

NFT as utopia.

Víctor Atobas

PRESENTATION:

In this text, included in the collection Amazon como utopía (spanish edition; Zoozobra, 2023), Víctor Atobas dialectically inverts the position of Varoufakis –who worked as an advisor to Valve, the company that owns the largest PC video game store–, to escape the reformism through the analysis of the revolutionary potential of the NFT in relation to the fetishism of merchandise.

NFT as utopia.

Víctor Atobas

Varoufakis worked as an advisor to Valve, the company that owns Steam –the largest PC video game store–, and we believe it is interesting to refer to his statement that: “No NFT can change an art world where art is a commodity within a universe of commodified people and things”, since “any digital service, currency, or good that is built on it within the present system will simply reproduce the present system’s legitimacy.” (Varoufakis, 2022).

Before dialectically reversing Varoufakis's position, we must start by introducing the concepts of NFT and blockchain technology. The latter can be conceived as a chain of blocks; a synchronized information structure in which the addition of a new block to the chain involves the transmission of information from the previous block to the one just added; Thus, we can imagine a series of information sets (such as NFTs) that start from an original block and that form a chain in such a way that the information is replicated through the form of successive transmission from the nodes or points of connection, which allows for the coordination and synchronization of flows in cyberspace, in the sense that all information inputs are recorded and collated in real time from all the connection points, so that it is not possible to fake them. On the other hand, the NFT is the

infrastructure of bits or meta-tag in which it is possible to add layers of information at different levels and that circulates through the chain of blocks, and that generally takes the form of digital goods such as works of art. What Varoufakis was referring to.

The dialectical inversion of the position of Varoufakis, which we cite here as a figure that symbolizes that reformist left that is incapable of understanding the potential of the inventions of capitalism, consists in repeating the gesture of Jameson, who in his analysis of Wal-Mart affirms that the logical preconditions for the appearance of a phenomenon –such as the barcode, the *container* or Big data – which appears at first under the sign of the negative, being used to destroy the fabric of the retail market in the United States, can be considered from its positive pole as inventions that make it possible to think about the emergence of the utopian future: the emergence of a new production concept.

We will highlight that Varoufakis indicates through the term "technological feudalism" that blockchain and NFT technology is oriented towards the negative pole of speculation, as is the case with cyberspace, which serves for social control; in this regard, he claims that big tech companies like Meta aim to become a kind of *digital fiefdom*. As revolutionaries, therefore, we affirm the opposite by repeating Jameson's operation; Technological inventions, currently used by dominance interests, are the only ones that allow us to conceive of liberation in the sense that the confusion and destruction inherent in the functioning of the market could be reversed through planning and coordination; In other words, the synchronization that we need to achieve in the society of the future, cyber-communism, has as a precondition the technology of the chain of blocks (blockchain) and the NFT.

In fact, as we pointed out, synchronization is one of the defining characteristics of the blockchain. In other words, we intend to conceive this and the NFT within the framework of the cyber-communist proposal that contemplates the possibility of a first stage, the transition towards socialism, in which commodification would continue to operate together with different enclaves in which private property would persist. And it is that the cyber-communist proposal is based on the current potential of cybernetics and computing, which means that Cockshott and Nieto do not wait when it comes to theorizing; they warn of the potential of technology from our own present, which is an exercise in utopian thought.

As we mentioned earlier, Jameson teaches us that in order to overcome the failure of representation in our postmodern era, we must conceive of utopian thought combining at the same time *both* the negative aspect of analysis and the utopian perspective itself. In other words, we incorporate Varoufakis's criticism that blockchain technology and NFTs are currently being appropriated by domain interests to speculate, just as occurs with cyberspace, used to control. In the same way, another of the criticisms that have been leveled against NFTs is that non-independent

video game developers use said bit infrastructure to manipulate the player and make them invest more money, which we could conceive as a process of oriented capitalism. to overcome stagnation; In other words, in an oversaturated market such as PC games and mobile devices, developers try to increase the profit rate through NFTs, running the risk of turning the art of videogames into a kind of auction in which the best bidder always wins. We will also point out that the use of the chain of blocks entails a huge energy expense, because speculators (especially in countries like China) use a large amount of energy, which in the case of the Asian country usually comes from coal and the pollution that the extraction and processing of this entails. In other words, the first step that Jameson carries out consists of incorporating into the analysis all the criticisms that have been leveled against the object of study. But why not dare to combine criticism with a truly utopian perspective?

