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The Malleable and Open Body: Emancipatory or Oppressive?

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Abstract *The turn to the body in the social sciences is typified by the articulation of a particular kind of corporeality. It is argued that the soma shows remarkable variation across history and context. This counters attempts to universally define the body's parameters and render it controllable and predictable, a project identified with patriarchal and racist agendas. The demonstration of the un-circumscribable body thus promises to be essentially emancipatory. Some have argued that this celebration is short-sighted and that this articulation is in line with the ambitions of neo-liberal geoculture. Here we ask whether the current reading of the body inevitably dances to the machinations of the capitalism of Empire. We argue that as much as the open and malleable body accommodates these toxic ambitions, it also provides a vista for emancipatory and critical agendas, one where we however have to take possession of the inevitable violence required.*

Introduction

The turn to the body in the social sciences across the last few decades is typified by the articulation and celebration of a particular kind of corporeality. Across various instances it is argued that the soma shows remarkable variation across history and social context; that it is a radically malleable materiality that emerges from its surroundings. This conceptualisation counters attempts to fix and isolate the body, to universally define its parameters and render it controllable and predictable. This latter program is often identified with particular ideological agendas, particularly those of patriarchy and racism. The demonstration of the un-circumscribable body thus promises to be essentially emancipatory. A counter-response has argued that this celebration is short-sighted and that this contemporaneous articulation is well in line with the ambitions of neo-liberal geoculture. In this article we take up this debate and ask whether the current reading of the body dances inevitably to the machinations of the capitalism of Empire. The argument is that as much as the open and malleable body accommodates these toxic ambitions it also provides a vista for emancipatory and critical agendas, one where we however have to take

possession of the inevitable violence required and distance ourselves from the delusions of beautiful souls.

Conceiving Corporeality

A prominent theme emerging out of recent body studies is the celebration of a corporeality that is multiple and open (Blackman, 2008; Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopoulos & Walkerdine, 2008). This is expressed through a number of entwined themes. The one, referred to here as the *embedded body*, accentuates its socio-historical location. Drawing on sociological analyses, anthropological ethnography and historical scholarship, a malleable body is revealed, one showing remarkable variation across time and context. It is also then a body that cannot be separated from or understood outside of its surroundings. For example, as per Foucault (1976, 1979), the body is disciplined into morphologies and confessed into subjectivities through power/knowledge formations whose emergence may be traced historically, or, as per Bourdieu (1993, 2004), a habitus is inculcated through social processes which allow varying forms of capital in different social fields. A body then emerges that is classed, sexed, raced,

etcetera. Focussing on contemporary society, some argue, as we will see, that modern disciplinary society has been left behind in the passing of industrialisation; the emergence of complex information networks establishing a society of control where the body-subject is constituted and regulated in diverse and nuanced ways unimaginable in modern institutional society (Hardt & Negri, 2000).

With a second theme, that of the *extendable body*, corporeality's boundaries become fluid as, noted by Merleau-Ponty (1996), the technologies it utilises expand beyond mere additions to prostheses that trouble the dermis as limit. More radically, recent work construes the body as more than a variable perimeter but as a changeable identity emerging through its immersion in assemblages (Blackman, 2008). Any claim to essence is troubled as the body's conjunctions with objects, technologies and others are contingent, that is, temporary and situated, and thus endless in possibility (Marcus & Saka, 2006). The body-subject continuously and constantly (re-)emerges through subtle shifts in context (van Ommen, 2009).

In considering both of the above themes, the issue of the *vital body* becomes relevant; the concern here being with articulating a body that is not merely the product of social processes, an inert and passive substance awaiting external animation, but rather one that is capable of activity, an agency that is then more than one equated with intentionality and consciousness (Blackman, 2008).

Recent body studies have also placed in the foreground the temporal aspects of the soma in discussions of the *enacted body* where corporeality as process is emphasised (Blackman, 2008). Here again the malleability of the soma is emphasised as the body is always an en route materiality, forever unfinished and in the process of becoming. Notions of stasis are cast aside as the body is performed into being. Essential to this is that the body is open to that beyond itself, interest in the *communicative body* revealing the ways our corporeality is able to engage with the other in ways beyond the emphases on discourse developed by the turn to language. Here we find the turn to affect and non-conscious processes, studies of how the body is affected and affects others, resulting in, for example, synchronised and attuned bodies (Blackman et al., 2008). Biology finds a place here in the recognition of the role of hormones in such subtle and powerful forms of communication (Brennan, 2004). In neuroscience we find a striking similarity to the body studies of social science in turns to emotion and unconscious processes (e.g., Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 2002).

