

LutteCoin: Toward a Situationist Blockchain

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Abstract. The Situationist International was a movement inspired by surrealism, Dada, and libertarian Marxism. Noticing “revolutionary” discourse attached to the decentralization of financial institutions in the cryptocurrency space, while lacking any truly revolutionary frameworks, we propose a decentralized peer-to-peer Situationist blockchain. Abandoning the spectacle of economic productivity, our “Proof of Non-Work Consensus Protocol” turns devices into an otherwise useless object, or “brick.” Users, liberated from the spectacle of electronic interfaces, pursue other dreams. The CPU power of these devices cannot be turned off until they burn out. They are inaccessible, mining and destroying wealth in an endless parody of economics.

Transactions

In 2009, Bitcoin was introduced to the world through a white paper published under the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto. The paper's rejection of centralized banking, and its links to the cybersecurity and privacy movements, soon led to its embrace by a cadre of techno-libertarians and anarchists. Bitcoin proposed a "trustless" method for securing the exchange of funds without intervention by a third party. Bitcoin's underlying technology – the "blockchain" – spawned a variety of decentralized finance tools, allowing for the exchange of international currency without fees. A range of alternative coins, using different protocols, rose up. Soon, smart contracts – essentially "programs" that govern specific interactions on the blockchain – became a tool for the management of self-sufficient networks, ranging from self-perpetuating sculptures (Primavera Di Filippi's Plantoid) to forests that manage their own logging rights (Terra0's Augmented Forest).

Critiques of Bitcoin abound. As a means of verifying transactions, large rigs of distributed, computerized "miners" solve increasingly complex verification puzzles – wasting energy and resources for their own profit. The volatility of crypto currencies creates opportunities for manipulation, while its fundamental

ideological principle of avoiding government oversight strips any recourse for those who "invest" in bad coins. Those aside, we are more interested in a *Situationist* critique of these tools.

We propose that blockchain, as a tool for cryptocurrency, operates according to a logic centering the *individual as a tool for economic activity* rather than centering *lived experience*. In social media posts related to cryptocurrency communities, memes circulate about "lambos," showcasing the potential wealth opportunities presented to long-term "hodlrs" (those who buy and refuse to sell a cryptocurrency) if these coins "moon," (reach astronomically high prices). Such propaganda lures coin investors with tedious spectacles of wealth (sports cars, mansions) as a signifier of financial independence, but that independence is linked to "dead time" in which the reward is spending power — liberation through economic productivity. Other, more radical forms of human potential are not considered unless they can be transformed into an instrument of finance.

Guy Debord, Secretary of the Situationist Internationale, wrote that the "Situationist Game" is a "moral choice,"

"... taking a stand in favor of what will bring about the future reign of freedom and play. This perspective is obviously linked to the continual and rapid increase of leisure time resulting from the level of productive forces our era has attained. It is also linked to the recognition of the fact that a battle of leisure is taking place before our eyes, a battle whose importance in the class struggle has not been sufficiently analyzed. So far, the ruling class has succeeded in using the leisure [which] the revolutionary proletariat wrested from it by developing a vast industrial sector of leisure activities that is an incomparable instrument for stupefying the proletariat with by-products of mystifying ideology."¹

Situationists saw the individual not as a tool for economic prosperity – as "workers" – but as agents directing their own lived experiences, being diverted by a series of endless distractions, or "spectacles." For the Situationists, both capitalist and communist ideologies ignored this facet of human experience, redirecting human *being* into an instrument of *productivity*. Even "leisure" was part of this productive cycle. Those governed by these systems turn to "the spectacle" – for vicarious experiences of living. As the Situationists sought to center the vitality of

¹ Guy Debord (1957). "Writings from the Situationist International," p. 39.

lived experience as the aim of revolutionary action, we aim to center it in the aim of a Situationist blockchain.²

LutteCoin is a cryptocurrency reimagined from a Situationist position, embraced as a tool for producing new life experiences. LutteCoin reimagines blockchain as a tool for rejecting economic productivity and exchange. This proposal questions whether blockchain can create a governance structure that achieves the opposite of its original ideological intent of complete financialization.

