Wynterian Technology: Web 3.0

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Abstract

Web 3.0, or Web3, is an emerging technology centered around access to market economics and

individual freedom in the digital space. The focus is often framed as a response to and protection

from the centralized control of Web 2.0, which sees domination of the internet by a small handful

of privately-owned corporations whose inner workings are a black box and data mining practices

often unknown or unavoidable. Web3 offers decentralized ownership, building, and encrypted

privacy on the web where users are compensated for their content creation or other contributions

through tokens, or digital assets. Direct access to capital and infrastructural control are thus

framed as solutions to challenges of Web 2.0. Critiques of Web3 focus on its limited

infrastructure and cyberliberatarien views that center individualized free market economics

advanced by its proponents. This paper offers an extension of this critique through a reading of

Sylvia Wynter's arguments on the invention of Man and limitation of Truth. I engage these

theories to trace the genealogy of Web3 as an act space and supposed protection and value.

Keywords: Cyberlibertarianism, critical theory, web3, web 3.0, blockchain, technology studies,

humanism

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Introduction

In this paper, I offer an analysis of the cyberlibertarian critique of Web 3.0, or Web3, through a

reading of Slyvia Wynter's theory on the invention of Man and the limitations of Truth. I hope

that with this analysis, we are able to fully understand the processes that gave and are giving rise

to the way that Web3 exists today. I start with an overview of Web3 and its comparisons to Web

1.0 and Web 2.0, and then move towards questions I intend to explore in this paper and ways that

Wynter's work will help to do so. After a brief overview of Wynter oeuvre and an introduction to

the theories named above, I share cyberlibertarian critiques of Web3 and proceed to trace the

history of cyberlibertarian ideology and its connection to Wynter's theories. I end with the stakes

of dominant technological narratives and where we can look for technological futures.

Overview: Web 3.0

Web 3.0, or Web3, is a developing concept that describes emerging technologies relating to the

internet. While there is no standardized definition of these technologies, Web3 usually refers to

"generally refers to a proposed decentralized architecture for the web, built on blockchain

technologies, protocols, and applications such as cryptocurrencies" (Busch, 2022b). A

blockchain is a digital database that "records data on a decentralized network of computers,

without central administration" in blocks that are linked together (Busch, 2022b). The data

recorded relate to tokens and are fully encrypted and immutable, "securing the provenance of the

digital object [token] while protecting privacy for those who interacted with the digital object"

(Carroll, 2020). Protocols are rules that govern the operation of a blockchain network and may

specify "how to execute transactions, how quickly new blocks of data may be added, and block size" (Busch, 2022a). Various users operate the computers, or nodes, of the blockchain network.

Cryptocurrencies are a type of token. Tokens are digital assets that can serve many functions – they can act as a form of currency, a digital or physical collective, a good or a service, or a digital identity. Tokens can be fungible or non-fungible. Fungible tokens are indistinguishable from each other and each type holds the same value. Each non-fungible token, on the other hand, is unique in some aspect. The purchase and exchange of tokens provide the backbone of Web3 infrastructure, as these transactions construct the "blocks" of the "blockchain." Cryptocurrency is a form of digital currency exchanged through blockchain networks "that operates entirely outside government or banking regulation and protects the anonymity of its users" (Carroll, 2020).

Web 1.0 and 2.0

Web 3.0 is framed as an emerging generation of the internet distinct from two previous generations, Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 from roughly the 1990s and 2000s respectively. These two iterations of the internet are not infrastructurally distinct. In both generations, "users access a web browser installed on their computers to connect to hosting servers, retrieve information from webpages, and display content on their computers," representing a client-server model of connectivity (Busch, 2022b). The distinction between Web 1.0 and 2.0 lies primarily in user interaction with the web.

Web 1.0 was characterized by consumption of static web pages and asynchronous commenting and hyperlinks being the only form of interactivity. User data was not captured or stored. Web

2.0 is characterized by the emergence and centralization of platforms –"the web-based interface and technical infrastructure that allows users to post content and interact with other users" (Busch, 2022b). Such platforms include Meta (Instagram/Facebook), Twitter, and YouTube. In this more dynamic and interactive generation of the web, users are also creators of content on the platforms that have come to be most of the internet. Corporations collect, store, analyze, buy, and sell data from in Web 2.0. Critics of the emergence of the small number of corporations dominating Web 2.0 claim that most value created from the web accrues to these corporations rather than the users themselves.