Thus, across these entwined themes of social science's recent engagement with the body we may discern the emergence of a set of contemporary emphases in understanding corporeality: This includes conceptualising it as dispersed, interconnected and multiple rather than rendered in dualistic or singular terms (Blackman et al., 2008). The open and 'molecular' body in process, relation and flux is preferred and pursued rather than a 'molar' substance

that is fixed, static and closed.

The Limits of the Limitless

In the midst of this celebration of fluid boundaries and morphology, Blackman et al. (2008, p. 19) respond with concern to the 'widespread contemporary tendency within the social sciences to simply avoid, by largely rhetorical means, the phenomena of fixedness and continuity'. For them the celebration of variability and multiplicity fails to recognise the socio-political context of many who have to deal with continuous and stable oppression and exploitation. As Hardt and Negri (2000) point out, what stays constant through shifts from modernism to postmodernism, from industrial to information societies, is the exploitation of capitalism. Furthermore, such practices have embodied effects since, as Blackman et al. (2008, p. 19) put it; 'the body is also a place where social influence gets stuck...' They also acknowledge the body's 'relative spatio-temporal boundedness and inescapable mortal finitude' (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 19). But in contemporary science even mortality is no longer construed as fixed. For instance, Turner (2006) discusses the predicted ability of medical technologies to radically extend the life span. He does, however, point out how the individualist fantasies of hypermodernity are problematic in that they fail to consider the ecological and ethical consequences of such readings of aging as pathology. For example, aside from the extreme likelihood that only the very wealthy would be able to afford such longevity technologies, what would be the consequences for ecologies and economies, especially for young employable populations, of having increasingly larger groups of people with drastically extended age ranges?

The contemporary emphasis in body studies on fluidity and multiplicity resonates with the current global social order as described by Hardt and Negri (2000). Hardt and Negri are associated with the Italian autonomous Marxist tradition, a diverse and dynamic movement that share in common a shift in emphasis from understanding capitalist exploitation to theorising the autonomous struggle of the working class as an essential factor in bringing about transformative crisis (Mentenis, 2006). This 'living labour' represents an expansion of the traditional conceptualisation of class to refer to all exploitable forms of labour that embody the impetus and creativity to rupture capitalist attempts to circumscribe and control and reduce this multiplicity to 'dead labour' (Mentenis, 2006, p. 45).

Hardt and Negri (2000) contrast the imperialism of modernity with the 'imperial' morphology of Empire. The former is characterised by the nation-state, the centralisation of power, and the maintenance of fixed boundaries, whilst the latter is typified by decentralisation, flexible hierarchies and boundaries, hybrid and fragmented identities, and a distributed form of power which infiltrates all aspects of the public and private. Stating that imperialism is over, they describe the material re-figuration of industrial

society through a metaphoric and technology of information networks, this constituting global flows of products, production, humanity, consumption, and (unidirectionally) wealth. For them this is a shift from a disciplinary to a control society: In the former the body-subject is disciplined within the boundaries of various institutions, constituted through processes of normalisation structured by binary logics. In the latter, these control mechanisms exceed institutional boundaries and are distributed and ubiquitous, a biopolitics that 'regulates social life from its interior' as processes of subjectification become more nuanced and intensive, functioning especially on the level of affect (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 23).

In similar fashion, Tronti (cited in Mentinis, 2006, p. 44) describes the development of the contemporary 'factory-society' where society is now thoroughly saturated with the capitalist relations of production. This means that the 'industrial proletariat' has been decentred as the 'extraction of surplus value' has now expanded to every nook and cranny of the social field. Again, as described above, the disciplining of worker's body has been exceeded as the vast multiplicity of corporealities and subjectivities come under the control of capitalist logic. Mentinis (2006) further describes the logic of representation (comprehensive definition) upon which contemporary capitalism relies in order to achieve this ubiquitous control.

