



INTRODUCTION

Origins

In 2013, Yoni Shemesh converted his small architecture studio at the heart of Tel Aviv into what at the time was one of the first Bitcoin meetup centres in the world. He cleared the 15 sqm ground floor, leaving there only one sofa, a few shelves and a big LED screen. He also smashed the front wall and replaced it with a huge glass. In a country where armed guards control the entrance to nearly every public institution, the message was clear: *everybody is welcome* (see [Figure 0.1.](#)). Alluding to the pioneering ‘Bitcoin Centre’ trading floor in New York – but going a step further by self-styling the space as a sort of diplomatic hub – Shemesh dubbed it *The Bitcoin Embassy in Tel Aviv*.

As the story goes, it all began after a night of heavy drinking dedicated to what Embassy associate Uri described to me in 2018 as ‘the most hallucinated ideas on how to advance mass adoption of Bitcoin’. The next morning, in a cloudy hangover, Shemesh decided to act on one of these hallucinations. By that afternoon he had already produced silver badges with the Bitcoin symbol and the inscription ‘Ambassador’. The core group of Embassy associates held another meeting that same week, this time over coffee. They decided that each would volunteer for one or two shifts per week to provide information about Bitcoin to anyone who dropped in. Although no template was used, the way shifts tended to be structured consisted of occasional information sharing with random visitors, focusing on either Bitcoin ideology or its financial benefits relative to fiat (i.e. state-backed) currencies. This also included the provision of practical technical advice to newcomers, such as how to install a cryptocurrency wallet, the pragmatic meaning of central concepts and investment strategies in the world of Bitcoin, and how to send and receive money via the Bitcoin



Figure 0.1. The entrance to the Bitcoin Embassy in Tel Aviv. Credit: Matan Shapiro.

network. These voluntary shifts in turn entitled each Ambassador to take part in the decision-making process. They would meet roughly every two weeks to ‘decide things in a decentralized way’, as Shemesh described this in an interview, alluding to their reliance on a flat social structure.

I first heard of the Embassy in September 2017. I had just begun research on egalitarian impulses in the emergent Israeli cryptocurrency scene and was exploring potential sites for fieldwork. I initially attended meetups

organized by different Israeli startup ventures, which were ideal spaces for networking. During one of these meetups I met an investor called Gur. It was a sweltering day, and we both sipped from half-frozen beer bottles on the twenty-sixth floor of a luxurious office building in north Tel Aviv, where the startup that had organized the meeting rented an entire floor. When Gur heard I was looking for a suitable site for fieldwork, he insisted that I visit the Embassy. ‘It is the real thing’, he assured me, ‘a real crypto community [in Hebrew: *Kehila*]’. I asked if I needed to make an appointment in advance, as was the norm for other such meetups. Gur laughed to signal I was way off track. He then raised his beer and declared, ‘To the revolution!’ I smiled faintly and toasted. *This feels promising*, I remember thinking as I marked in my diary a visit to the Embassy for the following Sunday.¹

Welcome to the New Economy

The Embassy occupied the unimpressive tiny ground floor of an old five-storey residential building on Ahuzat Bayit Street in Tel Aviv, part of a wider area that tour guides call ‘The White City’ due to the now-crumbling white façades of Bauhaus buildings constructed there between the 1920s and 1940s. To the left of the Embassy entrance was the door leading to the upper floors of the rundown building, protected by a heavy lock and an intercom. To the right stood a small shop selling designer furniture. The building shared a wall with the one next to it, creating an uninterrupted structure stretching between Montefiore and Ahad Ha’am Streets. Around the corner there was a café, and on the pavement in front of the Embassy next to motorcycle railings was a wooden bench. Later during fieldwork I discovered that the bench effectively extended the Embassy into the street, as Ambassadors often sat there to smoke, drink beer, talk or just enjoy the evening breeze coming from the magnificent Mediterranean coast down the hill.

Across the street stood a massive building that was the home of the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange. It occupied most of that side of the street, its windows gleaming and its outdoor ticker displaying the changing values of Israeli stocks in flickering red and green lights.² The building cast a permanent shadow along the street, an advantage in a city where summer temperatures can easily reach 35 degrees Celsius, and the humidity is at times unbearable.

I stood outside for a while, taking it all in. I then inhaled deeply and stepped through the glass door. The first thing I saw was an inscription on the wall in Hebrew and English with the Embassy logo on top (see [Figure 0.2](#)). It read: ‘Welcome to the New Economy! Here you can ask, share and talk [about] new decentralized cryptocurrency (sic). This is an open source community. Bitcoin accepted.’



Figure 0.2. Welcome inscription on the wall at the Embassy. Credit: Matan Shapiro.

A hoarse ‘shalom’ came from the old sofa in the centre of the room. A man with a snow-white ponytail sat there by himself, examining something on his mobile phone.

‘Shalom’, I mumbled, not sure if this man was the same one who greeted me.

‘Are you the guy who called yesterday and wanted to sell?’ The man with the ponytail stared at me.

‘Sell what?’