Infrastructure Compared

The use of decentralized blockchain technology, proponents argue, could contribute to a decentralized Web3 architecture of blockchain-created and run applications. Among these are the above-mentioned NFTs, in addition to decentralized apps (dApps), Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs), and governance tokens. Supporters hope dApps will replace current centralized platforms. Rather than operating code on centralized servers of corporations, dApps run code on the blockchain networks. Users could access these applications through blockchain-based digital identities. DAOs are "are groups whose rules are encoded and transactions executed using a blockchain and automated computer programs, without intermediaries," which provides more ways to enter and build Web3 infrastructure, as their membership, generally accessible through owning specific types of tokens, "may be used in Decentralized Finance (DeFi), which refers to the use of digital assets to deliver financial services through a blockchain network" (Busch, 2022b). Indeed, some of these technologies,

such as various dApps, DAOs, and NFTs are already fully integrated into existing blockchain

platforms.

Supporters of Web3 claim that its infrastructure addresses, if not eliminates, problems of

value-hoarding, user privacy, data mining, and the centralizing power of corporations in Web 2.0:

> While Web 1.0 and 2.0 use the client-server model, Web3 proposals would use a
>
> blockchain-based, "peer-to-peer" architecture. In a blockchain-based architecture,
>
> application code as well as data would be hosted across participating nodes in a
>
> distributed network rather than on servers operated by a company providing web
>
> applications or services, as is the case in Web 2.0. This would…address the concentration
>
> of services and data at current online platforms, eliminate intermediaries, and challenge
>
> existing business models (Busch, 2022b).

Web3 infrastructure, ideally, is not owned by a central party or authority, but rather by its users

"who will earn ownership tokens by contributing to the development and maintenance of the

services." Users could also earn tokens through their content creation, with tokens eventually

granting membership to dApps, DAOs, or voting rights on the direction of Web3 applications,

which all represent avenues to democratize data ownership (Busch, 2022b).

What is at stake with the creation and utilization of Web3? How do we understand the problems

supporters of Web3 seek to address and the proposed solutions? What can these identified

problems and solutions tell us about our past and existing societal and technological values?

Finally, what does an examination of these logics allow in terms of alternate, more liberatory

ways to engage and think through current and emerging technological problems and solutions?

For these questions, I engage the work of critical theorist Sylvia Wynter. Through her exploration

of the origins and effects of our modern episteme (order of knowledge) and its relation to past

and present conceptualizations of what it means to be Human, I think through the organizing

logic of Web3. I apply her conceptions of the Human, as Man1 and Man2, to this exploration in

order to understand the genealogy of Web3 as infrastructure and ideological claim. Her work

allows a tracing of economic, political, and social processes that work to produce our world

socially, scientifically, and culturally. I will also focus on Wynter's argument of the limitations to

Truth that emerge from epistemological orders to explore "Man's technologies."

Wynter: An Introduction

Sylvia Wynter is a philosopher and critical theorist whose work, as geographer Kathryn

McKittrck states, is grounded in "her ongoing struggle to represent the fullness of human

ontologies" (McKittrick, 2006). Her analysis of modern thought reveals the corresponding ethics

that accompany definitions and redefinitions of the human and the ways in which this could only

be effected through the concepts of race and colonial difference.

The Invention of Man

In "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being / Power / Truth / Freedom: Toward the Human, after

Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," Sylvia Wynter outlines the genealogy of modern

thought from the Renaissance and Enlightenment. She does this in order to examine the ways in which the context-specific conceptions and categories of the human come to represent Man, or the only mode of being human. Engaging with Foucault's chronology of our modern episteme, Wynter argues that two epochal transformations to the descriptive statement of what it means to be human, first in the Renaissance (Man1) and again in 19th century (Man2), "were effected only on the basis of what Quijano identifies as the 'coloniality of power,' (Wynter, 2003). In other words, the conception and social reproduction of Man1 and Man2 were made possible, and rendered necessary, through processes of colonization, the colonizer/colonized relation, and race, which in themselves encode and sustain what it means to be human. "Race," she argues, became "the non-supernatural but no less extrahuman ground (in the reoccupied place of the traditional ancestors/gods, God, ground) of the answer that the secularizing West would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and the what we are" (Wynter, 2003).

