A Conversation with Alessandro Monsutti on his book "Homo Itinerans"

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https://soundcloud.com/allegra_lab/allegra-podcast-a-conversation-with-alessandro-monsutti

Alessandro Monsutti's last book "Homo Itinerans: La Planète des Afghans" came out in September last year, with Presses Universitaires de France and will soon be translated into English. This evocative book tells the story of Afghan migrations and the military-humanitarian apparatus that has accompanied the Afghan wars, from the perspective of the actors whom the anthropologist met during his various journeys to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, the US, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. In between a travel diary and a classic ethnography, it brings the voices of Afghans on the move, international experts, NGOs workers and military officers who together form the "transnational arena" of migration and humanitarian governance. In this podcast, Alessandro Monsutti, Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, discusses his book with Julie Billaud, an anthropologist and lecturer at the University of Sussex and author of *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan*.

Music: https://freesound.org/people/DRFX/sounds/338986/

Totalizing a Partial View

Jacob Hjortsberg
May, 2019

Bitcoin is the world's first and most successful digital currency. It is based on a protocol that was first proposed in a white paper authored under the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto – to date the identity of the author is still unknown. The main

technical problem that the paper solves is the so-called "double-spend problem", which up until that point had stood in the way of any decentralized digital currency. The problem is this: If money only exists as digital information in online bank accounts, what stops a person from spending the same amount of money twice? While physical money for obvious reasons makes that impossible, there is in principle nothing stopping digital money from simply being copied and added to two different accounts, at the same time. Nothing, after all, is ever "transferred". Therefore, a so-called "third trusted party" is needed to keep a ledger of all transactions that are made, to make sure that money is never spent twice. Usually, this is done by banks.

Bitcoin's revolutionary innovation is to do away with the need for a trusted third party. Instead of entrusting banks to keep private ledgers of all transactions that are made, Bitcoin operates a public ledger that is kept and maintained by all users collectively. So how does it avoid money being spent twice? This is where the Blockchain enters the picture. In order for a certain transaction to become a part of the public ledger – and thereby confirmed – it has to be bundled together with other transactions in what is called a "block".

Each new block is connected to the previous one, together forming a chain that goes back to the very first transactions ever made. The people who create blocks are called "miners", since the successful creation of new blocks releases new Bitcoin to its creator; this is how new Bitcoin are created.

The process of creating a new block, however, is not easy. Bundling together new transaction into a block results in the creation of a "hash", a specific value corresponding a) to the information contained in the new block and the one before it, and b) to a random number called a "nonce". The hash is the answer to a mathematical equation resulting from the combination of these two values (the blocks and the nonce), but the miners only have access to half the information and have to find out the nonce value on their own. Due to the complexity of the equation, the nonce can only be figured out by repeated guessing – often millions

of times.

The chance of figuring it out first, and thus being rewarded with the new Bitcoin that is given to the one updating the Blockchain, is therefore determined by the processing power of the miner's computers, and the system is set up in such a way that the more processing power is applied over the whole system in trying to guess the hash, the harder the equation gets – in general, it should take about ten minutes for a new block to be generated. When a new block is created, all other users can easily determine if it is valid, because while it is difficult to guess the nonce, it is easy to determine if it is correct – all one has to do is test if it results in the proper hash. When the validity of the new block has been confirmed, all miners start working on creating the next block in the chain, and so on. In this way, the system constantly produces a consensus regarding the current state of the ledger/Blockchain – a *single source of truth* that the whole system has agreed upon.

To a large extent, Bitcoin was developed in response to what was seen as the excessive power of central banks and governments to control currencies in their favour, specifically following the policies of the 2008 financial crisis when big financial banks were bailed out, leaving thousands of people in severe financial hardship. What many Bitcoin advocates argue is that, in a globalized world where digital currency is unavoidable, it should not be controlled by centralized institutions that have to be "trusted" not to misuse their power.

Trust, after all, signifies that the relation in question is open-ended, not governed by necessity but human will.

One very vocal supporter of Bitcoin, Stefan Molyneux, has for example argued that this technology, if implemented universally, will put an end to wars, as wars are financed through money printing by governments controlling fiat currencies – as a point in fact, he argues, the gold standard was abandoned in order to finance the Vietnam war. Therefore, a shift to peer-to-peer based decentralized currencies like Bitcoin, he claims, will once and for all put an end to oligarchic

money power, giving power back to the people.

Leaving aside the validity of these proclamations, it's interesting to note that Bitcoin in this way has a certain ideal-type vision of the free market written into its code. Whatever problems there might be with the free market, according to Bitcoin enthusiasts, those problems are understood to be external to the market logic itself – governments and central banks misusing or exploiting the "trust" that (unfortunately) have to be put in them in order to constitute market logic. Bitcoin solves this problem by replacing trust with cryptography. Typically missing from this picture, then, is class – by which I mean concentrations of wealth that arise out of market competition, but also undermine it. Instead, from the point of view of this technology, the "freedom" of market exchange is only ever subverted by excessive government control coming from the outside, and never concentrations of private wealth within the market system itself.

Now, while this particular vision of the free market is not new, and indeed has been debunked countless times – perhaps most powerfully by Polanyi and Marx – what's new about Bitcoin, it seems, is that it manages to turn this misrecognition of market logic into the only recognizable reality. That is, in seeking to realize "pure" market logic as envisioned by neoclassical theories – which according to Bitcoin advocates has always existed as something of a supressed reality – Bitcoin actually represents something entirely new: a market logic that is able to constitute itself. In this way, while the dichotomy between states and market has up until now only been a phantasmagorical projection from the partial point of view of markets, Bitcoin represents *a technological means of totalizing this projection as real*.

> *Rather unsurprisingly, Bitcoin has been unable to do away with private concentrations of money power. It has, however, transformed the ways in which such concentrations emerge, and how they are organized.*

Soon after Bitcoin was launched, individual miners realized that their chances of mining new Bitcoin would increase if they coordinated their computational power

into so-called mining pools. Most of the new Bitcoin that is mined today is mined by such pools, the majority of which operate from China where electricity is cheaper. Currently, no one mining pool controls the system (i.e. control more than 51% or more of the processing power), yet they have severely reduced the possibility for individual miners to update the Blockchain.

While Bitcoin has in this way not been able to avoid accumulated money-power from controlling large parts of the system, it has been able to severely reduce the possibility of anything resembling economic class struggle. For this reason, it might be worthwhile to consider what it is that Bitcoin actually replaces, or seeks to replace. I noticed that, for many of its advocates, the main point about Bitcoin is to get rid of the element of "trust" in maintaining market rule. On closer inspection, however, this appears like a rather dubious formulation.

Is the relation between banks and citizens really one of trust? The answer ultimately depends on what one means by the term. Still, it would seem that regardless of definition, if we say that we "trust" banks, we will have a different dynamic in mind than when we say that we trust our friends. In fact, we would have to refer to two quite opposite dynamics. On the one hand, when I say that I trust a friend, this means that our relation does not need to take the form of a contract; in fact, for most people, making a friend sign a contract would be taken as *a clear sign of mistrust*. With banks, the opposite goes. Our "trust" in them is purely contractual: we trust them not to break the contract that both of us are bound by.

> *From this point of view, I believe, a better way to understand the kind of shift that Bitcoin represents is as a shift from politics to necessity.*

Rather than trust, what Bitcoin removes is *the gap or tension that has previously existed between the logic of the market and the process of establishing it.* While market systems have previously always had to co-exist with a logic that defies its principles, Bitcoin allows the establishment of market logic to be a function of market logic itself. As we've seen, within Bitcoin, the continual establishment of

market logic, as well as the process of changing its rules, is a function of the same principles that govern market activity. Hence, while there has previously always existed a tension between the act of instituting markets and the logics of markets themselves, Bitcoin imagines a seamless relation between the two, in which money functions as its own constitution.

Still, what disappears in this process is not trust, I would argue, but rather the possibility of thinking about politics as distinct from economics. Instead of market logic being established through a process of political contingency and will – subject to various forms of collective and class based struggle based on conflict of interest (and not trust) – politics is reduced to the necessity of market logic as inscribed in the Blockchain source code.

This is interesting to note, as it speaks to a wider issue that seems to permeate many solution that go under the name "smart" – many of which are based on the same Blockchain technology as Bitcoin. This is *the fusion or integration of systems of law or rule with their actual implementation*. In Bitcoin, the integrity of money is not guaranteed by some external agency keeping track of all transaction – it is written into the money itself. What's further striking is that the Blockchain technology can be extended back to the physical world. This is the principle of the Internet of Things (IoT).

The Internet of Things

IoT has emerged as one of the most important areas of research within "smart city" planning. What it means is putting sensors on objects in the physical world, allowing them to communicate with each other, as well as whoever has control of the information that is generated by them. We are already surrounded by such objects; the swipe cards that we use to get onto the metro is one example. As IoT technology becomes increasingly applied in cities, however, more and more objects will be equipped with sensors that determine how they can be used, and by whom. 5G telecommunication networks are primarily set-up to enable this.

Within the IoT community, this has spawned a lot of discussion regarding the relation between safety and security, a new dichotomy that partly mirrors the one between markets and governments. The idea is that, while security in the smart city means putting sensors on everything in order to detect actions that might be deemed security threats, this will imply a breach of privacy as more people than those guilty of crimes will have their every movement surveyed.

Like the dichotomy between markets and governments, the basic problem with this formulation is that privacy and security are not necessarily opposed to each other.

It is not as if the more you privilege security, the more you automatically have to disregard people's privacy, nor vice versa. Instead, as many people within the smart city community actually acknowledge – typically without noticing how it clashes with the security/privacy dichotomy, however – the very lack of privacy that many security regimes involve might be a security problem in its own right, insofar as "the wrong people" might gain access to the surveillance apparatuses that are set up in order to "protect" people.

Likewise, the very notion that security is always a matter of surveillance, and thus naturally stands in opposition to privacy, forgets that surveillance may in many cases be experienced as a form of insecurity for the people being surveyed. After all, the meaning of "security" is not necessarily the same for those who are surveyed as it is for those doing the surveying – especially not in authoritarian states like China, which has unsurprisingly been very interested in "smart city" development. Hence, what any simple opposition between surveillance and privacy will inevitably hide is the fact that the relation between the two can never be understood outside of the particular social arrangement in which both surveillance and security take on specific meaning. Whether security and privacy are contradictory or versions of each other can therefore only ever be socially determined. From this point of view, the real problem that is emerging within the smart city landscape is not that it constantly has to weigh security concern

against privacy concerns, but that it seeks to resolve this issue in a technical rather than social/political way.

> *In the smart city, surveillance itself is largely becoming a matter of automation: for example, computers can now independently analyse video-feeds to determine whether or not someone or something is deemed a security threat.*

Privacy, here, simply becomes the flip side of the law, as it is codified in computer algorithms; it comes to represent the other side of the law-as-necessity. Still, what disappears here is not privacy, I think, but public life as we know it. If public life is ruled by security cameras that enforce the law through algorithms, there can never be any true social interaction, understood as open-ended relations between people whose perspective can never be more than imperfectly coordinated. After all, when law enforcement is automated, something different happens than when the production of, say, shoes is automated.

It loses something essential. Shoes were never essentially social; the law is a social relation. If its enforcement is automated, therefore, it becomes what it never was: a thing, a necessary logic that is codified not only in writing but also in its execution as an algorithm. It can no longer be negotiated, only followed or not followed (mirroring the binary logic of the algorithms that enforce it). Within such a regime, the fact that privacy is seen as the opposite of the law is only to be expected: if the only thing that protects us is the law, the only thing that is *not* the law is a private non-social individual. The notion that the only threat to this neat opposition is the danger of "wrong people" gaining access to surveillance information, is a point in fact – it is the end of politics as negotiation, replaced by the binary and absolute logics of zeroes and ones.

[Featured Image](#) by [Marco Verch](#) (flickr, [CC BY 2.0](#)).