Detournement

This work is achieved through the tools of the Situationists, such as the "detournement," a tactic of reclaiming tools of "the spectacle": "[t]he integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu ... détournement within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres".³

Likewise, we borrow the iconography of cryptocurrency's spectacle: motivational photographs of office workers, posing Christ-like in short moments away from offices. Promotional videos. Even this paper takes the form of a cryptocurrency white paper, down to its structure and the selection of its fonts. The Situationists sought to end a social order of spectacles – the tyranny of labor, dead time spent without creativity or leisure. It was an enemy they could never defeat, but the beauty of life came through even in futile gestures of resistance. These attempts pried away moments of living without persuasion, commodification, or coercion.

Guy Debord's autobiography, *Mémoires*, was bound in a sandpaper cover. Any books placed beside it would be gradually destroyed. Likewise, a Situationist Cryptocurrency should at least *aim* to destroy the underlying spectacle of any nearby cryptocurrencies that seek to define freedom as an economic activity.

Governance

A Situationist Blockchain views "governance" cynically, no matter its source, as irreversibly linked to the governance of markets and power. You might look to America for this type of governance in action. Throughout American history, the

² See Alastair Hemmens and Gabriel Zacarias (2020) "The Spectacle," in *The Situationist International: A Critical Handbook*.

³ Debord, Guy (1958). *Internationale Situationniste #1*, translated by Ken Knabb.

workplace was the town square, social club, and social safety net. “Work gives life meaning,” and it gives life health insurance. But the Situationists rejected communism just as forcefully, seeing in the arrangement of the USSR a prioritization of the human as a vessel for work rather than play. “Workers of the World, Uniting” has no appeal. We would rather unite through making love or getting a good night’s sleep.

The Situationists had diagnosed a social order held in place through the manufacture of *Spectacle* — entertaining, passive distractions that commodify everything. Spectacle left no moment in life immune to profit or productivity. While “participation” was a fundamental siren-call of the Situationists, it was a call to play a different game. It was a call to actions without domination or demands. These respites were found in what they named “Situations.” It was appropriated from the Native American tradition of Potlatch. Debord had named the first Situationist newsletter “Potlatch,” explaining: “Potlatch took its name from the North American Indian word for a pre-commercial form of circulation of goods, founded on the reciprocity of sumptuous gifts.”⁴

Historical perspective on this definition, and how it came to be, is warranted. George Clutesi, a member of the Tseshah First Nation (“Vancouver”), tells us that the word ‘Potlatch’ was a European mangling of the verb *pa-chitle*, “to give.” In Clutesi’s clan, the ceremony is properly called *Tloo-Kwa-Nah* when Europeans were present.⁵ This translation error is typical to the challenges posed by the appropriation of Potlatch, in a long tradition of appropriation by Europeans. The authors share no relevant indigenous cultural heritage with those discussed here, so are in no position to assess whether the Situationists used the term well.

We will instead defer to Clutesi and the Tloo-Kwa-Naw for a description of the event. Clutesi writes that society members would spend years accumulating goods or items with the intent of giving them away. This could include utensils and robes, even hunting or fishing rights in certain territories. Clutesi writes that the most prestigious items were knowledge of songs and ceremonial dances. Tloo-Kwa-Naw itself lasted a full moon cycle, during which everyone was housed and fed by a communal network sharing responsibilities. During the ceremony, the collected objects were given away according to a complex web of social protocols.

⁴ Debord, Guy (1959). *The Role of Potlatch, Then and Now*, translated by Reuben Keehan.

⁵ Clutesi, George (1969). *Potlatch*, Gray's Publishing Ltd.

Beyond a feast or ceremony, the Potlatch acted as a means of governance that guided actions, arrangements, and social organization long beyond the moon cycle:

“A Potlatch is not simply singing and dancing around a fire. A Potlatch is where a Chief takes care of his community by giving away food and clothing. It’s where we tell accounts of our history and connect it through generations. A Potlatch is our banking system and our judicial system. A Potlatch is where we give names and acknowledge family ties. It’s where we collectively acknowledge our present and remember our history. It’s where we conduct marriages, remember those who have passed on, and negotiate territory lines. A Potlatch is so much more than singing and dancing” (Keisha Everson, First Nations Language and Culture teacher).⁶

The earliest work of indigenous scholarship on Potlatch we could find is cited here, George Clutesi’s book, *Potlatch*, from 1969. Raoul Vaneigem published his book in 1967. Mackenzie Wark notes that Vaneigem's concept of the Potlatch came not from indigenous accounts, but from the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas.⁷ Boas participated in a number of Potlatches while living with the Kwakiutl, often in solidarity with protests against a Canadian ban on the practice which lasted until 1951. But Boas' writing positioned Potlatch in a distinctly anti-capitalist frame, reflecting events specifically orchestrated as acts of resistance to government control. He misreported some elements, such as the accumulation of interest borne on what was "given away." His writing has been critiqued as reflecting a Western bias that simplified Potlatch into an idealist vision of an alternative to capitalist society.