‘Bitcoin, what else!?’

‘No, it’s my first time here.’ I smiled faintly.

‘Ahh’, he nodded. ‘Sit then, we’ll talk.’ He stood up, reached his hand out to shake mine and gestured towards the chair in front of the sofa. ‘Nissim. Nice to meet you.’

‘Matan. Likewise.’ I sat down. ‘I am doing anthropological research on Bitcoin, and I’d like to write everything you say.’

‘Yes, of course, you came to the right place.’ Nissim checked his phone again. ‘So, let’s begin with that guy that called here yesterday. I answered the phone. The guy said he had seen the slow rise in the value of bitcoin in the last year and he believes that it will crash down soon. So he asked if he could come over to sell his bitcoin holdings. Everything! What do you think I said?’

‘No idea . . . I heard that investing in bitcoin can be dangerous.’ I was asking more than asserting, while casually taking my notebook out of my bag.

‘Wrong answer’, Nissim nodded energetically. ‘You should never sell everything at once! Bitcoin is iron-strong [*barzel*]; if it crashes it will rise again. It is unbeatable, and that is the reason that here at the Embassy we believe that Bitcoin is your only insurance policy against financial meltdown. And it will come; there is no doubt about it.’

I nodded. That was exactly what I expected to hear in an ‘embassy’ dedicated to promoting what at the time I perceived merely as just another profit-making device in the incessant sprawling of capital. But the rest of Nissim’s enthusiastic monologue sparked my curiosity:

Remember what I am telling you; in Bitcoin it is not enough to have money, you need to know what you are doing [with the money] and understand what *liberty* is. Every step you take in the world of Bitcoin, you discover yourself; it is a process of internal revelation, like peeling an onion. You are all the time in a continuous lesson. Bitcoin makes your brain active. When you begin investing you find yourself thinking how to upgrade your life to the level you want to reach. It is like a spiritual doctrine that also has a material side to it.

‘Spiritual?’ I was genuinely surprised. ‘What you call “the material side” surely is the main incentive’, I insisted.

‘Not at all. The number one mistake people make is to think that Bitcoin is all about getting rich. But Bitcoin is in fact *opposed to* all the other capitalistic systems!’ He continued:

In our world people only know how to take – the municipality takes, the government takes, and for what? For security. ‘*We guarantee your security with ballistic missiles so they don’t attack us from Iran.*’ Well, they can’t even deal with flimsy

kites.³ . . . They just exploit the person, and I don't blame them. The bankers have the *freedom* to decide for us. The system gives them that freedom, which comes at our expense. They don't give us the freedom to decide for our own sake. And Bitcoin gives us the ability to take that freedom [into our own hands], which they don't allow us, and endow ourselves with it, merely by purchasing the correct coin, the right way, which doesn't tell you what to do, do this or that . . . [but rather] be free, be whoever you want, do whatever you want . . .

'How is that different from any other money system, or investment in stocks?' I asked.

'The difference is that here you have a community.' Nissim spoke as if this was obvious:

Bitcoin, since it is decentralized, and since it is not controlled by a central body or a superpower, can create a community which is homogenous in the sense that it takes care of its own needs with its own means. Today you can't do this [in the normative economy] because you cannot change [policy] priorities or decide that one service is more important than the other. But in our community [i.e. in the Bitcoin Embassy], things are decided for the benefit of everyone. For example, although it's a bit banal, we always bring pizzas for the open meetings we hold. What, are we going to tell each person [present] to pay for their share of the pizza? I can buy pizza for ten people; I have the ability so I will do it. There is collaboration and sharing here that is not pre-calculated. Nobody comes and says, 'Today I am buying pizza for everyone, remember that'.

'Well, you can say the same thing about any other group of people that decide to take things into their own hands', I charged. 'What would be the difference between the Bitcoin community and a group of colleagues who started a business together in an office building?'

Nissim stared at me obliquely, his chin almost touching his chest. He then typed something on his mobile and handed it over to me. 'Have a look', he said. 'This is Yaron, he is one of the Ambassadors here. Some years ago, he did an interview with a vlogger. He explains very well how Bitcoin can make a difference in the world. It's not long.'

I pressed PLAY and Yaron's head appeared on the screen. He said:

Why is Bitcoin good as a substitute for money and gold? Let's start with the fact that it doesn't have a Sovereign – [President] Obama, for example, who now [in 2014] needs 2.5 trillion dollars for health care, or Bush Senior and Bush Junior [who needed money] to finance wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – if [they] need it, the Federal Reserve will print it. There is no such thing in Bitcoin! There isn't any sinful centralized body – an insane mechanism . . . [instead] there is . . . a wonderful internet *ore*, an international freedom language that *overrides boundaries and shatters the Sovereign*, the Prophet Moses of the Third Millennium, who will

undoubtedly liberate us from the Pharaoh . . . The revolution of Bitcoin [will be] greater than anything that ever happened in the history of mankind . . . Bitcoin will be bigger than the internet, than Google, than Facebook, than the wheel, than $E=mc^2$. Satoshi Nakamoto [the still-anonymous inventor of Bitcoin] will be more famous than Michael Jordan and Jesus. *Bitcoin will be the backbone of human society in the world for everything: money, real estate, language, propriety, voting, organization, communities, stock-exchange platforms – everything will be [based] on Bitcoin . . .*⁴

