and it risks discarding democracy's preference for the common good against plutocracy. Yet the Moloch slayers do not only think and write about alternative voting systems, as Lani Guinier did; they test them out with friends, strangers, and the digital equivalent of millions of dollars—then notice the outcomes, the disasters and happy accidents, and fork the code to try again. The technology is dangerous; it can enable unaccountable pump-and-dump schemes as much as collective ownership. The specter of Moloch serves to spur the machine-makers to focus on the side of light, of coordination, of the common good. But it seems to me that the human-eating Moloch could just as easily reside in these new systems designed to vanquish him as in the principalities and powers that still rule the world.

### *Cryptoeconomics as a Rupture and Limitation*

Regardless of any practical use value, crypto represents a rupture with respect to the particular argument I have been making: it can be an antidote to implicit feudalism. Previous internet technologies have presumed a central server, whose legal owner holds ultimate responsibility for what takes place on that server. A democracy among users will almost inevitably come into conflict with the underlying technical and legal reality. The distinguishing affordance of a blockchain, however, is enabling a system that lacks any single owner, that is user-governed by default.<sup>54</sup> Blockchain protocols differ from earlier networking protocols in that governance is embedded; the protocol defines how to change the protocol. The Bitcoin blockchain is thus designed to be governed by the users who secure it by "mining," while many other blockchains give power to those who "stake" tokens. DAOs typically confer governance rights on their token-holders. At

the technical level, these systems are designed precisely to avoid the concentrations of feudal power that centralized servers have encouraged.

The technology's design, however, does not guarantee its social outcomes. Concentrations of power have been chronic in the governance of blockchains and organizations built on them. Crypto has been a tool for aspiring authoritarians, like El Salvador's Bitcoin-enthused president Nayib Bukele. Yet for reversing implicit feudalism, specifically, the opportunity is real.

Accordingly, crypto has occasioned a remarkable outpouring of democratic mediums that implicit feudalism fended off in the past. Tucked among the speculative bubbles, scams, and rampant financialization of crypto are countless experiments in online governance, more than in any previous period of internet history. The high financial stakes and the lack of external regulation surrounding blockchains have brought investments of tokens and time into the search for good governance. Because blockchain activity is by its nature public, the code behind successful experiments quickly spreads as others copy and adapt it. As a result, crypto has occasioned governance innovations such as

- decision-making processes that evaluate preferences in nearly real time,
- voting systems unavailable in conventional politics or business,
- mechanisms for incentive alignment among diverse participants,
- algorithmic dispute resolution,
- permissionless participation,
- widely shared accountability and distribution of benefits,
- self-enforcing security and censorship resistance,
- sovereignty from external control or regulation,
- transparency of on-chain activity,
- competitive markets for governance,
- ease of exit and capacity to fork systems,
- identity systems under user control, and
- novel interfaces for governance activity.<sup>55</sup>

In each of those are many particular examples. Among the decision-making processes, for instance, are these:

- *Conviction voting*: Votes on a proposal are continuously weighed based on both quantity of tokens staked and duration of staking.
- *Curation market*: Curators are rewarded for elevating proposals or projects that they correctly predict others in the community will like.
- *Decentralized dispute resolution*: A random jury of users with staked tokens independently choose the outcome of a dispute that they expect most others will pick, gaining or losing tokens based on their choice.
- *Lazy consensus*: Users with sufficient reputation from past activity can make proposals that pass automatically in the absence of objections.

- *Liquid democracy*: Token-holders can delegate their voting power to other trusted holders who can delegate them in turn; delegation can be withdrawn at any time.
- *Quadratic funding*: Matching grants are distributed according to a combination of the number of donors and the amounts they give to a cause.
- *SplitDAO*: A subset of users in a DAO can withdraw their tokens and move them to a duplicate entity.

The proliferation of governance techniques is not an end in itself, of course. It does not guarantee that governance will be in any way good. But, to borrow a biological metaphor, variation is a prerequisite for natural selection. For communities to identify the governance practices that work for them, they should have enough range of motion to explore diverse options. This range of motion is precisely what implicit feudalism has restricted in online spaces and what established forms of liberal democracy have often restricted in territorial governance.