The Financial Frontier is Hot #BitcoinDynamics

Quinn DuPont
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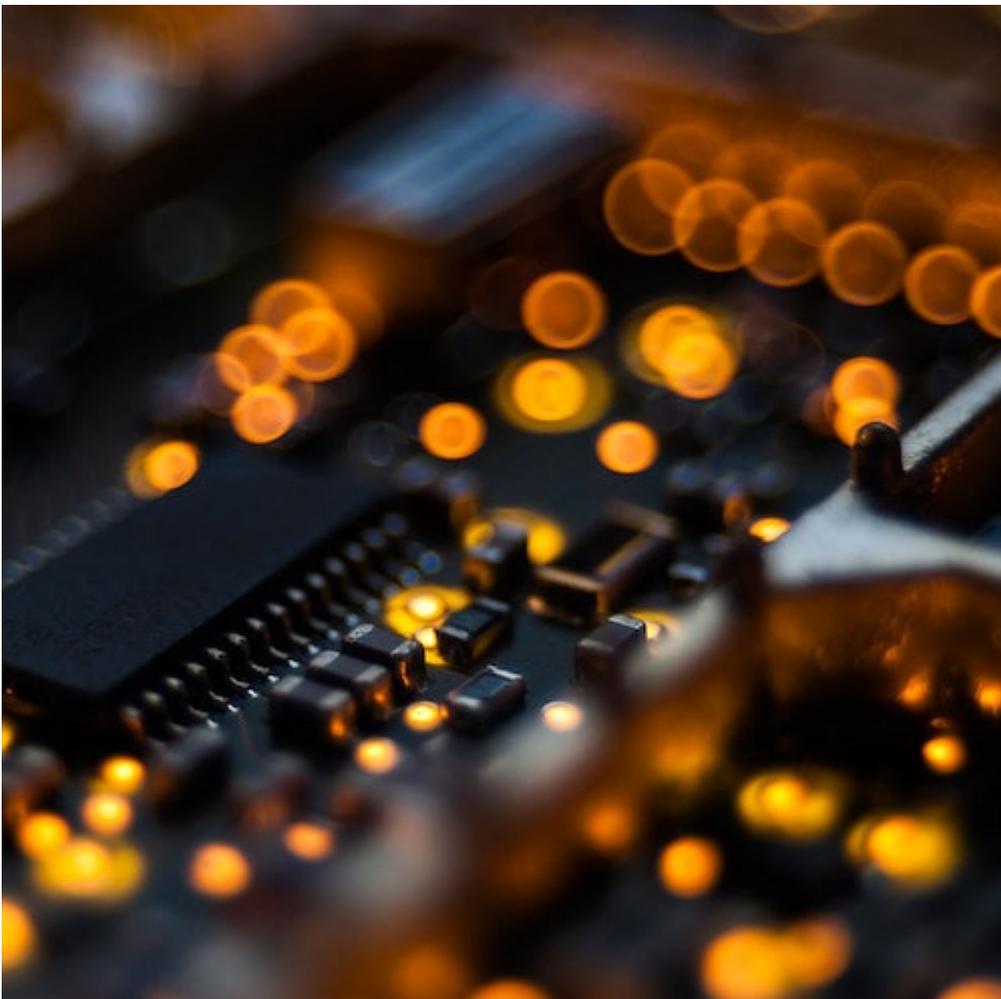
I started my journey with cryptocurrencies and blockchains as a Bitcoin miner in early 2013 (DuPont 2014). At the time there were few other ways to actually get Bitcoins, since online cryptocurrency exchanges were nascent and sketchy (and most proved fateful: early exchanges were hacked, bankrupted, or disappeared

with customer funds). If you lived in a major city, local meetups or Craigslist hookups were an option, but these had their own kind of unsavoriness. I had an incentive to mine too. I knew that mining used electricity, but my office at the University of Toronto came with "free" electricity. So, in Marshall McLuhan's old office in the historic Coach House in downtown Toronto, I set up an aging, 2008 Mac Pro workstation on a quest to mine Bitcoins. It felt right mining Bitcoins in McLuhan's old office—doing my part to produce new, blockchain media.

With the Mac Pro at full "office heater" speed, I set off for riches.

I was able to mine thirty thousand hashes per second with the central processing unit (CPU), a server-grade Intel Xeon chip. But this initial attempt was already out of date; as interest in Bitcoin had surged through 2013, CPU mining had become too slow to be practical. A few weeks later, my second attempt involved a new, midrange gaming graphics card that I bought for a few hundred dollars. Online research suggested that the AMD card I selected was ideal for Bitcoin mining, and a good compromise between price and performance. Plus, the card looked cool with its copper piping, edgy "gamer" graphics, and massive fan. With their 2.15 billion transistors, these cards were built for the demanding task of rendering millions of polygons for video games, but people quickly realized that they also excelled at running the SHA256 hash algorithm for Bitcoin mining. Using the graphics processing unit (GPU) on the card, with my second attempt I had transformed into a real wildcat Bitcoin miner. My machine was capable of turning out a respectable 350 million hashes per second.

Alas, my Bitcoin mining experiment did not last long. In the mining pool I had joined, I earned a half a Bitcoin, then valued at about US $10. Soon GPU mining was also too slow to be practical (even with free University of Toronto electricity). Specialized field-programmable gate array (FPGA) cards, once reserved for high performance supercomputing tasks, were becoming commercially available. These specialized cards did more with even less—their re-programmable chips stripped computing down to the very basics of crunching through hashes. But

even the era of FPGA mining was shortlived. Since Bitcoin mining was proving so lucrative, companies began fabricating tailor-made chips that were designed to do only one thing: run the SHA256 hash as fast as possible for the sole purpose of mining Bitcoin. These Application-Specific Integrated Circuits (ASICs) were soon at the cutting edge of chip design, using the smallest (and therefore most efficient) fabrication processes available and iterating the chip design dozens of times per year. Today, these are among the fastest and most efficient chips in the world.

My experience mining Bitcoin revealed that the "mining" metaphor is real. It was hot and used a lot of energy. Originally, the mining metaphor was a commentary on the metallist economic theories associated with Bitcoin (Maurer et al. 2013). Goldbugs loved that Bitcoin had a monetary cap and was scarce, so naturally the production process was called mining. But as my experience showed, it was not long before the metaphor took on a new meaning. Of course, computing has always had an important if underappreciated materiality. Reflecting on the parallels between early computing and Bitcoin mining, Finn Brunton (2015) writes, "as a practical matter, the work of computation is the work of managing heat." Brunton notes that the UNIVAC was hot and loud and that the EDVAC's 3,000 vacuum tubes required as much electricity for cooling as for operation. In hot Princeton summers the EDVAC facility resembled a ship's boiler room. Every computer since has had to deal with thermal management, from CPU bonding glue to my GPU's copper piping. Early wildcat Bitcoin miners complained about sweltering heat in the summers and the dangers of their ad hoc "fire trap" mining rigs (Gerard 2017). In the winter, miners enjoyed their money-making heaters. Once small-scale wildcat mining became too dangerous and unprofitable, Bitcoin mining shifted to industrial-scale operations in cool locales with cheap hydroelectric power, such as Iceland, Finland, Sweden, and the American Pacific Northwest (Brunton 2015). More recently, Bitcoin mining has shifted to China, where cheap, government-subsidized electricity from imported Australian coal is plentiful—and a serious environmental issue.

Zac Zimmer (2017) makes a comparison to the environmental impact and

exploitive labor practices of early modern silver mining at Potosí in colonial South America. At Potosí, wildcat surface mining using the *guayra* furnace quickly gave way to a mercury-laden process that ingested great swaths of the Cerro Rico mountain and left toxic tailings behind. The transition to industrial scale was required by Spanish colonists, who would not accept dwindling profits as the easy silver dried up; to improve profits further, the Spanish drafted indigenous laborers (*mita*). The clear parallel today can be found in China, with its massive Bitcoin mining facilities (one half of the ten largest Bitcoin mining pools are operated in China). The single dominant producer of Bitcoins in China is Bitmain, which fabricates and sells ASICs and runs its own mining facilities. At the end of 2017, Bitmain was directly responsible for 25 percent of all Bitcoin mining. The scale of Bitmain's operations are breathtaking: in a single mining facility in Ordos, China, Bitmain is responsible for 4 percent of global production. In the facility sit 21,000 mining machines in a constant state of upgrade and repair, serviced around the clock by workers who live on premises (a step up, in pay at least, from the early 2000s when young Chinese men worked long hours farming virtual gold in World of Warcraft; see Bronk, Monk, & Villasenor 2012). Each one of the 21,000 machines produce 14 trillion hashes per second from 189 ASICs. That's a boggling rate of computation. An identical story can be told at any of Bitmain's other facilities in China, or Bitfury's equally massive operations in the Republic of Georgia, or in rentable cloud mining facilities around the globe.

Zimmer (2017) argues that, just as the colonial Spanish terraformed South America, returning to metaphor, these Bitcoin mining facilities are "cryptoforming" the Internet.

There is no doubt that the environmental impact of Bitcoin mining is massive—the physical size of these facilities does not lie—but just how bad is it? In recent years the environmental impact of Bitcoin mining has become a hot-button issue within the community. With no clear way to accurately assess the electricity use or resources needed for Bitcoin mining, critics have offered measurements that highlight waste and environmental impact. It has been suggested that Bitcoin

mining uses more electricity than Iceland (17 TWh), Ireland (24 TWh), or Denmark (32 TWh) (2014 figures) (T. B. Lee 2017; O'Dwyer & Malone 2014). One estimate taking into consideration a range of factors pegs Bitcoin's electricity consumption at 44 TWh in early 2018 ("Bitcoin Energy Consumption Index," n.d.). Another posits that Bitcoin might use more electricity than electric cars (Loh & Tomesco 2018), or that a single Bitcoin transaction uses more electricity than the average American house in a week (Malmo 2017). But supporters fire back. They point out that traditional money and payment systems use electricity too: to keep the lights on in banks, to melt coins, to run ATMs and point of sales machines, and so on. They also critique the math used by the critics. One thorough debunking pegs the lower bounds for the electricity consumption of Bitcoin at "only" 2.85 TWh in March 2017 (one-sixth of Iceland's electricity consumption). When the next market run on Bitcoin occurs, it is likely that Bitcoin electricity consumption will increase by several factors, putting it back in striking range of Iceland's consumption, or worse.

Cryptocurrencies are wasteful for two reasons: 1) distributed and replicated transactions are redundant, and 2) the mining difficulty that correlates to price is an arbitrary activity and purposefully wasteful (as the price rises, miners are incentivized to increase their capital input).

The first, the waste caused by redundancy in cryptocurrency infrastructure, is comparatively miniscule. This is also why the energy-use defense mounted by Bitcoin advocates runs hollow; the electricity needed to run a brick and mortar bank or maintain redundant financial transactions across the globe is a rounding error in the face of "useless" proof-of-work mining. The second, the waste caused by mining, is key to the design of proof-of-work mining and is therefore an unavoidable and morally reprehensible ecological travesty. Unfortunately (for the global environment), the proof-of-work consensus protocol is responsible for features essential to the system: incentivizing transaction validation, issuing tokens, securing the network, preventing spam, and so on. For cryptocurrencies using the proof-of-work consensus protocol, wasteful mining is a necessary

consequence. Put simply, there is no Bitcoin without massive energy use and environmental impact.

In any manufacturing environment (virtual or not), optimization and specialization tend towards industrialization. In hindsight, it should have been obvious to everyone that Bitcoin's unique manufacturing process would end up with acres of specialized machines burning dirty coal, but at the time, the vision was wildcat mining. Much like the dedicated software developers working for free to code open source software, the hope was that interested people would fire up mining software on their home computers. These miners would be building the infrastructure of a new kind of decentralized money, and rewarded a little for their time, effort, and electricity bill. As my mining experience made clear, however, it wasn't long before this dream faded. The success of Bitcoin meant that real money could be made, which kicked off a rapid process of innovation and capital investment. Unlike typical innovation spirals, the product that resulted was so specialized and under so much competitive pressure that obsolescence was an innate feature. Today, with rapidly plunging Bitcoin prices the opposite has occurred: it no longer makes sense to keep older-model mining equipment running, so now those acres of machines are heading to the landfill.