‘Unbelievable!’, I whispered. Initially I had expected to find at the Embassy radical capitalists devoted to financial profiteering. Instead, I encountered a self-proclaimed community of social reformers. I remembered Gur’s promise that Embassy personnel were ‘a *real* crypto community’ and felt a sort of anthropological eureka moment. Do all Embassy members perceive Bitcoin as a revolutionary project, which is ‘not only about money’ but rather a ‘language of freedom’ that would destroy ‘the Sovereign’? To find out, I sought permission from Embassy associates to conduct ethnographic fieldwork with them, ending up accompanying Embassy activities and key research interlocutors for a period of nearly two years.

The Analytical Problem

Although Embassy members held broadly divergent sociopolitical convictions, and even sometimes differed on economic issues, they agreed on one fundamental principle – that Bitcoin was a tool of personal liberation. Their argument was simple: in the hegemonic or ‘centralized’ financial system, as they labelled it, social relations were overly regulated by ‘third parties’, such as banks, financial corporations, SWIFT services and credit card companies. Due to their intermediary role, these institutions also wielded enormous political and economic powers, which Embassy members claimed would always be detrimental to individual freedoms. Mass adoption of Bitcoin, in turn, will eliminate the current dependency on these institutions, enabling instead peer-to-peer (P2P) cash transactions at a global scale unfettered by fiscal protectionism. Expanding this notion from finance to societal structures at large, Embassy associates argued that Bitcoin could therefore also eliminate most forms of top-down regulation, thus bringing into existence a truly egalitarian society of economically autonomous peers.

The main idioms interlocutors used to justify the feasibility of this vision were ‘decentralization’ (*bízúr*) and ‘trustlessness’ (often pronounced in English).⁵ Both these terms were derived from the quasi-mythical *White Paper* published in 2008 by Satoshi Nakamoto, the pseudonymous inventor(s)

of Bitcoin.⁶ The paper describes the functionality of what quickly thereafter became known as ‘*the blockchain*’ – an open-source ledger, which uses algorithmic calculations to regulate the exchange of money between individuals (Greenfield 2018: 123–25). The White Paper transparently included the codes required to set up the blockchain on any odd computer, and it was published in an email-distribution listserv that at the time was regularly accessed by hundreds of subscribers. These codes have remained open to public scrutiny ever since, thereby permanently *decentralizing* control of the ledger across the entire network of users. Every attempt to defraud someone should thus immediately be identified and thwarted by multiple unrelated auditors. Decentralization prevents any single stakeholder from changing the algorithms without the consent of other users, and as a result it enables the safe exchange of money directly between stakeholders at an exceptionally large scale. As a key concept and mode of action, ‘decentralization’ enables every bitcoin holder to send their coins across the network securely, without anybody being able to stop or modify the transaction.

This last feature also makes *trustless money transactions* possible (Greenfield 2018: 122–23). Satoshi, as Bitcoiners around the world usually call them, described this feature in the White Paper (2008) as a ‘reduction’ of the level of trust required to send and receive cash online. Empirically this means that Bitcoin adopters do not have to trust neither human nor corporate intermediaries (i.e. third parties). In contrast, all peers can trust the mechanical system that regulates transactions in real time because its cryptographic formulas are open for all to see, thereby allowing users to verify on their own that the blockchain is functioning well. At least in theory, every Bitcoin adopter should gain in this way absolute certainty about the validity of their transactions. Embassy associates described this feature as an effective ‘automation of trust’, which they argued discarded human moral weaknesses (like the temptation to defraud or steal) and faulty sensory faculties (like occasional typing errors) from financial relationships.

But here lies an intricate problem. Anthropologist Viviana Zelizer (2005) argued that trust is an *ethical contingency* of close relationships. As such, trust is fundamental to the exchange of money, favours, goods, etc., insofar as it implies emotional dependency on or a measure of deference to meaningful others; especially in a context of long-term reciprocity that is not strictly commercial (see Richard and Rudnyckij 2009). Anthropologist David Graeber (2011) later complemented this stance, arguing that ethical contingency itself is endemic to *debt relationships*, which require a horizon of future exchange and therefore at least a measure of commitment from reciprocating sides.

When combined, these arguments then challenge Embassy associates’ ambitions to establish a small-scale community based on the exchange of

trustless money, let alone their aspiration to build an egalitarian society of fully autonomous peers. That is so because these perspectives suggest that trustless technology would necessarily *cut* any emotional contingency between peers on the network (see [Strathern 1996](#)), thus dissolving the fabric of human community that is essential to conducting any economic reciprocity over time. The pretension to decentralize power through trustless technology threatens communitarian cohesion at the level of grassroots activity because it radically fragments trust-based societal institutions into a variety of ad hoc, instrumental, dyadic arrangements; which, according to [Zelizer \(2005\)](#) and [Graeber \(2011\)](#), could hardly *replace* trust-based collaborative agreements. This prism thus associates Bitcoin with market-driven economic models (namely [Hayek 1958\[1948\]](#); [Menger 2009\[1892\]](#)), which diminish the scope of trust-based, community-oriented economic activities as it substitutes them with a set of individuated mechanical exchanges.

