

## Subjectification

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Published online: 5 June 2007  
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**Abstract** For Martin Heidegger the death that comes singularly for each of us summons us to exist on our own and speak in our own name. But Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that it is a specific social machinery that summons us to speak in our own name and answer for what we do and are. This summons is a death sentence. They enjoin us to flee this subjectification, this subjection. They do recognize that the release of becomings in all directions can become destructive and self-destructive. There are several weaknesses in their conception.

**Keywords** Anonymous talk · Authenticity · Becoming-woman · Death sentence · Depersonalization · First person singular · Importance · Subjection · Subjectivity · Sorcerers · Symbiosis · Watchwords

### The subject

Martin Heidegger pointed out that in every fear there is the recognition of our vulnerability, our mortality, and that anxiety, that feeling of finding ourselves cast adrift, nothing supporting us, nothing to hold on to, is a premonition of what dying will be: a being cast from existence into the void, into nothingness. This termination, he argued, is what gives us and our undertakings determinateness. We live in an environment of implements, paths, and objectives. To live is to see possibilities about us, some brought out by our own projects, others visibly outlined by other agents. But the very multiplicity of possibilities extending indefinitely before us produces inaction: what I can do others can do, have done, will do or might do. What, in the outlying field of possibilities that are possible for anyone,

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outlines the zone of possibilities that are possible for me is the black wall of my oncoming death. It is what makes me see when in power that I cannot remake the nation according to my own utopian plan, makes me delegate the administration and also the decisions of my company to my sons or my associates. It is what makes me see that my life as a gymnast will be over by the age of 25, and I do not have time now to join a band or do well in a premed program.

These thoughts lead to a specific understanding of what it is to exist on one's own, in the first person singular. Understanding that I am mortal is what gives me the realization that activities have ends, terminations, and that I have to live out and discharge my forces. Seeing, in the midst of the array of possibilities extending indefinitely about me, that zone of possibilities that are possible for me before my death makes me discover my own powers and skills. It gives me something to say on my own, of my own. It makes me realize that I do not have the talent to write the great American novel, that I do have the love and the passion, the kisses and caresses with which to love this individual or this AIDS orphan as no one can love him or her.

Maurice Blanchot criticized this Heideggerian concept of a life that casts itself with all its forces toward its end, living out all its forces in projects that have ends and an end.<sup>1</sup> Dying, Blanchot said, is not something I do. Death comes on its own, when it wills. And when, at the end of a fatal illness or an act of violence that I may have inflicted on myself, I find I am dying, I find myself progressively divested of all my powers; all the experience, knowledge, and skills I have acquired in the past fall away; and the time yet before me is a blank future where nothing is possible. It is not only that once I am dead I am no longer there to experience it; while I am dying I am being reduced to anonymity. I find I am dying as one dies, as anyone, everyone dies, as all that lives dies.

Dying is an event, Gilles Deleuze says, not a personal action: one dies, he says, like it rains. The man of resentment attaches to death the words just, unjust, merit, fault. But, Deleuze writes, morality has instead this to say, and nothing else: do not be unworthy of what happens to us (LS 149). When finally I have myself suffered, I come to understand, really, suffering, the suffering of those in other wards of the hospital afflicted with different wounds or diseases, the suffering of calves and poultry in the slaughter-houses, the suffering of every wounded individual of every species. To understand that, and to act accordingly, with compassion, is to not be unworthy of the suffering that befalls me.

Heidegger has explained that my envisioning the end of my life outlines for me the range of possibilities ahead that, in the unending expanse of what is possible for anyone, are what is possible for me—and makes me able to speak with my own voice. It makes me break with the talk, the anonymous formulations of the way things are and should be that we take up from one another and pass on to one another. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that it is not the anonymous and impersonal event of death that makes me able to speak with my own voice, but a force within discourse. A death within language.