There are, however, less wasteful alternatives. Bitcoin uses a proof-of-work mining algorithm called "scrypt," which is particularly susceptible to optimization and specialization. Even though ASICs are vastly more energy efficient than CPUs and GPUs (in terms of hashes per joule), their specialized nature has created perverse incentive dynamics in the cryptocurrency mining industry. Other proof-of-work mining algorithms attempt to prevent industrialization (and the centralization that comes with it) by making mining a general-purpose computing problem, which cannot be optimized. For instance, Ethereum's ethash mining algorithm requires significant memory, unlike Bitcoin's scrypt algorithm, so lean ASICs cannot compete. To mine Ethereum today, the best hardware is a beefy video card with a fast GPU and plenty of memory (until optimized hardware—already rumored to exist—is developed).

Because of the diversity of other cryptocurrencies that can be mined using commercially available, desktop hardware, wildcat mining has returned to the fringes of cryptocurrencies. This too, however, has had perverse and unexpected effects. Through 2017 and 2018 wildcat mining of "alt coins" became so prevalent that GPU manufactures could not produce cards quickly enough to satisfy market demand. Consequently, the gamers who traditionally purchase these high-end cards complained about empty shelves and rising prices. Gamers were being priced out by the voracious demand of cryptocurrency miners.

But just a year later, with crashing prices in 2019, these same machines are being scrapped or sold on secondary markets, since it is no longer profitable to run them (in the market for a well-used graphics card?).

Ultimately, wildcat mining is still wasteful, so alternative proof-of-work mining algorithms do not fix the environmental issue. The only real solution (short of prices dropping and staying at a level that makes industrial mining unattractive) is a move away from the inherently wasteful proof-of-work algorithm. There are a few proposals for alternative consensus protocols that keep the network secure without wasteful mining. Intel's proof-of-elapsed-time technique skips the wasteful work requirement and focuses on the true goal of consensus mechanisms, of making computation take time. Using this consensus protocol, the lottery system relies on the secure computing environment provided by tamper-resistant Intel chips. The downside is that the protocol is vendor-specific.

A more ambitious alternative consensus protocol is being developed by the Ethereum community. Instead of relying on computational work or special hardware, Ethereum is attempting to develop a game-theoretical solution known as proof of stake (dubbed "Casper"). On this model, consensus and security are achieved by requiring miners to make a "stake" in the network—by putting money (ethers) on the line, miners are disincentivized to cheat (if caught cheating they lose their stake). The challenge for the proof of stake consensus model is that it is not really an engineering challenge. Proof of stake requires getting right a

complex set of human and social motivations and behaviors. A version of this approach has already been deployed for closed networks with known participants that have existing relationships of trust (Ripple, for example, relies on a reputational model to accomplish consensus and honesty among corporate partners), but it is not yet clear that a general solution for open networks is possible. Until this next generation technology arrives, and we've somehow figured out the complex set of social incentives and prohibitions, the dreams of the monetary revolution will remain a hot nightmare.

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HODL, Patiently: On Vice and Virtue in the World of Bitcoin #BitcoinDynamics

Matan Shapiro
May, 2019

On 18 of December 2013, amid another nerve-wrecking drop in the Bitcoin price, a pseudonymous user called GameKyuubi published a post on the Bitcoin Talk online forum titled 'I AM HODLING'. He wrote:

I typed that tyitle twice because I knew it was wrong the first time. Still wrong. w/e. GF's out at a lesbian bar, BTC crashing WHY AM I HOLDING? I'LL TELL YOU WHY. It's because I'm a bad trader and I KNOW I'M A BAD TRADER. Yeah you good traders can spot the highs and the lows pit pat piffy

wing wong wang just like that and make a millino bucks sure no problem bro. Likewise the weak hands are like OH NO IT'S GOING DOWN I'M GONNA SELL he he he and then they're like OH GOD MY ASSHOLE when the SMART traders who KNOW WHAT THE FUCK THEY'RE DOING buy back in but you know what? I'm not part of that group. When the traders buy back in I'm already part of the market capital so GUESS WHO YOU'RE CHEATING day traders NOT ME~! Those taunt threads saying "OHH YOU SHOULD HAVE SOLD" YEAH NO SHIT. NO SHIT I SHOULD HAVE SOLD. I SHOULD HAVE SOLD MOMENTS BEFORE EVERY SELL AND BOUGHT MOMENTS BEFORE EVERY BUY BUT YOU KNOW WHAT NOT EVERYBODY IS AS COOL AS YOU. You only sell in a bear market if you are a good day trader or an illusioned noob. The people inbetween hold. In a zero-sum game such as this, traders can only take your money if you sell. so i've had some whiskey. actually on the bottle it's spelled whisky. w/e. sue me. (but only if it's payable in BTC)[1]. [sic]

Although the author was admittedly drunk, online respondents immediately praised his creative use of the typo error HODL. One of them, for example, posted a meme bearing the fiercely defiant face of actor Gerard Butler's lead role in the 2006 Walt Disney historical-fantasy epic "300". Butler holds his sword firmly as he rages a scream, his face scarred and bloody, behind him piles of dead Spartan soldiers and in front the inscription "HODLING" postfixed with three exclamation marks. The logic was clear: the longer you HODL – despite difficulties, temptations, fears and other inhibitions – the richer you will become in the future.

The term HODL has thus quickly become iconic in the global Bitcoin community, ultimately turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy about the benefits of keeping your Bitcoin rather than spending or selling for quick profits in the wild cryptocurrency boom and bust cycles.

After all, the Bitcoin value against the Dollar has surged exponentially since the post was written in the end of 2013, rising about 10 folds. By 2018 successful HODLers have consequently capitalized on their investments and in some cases

even became 'crypto-millionaires'. Building on this dynamic, prominent analysts, early-adopters and cryptocurrency gurus still routinely advise Bitcoin enthusiasts across the globe to 'HODL'. For them, it is a crucial step in the coming into being of what they call 'the New Decentralized Economy' (Nelms et al. 2018: 24-26).

In this post, however, I would like to complicate this picture slightly and argue that more than a mere investment strategy, the notion of HODLing among contemporary Bitcoinners increasingly becomes a crucial virtue that informs both the ideal-type image of a Bitcoin holder/user (who 'lives' the cryptocurrency vision in their everyday life) and the greater egalitarian values that undergird the future emergence of a properly 'decentralized' social organization in the global Bitcoin community at large. I base this argument on fieldwork I have been conducting for the last 14 months at [the Bitcoin Embassy](#) in Tel Aviv, Israel – a social club for Bitcoin enthusiasts which is collectively owned and managed by a group of Bitcoin early adopters, most of them members of the Israeli Bitcoin Association.

Vice

As it has already become clear, HODLING in the Bitcoin world reflects the desire that Bitcoin will one day become an alternative to the state-sponsored 'fiat' monetary system. This includes two potential scenarios: (1) that Bitcoin will be regularized as a means of exchange and become a widely accepted financial technology for payment; or (2) that Bitcoin will become an unprecedented store of value, 'going to the moon' as the slang goes, consequently acting like a precious metal (cf. Swartz 2018).

Precisely because HODL is a future-oriented practice it nonetheless remains a paradox: while many of the core Bitcoin enthusiasts across the globe have initially purchased the currency to liberate themselves from intermediaries, third-parties and the Big Other more generally, they are still largely 'stuck' with assets they cannot realize. Their economic autonomy thereby remains contingent on hazy

potentialities, as well as the necessity to receive salaries in and pay for services with 'centralized' fiat money. Somewhat surprisingly, my friends and interlocutors at the Bitcoin Embassy in Tel Aviv disagreed with this assertion.

Nissim, for example, a prominent member of the Israeli Bitcoin community, has once told me in an interview:

> *Holding Bitcoin is not about being stuck, it's about being patient… If you have money and put it in the bank and it accumulates interest, you keep it for your own needs. But you don't spend all of it at once. You also put it in a savings account. Bitcoin says (sic) that instead of putting your money in the bank and get one percent, or a quarter of percent for a year or whatever, here you become your own bank. This relates to HODLING – if you don't need the money immediately, why spend it?*

> *And yet, HODLING is not an easy game precisely because it is an act marred by vices and temptations.*

Every person involved in Bitcoin sociality – as a trader, programmer, investor, tech 'evangelist' or otherwise – is familiar with stories about people who compromised their HODL and lost money as a result. One famous scenario is that of persons spending too much Bitcoin in the early days on the Dark Net to buy drugs. Another common story is about people selling out all their holdings when the Bitcoin value was priced under two thousand dollars, only to bitterly regret this as it jumped to incredibly high values just a year or two later. And of course there are plenty of reminders about people trying to make money by betting on trends, trying to sell high and buy low, but nevertheless fall in the market manipulations of bigger 'whales' and end up in deficit. In all these cases the simple conclusion is that one must consciously overcome temptations to make a quick momentary profit or to satisfy some other Dionysian whim by practicing caution and continence. A research interlocutor called Nathan said:

HODLING is a restriction you put on yourself, it's not an external force that

stands in your way to spending... but the meaning behind it is that you avoid from commerce, you are not going to compete against sharks with lots of money that shake the market, you believe in the long-term value and just hold, you don't get into this game. Restricting oneself while waiting for the long-term value to justify spending can consequently also result in growing frustration. Those who break down and sell out thereby seek to actively 'unstuck' themselves in the pursuit of movement and emotional alleviation, which liberate you from the significant stress associated with waiting to an event that may happen in the future, and may not. The threat from the backstage here is a sudden and quick collapse of the value of Bitcoin, which in some cases may be as severe as bankruptcy, a 'run to the bank' or a 2008-style sub-prime market collapse.

For example, when in February 2018 Bitcoin had dropped sharply from an All Time High of nearly 20 thousand dollars in December 2017 to less than six thousand, some analysts were speculating an inevitable crash. Ariel, a research interlocutor from Tel Aviv, called me one day saying he is under 'a serious FUD (Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt) attack' and is considering selling everything he has. 'If Bitcoin crashes it means losing a lot of money', he gasped, 'and when I say a lot I mean a lot of money'.

Although Ariel did not sell out he did find some creative ways to keep HODLING while nevertheless reducing his risk factors, such as, for example, transferring fragments of bitcoin ('Satoshis') for people who would pay his utility bills in fiat. When the 'FUD attack' passed, he nonetheless returned to a more traditional HODL position. By practicing continence Ariel ultimately managed to calm himself down and remain patient. Nissim said:

> *What is HODLING? It means you have money. But it doesn't mean that because you have money you're going to buy a Rolls Royce and drive around town, even if you can. This is because it [Bitcoin] doesn't tell you to show yourself and how much you've got. HODLING... means that you don't have to waste you money away just because you have it [in your pocket]... [and because the Bitcoin value will only rise] this money is not static, its dynamic,*

as opposed to fiat, in which you can't make any profit at all in recent years. The real meaning of being stuck is in the Matrix world.

Virtue

For some of my research interlocutors at the Bitcoin Embassy in Tel Aviv, HODLING then becomes an ongoing test through which you can keep your vices in plain sight and learn to control them.

In that sense HODLING requires virtuous control and responsibility at the personal level, which, at the collective level, communicates fidelity (or even loyalty) to Satoshi Nakamoto's (2008: 1) economic and political vision to create an 'electronic payment system based on cryptographic proof instead of trust, allowing any two willing parties to transact directly with each other without the need for a trusted third party'.

Under these conditions HODLing is no longer regarded a passive inhabitation for the Bitcoin dream to come about, but, rather forcefully, an *active* form of cash-flow management which makes this dream realizable in the first place. Nissim's quote concerning the crucial role of patience in fact explicitly refers to 'patience' not in the narrow technical sense as mere passive 'waiting'; but as a dynamic process rooted in the active acquisition of knowledge, self-confidence and virtuous personality. It is a quest for self-improvement through which one can learns about onself and the world around, pragmatically practicing the concrete, grounded, vernacular implications of being your own bank. And for Nissim all this is a form of spiritual edgework. He said:

Bitcoin gives you the tools to improve and upgrade your internal being as a person. Only the person who understands he has an internal essence, and understands he is walking in a path, can do that. Bitcoin as a system is about filtering. Not every person is capable of studying the Torah, so in the same

way not every person can deal with Bitcoin. If you put a kipah on the head so that people will say that you are religious and you say 'believe me that I am religious because I bought this kipah for a 1000 shekels' it's not enough. Religion is something you must use, a spade with which you dig [rather than show off]... HODLING [consequently] means freezing the material dimension in your thinking... HODLING guides you in putting the money aside, [so that] it will do what it can do for itself [i.e. grow in value], while you will be dealing with the important things in life, which is solving your own problems and [developing] your own skills, [investing] in your own actions that are sublime, those refined things you want to achieve as a human being....