This critique could apply to some Bitcoiners, no doubt. But it could not explicate the attitudes and actions at the Embassy, wherein interlocutors *did* in fact value meaningful intimate relationships. For example, Ambassadors often expressed unflinching ethical commitment to majority rule, voluntarism, coordinated direct action, transparency, communal responsibility, and the maintenance of protocol; all of which are features of collective organization that require collaboration, mutuality and trust. Relationships cultivated at the Embassy, in other words, sometimes paradoxically curtailed individual dependency on trustless exchange, which interlocutors otherwise kept praising as near-spiritual gateways to freedom.

Although they were unable to solve this apparent conundrum – wherein methodological individualism is paradoxically mobilized to induce collective affinity, and vice versa – interlocutors at the Embassy generated an innovative ethnographic theory that partially mitigated the tension. As I quickly learned, at the heart of Embassy sociality was the desire to create a network of people who would be ethically indebted to each other as members of a community but economically indebted only to themselves. Individual autonomy is here measured by the ability to remain debtless in an economy heavily reliant on credit, while moral cohesion is sought through the successful maintenance of a flat (or ‘decentralised’) community organization. Interlocutors unsurprisingly thus used such notions as ‘social equality’ and ‘distributive justice’ to articulate the power of collective action in transforming human worlds. An ethos of collective affinity at the Embassy suggested that individual units and social wholes were *not* antimonious.

To work through this vernacular view, I realized, it would be crucial to go beyond the dialectic deadlock that portrays rational choice and societal intimacy as irreconcilable. I thus found myself asking: What does it even mean to take part in an ‘open-source, community’? How is membership in this

community, which requires some measure of collective cohesion to advance its stated objectives, reconciled with the libertarian ideals of total individual autonomy and trustless reciprocity? And even more broadly, what does this counterintuitive notion of communalist individualism (or individual communalism) tell us about emergent forms of social organization in a rapidly digitalizing world?

The Argument

Building on these questions, this book advances two interconnected arguments. First, I argue that Embassy associates were able to imagine themselves as both devoted communalists *and* committed individualists because the Embassy itself was a liminal space within which it was possible to bridge these usually opposed imaginaries. Liminal spaces and situations, being existentially neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’, at times serve to successfully mitigate paradoxes precisely because they are at least partially withdrawn from mundane routines while also simultaneously enhancing aspects of everyday dilemmas (Turner 1969, 1974; cf. Kapferer 2024). Ambassadors embraced the liminality of the Embassy, in other words, by continuously mixing ‘centralized’ and ‘decentralized’ organizational modalities in their everyday practice. The credibility of their project indeed *depended on* this fusion, which annulled the purported distance between enclosed (or centralized) models of social interaction and open-ended (or decentralized) ones (see Hayes 2019; Swartz 2018; Tuddenham 2024). Going beyond the moneyiness of Bitcoin – that is, its market liquidity as a store of value and its reliability as a unit of exchange – this argument seeks to explain how interlocutors in Tel Aviv turned a heterodox debate on economic decentralization into an ambitious experimental project, whose acuity they used to challenge the hegemonic relationship between autonomy and indebtedness in contemporary Israel.

The second argument will focus on Bitcoin crowds. I here rely mainly on the work of Christian Borch (2007, 2009, 2012), who demonstrated how fluctuating stock prices in financial markets funnel masses of individual traders into synchronic – yet temporary and continuously changing – trading positions. To describe this phenomenon, Borch (2007) used the term ‘crowd syndrome’ – a tendency to be swept away with others in a mass gathering, or, alternatively, in designated digital spaces – and act like them; whether this manifests economically, politically, judicially or otherwise. ‘Syndrome’ encompasses both the tendency of investors to follow the actions of informal industry leaders, who are perceived to be more knowledgeable or as having sufficient economic influence on trends; and the tendency to get caught up

emotionally in the seductive allure of the market, as boom-and-bust cycles intermittently consolidate or disperse buyers and sellers at a global scale, thereby inspiring intense emotional amalgamations of anticipation, thrill and gloom. These two factors might at time demolish the perceived boundaries between peers, turning them into a single mass of people who seemingly act synonymously and synchronically *as a sprawling crowd*.