Rose (2007) notes a similar social change, tracing a shift from eugenic rationalities, associated with nationalism, to the biopolitics of liberal democracies which explicitly promote the 'freedom' and self-determination of the global citizen. Here the emphasis shifts from the population to the individual, from a concern with evolutionary fitness to the quality of life, from public to domesticated spaces, from the logics of mortality (death) to that of vitality (life), from a politics of population quality to risk management. At the same time we have, since the 1980s, the promotion of an 'ethics of enterprise, responsibility, and self-actualisation' (Rose, 2007, p. 109) and a contemporary body-subject who is 'free yet responsible, enterprising yet prudent' (Rose, 2007, p. 111) aiming at improving its own and its family's well-being. For Rose (2007, p. 130) this is a move from the depth-ontology typical of twentieth century Psychology, characterised by concern with the nature of our psychological interiors, to a post-ontological view where the world is 'flattened' into surfaces, all aspects of being human becoming 'relays in complex, ramifying, and non-hierarchical networks, filiations, and connections'.

Associated with this are the direct mappings by neuroscience of cognition, emotion and desire onto the surfaces of the brain, constituting what Rose (2008, p. 460) variably calls 'cerebral subjectivity', 'somatic individuality' or the 'neurochemical self'. Given that '[m]ind is [then] simply what the brain does', Rose (2007, p. 192) wonders whether neurobiology will replace Psychology in the twenty-first century as the principle discipline for understanding our conduct. This means that Neuroscience becomes the new "social" science, the new dubious control technology. It is how-

ever here not intended that the neurochemical self be understood as a passive or determined entity but rather as an active agent who is required to take up new responsibilities and engage in new forms of self-surveillance and regulation in the light of new forms of biological interrogation and revelation.

Moreover, Rose (2007, p. 39) traces how the infiltration and excavation of the corporeal by the biological sciences, especially at the cellular, genetic and molecular levels, has resulted in the de-contextualisation, de-culturalisation and de-personalisation of the body reducing it to a 'utilitarian object'. He quotes Andrews and Nelkin: 'Body parts are *extracted* like a mineral, *harvested* like a crop, or *mined* like a resource. Tissue is *procured*...' (cited in Rose, 2007, p. 39, emphases in original). In this way the soma has been comprehensively claimed, in its dismemberment and dissolution, by capitalism as corporeal constituents are copyrighted and biological micro-technologies are patented under the profit motive. It thus becomes apparent that the opening, decentring and mobilising of the body not only enables an embedded and contingent reading but also, ironically, opens it up to exploitation in radically dehumanising ways never before imagined.

The Dark Side of Difference

With regard to critical analysis, Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 138) indicate that the strategies, the 'old weapons', utilised in modernity to counter discriminatory and exploitative practices and rationales are no longer effective in the contemporary order which in fact thrives on and is constituted by such logics. The assault on metaphysics and its essentialist binaries 'in the name of difference', in this way undermining the hierarchical structures and distinct boundaries of modernity, constitute the politics of difference, fluidity and hybridity of Empire. This critical form has thus been assimilated into a new global exploitative matrix. Rose (2007) concurs; in a world in flux destabilising the present is no longer a radical move but a conservative act, a contribution to the maintenance of the status quo. It is an observation also made by Papadopoulos (2003, 2004) in his consideration of embodiment theories and the contemporary global order.

Papadopoulos's lineage may be traced back to the critical psychology developed by Klaus Holzkamp in Germany across the latter part of the twentieth century. Holzkamp had embraced the Marxism of the German worker's movement not only as an activist but also as a significant resource in the development of his own theoretical work (Papadopoulos, 2009). In Holzkamp's 'science of the subject', the subject emerges from concrete social existence where repression refers to that which limits its involvement in altering the realities of its existence. Although drawing from this mediated Marxist tradition, Papadopoulos is critical of 'traditional Marxism', arguing that it shares some basic assumptions with liberalism, including the conceptualisation of a self-conscious and autonomous subject, the centrality of the state in both

repressive and emancipatory action, and a fairly uncritical faith in technology (Papadopoulos, 2003). Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos (2008) echo Holloway (cited in Menten, 2006) in distancing themselves from faith in the Revolution as event, describing instead a commitment to revolution as a continuous process of imperceptible micropolitics conducted by diverse agents through a multiplicity of emancipatory routes. Ultimately these people 'have nothing in common apart from the fact that their positioning as productive subjects makes them variously exploitable in the regime of embodied capitalism' (Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos, 2008, p. 258).