In this regard, we must clarify that technology is easily accessible; all workers can create NFTs at any time (for example: a limited edition music disc), as well as decide the distribution conditions (how many discs each run will have) and at what price they want to start the public auction, in which anyone You can bid during the period of time established by the producer with absolutely no opposition from the distributor. In the latter we already find an echo of the emergence of a new concept of production that Jameson analyzed.

Blockchain technology and NFTs can be considered within the framework of a possible and highly desirable transition towards socialism (that is, in a phase prior to the overcoming of social classes and the abolition of private property), in the sense that this infrastructure of bits can contribute to the synchronization and planning of the economy, since this requires the collection and processing of all the data regarding economic flows, and how to process so much information? Well, thanks to the mediation of the chain of blocks and NFTs, which contain data related to the movement of the thing or merchandise stored in different layers or information labels. Such a large number of flows can be fully encompassed and processed thanks to inventions of capitalism such as quantum computers, something that did not happen in the past, when cyber-communist experiments failed due to the poor development of the logical preconditions for the appearance of the phenomenon, that is, of computer technology.

The NFTS, in addition to serving the synchronization and democratic planning of the economy, could be considered as an infrastructure that would potentially contribute to the cognitive mapping that Jameson theorized about. It is at this precise point that we must emphasize that Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein proposed the expression *global commodity chain* to refer to all the production processes leading to the completion of the merchandise, from the tree in the forest to the table on which the cup rests. of coffee. "Since then a body of scholarly literature has developed that examines specific commodity chains in detail, not just reconstructing the path from production to consumption but examining each link and conceptualizing what each chain tells

us about structure and dynamics." of contemporary global capitalism» (Toscano and Kinkle, 2019: 186).

In this regard, we can point out that, faced with the stagnation of the utopian imagination that makes it difficult for postmodern subjects to imagine the society of the future, the academic literature has not been able up to now to conceive of blockchain and NFT technology as that infrastructures that allow to represent the *global chain of goods* . Our proposal in this regard is that we imagine a situation in which, in each commodity production process, new bits will be added to the NFT meta-tag, not only with regard to the production itself, but also with respect to the process itself. of obtaining raw materials as well as the same virtual order that would sustain the cyber-communist network in a transitional phase towards the establishment of communism. That is, with each process of obtaining raw materials, processing production and distribution through the virtual order of the network, a new layer of information will be added to the NFT. Of course, the levels of information referring to the disturbances caused by the merchandise in the metabolic balance of the planet will also be added. And we will go one step further by suggesting that the workers themselves can add more levels to the meta-label referring to production conditions, adding comments, figures, tables or even videos, for example: complaints about the state of the workspace in a factory of microchips destined to other industrial branches, being said interrelation between economic sectors contemplated in the macroeconomic plans subject to the authentically democratic decision making on the part of the social totality.

In this way, the technology of blockchains and NFTs could contribute to breaking (at least partially, since in the transition phase theorized by cyber-communism we would continue in a commodified world) with the fetishism of merchandise; the properties of the merchandise would not appear as its properties, but it would be possible to cognitively map all the processes of obtaining, producing, and distributing, to understand that the merchandise is a result of the social relations between human beings. However, this would not be a thought through the map of the terrestrial globe, as it happens in the art of video games.