This analytical direction also owes to Elias Canetti's (1984[1960]) fantastic analysis of the power of crowds. Canetti contends that a crowd comes into being when an emotional 'discharge' occurs, a sensory reaction he understands as a sudden loss of personal boundaries, which breeds unity with those around oneself. He calls this 'the loss of the fear of being touched' (ibid.: 17), which, he argues, makes us oblivious to interpersonal distance both spatially and affectively. It is not enough for people to gather around a leader who promotes this or that idea to make them a crowd, in other words. Rank and personal, 1974 charisma alone are seldom enough to mobilize people into mass action. Something must synergize some kind of deeper unity between people who assemble together in order to transform a multitude of strangers into a cohesive crowd. No matter how ephemeral this unity may be, Canetti argues, discharge is essential to generating a sense of collective empowerment by which crowds operate. Such discharge causes people who had never met before to feel closer, as a sudden affective flare passes *through* them. To be effective, Canetti insists, discharge must be unpredictable; even carefully arranged ritual settings, which are specifically designed to spark an emotional response, cannot guarantee the mobilization of untamed and previously unrelated groups of people into coordinated mass action.

In Bitcoin, rapid and often extreme value fluctuations against fiat currencies – especially the US dollar, euros and pounds sterling – directly influence trade volumes and wealth liquidity, intermittently consolidating and dispersing masses of unrelated traders across the cybernetic 'trading floor' on the blockchain. I will show that this dynamic institutes crowding at a global scale, demonstrating that synchronized yet arbitrary formation into groups of sellers and buyers become a key aspect of Bitcoin sociality especially during periodic cycles of boom and bust, which pull holders into mutual engagement at a hectic pace.

To link these two arguments together I will demonstrate ethnographically that the Embassy spontaneously became an intermediary or 'liminal' (Turner 1969) space for alternative sociality, which enabled people to experience their membership in the Bitcoin movement as *extremely decentralized* online but *highly concentrated* offline. Understanding the social dynamic of this reality, as I will show, can help theorize contemporary techno-utopian conceptions of society even beyond the specific case of Bitcoin.

Methodological Notes

I decided to focus my research on the Embassy and its people primarily because it was a dynamic social club and a vibrant meeting space. Although there were other such social clubs around the world, Bitcoin-related activities at the time were still mostly taking place online across social media outlets and virtual exchange platforms. Much of the global conversation also focused on money rather than societal reorganization (Dodd 2018). Taking part in Embassy routines was therefore a striking opportunity to immerse myself among people who pragmatically implemented ‘Bitcoin values’ in their lives, and who explicitly saw themselves as a ‘community’. Fieldwork enabled me to reconceptualize Bitcoin, whose materiality I was now able to turn from a spectral abstraction into a tangible human reality. To protect the privacy of main protagonists, in the book I anonymized or pseudonymized some aspects of that reality.

During fieldwork I visited the Embassy frequently, often several times a week, usually just hanging out with whoever happened to be there and occasionally also helping with administrative tasks. I regularly attended meetings organized at the Embassy or at nearby venues, including cryptocurrency conferences, lectures, drinking events, hackathons, chess competitions and parties commemorating Bitcoin milestones or Jewish/Israeli holidays. During these events, interlocutors sometimes engaged in public storytelling of Bitcoin myths, which differed from the open lectures for disseminating professional knowledge about it. I also accompanied the meetings of the Israeli Bitcoin Association (hereafter IBA), where Embassy members had a significant presence, and which often physically took place at the Embassy. In parallel I also conducted fieldwork online, paying special attention to ongoing debates on the ‘Israeli Bitcoin’ Facebook group, which became a major ethnographic venue. Initiated by Embassy members in 2013 as a platform to exchange ideas, by 2018 the page following had grown to include about 30,000 members. Most were silent observers, but others engaged in lively and often heated daily discussions. In addition, I followed discussions on Signal, Telegram and WhatsApp groups used by Embassy members and among wider circles of cryptocurrency adopters in Israel. On these platforms I learned the elaborate slang that Embassy members have developed over the years. Further data was collected during many unstructured conversations with Embassy and IBA members – which I transcribed with consent – as well as dozens of semi-structured life-history interviews with key interlocutors who kindly agreed to take part in the research.

Embassy members certainly developed a distinctly *Israeli* style as they integrated the principles of the New Economy in their everyday activities. Yet, this style included few references to the wider context of power relations in

Israel, including the complex political struggle between left and right over social and security issues, and the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories. Shirly, a veteran Ambassador, once told me that she believed Bitcoin would be accepted widely in Israel because it resonated well with three main processes in contemporary Israeli society: (1) disillusionment with collective forms of protest; (2) inflation of available vectors of belonging formed around gender, religious and political identities (e.g. veganism, the settlement colonial project); and (3) individuation of consumerist lifestyle choices, or the idea that one is autonomous and in control of his or her own aesthetic expression.

Each of these cases included an implicit perspectival stance, wherein collective processes were condensed into particularized forms, thus replacing the hegemonic imaginary of a national and harmonious 'Jewish Community' in Israel with the allure of post-national citizenship in a globalized, yet politically fragmented, world. Nissim had once defined this same tendency as 'tribalism', referring specifically to the fact that most of the people he knew, young and old, identified with their friends on WhatsApp and Facebook more than they did with the broader Israeli society and its mainstream values. This stance recognized and effectively legitimized the accelerated dispersal of mutually exclusive value systems and moral expectations in the Israeli public sphere. It associated Bitcoin with the continuing fragmentation and impending collapse of a Jewish-Israeli national community, whose foundational ethos had once adhered to the myth of unending solidarity derived from a shared history of persecution ([Anderson 2016\[1983\]](#)).

