

ML8: a follow-up with Martin Zeilinger and Max Haiven

Author(s)

Gloerich, Inte

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BLOG:

ML8: A follow-up with Martin Zeilinger and Max Haiven

By [Inte Gloerich](https://networkcultures.org/moneylab/author/integloerich/) (<https://networkcultures.org/moneylab/author/integloerich/>), July 9, 2020 at 11:10 am.

Because there was so much to discuss and many questions from the audience, many of my prepared questions for the speakers remained unasked during [Blockchain: Radicalising the Social Imagination](https://aksioma.org/moneylab8/session/panel-4-blockchain-radicalising-the-social-imagination/) (<https://aksioma.org/moneylab8/session/panel-4-blockchain-radicalising-the-social-imagination/>). After the session I decided to send some of my questions their way anyway. I asked them if they might have time to write a reply. Jaya unfortunately (understandably!) didn't have time on my very short notice, but Max and Martin, provided me with some very interesting responses. Here is a short write-up of my extended question time.

Inte Gloerich: *This is a question about something I experience myself often: when I tell people that my work involves blockchain technology, I see dollar signs, or rather bitcoin / altcoin signs, appear in their eyes. So in terms of radicalizing the social imagination, generally speaking, I would say that is not something the blockchain helps with. How should we relate to this? Is it important that the blockchain is seen as this capitalist money-making technology? Should we just keep working in our niches, or is it necessary to radicalize the meaning of the word blockchain so to speak?*

Martin Zeilinger: I think a 'radicalisation' of the social imagination in relation to blockchain technology can encompass a number of things: perhaps most importantly, that could include inspiring in people a more self-reflexive understanding and questioning of their own immediate, default assumption that blockchain tech is a 'capitalist money-making technology,' as you describe it. What does it mean (or, what might it be symptomatic of) that so many people find it difficult or impossible to think about this technology beyond the conventional capitalist paradigms which the technology is also, supposedly, able to disrupt? Once a more complex and critical notion of blockchain tech gets a foothold in the broader public imagination, it might then become possible to focus more directly on the many potential applications of blockchain tech that address entirely different value systems, such as secure communication and data flows, equitable participation in decision-making processes, or the commoning of digital infrastructures.

more so than any other emergent technology. It's instructive to look back on the history of the euphoria for previous "disruptive" technologies, including the steam engine, the telegraph and even the book and see that, in all cases, the development and fate of that technology depended far more on class struggle than on the technology itself. I think the only people served by the argument that any technology is in and of itself "radical" are the rich and powerful, who use the excuse of its allegedly inherently radical nature to mystify the deeply social and historical nature of any technology's use, development and outcomes. Radical uses of blockchain are those, to my mind, that advance radical goals: the abolition of private property, the dignity and abundance to which all humans are entitled, the overcoming of actual power relations (not power in the theoretical abstract sense). I would be excited to see real proposals for blockchain projects that worked towards these ends and made real substantial, risky interventions. Otherwise, I think the overwhelming majority of uses of "radical" or "revolutionary" are just hype, largely to attract investors (of both financial and spiritual variety) to various blockchain gimmicks that typically range from the nefarious to the absurd.

IG: *The Extinction Rebellion asks in relation to the climate crisis: How Normal was Normal?, saying there is no going back. How do you think we can take this current moment of pandemic-enforced change, that at least in some places radicalises social imagination, to have lasting positive effects? Could local currencies, grassroots resistance strategies, alternative organisations, and political activation, contribute to not going back to normal?*

MZ: I would say that the examples you give – local currencies, grassroots resistance strategies, etc. – have already been providing a really strong counterpoint to an awful, normalised status quo in many different contexts. But of course there are important pandemic-related changes to how communities can come together, operate, and act collectively. This context might be an opportunity to start thinking more about what positive, productive, critical contributions emerging blockchain technologies could offer to the new ways in which community action and participation can now happen.

Furtherfield's [CultureStake \(https://www.furtherfield.org/culturestake-2/\)](https://www.furtherfield.org/culturestake-2/) project might be a good case in point – it could be very useful for coming up with ways of making community participation, collective decision-making, etc. resilient, secure, transparent, and fair even in situations where people can't easily come together and act collaboratively in physical spaces.

MH: I think these and more are essential to creating the actual infrastructures of care, exchange, provisioning and cooperation that will allow us to withstand the very strong pressure to "return to normal." We have now, in the pandemic, a breach in the ideological and the material circuits of global racial capitalism, but we humans crave normalcy, even if it is normalcy that is killing us individually or collectively. The only way to withstand our own inclination towards "normal", and the very strong pressures to return to it in the name of

capitalism has tried to extinguish, as in the case of Indigenous people's resurgence). Ideology and ideas are flimsy in the face of material pressures, so it is vital to transform material life and social relations.

IG: *A central theme for MoneyLab has always been exploring new revenue models for the arts and the "creative industries". How can we find alternative value systems that support creative and artistic work? Perhaps part of the answer lies in complementary currencies, local economies, or non-monetary value systems. How do you think about this? Do you see promising directions for the arts in relation to what we talked about?*

MZ: I think that the value systems you mention have always existed. However, it seems difficult to use blockchain technology in ways that can achieve an effective and enduring resistance to being assimilated into the usual ultra-hierarchical, centralised, and property-oriented circuits of the art world. In this sense, the most visible manifestation of how this technology is taken up in the art world continues to be through blockchain-based art markets. I'm generally very critical of these platforms and their ambitions to create environments of tokenised artworks, financialised creative practice, and artificial digital scarcity. Interestingly, some of the more conventionally successful blockchain artists seem to be the ones who embrace these tendencies, even if it's in a critical or tongue-in-cheek fashion. Jonas Lund Tokens comes to mind. Last year, María Paula Fernández, Stina Gustafsson and Fanny Lakoubay published a [report \(https://gateway.ipfs.io/ipfs/QmSDmsV4H3XKrm3yS9vzhz84pY1duFsxRDnsw3XBReCX3\)](https://gateway.ipfs.io/ipfs/QmSDmsV4H3XKrm3yS9vzhz84pY1duFsxRDnsw3XBReCX3) that takes up exactly these questions – and they called it "There Is No Such Thing As Blockchain Art." That title isn't to be taken entirely seriously, of course, but it hints nicely at the tension with which blockchain in art contexts is struggling, namely between resistance to the ideologies and operational logic of financial systems, and assimilation into them.

MH: I am of the unpopular opinion that struggling to create or defend the niche for the survival of "art" or "culture" within capitalism is often narcissistic and even dangerous. I care a lot about artists and other creative workers, but I think the problem is that, to the extent we focus on their fate, we ignore the fact that they are workers under capitalism and what will benefit them/us most are the same policies and transformations that will benefit all workers: guarantees of social welfare, robust shared services, freedoms of movement and dignity, the removal of capitalist discipline. I think artists and "creative"-types can and should experiment with other means of provisioning, sharing and manifesting resources for their reproduction within, against and beyond capitalism. But these will only ever be methods of self-defence within a fundamentally abusive and violent system. I think artists and everyone else need to turn their intentions towards abolishing capitalism, which does not mean simply waiting around for some fabled revolution. Rather, it takes up the abolitionist question: what needs does capitalism falsely claim to meet? How could these needs be met otherwise? How can we begin, now, to build the institutions and infrastructures to meet our

through their possible answers. But we cannot be satisfied to simply carve out spaces of (unequal) survival within capitalism.

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By [Geert Lovink, January 9, 2022](#)

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