



AN ATLAS TO TRACK BLOCKCHAIN- COLONIALISM

BY CÉSAR ESCUDERO ANDALUZ

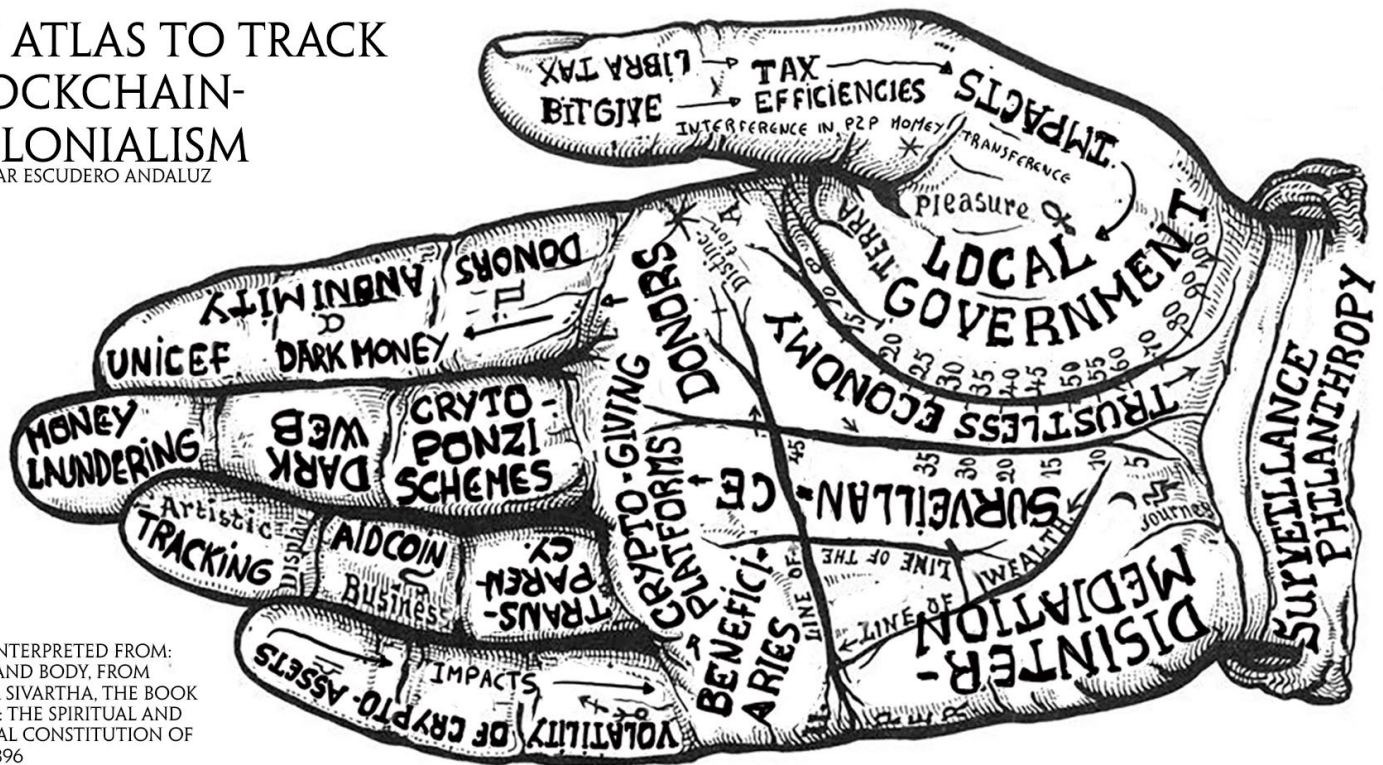


FIG. 1- INTERPRETED FROM:
BRAIN AND BODY, FROM
ALESHA SIVARTHA, THE BOOK
OF LIFE: THE SPIRITUAL AND
PHYSICAL CONSTITUTION OF
MAN, 1896

To understand Blockchain Colonialism, we must go beyond cryptocurrency investments, NFTs, and metaverses to bring the user closer to a more objective reality. To create an image of it, we need to investigate the relationships between planetary resources, human labor, economics, surveillance, and privacy. In this relationship, platforms, infrastructures, devices, corporations, governments, and individuals create a complex picture that is difficult to visualize with integrity. The objective of this atlas is to monitor how individuals, corporations, and governments have used blockchain to cross borders and extract benefits from those most in need, including land, labor, data, privacy, and other resources. Authors such as Mirka Madianou, Kate Crawford, Vladan Joel, Inte Gloerich, Oliver Jutel, and Peter Howson help us to understand the colonial and extractive legacies, the promises of economic and governance alternatives imposed on fragile societies in the developing world.