I concluded my fieldwork several months before Israel entered into a period of unprecedented political instability, which continues to this day. Beginning in 2019, the country held five successive election campaigns lasting well into 2021, each ending in a hung parliament. The government that was finally formed in 2021 collapsed a year and a half later, and the country held another election, wherein Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right political block had gained majority. Netanyahu formed a new government and subsequently launched in early 2023 a coordinated attack on the Israeli judicial system. Widely perceived as undermining the strength of Israeli democracy, this motion was then followed by a massive civil disobedience campaign during most of 2023, wherein hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took part in massive outdoor protests against the government.⁷

And then came the 7 October 2023 terror attack. Hamas terrorists had massacred in that day more than a thousand Israelis – most of them innocent civilians – and kidnapped several hundreds more. This was the catalyst for an all-out regional war which, apart from Israel and Hamas, included the Iran-backed Lebanese organization Hezbollah and the Yemenite Houthi militants. These armed conflicts later also included a direct military

confrontation between Israel and Iran itself. The war, which at the time of writing is still going on, resulted in a devastating human atrocity in Gaza. Major NGOs and Western States' officials have accused both Israel and Hamas of committing crimes against humanity⁸.

During my fieldwork in 2018–19, the occurrence of such a disaster was quite literally unimaginable, and consequently it was largely absent from mundane conversations. Most Ambassadors cared little whether one held right-wing or left-wing views, or whether anybody defined themselves as Jewish, Arab, Israeli, Palestinian, gay, straight, orthodox, atheist, libertarian, Socialist, liberal, conservative or any other conceivable vector of identity. The issue of Palestinian independence and the ongoing occupation of the West Bank were treated as mere background noise – when they were discussed at all – and my impression was that Embassy associates did not think that these issues were relevant to Bitcoin at all. In retrospect, I realize that their aversion to the topic merely reflected a general sense of indifference and a burdening fatigue among Jewish Israelis regarding the accumulating implications of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on civilian life. Like most people around me at the time, then, I did not identify the thickening clouds. Refraining from collecting more data on power, politics and militarism in Israel was ultimately the result of my own inability to realize that Israel was entering an entirely new – and very dark – stage in its history. I encourage colleagues to cover these lacunas in future research, providing new insights on how the historical events of the last few years have impacted Israeli Bitcoiners as well as the wider crowd of Bitcoin supporters across the globe.

Another important issue that I could not cover in this book concerns the over-representation of men at the Embassy. In an interview with Shlomit, one of the few women who was part of the core group of Ambassadors, I enquired why that was so. She responded that most of the time she did not pay attention to the low number of women in the scene, as she was used to it from her time as a computer science undergraduate. She said that increasingly women were signing up for technology studies and mentioned that 'generally women are less inclined to take the quick, aggressive financial decisions that you have to make with Bitcoin'. She did not relate to my further query about whether it was emblematic of other gender imbalances in society. Since this issue hardly ever came up – and when I did bring it up, interlocutors simply agreed that there should be more space for women in the world of Bitcoin – I will not elaborate on gender in the Israeli Bitcoin ecosystem. As with the political sphere, however, it is an important issue that merits a focused ethnographic study of its own.

Bitcoin is notoriously divisive, even when it comes to aesthetics. I decided to transcribe 'Bitcoin' with a capital 'B' because Bitcoiners themselves, in Israel and beyond, tend to use this form to describe their movement. When

‘bitcoin’ is written with a lowercase ‘b’ it usually relates to the currency itself in the context of being treated as a unit of exchange, much like ‘dollars’ or ‘euros’. Bitcoin with a capital ‘B’, then, implies a wider framework that Bitcoiners understand at a moral rather than an economic register. My usage in this book reflects Bitcoiners’ self-understanding as a distinct group united by common beliefs and a set of shared practices. Capital ‘B’ here acknowledges and denotes my interlocutors’ intent to take part in a transnational Bitcoin orthodoxy. This was reinforced by the theatrical performances sometimes staged at the Embassy (see [Chapter 5](#)), presenting semi-spiritual allegories that associated Bitcoiners with post-apocalyptic salvation, and occasionally portraying Bitcoin myths; all of these were emergent forms of social distinction. I capitalize ‘Embassy’ for the same reason, as a meaningful space for the cultivation of communalist boundaries, and which interlocutors conceptualized as a cultural institution rather than a business centre.