Video games are not properly a utopian art, although they can contribute to thinking about how we could represent the totality of late capitalism. In this regard, it should be noted that Jameson affirms that, after Ernst Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1968), *the utopian form stagnated because it did not know how to incorporate the irruption of the computer and cybernetics into its content, ignoring the way to integrate* the experience of the postmodern subject in video games and the computer; What is most striking in this sense is that Jameson does not limit himself to recording the aforementioned paralysis in the production of utopias, but rather points out that cyberspace is a new enclave space, that is, a pause in the process of social differentiation -theorized by Luhmann– in which the utopian author places himself to offer imaginative solutions to the social contradictions of a certain

historical period: «in fact, cyberspace constitutes a new type of enclave, a subjectivity that is objective and that, like systems theory Luhmann, but also like structuralism and post-structuralism that preceded it, suppresses the 'centered subject' and proliferates in new and post-individualist ways' (Jameson, 2005: 21) . In other words, the utopian author must necessarily place himself in the enclave space of cyberspace to make proposals that break with the neoliberal dogma that there is no future beyond cannibalism and the destruction of capitalism.

Philosophically analyzing the concept of cyberspace, Jameson understands that it is a literary creation that, however, can lead to figure out the totality of financial capitalism, always through imperfect language. In this regard, he understands that cyberspace is an abstraction raised to the second degree. The abstraction at a first level consists of "the metaphor of a city that would be an information network" (Jameson, 2015: 228), in which the city is conceived as an imaginary city of data. On the other hand, what is characteristic of cyberpunk literature –of which *Neuromancer* (1984) can be considered a founding milestone– is that it elevates that abstraction to a second level or to a second power; The data that we referred to earlier in this same text and that are transmitted through the chain of blocks (blockchain), and that have to do with the different flows and transactions, are transformed into a second level of abstraction in representation in two dimensions. than, in reality, it is about three-dimensional models. In this sense, the North American points out:

« The peculiar nature of an abstraction to the second degree, which, having accessed the sheets upon sheets of numerical ciphers which are already themselves statistical abstractions of real businesses, real profits, real transactions, now turns all that back into pictures, and pictures on the order of paper architecture at that [utopian prototypes on paper], two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional models[...]. Here, on this new level, what can be imagined and mentally grasped is the new dimension of sheer relationship-what Le Corbusier began to theorize as the "trajectories" through space-now intensified to an incalculable degree.” (Jameson, 2015: 229-30).

What is captured is a totality that is in perpetual movement and transformation, a totality that is also projected in the mind of Case, the protagonist of *Neuromancer*. In this regard, Jameson points out that in Gibson's work a figuration of the type of abstraction of finance capitalism can be detected. It picks up Arrighi's theory of evolution in three stages (2010): after having overcome the need for production -production as such is no longer so urgent- and after the subsequent saturation of the market has taken place, then capitalism bursts into his financial form, being left in charge of a stagnant production. Jameson affirms that «the only vocation of *cyberpunk* was to convey in literary

form this new type of financial abstraction» (Jameson, 2015: 232), something that the utopian form had not achieved.

Regarding video games, we can refer to the work for PC titled *Yo presidente. Objetivo: La Moncloa* (2008) as well as its continuation *Yo presidente: Crisis global* (2009). In these works, the player finds himself before the representation of the entire planet through a 2D map (which becomes 3D when zooming in on areas such as cities); in this regard, the player must approve and promote different national policies so that, if he chooses Spain, he can access the representation of economic and demographic flows from tables, reports, data and graphs. In the event that he adopts communist policies, the game will end; the player will receive calls from institutions such as the EU or NATO, announcing the dismissal of the occupier of Moncloa. *Game over*. The game will have ended and paradoxically it will have done so in a similar way to what happened in the real case of Syriza in Greece.

If we refer to the video game by way of illustration, it is because the map acquires a central position in the player's experience and it is interesting to note, in this regard, that Jameson proposes that we go beyond thinking through the map:

«Since everyone knows what a map is, it would have been necessary to add that cognitive mapping cannot (at least nowadays) assume something as simple as a map; in fact, once you understand what cognitive mapping points to, it is essential to discard all forms of thought on the map and imagine something else» (Translation from the Spanish edition: Jameson, cited in Toscano and Kinkle, 2019: 34).