Crypto has made unusually explicit what has always been true: money and other forms of capital are themselves media—malleable and programmable transmitters of information, which obtain value through the meaning-making they enable.<sup>56</sup> Blockchains, and the cryptoeconomics in their designs, are infrastructures for economic media grounded more in networks than in state power. Self-enforcing software can operate through economic stake and incentives in place of the monopoly on violence that state-backed financial systems employ. In a 2018 sci-fi-drenched promotional video for Aragon, a platform for blockchain governance, co-founder Luis Cuende boasted, “Today, we are in the first time in history that we can actually try out new governance models without the need of people getting killed.”<sup>57</sup> While this claim is less true than Cuende thinks, there are respects in which the explorations at hand are distinctly novel.

If cryptoeconomics is the sole basis of new governance models, however, there is cause for worry.<sup>58</sup> Diverse voices have long warned against the expansion of economic logics, crowding out space for democratic politics in public life. From the Zapatista insurgents of southern Mexico to political theorists like William Davies and Wendy Brown, the neoliberal aspiration for economics to guide all aspects of society represents a threat to democracy and human personhood. According to Brown, “as an economic framing and economic ends replace political ones, a range of concerns become subsumed to the project of capital enhancement, recede altogether, or are radically transformed as they are ‘economized.’ These include justice (and its subelements, such as liberty, equality, fairness), individual and popular sovereignty, and the rule of law. They also include the knowledge and the cultural orientation relevant to even the most modest practices of democratic citizenship.”<sup>59</sup>

The things not visible to the market, that is, become unthinkable. The market dictates a neoliberal people’s range of options. If the market cannot see a changing climate, there is no motivator for acting on it. If the market does not recoil at the plight of homelessness, neither can we, if we learn to be what the market sees in us.

Worries about the corrosive possibilities of economics on politics preceded the terminology of neoliberalism. Hannah Arendt observed that ancient Greek democratic thought regarded economics as housekeeping, a private matter segregated from the political sphere.<sup>60</sup> Athens' sexist, slaver economy enabled citizens to enter politics as relative equals, whose "prepolitical" basic needs were already met, whose democracy could stand aloof from self-interest and corruption. To be a free and trustworthy citizen meant being free from susceptibility to economics, someone trustworthy when contemplating public life. In the realm of the political, for Arendt, people become capable of acting in truly new, truly creative ways.

Arendt's account of a politics wholly distinct from economic necessity provides a useful foil for our purposes here. Let my use of *politics* refer to some approximation of Arendt's: public action concerned with the common good. Political institutions are domains for Homo sapiens before Homo economicus—or, perhaps more relevantly, the Homo speculans of speculative finance. Even Arendt would not remove politics fully from economic life, since politics should shape the economic order, and it depends on that order. But what distinguishes politics is its capacity to notice and address considerations beyond the allocation of resources and to organize economies accordingly.<sup>61</sup> While a country's taxation policy utilizes economic nudges, for instance, lawmakers must generally rationalize it according to conceptions of the common good, rather than solely optimizing for financial metrics. Politics is hardly immune to self-interest.<sup>62</sup> But incentives such as the need for politicians to run for reelection can introduce imperatives that economics alone would not.

The limits of cryptoeconomic design and the need for political spaces have become increasingly apparent in actually existing crypto. If the purpose of a governance system is to enable participants to have as much self-determination as possible—a tolerable oversimplification, I hope—whatever inhibits that self-determination becomes a limitation. As crypto matures, its designers have learned that older concerns about the corrosive effects of economics on democratic governance are also relevant to distributed ledgers: rampant plutocracy, the suppression of participant interests, and dangerous externalities.

The first limitation, plutocracy, is a direct outgrowth of governance that arises not from personhood but from economic stake—whether it be through token holding or “mining” with expensive computational power. The power of concentrated wealth over human participants has been a growing anxiety in crypto networks, including among leading developers.<sup>63</sup> Of course, governance by economics is nothing new; joint-stock companies conventionally operate on plutocratic governance—more shares equal more votes. Yet companies exist within the constraints of state policy, which can impose counter-pressure like progressive taxation, collective bargaining rights, environmental regulations, antitrust enforcement, and more. If distributed ledgers are based on cryptoeconomics without an underlying political order, such options are not available. As long as governance is reducible to economics, it will be difficult to prevent the feedback loops between wealth and power from spiraling into plutocratic outcomes.