Nissim's powerfully claims that you can only realize the deep meaning of Bitcoin when you HODL for prolonged periods of time despite periodic value drops or gains. Going beyond narrow economism, for him HODLing ultimately consists in practicing self-discipline both during recurrent instances of Fear, Uncertainty and Doubts (FUDs) in the market *and* through the collective euphoria that prevails when the market achieves new All Times Highs.

Within these terms an exercise of patience through HODLING facilitates the strength and fortitude necessary in order to endure difficult situations in life at large, as well as the process of personal development and self-improvement that comes with such endurance.

It is an active, dynamic process, which requires discipline, attention and even some sense of inner peace. Patience here also gives time, literally, to appreciate the collective aspirations that unite people in the Bitcoin vision, namely, the 'decentralized' sociality they promulgate as this manifests in a radical message about freedom from intermediaries and the emphasis on mutuality, communication, exchange, transaction and cooperation through peer-to-peer relationships that always primarily incentivize personal responsibility and the protection of individual boundaries.

Conclusion

It is widely accepted these days to think of technological innovation in terms of acceleration and exponentiality, which lead to entropy. Things become faster, we are told, processes get shorter, contemporary technologies quickly becoming obsolete in the face of rapid invention and the power of new solutions. Virtuous HODLing among Bitcoin enthusiasts advocates a different perspective concerning the use and practice of contemporary financial technologies, one which favours slowness, waiting, and even a measure of conservativism.

Many die-hard HODLers, for example, vehemently oppose the various 'forks' in the Bitcoin protocol – a term used to relate to the establishment of a new blockchain with a new currency that 'forked' from the main Bitcoin blockchain – because they think that solutions must come from within the community in a slow process of error and trial sustained by an open and transparent debate. Absolving the protocol in order to create a new one is immediately associated with abruptness, impatience, and even some form of greed, all of which are considered un-HODLer acts that Bitcoin enthusiasts associate with fiat and with 'scams'.

Within this emphasis on caution and slowness, the virtual end of a HODLING era is a contingency, a known event in an unknown future, which means it is present even before it actually happens. In this context being stuck with assets you are yet unable to realize turns into a process of ontological calibration and personal improvement that undergirds the emergence of a new crypto-libertarian social order.

HODLING is therefore more than just a means to an end. The dynamics of HODLing requires constant restriction and calculations by which you practice control and self-discipline, and therefore an end in itself for the coming into being of a decentralized sociality mediated by cryptocurrencies rather than fiat money. HODLers thereby resist the view of themselves as 'being stuck' by emphasizing meaning, intention, virtue and a transformation of rhythm. On these terms, HODLing is conceptualized as a form of work much like trading, although in a complete binary opposition: while profit from trading is ultimately realized in fiat,

profit from HODLING is done in crypto.

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[1] https://bitcointalk.org/index.php?topic=375643.0

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#BitcoinDynamics: The Rhythms, Dynamics and Virtues of Bitcoin

Matan Shapiro
May, 2019

The Bitcoin Blockchain

In October 2008, a person or group of people using the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto distributed online a paper titled 'Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System'. The document describes a network of interconnected computers (or: nodes), which automatically monitor each other in real time. They thus *decentralize* the auditing power of any single 'trusted third parties' (such as banks, tax authorities and credit card companies). The algorithmic codes that govern the operation of this system are openly exposed to the public so that it may be verified and maintained by a multitude of unrelated individual actors.

This feature is described as '*trustlessness*', i.e., one does not need to trust a single owner or stakeholder. Bitcoin enthusiasts around the world claim that this mesh

of multiple interacting nodes successfully overcomes any human bias, misjudgment or corrupting vices that may appear in a 'centralized' bureaucratic system. These principles – decentralization and trustlessness – enable the functioning of a new form of digital money that is not subjected to the whims of any single issuing sovereign. Satoshi, as Bitcoin enthusiasts have come to call him/them through the years, dubbed this money as 'Bitcoin'.

While Satoshi used the term 'chain of blocks' to describe Bitcoin's underlying operation system, it soon became known as *the blockchain*. Strange-sounding at first, this term is in fact quite logical: every 10 minutes the systems seals with a permanent time-stamp a virtual 'block', which contains a record of the entire transactions made between individual nodes, including the amounts that were sent and the virtual addresses or accounts that these nodes used. As opposed to ledgers that are stored on one central hub, the blockchain enables all individual nodes to register and monitor the transactions in real time while verifying and 'agreeing' between them which of these transaction is false or fraudulent and which is honest.

Consequently, the data recorded in every block cannot be altered without that being noticed by all other nodes, and scrutinized. In parallel, these nodes also 'compete' between them to solve a complicated cryptographic code, which conceals a set number of coins that will be awarded to the finder upon successful decryption. Every new block the system creates thus contains both the details of all the transactions that were done in the last 10 minutes and these new coins. Once a block is signed it is immediately linked to a chain of all previous blocks created beforehand, all the way back to the first block that Satoshi produced on January 3rd 2009, which bitcoin enthusiasts mythically call 'the Genesis Block'.

Genesis

'Genesis' is not just a fancy metaphor. Bitcoin enthusiasts all around the world

think of the first-ever block in the Bitcoin blockchain as a first step in the direction of a forthcoming decentralized and trustless future. This is so because the encrypted signature of this block – 000000000019d6689c085ae165831e934ff763ae46a2a6c172b3f1b60a8ce26f – concealed the following inscription: *'The Times 03/Jan/2009 Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks'*.

It is thus generally agreed that Satoshi's choice to mention the main headline from *The Times* of London is a clear political statement aimed at rebuking and negating the occasional crashes and resulting governmental bailouts intrinsic to the precarious fractional reserve banking system. Satoshi's clever use of encryption in the 'Genesis Block' is consequently taken as a literal prophecy, which predicts the coming into being of a fairer and more egalitarian society that will decentralize the power of contemporary economic and political institutions by replacing 'mediated' relationships with 'frictionless' peer-to-peer (P2P) monetary relations.

There are probably millions of Bitcoinners around the world who explicitly and self-consciously attempt to implement this vision of unmediated sociality not only when they trade Bitcoin online but also in their everyday lives. For example, my interlocutors at the Bitcoin Embassy in Tel Aviv – most of whom early adaptors who declare they seek the 'decentralization of power' in Israeli society through the widespread adoption of cryptographic monetary systems – run an organization that has no boss or formal leadership, wherein work is considered voluntary and responsibility is distributed among members ad hoc in accordance with the changing goals and challenges.

Lacking intermediary levels of hierarchy or a chain of command, mediation in such an organization is arguably smoother than that we might find in 'centralized' bureaucratic organizations that rely on specialized work force with predefined roles (think of a bank, for example). Arguably, my interlocutors claim, a Brave New World will slowly emerge from the everyday practice of Bitcoin. Yaron, an interlocutor from Tel Aviv, explained why in an online interview he recorded in

2014:

Why is Bitcoin good as a substitute for money and gold? Let's start with the fact that it doesn't have a sovereign...[and] no central body... [instead,] there is... a wonderful internet ore, and/or an international freedom language that overrides boundaries and shatters the sovereign, or/and the Prophet Moses of the Third Millennia who will undoubtedly liberate us from Pharaoh... Bitcoin does not redistribute the chips on the table but it does straighten the table up. It will not bring an end to poverty and injustice in the world, but it will bring to the fall the abhorrent [financial] barriers and the profit of the few – banks, big-brother, weapon industries, a sovereign, a crazy apparatus – which rapes humanity by [instituting] borders and wars and rules and separating [people].

The Middle-Ground

But the scope of this 'decentralized', 'trustless' and frictionless social order is limited. Unless they physically dislocate to live in isolated communities that experiment with new blockchain-based applications for the governance of society (e.g. Liberstad project in Norway https://www.liberstad.com/), Bitcoin enthusiasts continue to live in a finite, enclosed and hierarchic world defined by third-party mediation. Evidently, even truthful intimate connections premised on immediate trust and emotional connectivity – such as close friendships and kinship relations – are always mediated by other relations that validate them (parents wouldn't relate to each other the same way if they didn't have children together).

In addition, it is notoriously difficult to escape a multiplicity of bureaucratic state apparatuses that impose judicial, economic and moral restrictions on most interactions and relationships in society. My interlocutors in Tel Aviv, like most Bitcoin enthusiasts around the world, ultimately cannot totally self-alienate themselves from what they call 'the old economy' (which is based on state-regulated fiat money) precisely because they are dependent on fiat cash flow *all the time*. Living and working at the heart of Tel Aviv, they receive salary, pay

rent, and buy groceries in state-regulated Shekels.

Contributing in/being part of the Bitcoin vision always in that sense involves a regular back and forth motion, which tilts between fiat and crypto.

People who enter the Bitcoin world are forced to master the art of making-do in a border-zone that includes elements of both sides which it separates, living in a somewhat murky middle-ground between a 'centralized' mode of socioeconomic organization and its 'decentralized' crypto-alternative.

As Nissim, a research interlocutor from Tel Aviv, once told me:

We are in a transition period. Of course the idea is to live in the new world [of unmediated Peer-to-peer transactions] ... But everyday life dictates the rhythm of this transition, you intuitively identify the objectives you want to advance and act on them. It's a no-man's-land, but it is simultaneously also very dynamic. You aim for a target but you act as if it's not there. The inner feeling itself creates the way [forward]. You just need to listen to it. The idea of a middle is true for today but when the concept [of Bitcoin as a global currency] will mature, only then, freedom of action [...] will be synchronized with the truth. And when the truth is active, progress is unstoppable and its results are immense.

The middle-ground is continuously created through the ongoing tension existing between actions that take place in the so-called 'old' capitalist notion of mediated transactions and actions that take place in a 'new' so-called 'frictionless' flow of capital in decentralized cryptocurrency contexts. For Nissim, such tension is nothing less than a battle between good and evil.

But until the idea matures, as he says, he must accommodate both these practical worlds simultaneously, one leg in crypto and the other in fiat, always inhabiting a liminal position with respect to established perspectives on hierarchy, property, liberty, governance, citizenship and money in the wider society. Liminality is here

a continuous situation rather than a temporary anti-structural position, an ongoing state of instability at the heart of the capitalist order that transmits itself in the actions and choices of its human carriers.

Dynamics in the Middle

There are two distinct, yet mutually inclusive, market dynamics that define the emerging cryptocurrency economy in the middle-ground. The first is the dynamic of state regulatory practices, which tends to be slow, hesitant and conservative, to the extent that it sometimes evokes a sense of deliberate leg-dragging. As long as cryptocurrencies – especially Bitcoin – remain unregulated, they continue to function outside the dominant economic system and in nominal opposition to it.

The Second is the dynamic fluctuations of supply, demand and value-making in the cryptocurrency 'eco-system' itself, which tends to be rapid, radical and unpredictable. This sense of impending and ongoing danger of a sudden devaluation or impending crash has notoriously reinforced a mythical Wild-West stereotype in the popular imagination about the cryptocurrency scene, along with its adjacent hyper-masculine key symbols (e.g. the images of the self-sufficient Lone Ranger, Cowboy or Outlaw versus the corrupt Sheriff and the biased Big Other of centralized governments, widely defined).

Cryptocurrency enthusiasts, especially those pertaining to the vibrant Bitcoin global community, are directly exposed to and play upon these simultaneous processes and imaginaries in their everyday lives, both on- and off-line, as they attempt to survive in the middle ground: on the one hand they must continue to hold and trade Bitcoin, but on the other hand they must keep checking the pulse to avoid a crypto-crash. The tension between 'centralized' and 'decentralized' imaginaries of social organization is in that sense intimately experiential and an embodied phenomenon.

#BitcoinDynamics

In this week's thematic thread, we reflect on the social dynamics and rhythms of living in this emerging decentralized middle-ground. My own article analyses a market strategy that Bitcoin enthusiasts call 'HODL', which mainly consists in 'holding' your coins for as long as possible while avoiding the uncertainty of online trading.

