



Review of Tim Niemeyer, *History Echoes Bitcoin: Understanding the Value of Bitcoin's Properties through the Lens of History* (Zoom Out, 2023)

by Michael J. Kelly

“The development of social consciousness can only be furthered when the shackles of intellectual restrictions are removed.” –
Tim Niemeyer, *History Echoes Bitcoin*, p. 93

As a bitstorian, a professional historian and Bitcoin educator, I felt that it was only fitting for the genesis publication of the *Bitcoin Review of Books* to be a review of a fellow Bitcoin educator's book, and one that frames the significance of Bitcoin within a historical narrative: Tim Niemeyer's *History Echoes Bitcoin: Understanding the Value of Bitcoin's Properties through the Lens of History* (Zoom Out, 2023).

The question of Bitcoin's value, like the matter of what Bitcoin is, as Niemeyer relates, is one that every Bitcoiner has been asked about on numerous occasions and each time has come up with various explanations as to why BTC has value, usually in relation to established currencies. The reasons given range all over the place, from emphasizing the scarcity of BTC, to its predictability and transparency, its sovereignty, and its increasing decentralization (as mining becomes more localized thanks to hashrate heating, BitAxes, and more). These economic and political explanations at times lead to further philosophical support for BTC's value, with claims about BTC being a product of physics and math, implying a scientific authenticity or even objectivity as BTC's value, or even theological and ontological conclusions on BTC as a manifestation of electricity and therefore of life itself, which originates in the electromagnetic field. And all of that is not even to begin talking about the concept of value, *per se*, and that nothing has intrinsic value.

Enter Niemeyer's *History Echoes Bitcoin*: this book provides Bitcoiners with a much-needed, clear and well-articulated framework and roadmap for discussing the value of Bitcoin as it is derived through a specific disciplinary methodology: history. Niemeyer does what historians do: he creates meaning in the present by connecting it to an abstract (unreal) that we call "past," and he does so by determining his evidence, applying his facticity protocol (consensus mechanism), and organizing the facts that he's constructed into his historical truth: that Bitcoin's value is a product of a lineage, i.e., a genealogy and historiography.

In this way and by the language throughout the book, Niemeyer sets up Bitcoin's value within a powerful and productive religious dialectic, in that Bitcoin as a historical phenomenon oscillates between being, on the one hand, a fulfillment both of Nietzsche's critiques of hegemonic Judeo-Christian values in his *The Genealogy of Morals* and the exploration of those in the classic characters of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and, on the other hand, Bitcoin is provided value in precisely the same way that the Abrahamic religions, if not all religions, do, through historical narrative: as the Gospel of Matthew begins: "The book of genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

In fact, Niemeyer refers early in the book to the Golden Rule and contends that "people have free will and the deprivation of this right is immoral" (p. 10). This point could have used more clarification, though, since the next pages suggest Lutheranism, vs. Catholicism, as Bitcoin's expression of free will, but Lutheranism rejects free will in determining salvation, in contrast to Catholicism: so, following the former, yes, we'd be free to, say, make transactions on Bitcoin but not to determine our path to heaven or hell: personally, I feel like Bitcoin provides the fuller personal freedom found in Catholicism. But, more significantly, Niemeyer himself argues in that section for the importance of total freedom as what allows "individuals to determine [Bitcoin's] value" (p. 13).

The drive to turn Bitcoin into the result of a long-durée historical process represents our attempt to normalize it within American society (and maybe many others, but this book is American, like me, so that's what I'll stick to), which determines value firstly on grounds of historicity, whether it's politics (precedent, constitutionality, etc.), religion, identity (which is simply an attachment to a historical narrative), or much else. In contrast, capitalism is a historical phenomenon that operates

discursively here as post-historical, in that it is usually referred to as not historical but rather as an expression of “human nature” or universality, something that is always and unchangeable, like God. Fiat money used to be discussed in a similar way, until Bitcoin. And now Bitcoin is, it seems, on the trajectory of religion to ideology, that is, from being a radical interruption of the status quo (religion in the raw sense) to becoming the new norm (ideology, the everyday) at the point of hyperbitcoinization, when discussion about its value will disappear.

The intention to reach that point with Bitcoin is evident in Niemeyer’s *History Echoes Bitcoin* right from the start: the introduction (p. 3) begins with a quote from David Hume that presents the historical phenomenon of “human nature” as a universal constant, framing Bitcoin’s value as such. In this way, the book provides us bitstorians with what will later be seen as a primary source in the historiography of Bitcoin’s becoming and us Bitcoiners writ large with a foundational text for educating people on Bitcoin in a language that makes sense within our historical context.

Niemeyer’s arguments are substantiated with source materials and weaved together in a way that is readable and enjoyable while also being informative, the hallmarks of an excellent teacher turning their classroom lessons into texts. For instance, In the prehistory section, Niemeyer grounds Bitcoin as a product of decades of technological experimentation, not the result of some solo or immediate creation of Satoshi Nakamoto: Bitcoin is the result of a community of builders, not a siloed individual; it is a technological advancement built on years of trying to accomplish specific goals and it is, therefore, not a product made to be shilled or marketed to people but rather a tool that fulfils a need. Explaining this in transparent fashion is experiential and applied learning in text format.

