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Digital Cash: The Political Technologies and Utopian Philosophies of Cryptocurrency

Bitcoin may seem to have suddenly appeared out of nowhere in 2009. In fact, it is only the best-known recent experiment in a long line of similar efforts going back to the 1970s, as technological utopians and political radicals created new currencies to bring about their visions of the future, from protecting privacy to destroying governments, preparing for apocalypse, or attaining immortality. In the process their theories and technologies challenged legal, political, and philosophical concepts of sovereignty, identity, authority, and value. To tell this story and its consequences this talk will include forged passports and international-waters enclaves, heterodox economics, secret banks, militant silver mintmasters in the woods of New Hampshire, private rocket companies in Palo Alto, idea coupons and cryptographic signatures, randomness beacons, a surprising number of frozen human heads, and the question: what makes a digital object valuable? What can the answers tell us about the materials and metaphors of proof, objectivity, sovereignty, and authoritative knowledge?

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