Quinn DuPont's excerpt from his recently published book *Cryptocurrencies and Blockchains* (Polity, 2018) traces the dynamic of his own gradual immersion in the cryptocurrency world as a Bitcoin miner – an active participant in the maintenance of the Bitcoin blockchain – which then informs an up-to-date analysis of the infrastructural dynamics that undergird the cryptocurrency world at large.

Jacob Hjortsberg's contribution provides an acute critique of the dynamic of decentralization in Bitcoin by highlighting the notion of class and a 'politics of necessity', both of which for him relate directly to surveillance and the emergence of tyrannical contemporary powers around the world, beginning from the Blockchain, through the Internet of Things (IoT) to the Police State of the 21st Century.

Should we look at contemporary Bitcoinners as radical dissidents or simply as committed mavericks – that is, as people who are deeply rooted at the heart of the social and economic system which they ostensibly reject, and within which they are trying to assert their own autonomy? Do cryptocurrency enthusiasts in the middle-ground successfully instantiate a real alternative to the problems, shortcomings and instabilities that characterize the current state of capital accumulation and expansion around the globe? Or maybe their frequent zig-zag between crypto and fiat in fact accelerates some of the most destructive elements that undergird the dominant fractional reserve banking system, such as rapid value fluctuations and the concentration of financial power at the hands of few 'early adopters' and stakeholders?

Rather than offer clear answers to these questions, we hope that the three

analyses presented this week will inspire a lively anthropological debate on decentralization, 'trustlessness' and the liminal dynamics of the middle-ground.

Featured image: Marco Verch (flicker, CC BY 2.0)

# Call for Reviews: Gender & Sexuality – Contesting White Heteronormativity

Allegra
May, 2019

Political developments in many parts of the world today call us to challenge the forces that thrive on fascism, racism, anti-genderism, and the collapse of humanities. The books on this list do just that: These ethnographies and studies of Europe, the United States, and Australia present multiple realities that contest white heteronormativity. The list consists of books that explore the intersections of race, gender, sex and class from multiple perspectives. These studies deconstruct heteronormative practices, analyse non-normative identity construction among communities of queer people and black mothers, and engage critically with social media in the process of identity construction. We have also included books that uncover new forms of solidarity and usages of intersectionality in feminist research.

How to proceed:

As we receive many requests for reviews, please send an email to reviews@allegralaboratory.net indicating which book you would like to review, your postal address, and 2-3 sentences explaining why you should be reviewing the book. Please explain how the book relates to your own research or interests. We will get back to you once we have selected the reviewers.
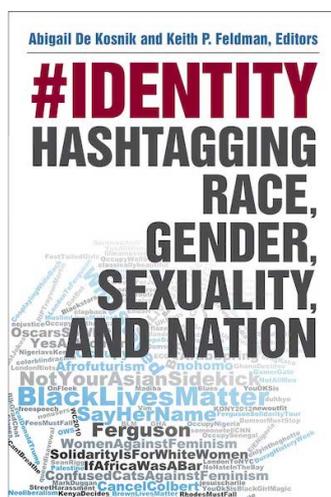
#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation. **Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman (eds.). University of Michigan Press.**

Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has served as a major platform for political performance, social justice activism, and large-scale public debates over race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationality. It has empowered minoritarian groups to organize protests, articulate often-underrepresented perspectives, and form community. It has also spread hashtags that have been used to bully and silence women, people of color, and LGBTQ people.

#identity is among the first scholarly books to address the positive and negative effects of Twitter on our contemporary world. Hailing from diverse scholarly fields, all contributors are affiliated with The Color of New Media, a scholarly collective based at the University of California, Berkeley. The Color of New Media explores the intersections of new media studies, critical race theory, gender and women's studies, and postcolonial studies. The essays in *#identity* consider topics such as the social justice movements organized through #BlackLivesMatter, #Ferguson, and #SayHerName; the controversies around #WhyIStayed and

#CancelColbert; Twitter use in India and Africa; the integration of hashtags such as #nohomo and #onfleek that have become part of everyday online vernacular; and other ways in which Twitter has been used by, for, and against women, people of color, LGBTQ, and Global South communities. Collectively, the essays in this volume offer a critically interdisciplinary view of how and why social media has been at the heart of US and global political discourse for over a decade.

Frank G. Karioris. 2018. *[An Education in Sexuality and Sociality Heteronormativity on Campus.](#)* Rowman and Littlefield.

While hook-up culture on university campuses represents a part of the story, it is only *part* of the story. It is important to add to this and investigate the way the university itself brokers and seeks out specific forms of sexuality, sex, and connection amongst students. This book sheds light on how the university as an institution endorses certain forms of sociality, sexuality, and coupling, while excluding others. Building on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, this book furthers the discussion on the impact these institutional measures have on students, and how students work through and around them – while simultaneously establishing relations outside of and beyond hooking-up.
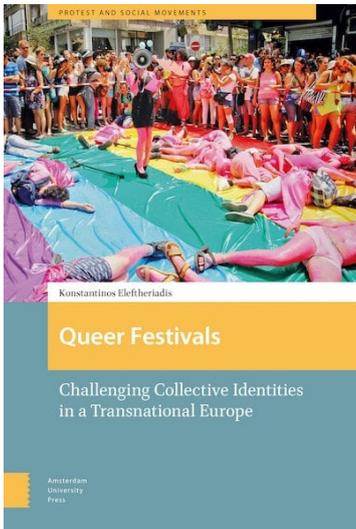
Konstantinos Eleftheriadis. 2018. *[Queer Festivals: Challenging Collective Identities in a Transnational Europe.](#)* **Amsterdam University Press.**

To what extent is queer anti-identitarian? And how is it experienced by activists at the European level? At queer festivals, activists, artists and participants come together to build new forms of sociability and practice their ideals through anti-binary and inclusive idioms of gender and sexuality. These ideals are moreover channelled through a series of organisational and cultural practices that aim at the emergence of queer as a collective identity. Through the study of festivals in Amsterdam, Berlin, Rome, Copenhagen, and Oslo, Queer Festivals: Challenging Collective Identities in a Transnational Europe thoughtfully analyses the role of activist practices in the building of collective identities for social movement studies as well as the role of festivals as significant repertoires of collective action and sites of identitarian explorations in contemporary Europe.

Wim Beumans. 2018. *[Queer Muslims in Europe: Sexuality, Religion and Migration in Belgium](#)* **.I.B. Tauris.**

Belgium was the second country in the world to introduce same-sex marriage. It has an elaborate legal system for protecting the rights of LGBT individuals in general and LGBT asylum seekers in particular. At the same time, since 2015 the country has become known as the `jihadi centre of Europe' and criticized for its `homonationalism' where some queer subjects – such as ethnic, racial and religious minorities, or those with a migrant background – are excluded from the dominant discourse on LGBT rights. Queer Muslims living in the country exist in this complex context and their identities are often disregarded as implausible. This book foregrounds the lived experiences of queer Muslims who migrated to Belgium because of their sexuality and queer Muslims who are the children of economic migrants. Based on extensive fieldwork, Wim Peumans examines how these Muslims negotiate silence and disclosure around their sexuality and understand their religious beliefs. He also explores how the sexual identity of queer Muslims changes within a context of transnational migration. In focusing on people with different migration histories and ethnic backgrounds, this book challenges the heteronormativity of Migration Studies and reveals the interrelated issues involved in migration, sexuality and religion. The research will be valuable for those working on immigration, refugees, LGBT issues, public policy and contemporary Muslim studies.

Provencher, Denis M. 2017. *Queer Maghrebi French: Language, Temporalities, Transfiliations*. Liverpool University Press.

This book investigates the lives and stories of queer Maghrebi and Maghrebi French men who moved to or grew up in contemporary France. It combines original French language data from my ethnographic fieldwork in France with a wide array of recent narratives and cultural productions including performance art and photography, films, novels, autobiographies, published letters, and other first-person essays to investigate how these queer men living in France and the diaspora stake claims to time and space, construct kinship, and imagine their own future. By closely examining empirical evidence from the lived experiences of these queer Maghrebi French-speakers, this book presents a variety of paths available to these men who articulate and pioneer their own sexual difference within their families of origin and contemporary French society. These sexual minorities of North African origin may explain their homosexuality in terms of a "modern coming out" narrative when living in France. Nevertheless, they are able to negotiate cultural hybridity and flexible language, temporalities, and filiations, that combine elements from a variety of discourses on family, honor, face-saving, the symbolic order of gender differences, gender equality, as well as the western and largely neoliberal constructs of individualism and sexual autonomy.

Andrea, Waling. 2019. *White Masculinity in Contemporary Australia: The Good Ol' Aussie Bloke.* **Routledge.**

Spanning the disciplines of sociology, history, media and cultural studies of popular culture, this book offers a historical exploration of Australian masculine tropes and an examination of contemporary representations of masculinity in the media. With attention to a range of thematic issues, including race, gender, sexuality, mythmaking, media representation, class, and nationality, it draws on new qualitative research and interview material to investigate the ways in which everyday Australian men take up, or reject such ideas. *White Masculinity in Contemporary Australia* thus explores the contradictory resistance to and adoration of ideals of masculinity, forms of Othering used to differentiate the practice of 'good' masculinity from that of 'bad' masculinity, the relationship between heterosexuality, masculinity and Australian sporting culture as central to ideals of masculinity, and the existence of differing pressures to be masculine. As such it will appeal to scholars across the social sciences with interests in gender and sexuality, Australian studies, and contemporary popular culture.
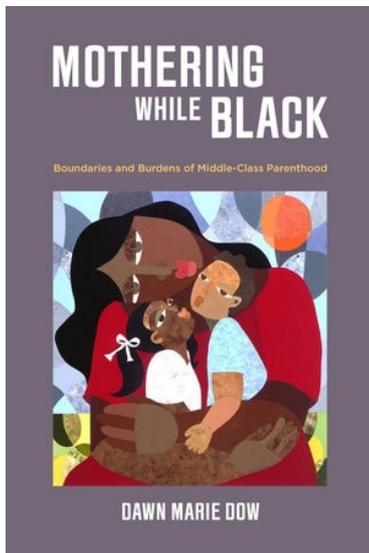
Dawn Marie Dow. 2019. *Mothering While Black: Boundaries and Burdens of Middle-Class Parenthood.* **University of California Press.**

Mothering While Black examines the complex lives of the African American middle class—in particular, black mothers and the strategies they use to raise their children to maintain class status while simultaneously defining and protecting their children's "authentically black" identities. Sociologist Dawn Marie Dow shows how the frameworks typically used to research middle-class families focus on white mothers' experiences, inadequately capturing the experiences of African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers. These limitations become apparent when Dow considers how these mothers apply different parenting strategies for black boys and for black girls, and how they navigate different expectations about breadwinning and childrearing from the African American community. At the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, work, family, and culture, *Mothering While Black* sheds light on the exclusion of African American middle-class mothers from the dominant cultural experience of middle-class motherhood. In doing so, it reveals the painful truth of the decisions that black mothers must make to ensure the safety, well-being, and future prospects of their children.
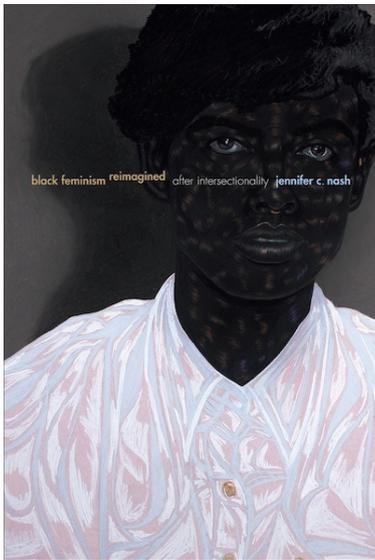
Jennifer C. Nash. **2019.** *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. **Duke University Press.**