Potlatch as an act of resistance is important in its own cultural context. The Situationist interpretation is twice removed from Potlatch as an indigenous practice, and the distinction seems important, so that we don't erase one history for another. Nonetheless, this Situationist Potlatch was central to their concept of governance. Using terms carefully to avoid this cultural confusion, a simplification may suffice: In a Situationist Reading of Potlatch, wealth is given away in proportion to what is received, with greater social power emerging from one’s willingness to destroy the excess. It is a means of giving that disrupts the spectacle:

⁶ Everson, Keisha. (2020). Oppression and Resilience, <https://cvcollective.ca/oppression-and-resilience/>

⁷ Wark, Mackenzie (2015). *The Beach Beneath the Street*. Verso. p 70

“The Situationists’ great claim was that one could choose to reject market relations of commodity exchange by appropriating the separated knowledge that they offered and then re-circulating it as a gift that would provoke others to make their own connections. If spectacle-capitalism formed a circuit for the circulation of reified commodified knowledge, then [their] aim was to create a modern Potlatch in which they could ‘interrupt the circuit when and where we please.’”⁸

Proof of Work

Blockchains, as the code-spine for Bitcoin, stands in opposition to this Situationist Potlatch. It is an endless, irreversible ledger of economic exchange, and famously aims to operate in a social context of "zero-trust." A blockchain doesn't require you to trust your neighbor in order to trust his currency. It doesn't require you to trust a bank or online processor. You can live without this trust because you trust the security of the ledger. The ledger, in the meantime, can be trusted because of a security protocol that allows it to be decentralized and unchangeable. This security emerges from the destruction of one kind of shared wealth – energy, and the environment – to create and exchange individual wealth. This is called a "Proof of Work" consensus. Proof of Work says that your computer has burned X amount of energy (“work”) while ensuring the accuracy of the blockchain.⁹ Dedicating your system to this task accumulates financial rewards. The more energy it burns, the more trusted it is.

Vaneigem writes: “Man only really separates himself from nature by transforming it through technology, and as he transforms it he disenchants it. But the use of technology is determined by social organization... Social organization – hierarchical, since it is based on private appropriation – gradually destroys the magical bond between man and nature.”¹⁰ In a perversion of Potlatch, blocks are "mined" by extracting natural wealth into an abstract economic framework without any reference to the social bonds or connections those exchanges represent. That framework is designed to support the absence of social connection and replace it with a distributed process for managing automated transactions. Used in this way,

⁸ Martin, Keir (2012). *The ‘potlatch of destruction’: Gifting against the state*. Critique of Anthropology. 2012;32(2):125-142, citing Andre-Frank Conord (1954) *Potlatch: directions for use*, written for Potlatch #1.

⁹ Alternatively, one could put up one’s own funds to justify one’s own node as trustworthy. This is called “Proof of Stake.” While more energy efficient, this is simply a means of paying to be trusted. Other protocols exist, but are yet to be implemented in a “dominant” currency.

¹⁰ Vaneigem, Raoul (1967) “Exchange and Gift”, in *The Revolution of Everyday Life: Impossible Communication or Power as Universal Mediation*.

it follows a logic of isolating and abstracting the points of connection between people, places, nature, and cultures. It is a machine rooted in the distribution and exchange of currencies rather than a technosocial ecology.

In his book, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (written before blockchain existed), Alex Galloway warns about the power embedded into the rules that govern such network arrangements. He writes: "Protocol then becomes more and more coextensive with humanity's productive forces, and ultimately becomes the blueprint for humanity's innermost desires about the world and how it ought to be lived. This makes protocol dangerous ... because it acts to make concrete our fundamentally contingent and immaterial desires" (p. 245). In contrast, a Situationist Blockchain ought to redefine concrete desires into immaterial ones.