A second limitation occurs in what is thinkable and speakable among human users. Like economics itself, cryptoeconomics is normative as well as descriptive. People begin to cast themselves in the image of the systems they inhabit. According to one study of management education, a field that tends to regard human nature as competitive and acquisitive, “self-interested behavior is learned behavior, and people learn it by studying economics and business.”<sup>64</sup> Systems are all the more constraining when they involve highly structured algorithmic processes, as crypto protocols generally do. While introducing algorithms may add efficiency to governance, a recent analysis finds that doing so can also result in “decreasing the space for governing actors’ discretion.”<sup>65</sup> It is no surprise, then, that the cultures surrounding crypto are highly attuned to algorithmically mediated economic indicators—using references to “bull” or “bear” markets to describe people’s emotional states. But human beings have interests not reducible to economics, never quite encodable in an algorithm. Reliance on cryptoeconomic governance risks losing sight of other things important to human flourishing.

The final limitation appears in crypto’s externalities, its effects that are invisible to its own internal processes. Bitcoin is governed most of all by the “miners” who carry out its computation—consuming energy at the scale of a mid-sized industrialized country. Miners often stand to benefit from ignoring their carbon footprint. A busier network roughly correlates to higher energy consumption and a higher trading price, increasing the value of the miners’ rewards. Other externalities relevant to blockchains include money laundering, dealings in dangerous drugs and weaponry, tax evasion, and ransomware attacks on public infrastructure. If crypto’s importance continues to expand, so does the danger of its potential for facilitating harm against people and the planet. The previous generation of Web technology has facilitated massacres and election interference; a new Web of money and contracts could get more dystopian quickly.<sup>66</sup> There must be safeguards that can counteract economic self-interest.

Another example of an externality is “public goods,” or the shared, critical infrastructure that many participants in a system rely on but few profit from, the virtual equivalents of roads and bridges. Funding these essentials has been a persistent challenge for crypto builders, as they discover firsthand that market mechanisms alone fall short.<sup>67</sup> Before cryptoeconomics, non-market institutions such as governments and (at vastly smaller scales) charities have been necessary; crypto projects are reinventing them through fee-funded treasuries and donor grant pools. MolochDAO was a step in this direction, and other experiments have followed. But project after project continues to find that economic incentives alone are inadequate to generate healthy markets, to say nothing of goods that markets cannot provide.

The limitations I identify are exacerbated by the difficulty cryptoeconomics has in recognizing human identity.<sup>68</sup> This is a persistent but not necessarily permanent condition. Cryptography obscures users from each other; economic designs care less about who users are than the tokens they hold. Those tokens

are how cryptoeconomics enforces its rules. Personhood is not a built-in concept for blockchains, as it is for any government with citizens. But the premise of any democratic structuring probably needs to be some way for systems to identify and represent individual human beings, along with relevant nonhuman agents.

While it has enabled productive experimentation, cryptoeconomics cannot serve as a sufficient basis for the governance possibilities in online spaces. My argument is perhaps anticlimactic in comparison to a technology that inspires such radical aspirations for remaking the world: crypto needs to rediscover politics. This entails enveloping economics within rules set by institutions not primarily economic in nature, which are capable of articulating, instantiating, and evolving shared understandings of the common good.

Already, crypto-governance practice appears to be reinventing some old wheels of institutional life, including the rudiments of politics. There are juries forming to resolve disputes, covenants enshrining shared values, and voting systems designed to reflect not just wealth but degrees of preference and the breadth of popular support.<sup>69</sup> Economics remains central to these; the systems typically enforce good behavior by requiring participants to stake tokens that they stand to lose. Yet the appetite is growing for crypto to recognize, when appropriate, the identities of the actual human beings who use it. Leading among those voicing this appetite is the apostle of cryptoeconomics himself, Vitalik Buterin. He has called for a new design paradigm and mythology, borrowed from the nomenclature of *World of Warcraft*, his once-favorite online game: *soulbound*.<sup>70</sup> Soulbound tokens, for instance, are not exchangeable commodities but remain with a particular user. Blockchains, it seems, need to account for souls.