In *Black Feminism Reimagined* Jennifer C. Nash reframes black feminism's engagement with intersectionality, often celebrated as its primary intellectual and political contribution to feminist theory. Charting the institutional history and contemporary uses of intersectionality in the academy, Nash outlines how women's studies has both elevated intersectionality to the discipline's primary program-building initiative and cast intersectionality as a threat to feminism's coherence. As intersectionality has become a central feminist preoccupation, Nash argues that black feminism has been marked by a single affect—defensiveness—manifested by efforts to police intersectionality's usages and circulations. Nash contends that only by letting go of this deeply alluring protectionist stance, the desire to make property of knowledge, can black feminists reimagine intellectual production in ways that unleash black feminist theory's visionary world-making possibilities.
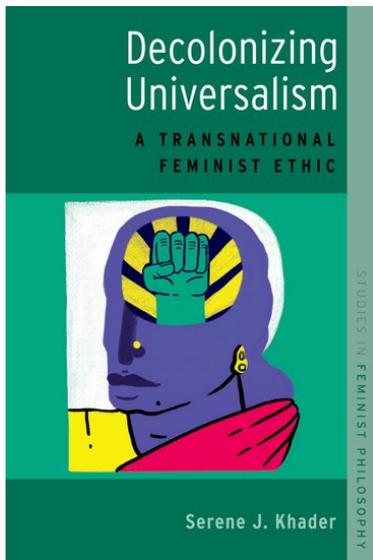
Serene J. Khader. 2018. *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic.* **Oxford University Press.**

Decolonizing Universalism argues that feminism can respect cultural and religious differences and acknowledge the legacy of imperialism without surrendering its core ethical commitments. Transcending relativism/ universalism debates that reduce feminism to a Western notion, Serene J. Khader proposes a feminist vision that is sensitive to postcolonial and antiracist concerns. Khader criticizes the false universalism of what she calls 'Enlightenment liberalism,' a worldview according to which the West is the one true exemplar of gender justice and moral progress is best achieved through economic independence and the abandonment of tradition. She argues that anti-imperialist feminists must rediscover the normative core of feminism and rethink the role of moral ideals in transnational feminist praxis. What emerges is a nonideal universalism that rejects missionary feminisms that treat Western intervention and the spread of Enlightenment liberalism as the path to global gender injustice.

The book draws on evidence from transnational women's movements and development practice in addition to arguments from political philosophy and postcolonial and decolonial theory, offering a rich moral vision for twenty-first century feminism.

Allegra review guidelines:

All reviews should be completed within three months of the receipt of the book.

We use British English (i.e. use –ise and not –ize word endings). We encourage clear expression and simple sentence structures especially if English is not your first language.

Word limit: 750-1500 words.

Font: Times New Roman.

Size: 12.

Line Spacing: 1,5

No footnotes.

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When submitting the review, do not forget to include your name, (academic) affiliation (if any), a photograph of yourself and a short bio of 2-3 sentences.

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# Gendered Harm

Abigail Stepnitz
May, 2019

Victoria Canning's (2018) new book makes an important contribution to a growing body of scholarship on the asylum system, bringing much-needed attention to the lived realities and consequences of Britain's "hostile environment" for immigrants. "Hostile environment" is a term first used by Prime Minister Theresa May in 2012 when she held the post of Home Secretary to describe her plans for reducing undocumented migration to Britain and making migrants' experiences in Britain difficult. *Gendered Harm* focuses on what it

means for women seeking recognition as refugees in just such an environment. At the heart of Canning's incisive, but unrelentingly human account of the causes, contours and consequences of the multiple forms of state violence inherent in the asylum process is a powerful understanding of what it means to think about violence as structural. Academically, she brings in a useful framework for considering the unique and multiple forms of structurally embedded state violence experienced by migrants. In practical terms she focuses on the material structures themselves and the very human forms of suffering they cause for women seeking asylum.

Whilst Gendered Harm is a very specific story of the British state, it is also the story of other states.

The term "hostile environment" was coined in Britain, but it reflects a global attitude towards those seeking protection. Nation states around the world grapple with asylum, from the "crisis" at the geographic edges of Fortress Europe, to the US/Mexico border to Australian policy on arrivals by sea.
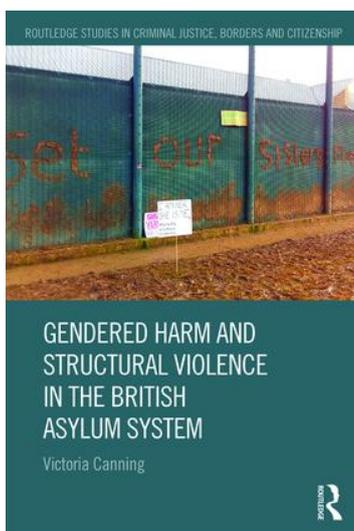
Canning's account concentrates on questions of structural power and violence, situating the British asylum process socially, politically, geographically, and culturally in a context of colonialism, austerity and fear mongering that mistrusts and denigrates migrant populations. She reminds us that experiences, collectively in the "asylum system" and for individual asylum-seeking women, exist on what she calls an "intersectional continuum." (27) Such a continuum exists not only in the life experiences of women impacting their identities, but also extends institutionally beyond asylum, geographically beyond the UK, and historically beyond the current rhetoric of migration 'crises.'

Gendered violence is a difficult, both for academics and in terms of policy-making.

Not only is it intersectionally experienced as part of women's daily lives and migration experience around the globe, but as a form of harm it at once necessitates thoughtful consideration and a keen awareness of avoiding perpetuating damaging tropes about women's lack of agency, and in particular, tropes about migrant women and their experiences in non-western countries with men of colour. Canning deftly handles the preservation of individual experience, story and agency, whilst remaining firmly in a structure and institution-focused critique of asylum and its gendered and racialized harms.

> *Canning is also careful to describe not only the power of the state and its systems, but also the important, powerful forms of individual and collective resistance that foment in the face of such hostility and violence (149.)*

She places these acts of resistance on a continuum as well – from the "everyday resistance" of surviving and refusing to be silent when faced with multiple forms of violence and exclusion, to specific acts, such as those acts of migrants who engage in lengthy and painful legal battles to gain recognition for their rights, or those who engage in hunger strikes in detention centres (153-154).

Canning stays close to Paul Farmer's calls to ensure that analyses of structural violence recognise the "materiality of the social," asking us to focus on "who wins, who loses, and what weapons are used" and to consider the "enabling conditions" which help to erase both history and accountability (Farmer 2004: 308).

> *Along these lines, Canning pays particularly close attention to the way the asylum process perpetuates and deepens trauma, which has real physical, emotional and psycho-social consequences (49).*

Crucially, Canning makes clear that these are not unintended consequences of an otherwise humane system fit for purpose, on the contrary, they are an integral part of a system designed to make the experience of seeking asylum as bad as, if not worse than, that of the persecution from which people flee (47).

Discussions of accountability are also central to Canning's work. She refers to it as "pinpointing responsibility" (66) for the architecture of a violent system and for the daily violence experienced by asylum-seeking women. I remain sceptical of the value of such an exercise, or even in framing questions in this way. I would argue, however, that perhaps "pinpointing" isn't a useful goal – diffuse, internalized, institutionalized forms of harm cannot be pinpointed, it is their diffuseness, their very sense of inevitability, propelled by momentum across history, spaces and actors that makes these harms so ubiquitous, widespread and difficult to combat. Broader cultural and structural changes to attitudes about migrants generally and asylum-seekers specifically are likely to be more effective in the long run.

Among the most powerful contributions of Canning's research is the useful scaffolding it creates for considering other forms of structural violence.

These multiple violences spill out institutionally beyond the formal immigration procedures into spaces like healthcare and housing, beyond the gates of the detention centers, into the everyday lives of migrants and other racialized communities across Britain. Violence against asylum seekers becomes part of a larger state apparatus perpetuating racism, misogyny and gross inequalities in access, health and wealth. Canning firmly situates asylum as central to any academic or activist approaches that aim to combat these violences across Britain and globally. Her work is a valuable addition to the toolbox of critical activist-scholarship.

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Featured image by [Steinar Engeland](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The Art of Listening #Keynote by Judith Beyer

Judith Beyer
May, 2019

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In her Keynote "On little and grand narratives in Central Asia" (28 March 2019), Allie Judith Beyer investigates the inter-linkages between orality, narratives, textual production and textual artefacts. In the context of a workshop on "Central Asian Studies Inside Out. Challenging Grand Narratives", organised by the Centre National De La Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Judith focuses on oral history as both a method of ethnographic inquiry and a theory of translation. She argues that the current overemphasis on data gathering and storing "has less to do with the way our informants remember or forget", and much more with our own methodological insecurities: a focus on technicalities, prevalent in much oral history research, is simply too narrow. Drawing on her long-term research in Central Asia, particularly in rural Kyrgyzstan, she advocates for context-embedded analysis of

narratives and for paying attention to how texts are put to use in terms of what they can stand for. Instead of devoting scholarly attention to the formulation of questions and the recording of speech, she advocates for the art of listening (McGregor and White 1986) as an active process. Listening is more than hearing and we would do well to re-cultivate it as a core ethnographic practice.

Words of Passage

Caren Frost
May, 2019

Hilary Parsons Dick's multi-site ethnography *Words of Passage: National Longing and the Imagined Lives of Mexican Migrants* is based on fieldwork conducted between 1997 and 2005 in Pennsylvania, U.S. and Uriangato, Mexico. The informative work considers the political landscapes, and how Mexican migrants have constructed their lives in the context of "becoming." As we know, groups from Mexico make up the largest percentage of undocumented migrants in the United States, yet current U.S. policies attempt to make living in the U.S.

untenable for migrants, so that they will return to Mexico and/or never consider migrating in the first place.

Dick's writing illuminates "the many ways the imagined lives of migrants shape national belonging and resource access," which is important to the discourse about immigration and its meaning in the 21st Century (226).

Words of Passage focuses on the multiple ways that being mobile facilitates how individuals define themselves as 'Mexican'.

Composed of seven chapters, the book provides an illuminating discussion about migrants moving "in and out of legal statuses" that unpacks the terms "documented" and/or "undocumented". It is this type of complexity around terms and categories that Dick considers throughout her work: one category cannot adequately describe the lives of the migrants, and indeed one category cannot describe any individual and/or group of people.
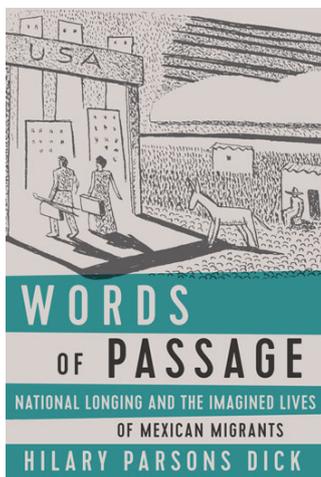
Dick begins with an introduction using vignettes to situate her participants' discussions in the religious, socio-economic, and political contexts of Mexico. These vignettes illustrate what it means to be Mexican, as well as how her research participants use their experiences to construct "the imagined lives of Mexican migrants" (p.5). Thus, people's lives are composed based on what is happening, what could happen, and what might have happened, demonstrating how the actual and imaginary are co-linked.

In Chapter 1, Dick considers how state institutions are used to create an official definition of what it means to be Mexican (p.41). Mexico is in the process of becoming "distinct as a nation-state by virtue of not being like the United States" (p.41) and determining what "progress" means for the country as a whole. While this process is occurring,

Mexico is maintained in a liminal state of being wherein people are continually striving for "a distant future" that is not linked to who they are at the current time (p.41).

Therefore, according to the Dick's interviewees the values of traditional-ness and modernity are in a state of conflict. In the current day, these values are continually creating "a social milieu in which some ways of being Mexican are normalized and others are not" (75).

Dick zooms into the impact of the migration process and how the process of migration enables or negates people's personhoods, for example a male migrants manhood can depend on his ability to send remittances to family in Mexico (115). These activities give rise to the conflict between "morality" and "mobility" (121), and highlight how the U.S. is understood to be a place of urbanization and modernity. For example, owning a home is a key element in being someone in the Mexican context and migrating is one method to earn funds for homebuilding (130). In addition, as individuals contemplate migrating new ideals about family and marriage are constructed. Women are not necessarily interested in traditional, patriarchal relationships, but rather those that support "companionate marriage and nuclear family life" (148). Thus, Dick finds that whole families are migrating rather than just the males of the family; however, the ethico-morality of women who migrate alone, with families, and/or with their children is questioned, and the mobility of women is seen in a negative light (p.162). Therefore, Dick makes the point that migration as mobility illustrates how an individual (e.g., male or female) links to their personhood and acceptable behavior in the context of being a migrant from Mexico.