Imagine new utopian prototypes, only this time not through the support of paper but cyberspace; The construction of these prototypes, therefore, can be generated through technologies such as blockchain and NFTs in the sense that they constitute bit infrastructures that allow to house different levels of information and represent the global chain of merchandise, not through *maps*, but in different representational forms; In addition to storing said information, said technologies allow its transmission in real time as well as its synchronization with all existing nodes. The latter is reminiscent of Allende's Cybersyn, which stored and synchronized data referring to factories that were simultaneously dependent on other industrial branches. This means that the logical preconditions for the implementation of the transition phase towards cybercommunism are emerging today, a matter of deep political depth that the reformist groups that only try to establish axioms so that the system does not explode like a time bomb.

Faced with reformism and its theorizing, which favors a negative diagnosis, therefore, we revolutionaries respond that in late capitalism the conditions for the establishment of democratic

planning, synchronization, and representation of the economy in figurative terms already exist. Given the complexity of postmodernity, which, as Jameson pointed out, transcends our cognitive mapping capabilities, the new innovations of capitalism such as blockchain and NFTs can be used (within the framework of the cyber-communist proposal) from their positive and properly utopian pole for the figuration of the entirety of late capitalism and the establishment of the cyber-communist network from different connection nodes of the block chain or blockchain, the transmission in real time and the storage of data in different layers of NFTs. While NFTs are used today for speculation, it is possible to imagine such bit infrastructure being used in future society to represent the *global commodity chain*. It is in this sense that Jameson suggests that "our task as artists, critics, etc., today is to try, to some extent, to recapture or reinvent a new form of representation of this new global totality" (Buchanan, 2007: 85).

That is to say, throughout this text we have tried to show that what appears at first as an obstacle to our freedom can be dialectically inverted to conceive it in a liberating, revolutionary sense: technology must be subordinated to the democratic decision of the social totality so that in this way we do not find ourselves before *technological strongholds* but before *new cyber-common-spatial lands*; However, this need can only be fully assumed in the event that we escape negative diagnoses that end up leading to despair because, after all, no matter how much the defenders of the capitalist system and the reformists who strengthen it insist, The future is not written.

Bibliography.

[Generally from the Spanish editions:]

Bloch, E. (2004). *El principio esperanza* . Vol. 1. Trotta, Madrid.

Buchanan, I. (ed.) (2007). *Jameson on Jameson: conversations on cultural Marxism*. Duke University Press, Durham.

Callenbach, E. (1968). *Ecotopia* , Self-published [a second version of the text was published in 1975].

Cockshott, P. y Nieto, M. (2017). *Ciber–comunismo*. Trotta, Madrid.

Dardot, P. y Laval, C. (2015). *Común. Ensayos sobre la revolución en el siglo XX*. Gedisa, Barcelona.

Debord, G. (2005). *La sociedad del espectáculo*. Pretextos, Madrid.

Foucault, M. (2009). *El nacimiento de la biopolítica: curso del Collège de France (1978–1979)*. Akal, Madrid.

Gibson, W. (1984). *Neuromancer*. Ace Books, New York.

Fishman, C. (2006). *The Wal-Mart Effect*. Penguins, New York.

Jameson, F. (2005). *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, London.

—Jameson, F. (2009). *Valences of Dialectics*, Verso, London. [*Valencias de la dialéctica*, trans. by M. López Seoane, Eterna Cadencia, Buenos Aires].

—Jameson, F. (2009). " *Utopia as Replication* ", in *Valences of Dialectics*, Verso, London.

—Jameson, F. (2011). *Representing Capital. A Reading of Volume One*, London, Verso.

—Jameson, F. (2015). *The Ancients and the Postmoderns. On the Historicity of Forms*, London, Verso.

Toscano, A. y Kinkle, J. (2019). *Cartografías de lo absoluto*. Materia Oscura, Segovia.

Varoufakis (2022). *Varoufakis on Crypto & the Left, and Techno–Feudalism*, in *The Crypto Syllabus*, accessed 2/9/2022.

[Link: <https://the-crypto-syllabus.com/yanis-varoufakis-on-techno-feudalism/>]