Blockchain Solutions to Socio-Political Problems
An Exploration of Current Issues in Web3
HLS Beyond Mini Seminar
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Synopsis
Particularly in recent years, blockchains and "web3" have been proposed as a panacea for technical and socio-political problems. Blockchain-based projects have emerged promising to do everything from banking the unbanked, to powering real estate transactions, to tackling the issue of misinformation, to empowering artists. In this series of conversations, we will look at several of these broad categories of blockchain-based projects and critically discuss: what are the problems that actually need to be solved? Do blockchains offer a viable solution? What are the limitations and trade-offs? And what are the implications of deploying blockchains in these ways? What can we learn from existing projects that have attempted to solve these problems?

Format
I will begin each seminar with a brief overview of that day's topic, but devote most of the time to open-ended discussion. The readings specified below will serve as a jumping-off point for discussion, so it is essential that you read them and prepare questions and topics for further discussion. I would also encourage you to investigate the example projects listed for each session — in particular, the ones marked in bold are likely to come up in the discussion. If you would like to research the topic areas more broadly before each session to help formulate your thoughts, I would encourage you to, and if you find any material that you find particularly thought-provoking please send it to me so I can also read it in advance!

For each day, I have assigned a group of students to do a particularly deep dive on the readings. These students should read the material, prepare some questions and discussion points as a group, and send them to me in advance of the session. There is no need to engage in a deep discussion of the readings before the session — that is what the in-person time is for — but please do try to come up with questions that will spark engaging discussion that will dive into some of the deeper topics rather than staying at surface-level.

These sessions will operate under Chatham House Rules to encourage open discussion, meaning that you are free to discuss the topics from the class, but should not attribute statements or opinions to any specific individuals.

Background
If you are unfamiliar with blockchains, cryptocurrencies, and web3, it will be useful to familiarize yourself with the broad topic area and terminology. Bloomberg has a good primer. My Web3 is Going Just Great project has a glossary that can aid with jargon. It will also be useful to get a sense of the ideology behind crypto — namely when it comes to topics like "decentralization" and "trustlessness". I have uploaded a recording of one of my lectures on the subject in case it is useful.

If you would like to familiarize yourself with my background and work, I'd encourage you to check out Web3 is Going Just Great, subscribe to my newsletter, and take a look through some of my essays on cryptocurrencies and blockchains.
March 6: Dispute resolution

Readings:

Example projects: Kleros (whitepaper), Aragon Court (whitepaper), Jur Dispute Resolution Module (blog post, specification, concept only)

March 27: The music industry

Readings:
- "Case study: Why you can't put the music industry on a blockchain", David Gerard. Attack of the 50 Foot Blockchain, pp. 135–149. 2017. PDF attached, distributed with permission from the author.

Example projects: Audius (whitepaper), Sound (blog post), Ujo Music (defunct), Mycelia (heavily delayed, possibly abandoned)

April 17: "Truth" — Anti-misinformation and fact-checking

Readings:

Example projects: Golden Wiki and Knowledge Graph (docs), Everipedia (whitepaper, defunct — pivoted to IQ.wiki), Civil (draft whitepaper, defunct)