Two final comments about this book. First, Dick's ethical principles for "giving back" to the communities that she worked with is a crucial element for her about how people conducting ethnography should engage in research.

As researchers, it is not an us versus them, but rather an "Us" that is important for telling contextually relevant stories about people's lives and how the social,

political, and geographic landscapes impact these stories.

Second, Dick points out that being an ethico-moral individual is crucial for many types of fieldwork and structures how researchers interact with their participants. This concept highlights the need to understand the cultural and social parameters in which fieldwork is conducted. Without being aware of this concept and these parameters, ethnographers will gain only a superficial understanding of the people they wish to know more about.

Dick's ethnography provides an historical, geographic, and cultural landscape presentation about what it means to be a Mexican migrant and how that position is continually negotiated. This book presents an holistic view that other ethnographies may not grant, and offers not only a clear picture of how to conduct a thorough ethnography but also about how Mexican migrants contextualize their own lives in terms of the past, present, and imagined future.

Dick, H.P. 2018. *Words of Passage: National Longing and the Imagined Lives of Mexican Migrants*.   Austin: University of Texas Press. 283pp. ISNB-13: 978-1-4773-1402-9.

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# The Borders of "Europe"

Angela Smith
May, 2019

In the frenzied media coverage of Europe's migration "crisis" in recent years, the borders of Europe have been depicted as under attack, desperately in need of securing against the staggering numbers of migrants on the move. As European states modified their border policing tactics, migrants responded in turn, adjusting their routes and strategies in the hope of reaching their destinations. Nicholas De Genova has long argued that one reason why human mobility appears so threatening to state sovereignty is the "sheer autonomy" of migration. It is this interplay – between migrants' "mobility projects" and state responses – that De Genova pursues in this edited collection.

In *The Borders of "Europe"*, De Genova brings together eleven chapters in a multi-scalar and wide-ranging examination of the tensions between freedom of movement and the technologies of states seeking to control and limit human

mobility. Through the selection and arrangement of these theoretical and ethnographic contributions, and the ideas set out in De Genova's comprehensive introductory chapter, the collection reveals not only the shifting and dynamic production of the border, but of the very notion of "Europe" itself, as a political, economic and cultural project.

The book sets out to undertake a formidable task in attempting to both track and analyse the various shifts in migratory movements and bordering practices in Europe, during the years of peak irregular migration across the Mediterranean, as well as mass migrations by land into and across Europe.
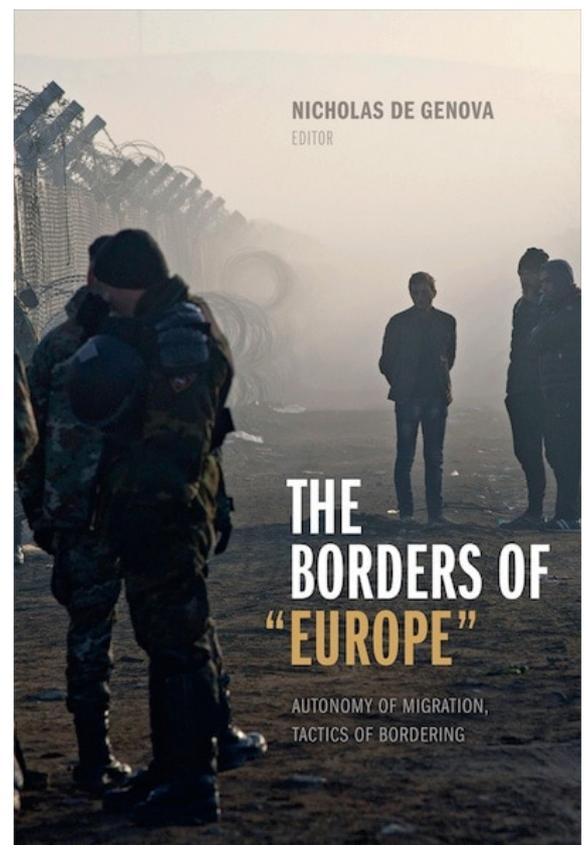
The chapters in the collection are thoroughly foregrounded by De Genova's introduction, which provides a critical examination of Europe's "crisis" and traces the shifts that have occurred in irregular migration in recent years, and the ways in which the border has both expanded outwards through externalisation policies and retracted inwards, as the spaces of asylum have shrunk. De Genova documents the demonisation and criminalisation of refugees and migrants, and key moments which served to heighten the "dangerous" autonomy assigned to migrants – such as the Paris terror attacks, and mob sexual assaults in Germany (p.14-15). He examines the racialised dynamics of these constructions, and

locates these within Europe's colonial history – a critical historicisation which is often absent in the popular migration "crisis" discourse.

The chapters in The Borders of "Europe" stretch across an expansive geography, with ethnographic material drawn from Mali to Latvia, Istanbul to London, and across the Mediterranean with Greece, Rome and Southern Italy represented, alongside Tunisia and Melilla in North Africa.

It is notable – and perhaps commendable – that many of the contributors are PhD candidates, postdoctoral fellows, or other early career researchers. Their research is therefore the result of sustained fieldwork undertaken at the height of the "crisis," with several of the contributors being actively involved in migrant solidarity projects.

In chapter one, "'The Secret is to Look Good on Paper': Appropriating Mobility within and against a Machine of Illegalization" Stephan Scheel lays out the ways in which the border regime produces migrant illegality, masked behind the spectacle of border enforcement. He argues that from the point of applying for a visa, the Schengen visa regime creates an "artificial scarcity of access to mobility to Europe by setting visa requirements that do not correspond to local circumstances" and therefore "entices applicants to engage in criminalised practices" such as document fraud (p.60). In their "performances of docile compliance," migrants subvert and appropriate the rules and criteria that seek to deny them mobility. They script themselves as credible mobile subjects, thereby undermining bureaucratic "risk assessment" practices.

Other chapters – including those by Ruben Andersson, Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, and Laia Soto Bermant – examine the Mediterranean, the spectacle of bordering practices, and the increasing entanglement of security, economic, and humanitarian interests involved in the performance of border policing.

They situate humanitarian imperatives within a larger assemblage of migration

Andersson's chapter "Rescued and Caught: The Humanitarian-Security Nexus at Europe's Frontiers" demonstrates the role of humanitarianism in contributing to a self-perpetuating "illegality industry" at the borders (p.67). Heller and Pezzani argue in "Liquid Traces: Investigating the Deaths of Migrants at the EU's Maritime Frontier" that despite the high degree of surveillance of the Mediterranean maritime space, the EU routinely engages in lethal acts of non-assistance to vessels in distress as a tactic of bordering. By looking at surveillance data with a "disobedient gaze," they have been able to expose and challenge deadly violations at sea (p.110). Bermant's chapter on the Spanish enclave of Melilla shows us that we must move beyond traditional understandings which pit mobility against restriction, and instead consider the economic interests at stake in the openings and closing of borders, and the forms of selective border permeability that exits, despite the apparent reinforcements.

Five chapters in the collection draw upon migrant experiences and perspectives in diverse localities, to paint a picture of migrant autonomy, planning, resilience and claim-making, alongside pervasive experiences of fear, trauma, waiting and insecurity. Clara Lecadet focuses on expelled migrants' self-organising in West Africa and the politicisation that can arise from the experience of being deported. The role of the humanitarian regime in bordering enforcement is further critiqued by Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli in their chapter about Choucha – a refugee camp in Tunisia along the Libyan border, which officially no longer exists. Former asylum seekers living in the "camp after the camp" have been abandoned as humanitarian subjects, and so undertake diverse strategies to further their mobility projects beyond the various forms of capture (p.183).

Souad Osseiran's chapter on Syrians in Istanbul and Maurice Steel's chapter on Syrians in Greece both draw upon ethnographic fieldwork with migrants in transit, who are seeking to move towards and within Europe.

Beyond the official information and political boundaries, migrants share with one another their own information and perspectives on their destinations, which offer various degrees of precarity and permanence, to create alternate imaginings of "Europe". The examination of the European asylum framework – the Dublin regulation – by Fiorenza Picozza utilises ethnographic fieldwork with Afghanis in London and Rome to show how migrant illegality and refugeeness is socially and legally produced, leaving many "with tentative forms of legality." Many "Dubliners" remain stuck in transit, moving from one country to another for years. Picozza demonstrates the ongoing affective, embodied and existential impacts of being "Dublined" on those who seek to cross borders, even long after their arrival (p.250-252).

The final two chapters raise, amongst other issues, the role of the "citizen" in relation to the foreigner, the refugee, the migrant. Evelina Gambino explores a campaign for fairer work conditions, emerging out of a migrant settlement in the heart of the food bowl in southern Italy, which became a regional centre for recruiting cheap labour. She examines the intersections of capital and migration control, and raises issues of fair labour, politicisation, solidarity models, and reflections on militant or activist research. In stark contrast to these solidarity projects, Dace Dzenovska in her chapter "'We want to Hear from You': Reporting as Bordering in the Political Space of Europe" traces the ways in which European citizens become enlisted in everyday practices of bordering through practices of reporting on suspected foreigners in irregular visa conditions. Dzenovska analyses these reporting practices as a technology of government by late liberal democratic states, where state power is obscured while citizens do the work of policing and surveillance.

The Borders of "Europe" draws upon diverse localities and contexts to bring together a picture of Europe's borderscape, where migrants' autonomous mobility comes up against the bordering practices of states and their collaborators, including private agencies, humanitarian actors, and everyday citizens. The collection manages to stitch together diverse ethnographic sites, lived experiences, and critical analysis to illustrate the ways in which the border has

become a key site for defining and contesting the very meaning of Europe.

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What's in a Name? From Astana to Nursultan

Mateusz Laszczkowski
May, 2019

What's in a name? That which we call a rose

by any other name would smell as sweet.

William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet (act 2, scene 2)

On 19 March 2019, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev, aged seventy-eight, resigned. He had ruled the country for thirty years (first as the head of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR and then, following the Soviet Union's demise, as the post-Soviet republic's first president). The following day, the Kazakh parliament passed a resolution renaming the country's capital city from Astana to Nursultan, and obliging the municipal governments of all of Kazakhstan's cities to rename their main streets after Nazarbaev. To outside

observers, the resolution marked Kazakhstan's eventual slippage into full-blown personality cult, logically following decades of authoritarian rule. While by no means do I intend to eulogize Nazarbaev's democratic credentials, I wish to suggest that the recent events, while surprising, actually change far less than it might seem. And that is exactly the point. To risk another literary parallel—admittedly far-fetched—*barys*, the majestic snow panther that is one of Kazakhstan's national symbols, appears close kin of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's famous *Leopard*. In a memorable quote, one of the protagonists of that great Italian novel, Tancredi, declares: 'If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.' I do not know if Nazarbaev had ever read Lampedusa, but if he had, he clearly took Tancredi's paradoxical advice to heart.

It bears noting that for the city in question, this is already a third name-change in less than three decades. Established in the nineteenth century as a tsarist trading outpost called Akmolinsk, the town was renamed Tselinograd in 1961 by the Soviets. Following the end of Soviet rule, it was briefly known as Aqmola, before becoming Astana ('Capital' in Kazakh) in 1998, when Kazakhstan's capital was transferred here from Almaty. At some level therefore, residents might perceive yet another switch as business as usual.

Nazarbaev resolutely avoided the development of an all-out personality cult. He forbade statues to himself to be raised. Around the time of my doctoral fieldwork in Astana, a decade ago, his likenesses only began appearing, as if hesitantly, on monuments—usually amid other figures in group scenes in bas-relief depicting the Kazakh nation and its history. The idea of renaming the capital after him is not all that new. It was proposed several times over the last decade by various sycophant politicians, but Nazarbaev always refused.

Astana very effectively served as 'personality cult by proxy' anyway ([Adams and Rustemova 2009](#)). Nazarbaev was credited with planning the city, from the general idea of capital relocation down to the design of particular buildings, such as Astana's key architectural symbol, the Bayterek tower, whose shape the President had allegedly outlined on a handkerchief. He was frequently depicted

literally as Astana's architect, and the national holiday, Astana Day, was celebrated on his birthday.