The book is composed of historical vignettes structured around core tenets of Bitcoin: permissionless, consensus, decentralization, trust minimalization, censorship resistance, open-source collaboration, immutability and scarcity. One of the most paradigmatic sections of the book is the story of the doctor Ignaz Semmelweis (pp. 28–30) and his tragic death caused by the rejection from his profession’s establishment: ahead of his time, he proposed the idea of doctors washing their hands because of what we now know to be germs. The profession, its institutions and its figure were all too arrogant, conceited and afraid of critical self-reflection on how they operated to explore new ideas. Instead, they let their patients die. This feels a lot like of how disciplines,

institutions and established bureaucrats approach Bitcoin: they decide that it is better not to create a new system or do what's right for those who rely on it than it is to consider transformative progress.

The book is replete with moral determinations of what is right and what is wrong, who is good and who isn't: this consistent undertone establishes a "correct" history and therefore "right" identity and value in the present. Nonetheless, Niemeyer, especially in the section on censorship, rejects the notion that others have a right to morally determine what can and cannot be censored (see p. 93). This dissonance between exercising one's power to moralize, that is, to decide who is bad and who is good (and who gets written into history and who doesn't) while also believing that one should not have others' morals thrust upon them is a perfect synopsis of where we stand sometimes as Bitcoiners so certain that Bitcoin is the right path forward; it shows, as well, precisely how difficult it is to fully overcome censoring and centralizing morality, as Nietzsche dared us to, at the core of social organization and various debates within the Bitcoin community.

Niemeyer likewise claims the universality not only of morality but also of "human nature," as if it were not a historical phenomenon, as if there was some absolute and unchanging essence to humanness found in every human, everywhere, throughout all time. This is not true even if it feels true, and this too is a wise move by Niemeyer because it highlights for readers, especially Bitcoiner readers, how much work we need to do all the time to remember the historicity of Bitcoin, of the world around us, and of the systems and patterns by which we live, because if this isn't all historical then neither Bitcoin nor any other technology could change it.

Many of the vignettes in the book focus on the issue of trust in society, particularly in the US, in order to demonstrate both how much we rely on it for society to operate and to suggest that we would be better off building a trustless society with Bitcoin. The point is made fairly convincingly but it could have been more impactful if it had been brought into conversation with the overriding discourse on morals and belief: to what extent, for instance, does Bitcoin usher in a post-belief era, one in which we do not ultimately rely on faith, on suspending disbelief (or, in Wittgenstein's words, judgment) as the foundation of all knowledge. However much we dig down into evidence to verify historical claims, at some point we simply have to believe that, firstly, there was a past, and, secondly, that it happened as we think it did. The need to verify vs. trust is essential to grasping

Bitcoin, but it also, indeed, the basis for a serious alteration of how we operate as a society, to take the path less taken as Niemeyer maintains through Robert Frost (p. 43).

The linearity of the historical timelines that Niemeyer constructs, and his insistence on the linearity as an absolute, at times reaching back to the Neanderthals (p. 113) and the Ten Commandments (p. 115) is a way to project that deep past into the present through an imagined timeline that skips over enormous amounts of data. This is a popular way to deal with pasts, and it's fantastic for getting one's point across, as authors do it all the time, from Dan Brown to Yuval Harari and more. The problem for this conception as a path for understanding and evaluating Bitcoin is that Bitcoin itself is not exclusively linear: on a small and maybe somewhat pedantic scale, timestamps of block don't always go in order, as sometimes we have non-monotonic blocks, blocks that follow the rule of the Median Time Past but aren't exactly sequential in timestamping; but okay, that's a minor point: the big one is that the originary data that enters mempools is not at all linear (or predictable), but rather rhizomatic. As such, we have a network that is both rhizomatic and relatively linear, and so, again, Niemeyer's narrative construction elicits a core paradox in how we Bitcoiners often talk about and assign value to Bitcoin (for the sake of others asking us) and its own complex duality of function. This relative time-space revelation gets us thinking about the potential multiplicity of value in Bitcoin (and maybe how mathematical ontology could help us overcome this gap by uniting the spaces, as it does for the quantum and the Newtonian [p. 118]).

In conclusion, Niemeyer smartly integrates complex paradoxes, confusions and urgent problems in Bitcoin education into a text that is pleasant and enjoyable to read. His closing reflections on Bitcoin's immutability represent the thrust of the book's intention and call to action: "Truth should be immutable. If we truly want a fair and just society, we should allow light to shine on the public entities that govern us. Without it, we give up any semblance of checks and balances; there's no quality assurance when a specific group can say what is true or untrue, relevant or irrelevant, information or misinformation" (p. 124). And, I would add, there is no such thing as a false truth, only a truth derived from a facticity process, a consensus mechanism, with which we do not agree. Bitcoin recognizes and facilitates the actualization of this P2P desire, the episteme of the Reformation that Niemeyer relates, with its transparent, rhizomatic-meet-arborescent truth procedures and thus value process.