The invention of Man1, or the classical order, Wynter argues, initiated "the first gradual de-supernaturalizing of our modes of being human, by means of [Western Europe's] re-invention of the theocentric 'descriptive statement' Christian as that of Man" (Wynter, 2003). Wynter traces the origins of this first epistemological shift in the European colonial exploration of the Americas and resulting enslavement of Subsaharan Africans. Man1 replaced Latin-Christian's previous conception of Man/human as the True Christian subject of the Church. Such a redefinition was needed because of a discovery that would have rendered the Latin-Christian worldview as irrational and impossible. Man as the True-Christian Self versus Non-Christian Other – a category populated by pagans, heretics, and Jews – relied on resulting logics of supernaturally uninhabitable continents of Africa and the Americas (Wynter, 2003). Colonial Portuguese

contacts with these lands, however, were in fact inhabited with people completely outside of the Latin Christian worldview, and thus its resulting logics and expectations of Grace, salvation, and indeed Christianity.

A new descriptive statement of what it meant to be human was thus necessary. The emergence of this new conception of Man/human, brought about and rendered necessary by colonial exploration. Latin-Christian Europe's matrix of humanity was rewritten to organize the secular, rational Human and the irrational Other, wherein Indigenous people of the Americas and Africa occupied the space of the "Other." The conception of Man1 as a natural phenomenon, similar to non-human biological organisms and processes, allowed the naturalization of man of Human, as its seemingly natural and neutral modes of being could not be disavowed.

The 19th century conceptualization of Man2 (our current episteme) follows a similar epochal rupture grounded in Darwinian ideas of evolution and natural selection. This epistemological transformation again redefined the human on the basis of colonial exploitation in order to categorize "all the colonized darker- skinned natives of the world and the darker- skinned poorer European peoples " (*Sylvia Wynter*, 2015; Wynter, 2003)**.** Science became the "master code" of human organization, represented through the color line, "in order to enable the selected/dysselected, and thus deserving/undeserving status organizing principle that it encoded to function for the nation-state as well as the imperial orders of the Western bourgeoisie" (*Sylvia Wynter*, 2015; Wynter, 2003). This conception of the human was again posited as a scientifically existing, rather than socially constructed, law of nature. Man2's biologically-legitimized nature was defined as securing the material basis of [his] well-being and existence.

Wynter also engages Foucault's **"**politics of truth" to highlight the terms in which societies must function to preserve the dominating from Man/human (Wynter, 2003)**.** The politics of truth are observable in media, educational institutions, and cultural institutions to ensure the maintenance of dominant modes Man/human. These limitations of Truth, or "inner eyes" limit "how we can see, know and behave upon our present global and national order" (Wynter, 1993)**.**

Wynterian Techn/Man's Technologies

How did we arrive at the problems and solutions of Web3 cyberlibertarian framing of Web3? Incorporating Wynter's arguments, I will first present current critiques of Web3, explore the emergence of this ideology, then move towards its past precedents.

Critiques of Web3

Criticism of Web3 technology highlights various areas of concern: detrimental environmental effects, myths of decentralization and technological neutrality, and reliance on free market economics. On a humanistic level, critics compare Web3 expansion rhetoric to "the settler colonial situation: the assumption of an empty social space to be filled, and the promise of sovereignty and riches for those occupying it" (Corballis & Soar, 2022)**.** Indeed, some scholars have argued that the dominant politic of blockchain technology is a continuation of past cyberlibertarianism, " a faith in technical solutions…for electronically mediated forms of living with radical, right-wing libertarian ideas about the proper definition of freedom, social life, economics, and politics" (Corballis & Soar, 2022)**.**

Corballis and Soar also note that blockchain technologies encode right-wing politics and hide

economic frameworks behind seemingly neutral automated processes (Corballis & Soar, 2022).

The neutralization of technology underpins the cyberlibertarian belief that the internet is a

"nonhierarchical, disembodied space of free flowing information" whose subjects, free from the

nation-state, "are sovereign individuals who transcend borders of geography and culture"

(Corballis & Soar, 2022). As the authors state, the non-nation state governance is defined by

market logics that are run by individuals on the blockchain acting in accordance with their

interests (Corballis & Soar, 2022). "Democracy," they argue, "becomes a market" one needs to

buy into and technology is unbound from its material, geographic, and sociocultural realities

(Corballis & Soar, 2022).

Cyberlibertarianism

Cyberlibertarianism, as an ideology, developed in the 1990s, alongside the then shift to

"hypermedia" (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007). The technology-driven social change made

possible by global telephone networks and the ability to produce, send, and receive

unprecedented amounts of information "fundamentally transformed" existing forms of work and

leisure and opened new industries and investment opportunities that required new ideological

frameworks (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007). "At this crucial juncture," Barbrook and Cameron

write, "a loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the

USA…succeeded in defining…the Californian Ideology." (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007).