Debord wrote that the Situationists would aim "to abolish not only the exploitation of humanity, but also the passions, compensations and habits which that exploitation has engendered."¹¹ At the same time, it was acknowledged that the Spectacle was too powerful an enemy. Any resistance would quickly be recuperated into the Spectacle itself. Instead, resistance was a constant struggle for moments of autonomy, and the concept of recuperation could be wielded both ways.

When radicals use the spectacle against itself, it is a hijacking, or *detournement*. This hijacking would take on a destructive glee after the Watts Riots. Debord saw in the destruction, vandalism, and thefts a radical reversal of control between those oppressed by a vast culture of commodification, writing that "People who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities... Once it is no longer bought, the commodity lies open to criticism and alteration, whatever particular form it may take. Only when it is paid for with money is it respected as an admirable fetish, as a symbol of status within the world of survival." (Debord, 1981: 155)

Non Fungible Gestures

MacKenzie Wark has written about the Situationist movement as having "its own quite particular economy of donation and reputation."¹² Wark focuses on the

¹¹ Debord, Guy (1957). Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action.

¹² Wark, Mackenzie (2015). *The Beach Beneath the Street*. Verso. p 71

French thinking about this kind of exchange, including Jacques Derrida: “Derrida proposes instead that the gift must interrupt the economy. The gift is not supposed to be returned. It is outside circulation and circular time. Giving suspends all calculation. The gift is canceled by any reciprocation, return, debt, counter-gift or exchange.” A pure gift is a gift that cannot create an obligation or compelling reciprocity from the recipient. Wark explains that

“...for the Situationists, the very impossibility of the pure gift calls into being a whole terrain of possibility for an art and politics of the impurity of the gift. Every impure gift forces both giver and receiver into the invention of an attitude to life that can accept the gift, but not exchange it. The invention of everyday life could be nothing but the inventive accommodation to gifts, to the subtle art of not returning the gift, of giving again in a way that is not circular, that does not simply pass on the debt. Exchange affirms the identities of givers and receivers, and the value of the thing exchanged. Exchange arises as a way to contain the disturbing capacities of the gift. This might be the last nobility left to life: to give and not receive, receive and not gift, to invent unreturnable acts (another name for which might be situations).” (ibid).

The Situationist Blockchain is a way of reconciling the idea of revolutionary liberty defined by the crypto scene with the revolutionary liberty of the Situationist Internationale. The ideology of crypto-revolutionaries is deeply rooted in conservative concepts of economics, exchange, commodification and profit. The idea of the Situationists is a constant search for moments of reprieve from the psychic damage of those concepts, a retreat from the idea that “‘having’ (the products of dead labour) becomes more important than ‘being’ (satisfied and integrated into one’s living labour),” as described by Keir Martin.¹³

Michel Bauwens writes that “cryptocurrencies are a disaster” from a psychological view:

“On the one hand, they are a very powerful agent towards the ‘transactionalization of life’, that is of the fact that all the elements of our lives are progressively turning into transactions. Which overlaps with the fact that they become ‘financialized’. Everything, including our relations and emotions, progressively becomes transactionalized/financialized, and the Blockchain

¹³ Martin, Keir (2012). *The ‘potlatch of destruction’: Gifting against the state*. Critique of Anthropology. 2012;32(2):125-14

represent an apex of this tendency. This is already becoming a problem for informality, for the possibility of transgression, for the normation and normalization of conflicts and, thus, in prospect, for our liberties and fundamental rights, and for our possibility to perceive them (because we are talking about psychological effects).”¹⁴

Through a Situationist lens, the blockchain operates like any other spectacle, whereas capitalism is able to "mine" profit from the leisure of the masses which would otherwise be spent on living. To generate profit and spend it is *working*, and true leisure must transcend work. We are interested in the resistance of the crypto ideology of financialization and how it is embedded into the control mechanisms, or protocols, of blockchains, and how they might be taken back and repurposed. It dares cryptocurrencies to confront this radical posture for what it is, and proposes an alternative. The Situationist Blockchain combines elements of detournement, the refusal of spectacle and commodification, and a specific, Situationist-defined concept of Potlatch, or the pure gift, or the de-commodification of commodities.