The talk does not just circulate among us. It is always directed, they point out. In the discourse of practitioners of a scientific discipline, a technological team, a

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Writing*.

political meeting, in the exchanges of a medical team and the gossip of the nurses during a break, in any conversation, there are cues, prompts, watchwords, passwords that indicate what topics are to be rehearsed and what topics passed over in silence and with what vocabulary, what grammar, what rhetoric, in what tone of voice things are to be said. It is not that every language-game operates within a set of rules, or that every meaningful discourse derives from principles, or that the opinions expressed and judgments made can be shown to derive from a coherent ideology—a class, religious, ethnic, or gender ideology. Deleuze and Guattari replace the notion of ideology with that of ordering-words, those cues, prompts, watchwords, passwords—brief, trenchant words or expressions that are discontinuous and not governed by an overarching and coherent set of general beliefs. We hear or read them on the faces of the big men or the big women of the group.

These cues, watchwords, and passwords order how we are to speak and when we are to speak. We are to speak as representatives of the scientific discipline, or the state of veterinary medicine, or as representatives of the company or store. We are to speak of what facilitates the work, of what entertains the group, or we are to repeat commonplaces that affirm group solidarity.

And there are times when we are to speak in our own name. We are enjoined under oath to tell the court just why we kept pit bulldogs and what we did when they attacked the victim. The paramedic is required by the medical staff to say just how he saw the accident victim when he arrived on the scene and how the victim reacted in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. The student is asked to write down on the exam just what he has understood. The researcher is required to report exactly her methodology, her data, her verifications, or her work will be rejected by the journal and she may be dismissed from her position and from the profession. The prisoner is ordered to identify himself and recount his activities under threat of torture. It is not some inner compulsion to authenticity, but a collective, a social machine, that orders me to speak in my own name.

In what I say the subject of my statements opens a line along which words connect with further words; my statement requires further statements to qualify it, explain it, or justify it. The subject that utters those words connects back with the subject of the statements: I am what I say and saying what I am evokes and generates further statements.

Of course most of the time this circuit does not take hold; my mouth just picks up talk from others and passes it on to others. But faced with someone who orders me to speak for myself, I find myself attached to what I say. I am attached to pit bulldogs, and this is the starting point of how I define myself and how I explain my behavior. I am passionately attached to leather and whips. I am attached to my studies, to my research, to the medical profession. I am passionately attached to my people and our land under foreign occupation.

The locus of passionate attachment can also be the smile, the eyes, the hands, the laughter of a lover. Then I seek to be what the other says I am, and I aim to make the lover be what I say she or he is.

The order words that enjoin us to speak in our own name, to speak and to exist on our own, are, Deleuze and Guattari say, a verdict—a death-sentence (TP 107). Demanding that we stand on our own, they order us to stop and isolate an inner core of lucidity and will. Death is not only the limit put on our time, our life-time; it is

also a limit put on our space. What is being cut away when we are ordered to stand there on our own and speak in our own name is the swarming within of becomings—becoming woman, becoming animal, becoming vegetable, rhizomatic, becoming mineral, becoming molecular. The one who is ordered to stand on his own is being cut off from his vital environment.

And the effort to be what I say of myself—that I am passionately devoted to the law, or to reason, or to an animal of another species or a shoe or a lover, this self-consciousness and this passionate love themselves produce, Deleuze and Guattari say, impotence and emptiness. The pit bulldog aficionado becomes more and more isolated from his neighbors and the community and eventually will be jailed, where if one is not tortured by the guards one is by the other prisoners. There is something pathetic about the straight-A student and the myopic researcher passing the years shuffling measurements and charts. The effort to be what my lover says I am and make my lover be what I say he or she is shuts us up in a domesticity made of suspicions, accusations, and jealousies (TP 131-3).

Becoming someone who stands on his or her own and speaks in his or her own name—subjectification—is subjection and subjugation. It is walling oneself in, looking out upon the outside world from behind glass windows. Deleuze and Guattari encourage us to hurl ourselves out of those windows and plunge into the world outside in order to really live. How do they see that life outside?

## **Humans and their world**

Hegel envisioned the whole of history as a process of humans investing the material world with meaning and worth. The master, who makes death into his own power, imposes his will and his conceptions upon the slaves. The slaves find that in laboring they embed human conceptions and will in inert materials. The historical destiny of the planet upon which humans evolved is to appropriate it to the spirit and humanize all nature. Marx saw the reverse at work: the master becomes subject to the recognition and the labor of the slaves. The workers become cogs of the machines they operate; commodities come to determine the conceptions and desires of humans.