César Escudero Andaluz

Interface Cultures, University of Art and Design Linz.
cesar.escudero-andaluz@kunstuni-linz.at
<https://escuderoandaluz.com/>

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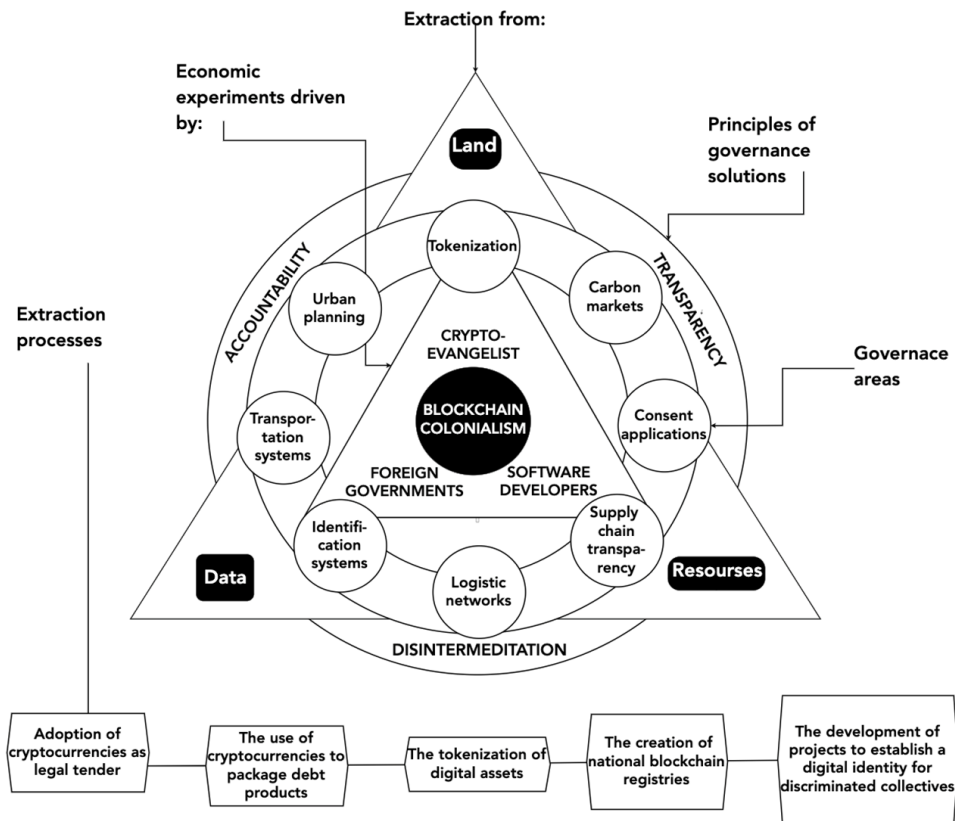


Fig. 1. Blockchain Colonialism 2024 Diagram.

Deconstructing blockchain rhetoric

The false promise of blockchain lies in its claims of universality, which go beyond a platform that mediates data and provides services in the cloud; in the humanistic sector, blockchain aspires to influence governance systems for data production and platform dependency. In doing so, it establishes a technological frontier, where the valuable resources of the developing world become objects of paramount importance (Jutel 2021). Moreover, blockchain behaves as a substitute for trust between people; it promises to democratize big data, offering all kinds of governance solutions under principles such as transparency, disintermediation, accountability, and efficiency (Jutel 2021).

Blockchain Colonialism

Blockchain colonialism encompasses economic experiments driven by foreign governments, software developers, and crypto evangelists, who have used encryption, security, and trust emblems to extract benefits from those most in need. This situation has been possible through different processes such as adopting cryptocurrencies as legal tender, creating national blockchain registries, using cryptocurrencies to package debt products, tokenizing digital assets, or developing projects to establish a digital identity for discriminated collectives (Howson 2021). In addition, these processes have been combined with social governance systems in areas considered underdeveloped from a Western

perspective, such as supply chain transparency, consent applications, logistics networks, identification and transportation systems, urban planning, and carbon market tokenization.