Pairing cryptoeconomics with intentional politics can help overcome the limitations that bedevil cryptoeconomic governance alone. This does not mean that political mechanisms must occur in every app and protocol. Even standard liberal-democratic theory permits diverse forms of association and business within a democratic structure, and similarly politics may be necessary only at key leverage points in a crypto network. Economics has its place, but citizens make the market's rules through their civil rights rather than their economic power. Similarly, if democratic structuring were present at the base layer of crypto systems, participants could assert interests and externalities that cryptoeconomics alone would tend to obscure.

Some have argued that the proper means of democratic structuring for crypto is through state regulation.<sup>71</sup> This is happening to the extent that governments are intervening with taxation, securities enforcement, and even the development of their own digital currencies. But relying solely on existing governments inhibits at least some of what cryptoeconomics promises, such as the ability to experiment with radically diverse organizations, permissionless participation, and censorship resistance. Dependence on territorial regimes also lessens the capacity of these technologies to enable equality among users across borders. The actual democracy

present in governments may be limited or nonexistent. Crypto can be a medium for political imagination of a kind that governments are unable to provide on their own, whether due to outright hostility or mere intransigence. It is probably neither sufficient nor desirable to outsource crypto's politics to governments.

An alternative is to incorporate democratic design into blockchain protocols themselves, or the apps and DAOs built on them. For this, there is much to learn from the legacy of cooperative business, which blends person-centric governance (one member, one vote) with market-based incentives (patronage dividends in proportion to participation). The cooperative model has historically enabled activities that many DAOs pursue, such as gathering capital from participants who are not wealthy investors, enabling them to hold meaningful governance rights, and distributing rewards fairly.<sup>72</sup> Cooperativism also provides a framework for democratic governance that can help counteract plutocratic tendencies, while putting noneconomic values at the center of decision-making. Recognizing this, a growing number of DAOs have been incorporating as cooperative legal entities. Others are integrating co-op values into their software, such as by reserving governance power for workers or active users.<sup>73</sup>

A further strategy for democratic structuring is to establish a robust set of rights, responsibilities, and guarantees. Crypto networks have already developed constitutional layers in the code of their underlying protocols, which protects certain rights such as property and censorship-resistance.<sup>74</sup> A much wider set of values could be encoded into protocols, such as ones that prevent harm to people and the natural world, enforceable through the protocols themselves. Natural language agreements can be enforced through cryptoeconomic courts.<sup>75</sup> Future protocols might include code that ensures certain protections for workers, prevents direct harm to humans, or guarantees a basic income to all users. Protocols might ban carbon-emitting miners and other ecological harms. Rights-based designs could counteract plutocracy and make externalities more visible to a protocol that would otherwise ignore them. Cryptoeconomic designs can thus achieve goals not reducible to maximizing wealth.

The actual track record of activity on crypto networks has proven unnerving. Viral tokens attract hopeful retail investors, who may reap astonishing gains or see large chunks of their savings wiped away in hours. Venture capitalists meanwhile hold large stakes in important DAOs and protocols through which they can dominate governance processes. Perhaps, as Lana Swartz suggests, the whole point of crypto is not the promise but the scam, the "arbitrage on uneven belief among participants" in a hoped-for future "ever coming to pass."<sup>76</sup> Any opportunities that crypto presents on behalf of democracy, therefore, accompany opportunities for democracy's enemies.

The billion-dollar stakes of the crypto ecosystem have been uniquely generative for stress-testing experiments. Buterin writes, "Crypto is the ultimate training zone: if you can build something that can survive in this environment at scale,



it can probably also survive in the bigger world as well.<sup>77</sup> As this training zone develops, participants should be attentive to how their systems succeed not only in enabling functioning markets but also in achieving at least as much justice as the systems they are supposed to replace.

### DEMOCRATIC PLAY

I once attended a small party of Moloch slayers at a junkyard-themed venue in Colorado. Buterin was there, along with leading Ethereum entrepreneurs and a documentary director with a camera recording on and off. Conversation veered between stilted small talk and ferocious discussions on the merits of various blockchains. The evening didn't really seem to flow until, several hours in, the chess boards came out, side by side in a row, each with a clock next to it. I am not much of a player, so I watched as most others present took their places, and the room discovered an earlier elusive clarity of purpose.<sup>78</sup> It occurred to me that maybe the whole undertaking of crypto, for its architects, served the same function as a game of chess: an absorber of mental computational cycles for people otherwise bored by the normal world and a test of prowess among them. The blockchains beginning infiltrate high finance and pop culture, perhaps, were for the people building them only the latest fascinating game-board.