Marx sought to expose and overcome this capitalist experience of being bewitched by fetishes, by commodity fetishism, but Deleuze and Guattari uncover the fundamental relationship between humans and their environment in the experience of sorcerers. In trance and in delirium a sorcerer becomes a wolverine, leopard, or eagle—not imitating them or identifying with them, not acquiring the structures and organs of other organisms, but contracting certain forms of their behavior and cries, behaviors without objective nor termination, since they are susceptible of extending in the most varied situations. Animals come in packs, herds, and flocks, and induce multiplicity in the movements of the human animal who enters into symbioses with them. What are contracted are ways animals move in packs, move in relation to one another and affect one another and other species with intensities.

A hunter acquires the sharp eyes, wariness, stealth movement, speed, readiness to spring and race, and the exhilaration of the beast he hunts, which are available for stalking prey but also for gamboling down the hills into the river, dancing, and sexual contests. A forager is bent upon the earth, is herself imbued with the damp and smell of the ground, and acquires the patience of plants. There is symbiosis, for the prey animal contracts the speed and direction of movement of the hunter, and the plants protect themselves with thorns and toxins from foragers and recover after their passage. In the Altai mountains in the far west of Mongolia, there is a community of Kazakhs who take young eagles from the cliff nests and train them as falcons. It is female golden eagles that are kept, for they are the stronger hunters. They weigh some 20 pounds and have fierce talons; the hunter perches his eagle on his hand wearing a thick leather glove and sleeve. When winter comes and the animals are in new thick fur, the hunters mount their horses and climb the mountains to release the eagles who soar over the mountains and return with a fox, lynx, or even wolf. The eagle hunters are a knighthood; they wear black coats with silver belts and hats made of the tails of 50 mink. The hunter keeps his eagle in the best room of his house, and acquires the fierce intent, patience, and love of the high mountains of the eagle. Eagles live 30 or 40 years; after 10 years the hunters release their eagles into nature so that they can find mates and reproduce.

Sorcerers work these symbioses with packs of other animals species among hunters, warriors, secret societies, criminal gangs, street mobs, ascetics such as the sadhus of India and the Desert Fathers in early Christianity, and in practices of ritual deflowering or sexual initiation.

Deleuze and Guattari say that becoming-woman is the primary becoming, introducing the others (TP 277). Becoming-female and/or becoming feminine? They are certainly thinking of Daniel Paul Schreber, who both felt that he was becoming pregnant and employed feminine adornments and provocative gestures to become a slut irresistible to God. But the prime case is the warrior who disguises himself as a woman in order to escape (TP 277-8). To disguise himself is an integral part of being a warrior, and it is by fleeing that the adversary is brought out into the open. More generally, sexual couplings are war machines; the male body divests itself of its unitary and functional organization to prolong in itself movements of the female body and thereby to release wolf, cat, octopus, and segmented worm movements in itself. It is in the contact with a woman that sorcery begins.

An industrial worker takes on the movements and pacing of the machine, while machines are made to the scale and force of humans. There are also symbiotic couplings with plants: among the sequoias the woodman's body does not become ligneous and stiff, but he stands tall, looks skyward, and becomes laconic. There are couplings with the movements of the winds and the rain in the sprawling savannah, the frozen tundra, and the misty tropical swamps. There are movements that take on the movements of cells and of molecules and scintillations of light.

These becomings, these symbioses, intensify and turn in eddies of pleasure. Into multiple, nomadic, transitory, ephemeral eddies of egoism on the surfaces of the body, where excess energies are consumed in pleasure. This surface "subjectivity" is produced, Deleuze and Guattari say, as a "celibate machine." (AO 18)

At the limit the body picking up multiple movements and trajectories of its environment, entering into multidimensional symbiosis with it, loses itself, becomes nonsignifying, nonsubjective, impersonal, anorganic, imperceptible in its environment, and thereby produces a world—one world among innumerable others, connected to them. In the process eliminating all waste, death, and superfluity, complaint and grief, unsatisfied desire, plea or defense—everything that roots an individual in himself, everything that prevents one from slipping in among the things, growing in the midst of things (TP 279).