Students of politics have produced many theories of how authoritarianisms work. In political anthropology, one prominent way of thinking assumes that citizens under authoritarian regimes choose to act 'as if' they identified with official ideology, for that guarantees a modicum of stability and day-to-day survival (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Wedeen 1999; Yurchak 2006; Žižek 1991). To some extent, this is also plausible for Nazarbaev's Kazakhstan. But my research suggested that the role of Astana in shaping the political in Kazakhstan was more positive. That is, beyond cynical resignation and dissimulation, the much-propagandized development of the capital—with massive investment, astonishing pace and scale of construction, and spectacular, cosmopolitan architectural forms—animated citizens' imaginations, inspired hope and fantasies of a better future (Laszczkowski 2016; see also Koch 2018). People were aware of the vastly uneven distribution of the benefits and widespread corruption. Legends of fantastic embezzlement circulated, interspersed with rumours of new buildings literally falling apart before they were even built, as a result of contractors' mundane economizing. Many citizens—not least the hopeful migrants who flowed to Astana from remote corners of the country in search of better, more affluent, more 'modern' lives—directly experienced the harsh realities of making a living in this city under construction.

Still, Astana—the material forms inextricably blended with images and imaginations—functioned as a generator of personal hopes, plans, and dreams, and a hotbed of opportunities.

The dreams were not necessarily utopian. Commonly, the hope was for an apartment and a modest job. My point is that by generating the multiplicity of these personal visions of improvement, Astana helped channel citizens' energies and emotions around a collective goal defined and orchestrated by the country's leadership (Laszczkowski 2014).

I recall that at the time of my fieldwork, for the majority of the people I met there the biggest fear was what might happen if Nazarbaev suddenly was no more. The series of bloody coup d'états in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, wars in Tajikistan and Georgia, and prolonged unrest in Ukraine, provided dreadful scenarios. Simultaneously, compared to the other regimes in the region—the dictatorship of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and the bizarre rule of Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan—Nazarbaev seemed almost an enlightened despot. My interlocutors generally knew that none of Kazakhstan's elections had been internationally recognized as 'fair and free'. But that just wasn't really a meaningful category. I remember I was struck when a local friend—a ballet artist—stated: 'What Putin and Medvedev did in Russia, that's the way to go. One substitutes for the other and things can go on. But here, no—fucking elections must be held!' Similarly, many of the people I met were aware of the persecution and [occasional killings of opposition politicians](). But if you could live your life in peace and relative affluence, why would anyone oppose the government in the first place? In the name of what abstract principles? Nazarbaev was seen first and foremost as a guarantor of stability, and that was a fundamental value.

Without going back to Kazakhstan for a new period of fieldwork it is hard to say, but I suppose many citizens (probably most) welcomed the President's last gambit with relief. The much-feared transition to an inevitable post-Nazarbaev future shall be smooth. Nazarbaev passed the presidency over to one of his tried-and-trusted apprentices, Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev, Speaker of the Senate and former Prime Minister. Tokaev is a familiar, reassuring figure to the general public. Simultaneously, Nazarbaev continues to chair Kazakhstan's Security Council and head the ruling party, Nur Otan. Citizens may rest assured—the Elbasy ('Head of the Nation', a honorific title that Nazarbaev uniquely bears) is still in charge.

In the days after Nazarbaev's abdication, there were [protests]() in Astana and several other cities against the renaming of the capital. It takes courage to openly express dissent knowing full well that this may and very likely will lead to arrest and persecution. I do not mean to downplay that courage. But the numbers of protesters were insignificant—reportedly, no more than several dozen. More

typically, the Kazakhstanis reacted with irony. Jokes and memes around the name Nursultan mushroomed across the social media. For instance, in a short video, a man says he is driving down Nazarbaev Avenue, to get to the Nazarbaev Airport, on his way to Nursultan where he is going to apply to Nazarbaev University. There were also demonstrations of support for the decision.

Do these reactions testify to the absence of a democratic ethos, the success of official ideology, or widespread fear of power?

In some sense, each of these hypotheses may be true—to some extent, for some people. But I think what these reactions truly suggest is something different. Namely, we are yet again reminded that there are many more modalities of political agency than allowed for by binary concepts such as complicity and resistance, authoritarianism and democracy, and so forth. Continuity and change are also such a binary opposition. Reality, as Lampedusa understood and I think so does Nazarbaev, tends to be much more pliable than that. I am curious to see what the future will bring. And the capital's name? After all, what's in a name?

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Featured image: Bayterek tower amid Astana's under-construction landscape. Photo by Mateusz Laszczkowski.

Undoing Work, Rethinking Community

Marion Lougheed
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How does work confer dignity and a sense of belonging? Is work the central identity-conferring activity of society? What if society were structured around something other than work? In an effort to bring Marxian theory to bear on imagining a more equitable society, political scientist James A. Chamberlain grapples with these and related questions throughout his new book ***[Undoing Work, Rethinking Community: A Critique of the Social Function of Work.](#)*** Chamberlain focuses on flexibility and the notion of an unconditional basic income as necessary building blocks for such a society. His definition of work remains unsettled, perhaps because he wants to leave open his discussion to include various imaginable, actual, or not-yet-imagined forms of work, or perhaps because work is a difficult concept to pin down. While leaving the concept undefined (14) and sliding between notions of employment and work, he does distinguish between paid and unpaid labour, and includes both in his analysis.
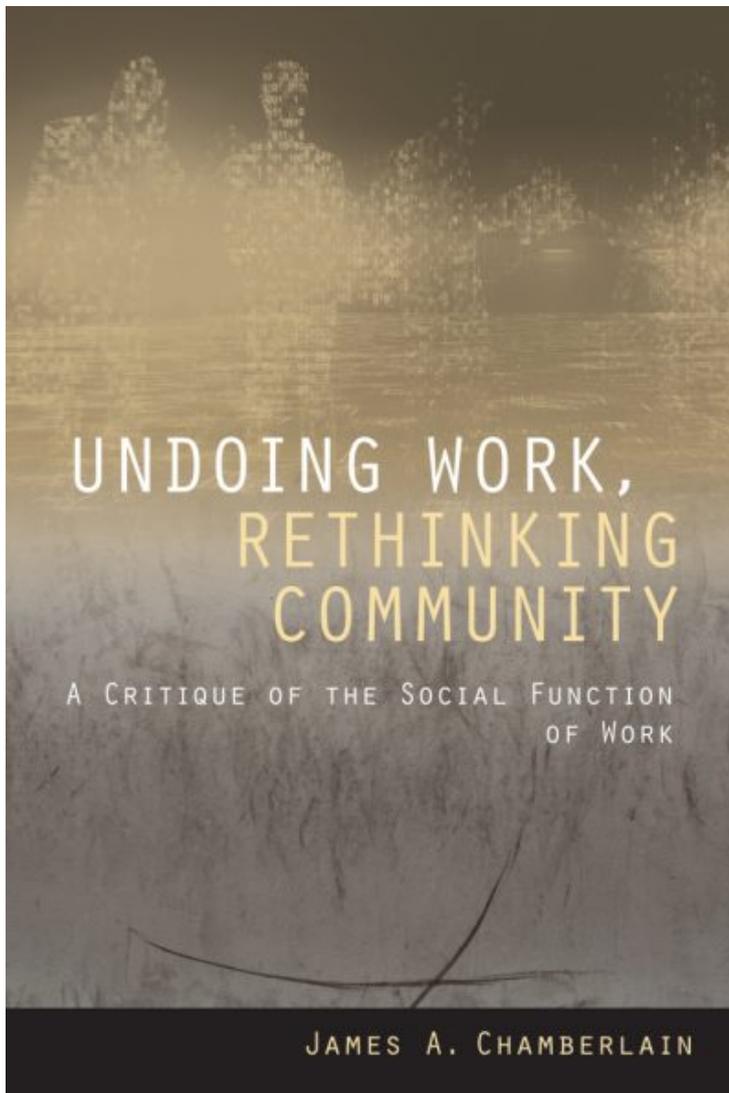
Chamberlain doesn't envision a utopia where humans are "freed" from labour altogether, nor does he see such a condition as desirable. His purpose appears to be to challenge the centrality of work, especially formal employment, when it comes to social inclusion. He draws primarily on André Gorz to demonstrate the integration between paid work and social belonging. But Chamberlain is not uncritical. He points out a tension in Gorz's thinking, namely that Gorz condemns the obligation to work while arguing that if people were no longer obligated to work, they would lose their "social existence (15)." Chamberlain also brings in Hardt and Negri's work to argue for alternatives to the contemporary work society, including one that would "involve the full flowering of cooperative activities, unimpeded by the barriers and enclosures erected in the name of private property and the accumulation of capital (102)." Thus, *Undoing Work, Rethinking Community*, is anti-capitalist and Marxian, without being a proponent of a specific, concrete model for a new society.

Chamberlain looks at an unconditional basic income (UBI) as a political strategy that might contribute to undoing work's social centrality, but he cautions against naïve thinking that such an income would inherently solve the social stresses that arise from low income (141).

He carefully deconstructs the political rhetoric that enhances the status of employment, even when the societal or personal value of such employment is questionable. He also considers the uses of such rhetoric when those wielding it actively ignore or fail to consider the social conditions that lead to inequalities and suffering. Examples of this rhetoric come mostly from the US and the UK, which suggests that the rhetoric may not be as universal as Chamberlain seems to suggest (e.g., US Senator Bernie Sanders is quoted as saying, "work is part of what being human is about" and former UK prime minister David Cameron is quoted as saying, "work is at the heart of a responsible society" [2]).

A lot depends on how the UBI is implemented, and with whose interests in mind (76). As an example, Chamberlain describes how workplace flexibility can be beneficial or detrimental to employees or managers/owners, respectively, depending on how that flexibility plays out and who has the most control over it. Flexibility can free up workers to make their own choices about when and how much they want to work, but it can also increase their precarity and vulnerability to the demands and desires of employers. In the latter scenario, time potentially dedicated to work can actually expand, while remunerations and benefits shrink. Chamberlain does not explain how this would play out in specific professions or workplaces.

> *But higher education would be a good example of increased flexibility, which also means higher expectations without proper compensation – either monetary or career advancement.*

While Chamberlain makes a lot of strong points, as a political scientist his analysis is abstracted from ground-level data, including ethnographic or sociological data, which means that some of his claims lack empirical evidence. While he establishes the place of work in political rhetoric with evidence from speeches, he does not engage in any depth with how actual workers or the unemployed might experience or understand the place and function of work in their lives. That being said, he draws on other scholars, such as Kathi Weeks, who

have deconstructed neoliberal discourse that hold individuals responsible for their own employment (102). In this way, Chamberlain contrasts this neoliberal logic with the possibility that a group or society as a whole could be *collectively* responsible, as long as everything necessary and desired gets done (53). This is the version that he promotes in the book, although it is not the only version he would accept. He affirms repeatedly that he is not trying to offer a single, specific solution. Arguably, there are socially acceptable exceptions to this individualizing discourse of responsibility to work, which Chamberlain does not discuss (e.g., children or people with disabilities). He writes as if this discourse is totalizing and uncontested. At the same time, however, he allows that his coverage of the topic is partial, and only a beginning. The book makes some overly general claims that would be more nuanced through an analysis of existing data on people who might resist or repurpose work's apparent centrality in social life. Anthropologists could step in to fill this gap.

This book lays some groundwork for, as the subtitle says, a critique of the social function of work.

Perhaps both its lack of examples and its tentativeness are evidence of the author taking first steps in an unmapped new direction. There is much left to be said on the subject. Anthropologists might take up this book for theoretical inspiration around work and precarity, both in the academy and elsewhere. Since the book is set up mostly as a discussion among scholars, it lacks the depth and real-world groundedness of empirical research. With that in mind, anthropologists can use this book as a springboard to develop, challenge, and build upon the interesting and important conceptual foundations Chamberlain has laid in this book.

James A. Chamberlain. 2018. Undoing Work, Rethinking Community: A Critique of the Social Function of Work. **Ithaca: Cornell University Press.**

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