Then it would be no accident that Buterin has explained his affection for decentralized protocols with a story of teenage agony—when the centralized corporate owner of *World of Warcraft* issued a unilateral software update that messed up his progress.<sup>79</sup> Crypto communities frequently form on Discord, a social platform first developed for online gamers. The beating heart of a crypto Discord server is the meme channel, where members try to one-up each other with jokes and playful propaganda, only some of which make their way to the more public X and Reddit feeds. The quest to defeat Moloch, which I have so far treated as a kind of grand mythology, is also just another meme game.

Crypto would not be the only sort of high stakes politics to seem, if you squint your eyes just right, reducible to play. From the ball courts in ancient Mayan temple complexes to the partisan contests among political operatives in present-day elections, the playing of games is never far from the machinations of power. It happens that my first encounter with the classic treatise on play and culture, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, was as pre-reading for a conversation on governance among crypto enthusiasts.<sup>80</sup> *Homo Ludens* is a mighty feat of World War II-era European erudition, traversing a wide sweep of ancient history and colonial ethnography. Huizinga concludes that play, within rules set apart from other realms of life, is the engine from which culture arises and on which civilization depends. He traces the rituals of Indigenous societies that respond to harm without outright punishment, using dance, dress, and choreographed jousting to resolve what might otherwise be persistent cycles of revenge. Vestiges of such play persist in the scripted, costumed rituals of modern courts, although Huizinga finds that coercive

power and punishment have there supplanted most of the capacity for playful conflict resolution.<sup>81</sup> As the war against Nazism raged around him, Huizinga identified the fascists' mass rallies and goose-stepping as a sort of false play, not exploring human possibility but suppressing it.

Decades later, in the context of transformative justice, adrienne maree brown takes play a step further with the language of *pleasure*. She reminds fellow activists that struggle cannot be all serious and dutiful, that social change should revolve around what makes life nourishing, delicious, and erotic. "We all need and deserve pleasure," she writes, and "our social structures must reflect this."<sup>82</sup> Part of how oppression works, she observes, is by granting some people the privilege of enjoyment and denying it to others, whether through outright barriers to spaces of play or through impositions of shame.

The cases in this chapter involve dramatic differences in who has the privilege to play. Through speculative investment in their still-experimental technologies, crypto builders have been able to play with financial resources unavailable to activists in over-policed, under-resourced neighborhoods. Some sites of imagination have far more to work with than others. In a just society, all people should have pathways to play and the political possibilities that come with it. Demanding and protecting the right to play is a struggle to more fully self-govern.

Here, brown's fractals are at work again—the interweaving of everyday life and political power. Transformative justice has never been about just municipal police budgets; it begins and ends with people experiencing safety differently in their communities. Crypto, meanwhile, cannot be understood as merely a new class of digital assets; its value has always been bound up in the making of new mythologies and remixing old ones. In both imaginative worlds, play is a bridge between present institutions and future ones, between Tocqueville's "earth and heaven." Through play, people cultivate the political skills that the next evolution of democracy will require.

The political economist Vincent Ostrom, a twentieth-century disciple of Tocqueville, taught that citizenship is a sort of "artisanship," both art and science. Unlike a sculpted pot or statue, however, Ostrom noted that organizations are "artifacts that contain their own artisans."<sup>83</sup> The possibilities of organizational life are not to be found in universal laws but in the political imagination their participants allow themselves to have, and in the capacity to sneak imagination into practice.

This chapter has begun to chart a departure from the logics of implicit feudalism and homesteading with two very different case studies in mediated political imagination. Transformative justice and cryptoeconomics both challenge existing institutions through transcendent reference and immanent play. In so doing, participants have been able to explore democratic mediums still foreign to the reigning social infrastructure. From here, I turn to the preconditions and substrates that could make such practices much more widespread. How can communities gain the power they need over their online spaces to engage in democratic play?