The Book

Techno-utopian ideas are as old as Noah and his ark, and it seems reasonable to argue that they are intrinsic to social experiences of time and materiality. Similarly, as [Norman Cohn \(2001\[1993\], 2004\[1957\]\)](#) has shown, notions of equality, submission, individualism, communalism and domination have for centuries been explored in different combinations as part of myths and cosmological theories. Even P2P cash transactions were practised long before neoliberalism emerged as a political-economic force ([Graeber 2011; Ingham 2004; Simmel 2004\[1990\]](#)). Hierarchical and egalitarian experimentations with money technologies, in short, are by no means distinctly modern, and their philosophical implications often turn out to be broader than the political-economic framework promoted by champions of decentralized markets ([Shapiro and Skartveit 2025; Swartz 2020](#)).

The technological novelty of Bitcoin, as I see it, therefore goes beyond politics and the economy. Its social impact mostly lies in successfully linking virtual and actual realities into a single moral-economic frame of reference, from which heterogenic crowds of adopters could construe or contest different forms of alterity at both global and local registers ([Shapiro 2022, 2024](#)). Focusing on the intrinsic paradoxes and local complexities that the ‘Bitcoin community’ acquired in Israel, the book methodically develops this assertion over seven chapters.

[Chapter 1](#) provides the necessary historical, technical and theoretical background about the growth of the Bitcoin phenomenon over the previous decade. I will locate the genealogy of the Embassy in a specific sociocultural process that began in the 1960s in the US and culminated in the globalization

of P2P modalities of exchange in the sharing economy of the early 2000s. This will be followed by in-depth explanations of technical, political and philosophical terms that are used widely among Bitcoiners around the world. This chapter should serve as an introduction to Bitcoin sociality, which will be useful also for those readers who are already well versed in it, as the discussion also explicates the cultural undercurrents of techno-libertarian politics and their growing influence on contemporary mass movements around the globe.

Chapter 2 describes how Embassy associates organized their community. What constituted the boundaries of this community, I suggest, was not merely the possession of or trading in bitcoin; but active participation in a conversation about the moral scope of techno-cryptographic interactions, both virtual and actual. Rather than conformity to a core ideology, pertinence to the community was based on people's differential subject positions in an ongoing moral debate on freedom, money and individual agency. For that reason, I will emphasize, Embassy members could segment rapidly into a multiplicity of smaller groups while still supporting the community at large and contributing to the Embassy's primary proselytizing role. They enacted the principle of 'decentralization' at the very basis of their collaborative efforts to advance Bitcoin, claiming that their success should serve as real-world example for sceptics and critics.

Chapter 3 builds a case for individualism within Bitcoin, analysing how interlocutors cultivated personality traits that they assumed were necessary for survival in the upcoming New Economy. Strategies that marked this process included embracing the idea of becoming 'your own bank'; fostering a 'HODL' philosophy (a deliberate misrepresentation of the verb 'to hold') as a key investment precept; propagating the values associated with patience, humility and spiritual self-development; accepting the libertarian axiom that personal responsibility is a path to freedom; and recognizing the importance of the wider Bitcoin global community in supplying a stable base of support for these perspectives. Engaging with Margaret Thatcher's infamous dictum 'there is no such thing as society' – while contrasting it with Ayn Rand's Objectivist ideas – this chapter demonstrates how a *mass society* of 'individual men and women' does in fact emerge in the context of Bitcoin sociality.

Chapter 4 explores the liminality of the Embassy as a space located 'in between' centralized and decentralized imaginaries of social organization. I will show empirically that Ambassadors switched back and forth between their bank accounts and their digital wallets, each being the material embodiment of what they imagined as mutually exclusive value systems. Partaking from Victor Turner's (1974) notion of the liminoid – a specific form of liminality that is conducive to creative action – I analyse the Embassy space as 'middle ground' or a meeting point

between centralized and decentralized political-philosophical frameworks. I speculate that this was a decisive factor in the making of the Embassy into a cultural centre from which associates could preach for a radical reorganization of social institutions. I will argue that intrinsic to this liminality was the ongoing tension between communitarian and individualized definitions of freedom, which interlocutors continuously negotiated.

Chapter 5 examines the millenarian views shared by Embassy members, who developed a theory of space and time regarding the expected emergence of a new world order following the inevitable collapse of the fractional-reserve banking system. I analyse the cosmogonic implications of this expectation, which, as opposed to some recent critiques, I argue should not be understood as indicative to the emergence of a ‘financial religion’ (see [Faustino, Faria and Marques 2022](#); [Golumbia 2018](#)). Rejecting the idea that Bitcoin sociality may somehow be compared with religious lifestyles, this chapter explicates why many Embassy members saw eschatological crisis in a positive light, its rapturous powers thus feeding the ideal of trustless sociality along with its aspired triumph (cf. [Shapiro and Skartveit 2025](#)).

Chapter 6 focuses on crowding in the world of Bitcoin. I show how value fluctuations on the blockchain regularly establish a curious topology that impacts traders’ decisions as they engage with other traders online. Developing this spatial dimension, I claim that Bitcoiners the world over respectively become ‘closer’ or ‘more distant’ from one another when they sell or buy bitcoin, especially when a sudden rush takes place due to Fears of Missing Out (FOMOs). Crowding is continuously produced as a byproduct of this dynamic ([Shapiro 2024](#)). The bitcoin blockchain is in that sense an interface, whose automated self-referential dynamic and intrinsic instability work to disperse money and affect across cyberspace. Even though crowding phenomenality on the blockchain is often unpredictable – a result of sudden emotional ‘discharge’ ([Canetti 1984\[1960\]](#)) that literally ‘pushes’ people into selling and buying positions – the dynamics of commerce within the Bitcoin ecosystem are contingent on such bursts.