Silicon Valley's solutionism

Silicon Valley's solutionist innovation, performative entrepreneurship, and hackathons have blurred the boundaries between NGOs and platform developers that have combined extractive practices with Internet-connected computer quantification methods to analyze data and turn them into predictive products, justifying some of these practices in the context of "emergencies." Where artificial intelligence (AI) is used, among other things, to track displaced people and predict population flows. Consequently, blockchain colonialism creates risks for non-profit organizations such as WWF, Oxfam, and UNICEF (Howson 2021).

Obscurantist paradigm

In addition, in vulnerable communities such as refugees, climate migrants, or local communities, blockchain projects impose and force them to give up personal data in exchange for basic needs, which can lead to unpredictable capitalization in the future (Gloerich 2023). According to the researcher Peter Howson, this data could also be used to make decisions about individuals, with far-reaching consequences (Howson 2020). For example, the US state could ration resources or determine migration rights by combining biometric data, reputational evidence, and social network data secured on the blockchain (Jutel 2021). Furthermore, the media professor at Goldsmiths University, Mirca Madianou, argues that states and governments increasingly use biometrics to control borders and keep out "undesirable" populations (Madianou 2021).

This is possible regarding technical infrastructure through mobile applications, smart contracts, and the web3 operated through engineered protocols. This means that they cannot work outside the way they are coded. Consequently, programmers and corporations have greater agency. According to Oliver Jutel, algorithmic governance and pure mediation claims make this technology obscurantist and difficult to disentangle from rhetoric and ideology (Jutel 2022). Another clear example is Worldcoin, a startup created by OpenAI CEO Sam Altman in 2019, which uses orbs to scan people's eyes in exchange for a digital identity card and cryptocurrencies.

Counter-actions

To find a more coherent way forward, Inte Gloerich argues that it is essential to create alternative spaces that challenge and resist dominant logics of exploitation to envision ways to undermine, resist, de-center, or subvert the current situation, shedding light on the intersection of decolonial thinking, blockchain technology, and artistic practices (Gloerich 2023). On the other hand, Julian Crandall stresses that blockchain technology can be constructively applied through democratic participation and anti-colonial struggles and that it is essential that local developers participate in these blockchain initiatives rather than relying on outsiders (Crandall 2019).

Crypto-giving

Donating and transmitting traceable digital assets through platforms such as BitGive can be more tax-efficient than selling them. Some intermediaries, such as LibraTax, offer advisory services that enable donors to transmit digital assets with the lowest possible tax burden. These services displace undue and corrupt state interference in money transfers in the relationship between donors and beneficiaries. This framing of the state as a corrupt entity in the Global South has meant that many poorer countries are not raising enough tax revenue to fund even the most basic services, such as health and education. As the UK Tax Dialogue reports, “if we are to achieve the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), cryptocurrency platforms are ultimately an impediment to achieving those goals” (Howson 2021).

Other fields of action used to justify crypto-colonialism are more related to transnational approaches and sustainable development, such as biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and managing carbon offsets. For example, projects like Nemus.earth and Moss.earth tokenized parts of the Amazon rainforest to sell as NFTs. These projects continue the economy of rarity established by collectible NFTs, where unique features increase land value and are governed by stakeholders in a DAO (Gloerich 2023). However, as in historical colonialism, these symbolic representations are abstract assets that promise future income and care little for the survival of what they represent (Juárez 2021).

Critical contextualisation and self-reflexive discussion of the artwork

Developing maps, data visualisations, and diagrams is a process of knowledge creation rather than knowledge revelation (Dodge 2000).

Over the last few years, many artists, including Suzanne Treister, Mark Lombardi, Bureau d'Etudes, ShareLab, Übermorgen, Paolo Cirio, and RYBN have been working with diagrams as a tactic to unmask hidden dominant narratives of the world, helping to understand complex power structures, and bringing the audience closer to a deep research project based on vast amounts of information. The researcher Kate Crawford introduced the atlas as a method to make information more accessible in her book *Atlas of AI* (2021), and together with Vladan Joler, they created the diagram *Anatomy of AI System* (2018) to understand the real costs of large-scale AI systems.

My previous artistic practice has also used visualization as a methodology. In collaboration with Martín Nadal, we developed *Bittercoin, the worst miner ever* (2016) to visualize the waste of energy and resources of the Bitcoin Miner Industry. Also, the diagram *Economy, knowledge and Surveillance in the age of Cryptocene* (2018). Doing an analogy between knowledge privatization and the accumulation of information in the networked world. *An Atlas to Track Blockchain Colonialism* takes this previous experience to ground the critique of this technology, in an analog format outside of Blockchain.

Project page:

<https://escuderoandaluz.com/2024/04/10/an-atlas-to-track-blockchain-colonialism/>

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