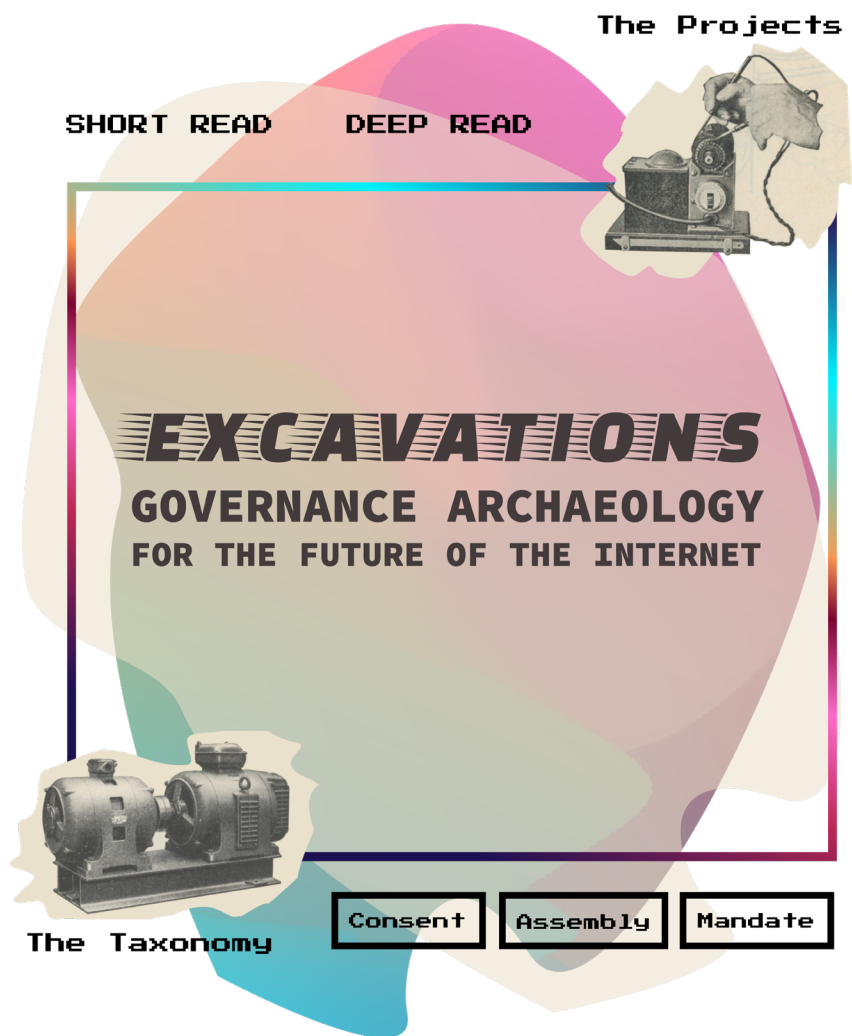


FIGURE 10.

## PROFILE

### Excavations

*excavations.digital*

*Excavations: Governance Archaeology for the Future of the Internet* is an online exhibition that presents work from a residency involving ten artists and collectives. The residency took place online during the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns, with artists located in many parts of the world. During the residency, they reflected together on the present and future of online governance, grounded in discussions about the long history of human societies. At the end, we exhibited *Excavations* at the United Nations Internet Governance Forum.

The residency coincided with the development of a database that collects historical, cross-cultural, collective governance practices, discussed in chapter 4. Conversations with the artists informed the design and interpretation of the database. In *Excavations*, the artworks appear with links to patterns in the database's preliminary taxonomy.

The New Delhi-based collective Barabar, for instance, developed a work of dystopian fiction called *The Rights Market* that imagines human rights available for purchase à la carte on a convenient app—echoing patterns in the database of “auction” and “consent.” Mateus Guzzo produced a diagram called *Public Audio*, a representation of the Brazilian media ecosystem inspired by Salvador Allende’s Project Cybersyn in 1970s Chile; it evoked historical patterns of “monitoring” and “positive reinforcement.” Haudenosaunee artist Amelia Winger-Bearskin worked on *SKY WORLD/CLOUD WORLD*, connecting cloud-based chatbot technology with Indigenous conceptions of honoring the sky, reflecting patterns such as “matriarchy” and “reparations.”

Many of the *Excavations* artists came to their work with a strong sense of ancestry—of obligation to ancestral lineages, both direct and adopted. This sensibility has helped inform our thinking surrounding the meaning and use of the database. If the database were simply another act of appropriation, the artists taught us, it should not exist at all. The information it contains must, rather, be an invitation and starting point for relationships, for accountability, for repair.