Chapter 7 focuses on the potentially destructive force of crowds that remain entirely dependent on random value fluctuations. I show that the growth of a global Bitcoin crowd could destroy the spirit of Bitcoin communitarianism, especially as it concerns the collaboration that interlocutors at the Embassy relished. Following on from discussions on Italian Futurism and Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994[1967]), I will ask whether the liberating qualities of crowd dynamics might also isolate individuals and engender a more despotic political order; as was the case with Futurists a century before. Precisely those aspects of Bitcoin sociality that Embassy members claimed united them in exploring new forms of liberty could thus lead to a concentration of power in the hands of the few. This

chapter critically explores one of the darker turns that a wide-ranging adoption of decentralized sociality could take.

The Conclusion summarizes the methodological and theoretical implications of this study. I will emphasize again that Bitcoin is a cosmological artefact as much as it is a money technology (see Brunton 2019), whose *dynamic circulation* enables postmodern crowds of autonomous individuals to feel they are rising together from the sands of history to storm a metaphorical Bastille of omnipotent power; at once enforcing imaginaries of heroic individualism and a righteous collective struggle. I speculate that this dynamic is already becoming an important social phenomenon, and that it will likely be shaping our shared social space both online and offline in the coming decades.

In this book I ultimately venture to achieve three main objectives. First, I will describe in its full complexity the social life at the Embassy and its vicinity, representing Ambassadors' techno-utopian ideals as accurately and empathetically as possible. The book thus intends to tell the story of Bitcoiners in Israel from a heuristic subject-position that has so far received little public attention, partially because media coverage on Bitcoin to date has tended to focus on its financial aspects rather than its political-philosophy and cosmogonic features. Second, I will connect analytically local convictions and beliefs – as well as the grassroots activities I observed and took part in – with crowding phenomenality online. I do that by linking the dynamics of community building among Israeli Bitcoiners with the dynamics of trading on the blockchain. And third, I will offer critical insights on my interlocutors' own search for personal and collective liberty, which defined both their emotional togetherness and community structure. Taken together, the book thus advances the assumption that the growing popular involvement in cryptocurrency sociality necessitates a heightened public conversation on techno-utopian ideals, one that goes beyond utilitarian discussions on risk and financialization to engage instead with the emergent construction of postmodern mythical frameworks in a time of rapid digitalization. I invite you to slide with me down the rabbit hole.

NOTES

1. In Israel, Sunday is the first day of the week and a regular work day.
2. Months later, I asked and learned that the proximity between the embassy and the stock exchange was a total coincidence – a poetic juxtaposition of arch-nemeses, nonetheless.
3. This refers to kites loaded with explosives that at the time were occasionally being sent from Gaza, which Israel seemed unable to intercept and destroy.
4. To protect Yaron's identity I am not providing the link.

5. To describe 'centre-less-ness', Embassy members conjugated the Hebrew verb *lê'-vá-zer* (from the root *b.z.r*), meaning both 'decentralization' and 'distribution'. They thus implied the lack of a centre-periphery relationship and a dynamic dispersal through space. To describe 'trust', they used the Hebrew word *emun*, an adjective derived from the root *a.m.n*. To convey trustlessness, interlocutors either used the combination 'lack of trust', or the original English term. Note that *a.m.n* is also the root for *emunah*, which means 'belief'.
6. In 2016, an Australian computer engineer named Craig Wright claimed he was in fact Satoshi Nakamoto. This claim was dismissed by figures of authority in the world of Bitcoin. Wright later made this claim again in court. At the time of writing, the bulk of Bitcoin adopters still treat his claims with dire scepticism.
7. During this period, a profound transformation of the Israeli political landscape has taken place. By 2025, the ongoing crisis had effectively accelerated the destruction of an already crumbling ethos of conviviality between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, also magnifying in the process the increasingly violent clash between right-wing and left-wing Jewish-Israeli political factions over the direction that Zionist ideology should take in the coming decades. This struggle has escalated to the point it threatened to shatter whatever was left of the consensus among different segments of the Jewish People, in Israel and in the diaspora, concerning their presupposed shared destiny as a united 'People of Israel' (*Am Yisrael*).
8. Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip unilaterally in 2005. In 2018–2019 liberal Israelis generally believed that Gaza no longer posed an existential threat to the State of Israel. That was so despite the recurrence over the years of several 'rounds' of armed conflict, as they are called in Israeli popular discourse, between Israel and Hamas. Following the 7 October attack in 2023, however, the IDF reoccupied the Gaza Strip as part of its military campaign against Hamas, obliterating nearly everything in its path and causing unprecedented destruction.