Proof of Non-Work

“We experience the externalities of the attention economy in little drips, so we tend to describe them with words of mild bemusement like ‘annoying’ or ‘distracting.’ But this is a grave misreading of their nature. In the short term, distractions can keep us from doing the things we want to do. In the longer term, however, they can accumulate and keep us from living the lives we want to live, or, even worse, undermine our capacities for self-reflection and self-regulation, making it harder, in the words of Harry Frankfurt, to ‘want what we want to want.’ Thus there are deep ethical implications lurking here for freedom, wellbeing, and even the integrity of the self.”

— Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing*.

We began with an idea of resisting economic incentives for participation. Whereas Bitcoin relies on Proof-of-Work (POW) as its method of validating a mining node’s version of the ledger as accurate — to establish trust — we turn to Proof of Non-Work (PNW). PNW brings elements of the pure gift to the Blockchain. It is an

¹⁴ Bauwens, Michel (2017). “The Financialization of Life,” P2P Foundation. <https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/the-financialization-of-life/2017/09/10>

alternative to extracting and burning resources as the sacrificial evidence of your commitment to the ledger.

Instead, as a gift freely given, you sacrifice your own devices. As engines of productivity, the laptop, smartphone and wearable device are a deeply ingrained delivery vehicle for spectacle and distraction. Designed as tools of ever-increasing productivity, in which social interactions are commodified through digital social networks and surveillance capitalism, today's modern computing devices offer a trade-off between social interaction and creativity on the one hand and endless manipulation and spectacle on the other. They are relentlessly optimized to polarize, distract, and inflame, hijacking lived time to provide fragments of your life to be analyzed and sold back to you through marketing. These devices and platforms are, to state the obvious, transforming your time and leisure into "commodities." The Situationist Blockchain beckons you toward severing your relationship to the tyranny of interactive productive spectacle, to bite the hand that feeds you — perhaps even to bite your own hand.

The Situationist blockchain refuses to participate in remote work, social surveillance and data capitalism. Having already accumulated these machines, users are able to fulfil their purpose of profit-making completely. By downloading our cryptocurrency "wallet" (a program for mining and holding cryptocurrency) you agree to dedicate 100% of your system's resources to the single activity of accumulating wealth that can never be spent. The device becomes "bricked," useless for any other task, fulfilling your obligation to the "Proof of Non-Work Consensus Protocol." If the wallet is running, you're not on your phone.

As you brick more of your devices, you accumulate more cryptocurrency. Your device is mining while you do something else – anything else. The machine dreams of labor on your behalf. You can play, sleep, love, eat, and pursue any spontaneous volunteer action that moves you. That is, for Situationists, the act of liberation, however temporary.

Meanwhile, your wallet accumulates wealth which is endlessly destroyed in a parody of economics. In a strange quirk of markets, the more currency that is destroyed, the more valuable the currency becomes. Following the dream-world logic of surreal situations, this means that a cryptocurrency that is constantly destroyed and never spent should be the most valuable currency in the world.

In the dream logic of surreal situations, the pure gift replaces existing economic models, and vast sums are accumulated by tech giants such as Facebook

or Google by turning off the engines of their networks. Bricking cloud servers and iPhones is the ultimate gift, an act of de-commodifying commodities in ways that absolutely cannot be returned by the receiver. In exchange, they receive an inordinate sum of social capital. This would be reflected in the massive sums of cryptocurrency they would instantly acquire, as hundreds of thousands of their machines mine dead time for a dead currency. Acknowledging the uselessness of this wealth is the final step of the Situationist revolution, an unattainable dream.

The Situationist Blockchain is presented as a Non Fungible Gesture, a gift given freely with the aim of imagining a world beyond financialization and commodities. It reclaims the rhetoric of radical change and dares the dreamers to dream of something aside from a salvation to be delivered through financial instruments. To reassess the waiting game of accumulation, the constriction of light flickering from glass boxes, and pursue the richness of the moment's immediate possibilities.

What happens then?

LutteCoin is a project of the Excavations: Governance Archaeology for the Future of the Internet residency held virtually at University of Colorado Boulder and King's College London. Its aim is to explore pre-digital mechanisms across diverse societies and cultural practice through creation-oriented research. Curated by Federica Carugati (King's College London), and Darija Medic and Nathan Schneider (Media Enterprise Design Lab, University of Colorado Boulder), with support from the Eutopia Foundation and in collaboration with DiploFoundation.