When Papadopoulos (2004, p. 9) states that embodiment theories are 'active forces in the transformation of social and material conditions', we, as critically oriented social scientists, can only nod in agreement; after all in deference to Marx the aim of theory is not to interpret the world but to change it (Balibar, 2007). Where things become unsettled is when we realise that he links this ability to change to an anti-revolutionary agenda. Papadopoulos (2003, 2004) argues that contemporary celebrations of embodiment theory, connectionism models and 'post-structural' systems frameworks should be treated with suspicion as they can all be linked to the conservation of the current neo-liberal social order.

Emerging since the 1970s is a distinctive 'self-creating body' partly constituted and given scientific legitimacy by the discourses of connectionism, embodiment theory and biotechnology. The opening and penetration of the body articulated by these discourses resonate with attempts, since the 1960s, of North-Atlantic emancipation movements to counter essentialist, determinist, impermeable, decontextualised, universalist and formulaic notions of the body. This has resulted in the celebratory discourses of hypermodernity and postmodernism which concede to liberal individualism by ignoring 'the facticity of the present' (Papadopoulos, 2004, p. 20) where military and social forms of technostuctural violence normalise exclusion and create 'people who do not even figure' (2003, p. 74). For Papadopoulos (2004, p. 23) then the emancipatory notion of the open body 'hinges on the belief in a self-reliant and self-assertive individual' which is neo-liberalism's chief ideology and technology in terms of subjectivity. It is important to note that here the assemblage through which the self emerges is identified as that of the market where in the individual then strives to reach a particular improved and improving social position. Papadopoulos (2004, p. 24) concludes that although embodiment is 'a radical challenge to western thought' it is also an element 'of the prevalent social and political governmentality in this particular historical moment'.

It is hard to see from Papadopoulos' account how any critical agenda can be pursued since all attempts at reflexive action only proliferate the subjectivities on which liberal geoculture thrives. We argue that what is required in the face of this seeming paralysis is to consider the version of the 'self-creating body' that is offered here. If it is a self-creationism that recognises its constitu-

tive embeddedness then it seems to be one that erases all aspects of this aside from that of the market which is inflated to a totality; all that then matters is one's place in this particular power grid. Such a limited reading of one's circumstance is then effective in maintaining the status quo and particular ideologically embedded ideals, be it the independent male of patriarchy, the endlessly exploitable world of capitalism, or the autonomous individual of liberalism.

Surely what is at stake here is the interpretation of identity as emergent: It seems reasonable to claim that it is possible for the individual to simply use the other as competitive comparison without recognising any constitutive dependence. It is however also possible to recognise one's emergence from context more radically thus revealing the illusion of autonomy, self-reliance and self-definition. We argue that the 'self-creating body' is a particular economic (ideological) imposition on the malleability articulated in embodiment studies. It is one that reintroduces a postmodern version of the liberal agent and erases context by placing responsibility with the individual to cope with travesties of geo-political aetiology such as 'changing climates', 'economic recessions' and 'stress'. Such a notion may be regarded as a simultaneous attempt to close down and exploit openness through the asocial rationale of liberalism. Openness does not belong to or, rather, is not totalised by any ideology no matter how ubiquitous the geoculture through which it is constituted. Such a notion exceeds comprehensive colonisation and is therefore an opening for multiple political agendas. It brings home the point that no concept (including openness, stability, anti-essentialism, and essentialism) is inherently emancipatory or oppressive. Rather, in a world of multiple agendas such notions cannot be atemporally fixed but offer ongoing resources to enact emancipations and oppressions through the imposition of various economies.

