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## Cryptocurrencies and the Technological Foundations of World Society

Mattia Cacciatori

Department of Politics, Languages, and International Studies

Within social sciences, there is a growing interest in, and concern for, the ways in which cryptocurrencies are shaping social realities. So far, the major approaches to understand the impact of cryptocurrencies have been economic, sociological, political, legal, and technological. In other terms, scholars have questioned whether cryptocurrencies are likely to set a new economic standard, (Ametrano, 2016; Taskinsoy, 2019) how they are being socialised, (Zimmer, 2017) if they alleviate the inequalities inherent to the capitalist system, (Karlstrom, 2014) how they can be regulated through legislation, (Grinberg, 2011; Trautman, 2014) and what technological developments underpin their usage. (Redshaw, 2017)

On the other hand, international relations (IR) literature has been silent on the issue. This is especially striking as the evolution of cryptocurrencies, especially those outside the central banking system, is considered to be a key potential threat to the US dollar hegemony (Forbes, 2017; Perracini, 2018), which has widely been credited as garnering the US financial, economic, indebtedness and political advantages associated with its dominant power position in the international system (Strange 1987, Norloff, 2010). Furthermore, growing private investments in this new kind of currency also stimulates debates on the advantages and disadvantages of the denationalisation of currencies, (Hayek, 1976) which deeply interrogates the entire state-based architecture of Westphalian politics. Depending also on the choices that states make, reconfigurations of power to respond to the emergence of cryptocurrencies could have deep consequences in terms of influencing hegemonic cycles, diplomacy, and power distribution among states and between state and non-state actors.

There are essentially two contrasting visions on the emergence of cryptocurrencies: on one side, many private investors are arguing that these can ultimately lead to a transcendence of traditional forms of statehood, allowing for the emergence of a global society of individuals underpinned by cryptocurrencies. (De Caria, 2019) On the other, state actors tend to underline the fact that they will always play a crucial role in the production, distribution, and regulation of cryptocurrencies. (Hughes and Stephen, 2014) These two stances seem to be in clear contradiction one with the other, and yet currently we are witnessing the manifestation of both. On one side the cryptocurrency market has grown exponentially since its emergence, (Research and Markets, 2019) with many investors claiming that the statelessness of the money is among the crucial reasons to invest. (Aggarwal et al., 2019) On the other, more and more states are attempting to influence the future of the cryptocurrency market. (Inshyn et al., 2018)

Precisely because of this tension, the English School provides with an excellent theoretical venue to investigate the phenomenon of cryptocurrencies. The idea that at least two social realities can coexist at the international level, in this case International and World Society, has been one of the cornerstones of the School. (Brown, 2001; Buzan et al., 2004) So, by associating World Society with the reality where private investors conduct their relations at the margins of state sovereignty, and International Society with the power dynamics that are emerging in concomitance with the growth of cryptocurrencies, we can envision at least two controversies that are likely to affect international politics: the first one is a normative friction between individuals and states on the future of sovereign statehood. Developments in this area are likely to be shaped by the growth of cryptocurrencies. The more private investors accumulate cryptocurrencies, the more they will create a space where states have difficulties in exercising their power. (Gamble, 2017) In this sense, cryptocurrencies provide for the possibility of a

*non-state* dominated international politics. While IR literature has already focused on non-state agency, with prime manifestations being non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and international law, (Buzan et al., 2004; Habermas, 2008; Navari, 2018; Neumann, 2001) these are substantially different from cryptocurrencies for three reasons: the latter are *not* created by states; they *don't need* states to operate; and they *don't aim* at helping states in carrying out their logistical tasks. Because of these characteristics, cryptocurrencies can further question the primacy of sovereignty as a fundamental norm in international politics.

The second friction occurs within the rational boundaries of International Society and is likely to follow a competition-for-technology model that resembles the Nuclear Race. The reasons why states are taking an interest in investing in cryptocurrencies are plenty and multifaceted, from taxing them to generate extra-revenues at low cost, (Lansky, 2018) to directly investing in them to avoid international economic sanctions. (Chowdhury, 2019; Konowicz, 2018) One interesting dimension of this potential evolution, beyond state competition for technological resources, will be the recognition that technologies such as cryptocurrencies have their own *telos*. In fact, if states start to race for the accumulation and production of cryptocurrencies, they will need to ensure that the technology becomes more and more functional. So, while at the state-level it will be possible to witness friction among future crypto-powers, the technology will steadily develop. This can result in the controversial idea that technology, instead of being a mean to achieve an end, becomes an end in itself. And this would relegate states, individuals, and their frictions, to mere tools for technological development. There is a sort of techno-determinism in this line of reasoning, that is not different from the economic-determinism that pervaded a portion of the discipline since the End of the Cold War and of which, it has been argued, a hierarchical World Society could be an articulation. (Buzan, 1993; Wendt, 2003)

The two considerations above revitalize the discussion on the possible configurations of World Societies. Buzan argued that World Society can have three structures: “[i]t could be a hierarchy (world government); it could continue to be international anarchy; or it could be primal anarchy at the individual level—the stateless society of classical anarchism—that effectively eliminates the political sector”. (Buzan, 1993) As outlined in the sections above, if cryptocurrencies will prove to be an asset in the future, they will highly influence these configurations. However, regardless of the kind of World Society that will emerge, technology is likely to be at the top of the teleological pyramid, (Severino, 2011) resulting in what we might call a Technological World Society.

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