Deleuze and Guattari envision a form of passionate love that abolishes one's sense of being a subject: "to become the great lover, the magnetizer and catalyzer...one has to first experience the profound wisdom of being an utter fool." (Miller, 229). They envision using the *I think* only to become animal, vegetable, mineral, molecular. Thinking becomes, Deleuze explained, "the harshest exercise in depersonalization, by opening themselves up to the multiplicities everywhere within them, to the intensities running through them." (HC 6)

But, we object, is there not a wholly different process of subjectification that we see in dancers, doctors, mothers, backpackers, beach bums?

One day, in the secrecy of my heart, I said to myself "I am a dancer." I put this word "dancer" on myself, and my substance retains it. It settles into my musculature and nervous circuitry, tunes my circadian rhythms, does not have to be repeatedly brought to my consciousness. I find I belong on the dance floor; there my body feels right; I do not have to tell myself to go to the dance studio, if I am forced to be elsewhere some days I feel restless and out of sorts. I set out, as Nietzsche put it, to become what I am. To be sure, I am not yet a dancer, and I shall not know until months, years, of training if one day I will really dance, dance my own dance. But it is certain that if I do not say "I am a dancer," if I do not fix this word in my heart, I shall never be a dancer.

This word is not a term in a language game with others; it is a secret word and becomes the more unpronounced as it settles into my nervous circuitry, musculature, and circadian rhythms. If I go around saying "I am a dancer," I am probably seeking the support and permission of others and have not or have not yet put this word on myself.

Let us not be misled by the fact that "dancer" is as common a word as there is in language to conclude that I am simply conforming myself to one of the identities a society defines. "Dancer" is a word I put in myself, and found acquiring an ever more concrete and singular meaning as I become a dancer. When I affirm "I am a dancer," I affirm that today or one day I dance with all my own inner body melodies and suppleness, with all my love, nostalgia, hope, heartache, fear, despair, that I dance as no one ever has danced or can dance.

I find myself becoming a dancing crane, an antelope, a sage grouse, a pirouette of coral fish, a comet, a whirl of atoms, each of these becomings shaped in intensities of exhilaration or serenity.

"I am a dancer" means I am becoming a dancer and at any moment, any year, there is the risk that it will not happen, that I will be immobilized by injury or by a chance weakness in a movement. By chance the dance took possession of me this night; by chance I found myself in this agile and supple body with this sense of

rhythm and this sensibility; by chance I was born. In saying, in the secrecy of my heart, “I am a dancer,” I turn away from the faces with which the collective machinery utters its cues, prompts, watchwords, passwords. For me, morality has this to say, and nothing else: do not be unworthy of what happens to you.

Every day we see the difference between the doctor whose identity he was ordered to assume and answer for and the doctor who leaves for the refugee camp under fire because he is a healer. We see the mother for whom being a mother is something the collective machinery ordered her to be and the mother who brings forth by chance a life like no other and each day finds or invents a nurturing like no other. We see men and women who, despite all the cues, prompts and orders that the collective machinery issues to them are impassioned seamen, protectors of silverback gorillas, farmers on another continent, wanderers in ever more remote lands and societies.

Among those identified as philosophers we see the difference between professors and thinkers. Deleuze wrote:

The history of philosophy plays a patently oppressive role in philosophy...“You can’t seriously consider saying what you yourself think until you’ve read this and that, and that on this, and this on that.”...I myself “did” history of philosophy for a long time, read books on this or that author...It was Nietzsche, who I read only later, who extricated me from all this...He gives you a perverse taste...for saying simple things in your own way, in affects, intensities, experiences, experiments. It’s a strange business, speaking for yourself, in your own name, because it doesn’t at all come with seeing yourself as an ego or a person or a subject. Individuals find a real name for themselves, rather, only through the harshest exercise in depersonalization, by opening themselves up to the multiplicities everywhere within them, to the intensities running through them. A name as the direct awareness of such intensive multiplicity is the opposite of the depersonalization effected by the history of philosophy; it’s depersonalization through love rather than subjection.” (HC 5-7)

### **Destructive and self-destructive depersonalization**

If the constitution of a subject, subjected to and subjugated by the face that orders us to stand on our own and speak in our own name is a death-sentence, the release of becomings in all directions could well become destructive and self-destructive, Deleuze and Guattari write (TP 270). On the one hand, it may lead back to the family and the state: passionate love stratifies into functions stabilized in the conjugal family. Symbiosis with multiplicities of animals reverts to domestication of them. Warriors become subjected to the state; the desert visionaries become saints of the Church.