Hardt and Negri (2000, p. xv) recognise this; for them a system that produces a profound multiplicity of singularities offers new routes for emancipatory action. Through their 'resistances, struggles, and desires', the multitude are able to independently construct a counter-Empire; consisting of alternative and innovative democratic forms of global flows and exchanges. Where for Papadopoulos the 'self-creating body' of liberal geoculture is unavoidably and dangerously conservative, Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 25) refer to the paradox of the plurality and multiplicity of biopower:

while it unifies and envelops within itself every element of social life (thus losing its capacity to mediate social forces), [it] at that very moment reveals a new context, a new milieu of maximum plurality and uncontainable singularisation – a milieu of the event.

Their view is thus positive: 'Empire creates a greater potential for revolution than did the modern regimes of power...' (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 393).

For Rose (2007) it is a similar circumstance; recognising that the contemporary situation requires the revisiting of critical strategy. When all is in flux then we need to recognise and utilise continuities and stabilities as much as change. Change in itself is not emancipatory, stability is not essentially oppressive. Or, in the case of one posthuman nightmare where it is believed that the body will be reduced to codes and commodities, we must recognise this as an economic imposition where the aneconomic of life will resist such attempted containments (Gane, 2006; Rose, 2007). As previously indicated, Rose argues, as Hardt and Negri do, that critical analysis needs to move beyond the assault on traditional binaries for these do not function as radical interventions in a society of control. What he recommends is similar to the questions Prilleltensky and Fox (1997) and Painter, Terre Blanche and Henderson (2006) advocate: Irrespective of its origin (mainstream or critical) what does a figuration offer, what benefits and losses for whom, how can this rationale function as an agent of control or emancipation?

Post/binary Logics

In this section we argue that more is needed than the form of critical analysis advocated by Hardt and Negri (2000). It is not only a matter of needing a post-binary logic but, rather, a logic that is both post-binary and binary, where, on a contingent basis, from one matter to the next, we have to ask ourselves which is being or which can be utilised.

In contemporary life rigid binaries can be (and are) reasserted. To give a brief example; an article on the 'psychopath' in a recent edition of an award winning popular glossy magazine bluntly states: 'Abhorrent as it is, true psychopaths are born not made' (Malherbe, 2010, p. 37). Here, quite plainly and with violent simplicity in the realm of popular discourse, a person is construed in binary fashion as the product of nature, biology, and genetics. As much as such a construal allows society to wash its hands of the violent and immoral other, more subtle and resistant readings of the self as both biological and social, both determined and agent, are possible. We need to remember that scientific practices still hide their politics (and their morality) through claims of objectivity as they circumscribe bodies through oppressive (binary) notions of the normal and the complete. This continues to lead to legitimate concerns by those pursuing emancipatory agendas with unsettling such claims (often using the contradictory and nuanced claims of science itself against these agendas), showing the finished as unfinished, the inert as vital, the static as in motion, the fixed as contingent, and the normal as instance (Diprose, 2002).

The opposite (post-binary) claim also warrants critical attention: Our own research involving deconstructive (mis)readings of several texts from the neurosciences suggests that, aside from some metaphysical (binary and information processing discourse) remnants (where we feel encouraged to shake the inertness out of

these readings) we are in the midst of a neuroscience in line with the logic of a postmodern politics, that of imperial sovereignty (Hardt & Negri, 2000). For example, the neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux (2002) articulates a profoundly plastic brain constituted of various conscious and unconscious systems in continuous dynamic relations of dominance and submission whilst embedded in and emerging from complex contextual layers. Following Papadopoulos' aforementioned argument, such 'critical' readings of contemporary neuroscience could be seen as wolves in sheep's clothing, radicality that simply serves the new version of old exploitative orders. But, as indicated above, what is important is that should this social order now be different to that where binaries and disciplinary regimes once held exclusive sway, then critical movements need to acknowledge this shift through the development of new construals of analysis and resistance within this contemporary landscape.