This mix of technological determinism and libertarian individualism blended the "free-wheeling

spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies," grounded in the belief of the

liberatory potential of new technologies (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007)**.** Californian Ideology insisted that free market economics was essential to this new information age. Its supporters, in this way, were advocates of "libertarian form of politics…where all individuals will be able to express themselves freely within cyberspace" (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007).

1960s

Cyberlibertarian logic can be traced back to the late 1960s culture wars, protests, technological innovations. The political climate of the late 1960s saw a growing divide between "straight" and "counterculture" in California. Within the Left, the role of technology was often embraced as a possible space of free expression not bound by censorship (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007)**.** Community media activists, "became involved in developing new information technologies for the alternative press, community radio stations, home-brew computer clubs and video collectives" in an attempt to implement direct democracy in varying social institutions (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007). At the same time, the New Right supported information technology's possibility to create new markets for the private sector (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007).

The earlier attempts at community media organizing, like other "social cum intellectual movements of the sixties" represented a brief challenging of the dominant episteme of Man2 and its logic of man as inherent securer of materials for individual survival (Wynter, 2003). These movements reframed ownership, control, and production of digital technologies before, like other movements of the time, being coopted shortly thereafter.

<u>1990s</u>

Such cooptation would occur a generation later with the rise of the "virtual class," a group of skilled technology workers without permanent jobs but temporary, high paying contracts who advocate for free market economics in the digital space (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007). While framed as politically radical because of its anti-corporation stance, the cyberlibertarian shift of the 90s operated neatly within our present racial, economic, and social episteme of what it means to be human, and what it means to protect and reproduce the human.

The "digital artisans" of the virtual class simultaneously occupied a space of privilege and exploitation because of their pay and constant temporary work contracts (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007). Though this class of workers experienced the work and culture of the community media activists before them, their alignment with the Western bourgeois social order meant that "work itself has become the main route to self-fulfillment" (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007). Secure access in the position of Man2 as controller of capital became the way through which the virtual class articulated their class desires of anti-corporation technology and free market economics. This contradiction did not present a problem: "as a hybrid faith, the Californian Ideology happily answers this conundrum by believing in both visions at the same time – and by not criticizing either of them" (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007).

The limits of Truth, possibility, and analysis here are bound by a capitalist mode of production. The goal of the virtual class is not freedom from neoliberal economics, but inclusion within it as a fulfilled worker. Man is a "location of desire" (McKittrick, 2006):

The conception is the imperative. This is why, however much abundance we
produce, we cannot solve the problem of poverty and hunger. Since the goal
of our mode of production is not to produce for human beings in general,
it's to provide for the material conditions of existence for the production and reproduction of our present
conception of being human: to secure the well-being, therefore, of those of us, the global middle classes,
who have managed to attain its ethno-class criterion (McKittrick, 2006).

Support of cyberlibertarianism in the 1990s reveals attempts of naturalizing and neutralizing

digital technologies and obfuscating their socially constructed nature, much like descriptive

statements of Man naturalize its supposedly scientific descriptive and hide its social constructs.

Similarly, the free market of the digital world is a space so bound by seemingly natural laws that

"attempts to interfere with the emergent properties of these technological and economic forces,

particularly by the government, merely rebound on those who are foolish enough to defy the

primary laws of nature" (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007). The mapping and encoding of a

capitalist mode of production onto the digital space, and this treating it as inherent, as "just

there" obscures the practices and infrastructures of domination that construct and maintain the

episteme of Man2 through the technology of Man.

Finally, the logics of cyberlibertarianism reflect White, Western bourgeois freedom at the

expense of the exploitation of the non-White, ghettoized, and Third World Other. This not only

manifests the dangerous working conditions on manufacturing plants increasingly moved outside

of the United States, but is also observable through digital redlining, the divide between the

information rich and the information poor, unequal broadband access, digital (in)accessibility,

and the environmental effects of digital technologies disproportionately affecting communities of

color (Barbrook and Cameron, 2007) .

Conclusion

An analysis of ideologies underpinning Web3 reveal its conception in logic firmly planted in

"ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western

bourgeois) conception of the human, Man which overrepresents itself as if it were human itself"

(Wynter, 2003). The effects of such a framing of technological problems and solutions limits,

but does not completely hide or prevent, understandings of technological freedoms rooted in

challenging our present episteme and centering those issues that may exist outside the "inner

eyes" of dominant society. Web3 rhetoric centered on securing economic access to markets and

assets tells just one technological story and appropriates notions of technological freedom and

sovereignty. Activists and educators advocating for digital and information access, against digital

redlining, and against surveillance and Black and Brown communities, poor people, and queer

people, represent rich sites technological creation and story-telling that challenge the

predominant rhetoric of Web3.

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