Those who use drugs do undergo an extinction of the ego, a disintegration of the organized organism, and perceive a molecular explosion of spinning and throbbing microevents that are intensely pleasurable. But, Deleuze and Guattari say, that gives

way to hallucinations, delirium, false perceptions, phantasms, and paranoid rushes that are so many forms that hold the perception and block it from the real microperception of spinning colors and scintillations, as well as from the real movements of animals, plants, and the open roads leading to mountains, oceans, winds, and sky (TP 285). The release of these multiple impulses and symbioses could issue in simple disintegration and dissipation of energies. Movements do not compose with one another but conflict and weaken one another. The body of the drug user becomes dependent on the dose and the dealer, while emptying of energies in the abominable vitrification of the veins, the purulence of the nose, the glassy addict's body (TP 285).

Do we not see something similar in the writers, painters, and musicians whose release of animal, vegetative, insect, and mineral movements is so admired? We see the most "revolutionary" texts and music produced as hallucinations, while the author himself or herself settles into the most banal and conformist celebrity and wealth. And for millions in the archipelago of urban technocenters, horror films and frenzied music are the opiate that permits them to stratify themselves in the control rooms of sordid consumerist greed. They used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with the IKEA or Nieman Marcus catalogue and after work join others in the bliss of guided meditation support groups.

We also see that the authors of the most "revolutionary" texts and music do disintegrate into real madness.

The depersonalization, the release from the controlling ego and the liberation of multiple becomings that contract the movements, rhythms, and velocities of women, animals, plants, molecules avoids self-destruction, Deleuze and Guattari explain, by acquiring a consistency through an internal composition that remains master of its approaches and velocities (TP 286). This internal plane is not imposed from above by a rational and purposive ego or constructed by character management, but develops within the movements themselves. As one continues, it becomes clear whether the symbioses are effectively engaged producing more power, whether multiple movements are able to coexist, and whether transformations are occurring. It is in the course of hunting that the eagle hunters of the Altai Mountains develop the inner consistency of their lives; in the course of wandering and foraging the Australian deserts that the Aborigines consolidate a culture unlike any other. In going out to sea the boy progressively becomes a seaman. In leaving Buenos Aires on his motorcycle Ernesto Guevara becomes a soldier of America, in leaving Cuba becomes a warrior for justice for whom a blow struck on any human becomes a blow struck on his face.

Reading Deleuze and Guattari, it does make us uneasy to see that they celebrate the liberation from constraints in the writings of Artaud and Schreber and Wolfson, passing over the dangers set free. Does not the fiction of Lovecraft and horror movies and the songs of Marilyn Manson captivate us with hallucinations, delirium, false perceptions, phantasms, and paranoid rushes that are so many forms that hold the perception and block it from the real movements of packs, herds, flocks, criminal gangs, street mobs, and war machines? When this question was put to Deleuze's own writing, he replied:



I'll move to your other more cruel and hurtful criticism, when you say I'm someone who's always just tagged along behind, taking it easy, capitalizing upon other people's experiments of others, on gays, drug-users, alcoholics, masochists, lunatics, and so on, vaguely savoring their transports and poisons without ever taking any risks...If I stick where I am, don't travel around, like anybody else, I make my inner journeys that I can measure only by my emotions and express very obliquely and circuitously in what I write. And what do my relations with gays, alcoholics, and drug-users matter, if I can obtain similar effects by different means?...Drugs can produce *délire*, so why can't I get into a *délire* about drugs?...Arguments from one's own privileged experience are bad and reactionary arguments. (HC 11–12)

How can we accept that? That invisible cities constructed out of words are as good as the Rio de Janeiro, Calcutta, and Bagdad in whose streets we have danced, begged, or warred? Does not a writing addicted to floating delirious swarmings of words separate us from the real movements of animals, plants, mountains, oceans, winds, and sky just as does the delirium of drug-addicts? Deleuze had celebrated Sartre's refusal of the Nobel Prize, citing Sartre:

The writer takes up the world as it is, totally raw, stinking, and quotidian, and presents it to free people on a foundation of freedom.... It is not enough to grant the writer the freedom to say whatever he pleases! He must address a public that has the freedom to change everything, which implies, beyond the suppression of social classes, the abolition of all dictatorship, the perpetual renewal of categories, and the continual reversal of every order as soon as it starts to ossify. In a word, literature is essentially the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari do mention, in passing, that the collective apparatus that orders us to stratify ourselves as subjects is first an economic system.<sup>3</sup> Capitalism liberates products from the worth they have inasmuch as they were connected to the earth or to the despot and liberates the desires of consumers to invest in all directions. It establishes a material culture where consumers make their own collections of mass-produced clothes, furniture, cooking utensils and dining sets, and network with other collectors of antique cars or telephones, jazz or baroque music, or Shunga woodblock prints. However, each consumer is constantly being called upon to buy, and what he is enjoined to buy is a line: Porsche, Armani suit, Waterman pen, and Chivas Regal; or SUV, Levi-Strauss jacket, Ray-Bans, and Coors beer.

Depersonalization, when we open ourself to the multiplicities everywhere within us, to the intensities running through us, could issue, Deleuze and Guattari say, in simple disintegration and dissipation of energies. What is required, they say, is that

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* Cited in Gilles Deleuze (2004).

<sup>3</sup> "Subjectivation as a regime of signs or a form of expression is tied to an assemblage, in other words, an organization of power that is already fully functioning in the economy, rather than superposing itself upon contents or relations between contents determined as real in the last instance. Capital is a point of subjectification par excellence" Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987).

our multiple energies acquire a consistency through an internal composition that remains master of its approaches and velocities. But is not this internal composition induced from the outside? Is it not when we find ourselves caught up by, possessed by the requirements of what is important that our energies are marshaled and released? Deleuze and Guattari depict depersonalization, release from subjection, subjugation, subjectivity, as provoked by the discontinuous multiplicity of things about us—these can be just anything, they write: food, a dress, an article of underwear, a shoe, a face, an animal of another species can become objects of passionate attachment (TP 129). Such attachments are productive, they insist: what they produce is consummation and consumption in eddies of pleasure. What is missing in this account is *importance*, the powerful grip of what is important and its immediate and urgent needs that arouse and engage our powers as we become empowered by its forces and movements. It is in being attached to the trivial and the accessory that our energies are disintegrated and dissipated.

As we become intimate with persons, other animals, ecological systems, buildings, or artworks, we develop perceptual and conceptual sensitivity, logical acumen, breadth and depth of comprehension, and the capacity to distinguish the important from the trivial. There is no perception, no understanding, and no practical action in preparing a meal, in automobile repair, in nursing, in scientific observation, without discernment of the important from the accessory. Importance is not simply ascribed to things in relation to our needs and wants and pleasures; importance is in things. Deleuze and Guattari do not acknowledge this; their denunciation of subjectivity is accompanied by a subjectivist epistemology. Importance is seen in the baobab tree, the Borobudur stupa, the condor soaring over the glaciers of the Andes, the fervor and incorruptibility of Steve Biko.

Deleuze and Guattari insist that animals do not exist in isolation; they come in packs, herds, flocks, multiplicities. They also exist in ecosystems. To see anything that exists and is not simply an image, a phantasm, is to see what it needs to exist. When we see things we see how they have to be protected, nourished, repaired, rescued. When we see what is important and see the urgency of its needs and see how we are there and have the resources, then our multiple mental and physical capacities and skills are energized and integrated—in a breakout from our stratified body and a forgetting of the closed circuit of subjectification.

Lacking a consideration of real, objective importance, Deleuze and Guattari do not, any better than psychiatry and psychoanalysis, exhibit the difference between the real madness of the cult of the ego, the paranoia of interpretation, conjugal life à la Strindberg, stockbrokers, and macropolitics, on the one hand, and the powers and exhilarations of Paul Farmer, Jacobo Timmerman, and Evo Morales, on the other.

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