The Omnipresence of the Metaphysical Closure

Given this, what is most important is that we recognise the omnipresence of the metaphysical closure. In the current celebration in body studies and social theory of the open against the closed, the plastic against the fixed, process against stasis, immanence against transcendence, we must simultaneously recognise in these examples the inescapable (re)emergence of binaries that need their 'presence' interrogated. The difficulty with readings sensitive to the fixings (the stasis) of the Law (and its various synonyms; secondary violence, metaphysics, order, information processing cognitive science, conventional connectionism) is that in bringing the other face to bear (the aneconomic, ordinary violence, the excess, *différance*, radical connectionism, and other quasi-synonymic nicknames) a simple inversion remains where 'philosophy' (the system, the economy) is replaced by 'literature' (the play of signification, the aneconomic) (Hurst, 2004). That is, here we find the fantasy found in Rorty's (mis)reading of deconstruction as the free play of signification where the oppressive dualities (binaries) of metaphysics have been overcome (Hurst, 2004). The trouble with this is that it reveals a naïveté, a postmodern optimism, an instance of new age (bourgeois) obscurantism, that slips wholesale into the post-history and post-political ideological ruse of the neo-liberal social order, blind to the dualism that is simultaneously reinserted in the very moment of its constitution. As Derrida pointed out; the metaphysical enclosure cannot be escaped (transcended) but only (interminably) exceeded (Bennington, 2000).

Take as an example Lux's (2010) analysis of the politically problematic (conservative) notion of biological determinism: Historically genetics has provided an influential source of legitimation for this form of determinism. One would imagine that the complex nature of genetic inheritance revealed by contemporary genetic research, where the gene as basic unit of inheritance has been deeply troubled, would marginalise this notion allowing for

more complex readings of the human condition. However, as Lux (2010) argues, instead a new (systemic) form of biological determinism has emerged wholly compatible with the individualism of the neoliberal agenda. Thus we have the return of a notion transformed but still operating in conservative and binary fashion.

A further example, from the opposite side of the political spectrum, is the welcoming of postmodern Empire by Hardt and Negri (2000), the imperial realm of the post-binary, where the multitude, despite being subject to ubiquitous control are liberated from the transcendental impositions of modernity, and can now bring about a new social *order*. Postmodern such a society may be, freed from the imposition of the economic it is not; the multitude still require an agenda (the constitution of a 'new proletariat' detailed in *Empire*) where the capitalist order's programme is to be overthrown. Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 217) argue that '[h]ybridity itself is an empty gesture, and the mere refusal of order simply leaves us on the edge of nothingness – or worse, these gestures risk reinforcing imperial power rather than challenging it'. Difference for the sake of difference suits the capitalist postmodern and assimilative machinery, which can then impose (as obvious and natural) its economy on this love affair with the aneconomic. The need for direction, agenda, organisation, strategy, and order remains. The celebration of the aneconomic still requires the secondary violence of the economic to be effective and truly emancipatory (as this economy, in turn, needs the tertiary violence of being caste into play through interminable critique) (Beardsworth, 1996).

Unavoidable Contamination, Interminable Critique

To conclude, Olivier's (2007) distinction between the postmodern and the post-structural is useful here: By drawing this distinction he frees critical conceptualisation from conflation with the pseudo-emancipatory relativism of the former whilst simultaneously reminding us of the logic of constitutional contamination (the inescapability of the other) of the latter (as articulated in the previous section) (Staten, 1984). The notions of transcendence, of escape, of purity, even event, is that of beautiful souls; those that believe that some position can be achieved where we will finally be released from the contamination and violence of the reviled other. But, as Wilson (1998) points out, the pure/fallen and transparency/violent binaries cannot hold since contamination and violence cannot be avoided. The attempts to secure such positions cripple the critical project, first, by excluding essential areas (e.g., the essential, the closed, the biological) and theoretical resources (e.g., biology, neurology) associated with the nefarious other and, second, by introducing another form of violence, that of the *belle me* where one denies one's own capacity for violence and thus smothers both the 'evil' and 'oppressed' other in the 'truth' of one's projections. The politics of utopia needs the contamination of the politics of aporia (Stavrakakis, 1999).

It is here that Hepburn's (1999) point needs to be kept in mind; that if we have the insight and courage to recognise that the other always returns (in the very moment where we imagine ourselves liberated, post-binary, pure, essence, and so forth) then we should also not mistake it for what it was but should articulate the displacement (the otherness of the other) at hand. In more Foucauldian terms, new knowledges are not essentially emancipatory but all transformations bring about *new freedoms and dangers* (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). That is, if the ostracised always returns, then we need to ask in what form it has made its comeback. As much as the open and malleable body of contemporary body studies opens up dangers we should also exploit these developments for the emancipatory actions they allow.

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