

ARTICLE



Bauman and Heller: Two Views of Modernity and Culture

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ABSTRACT

Two of the most interesting contributions to the challenge of making sense of modern culture come from thinkers originally from East-Central Europe: Zygmunt Bauman and Agnes Heller. Their emphases differ, Bauman focussing on the dark side from the Holocaust through to the uncertainty of liquid modernity, Heller on the bright side of modernity with a detour via the analysis of Soviet type societies. Bauman, in effect, draws attention to the limits of modernity, Heller to its possibilities. Read together, these arguments usefully throw light on existing debates concerning modernity, the postmodern and the constraints and opportunities of modern culture .

中文摘要

有效应对现代文化挑战的两大最重要贡献源于中东欧的两位思想家：齐格蒙特·鲍曼与阿格尼丝·赫勒，但两者的重点却不同。鲍曼主要关注从大屠杀至不确定的流动现代性的黑暗面，而赫勒则间接通过分析前苏联型社会，集中于现代性光亮的一面。事实上，鲍曼关注现代性的局限，而赫勒则探索它的可能性。结合阅读两者的观点，我们会发现这些观念可以有效地启示现存关于现代性、后现代性、现代文化的局限与机遇等方面的论争

KEYWORDS

Bauman; Heller; culture; modernity; postmodern

关键词

鲍曼; 赫勒; 文化; 现代性; 后现代

What is modernity? What are its threats, and its promises, its dark, and bright sides? How does modernity relate to modernism, to capitalism, and to freedom? What is the culture of modernity, and what was the controversy about the postmodern? So many questions, and so many good theorists in the field to whom we can turn for advice. Yet the dominant trend in Anglo discourse has been to privilege the Paris-Frankfurt axis, Foucault or Habermas, Lyotard or Honneth. Voices from the periphery are less often heard, even if this is the closer periphery of Eastern Europe, even if these voices are also mediated via the main game, the transatlantic conversation held across the UK and the USA.

In this article, I engage with the ideas of two such major interlocutors, Zygmunt Bauman, and Agnes Heller. Theirs have in many respects been parallel paths, from Eastern Europe, Poland, and Hungary, respectively, out into other worlds and other modernities. Both were Marxists and non-Jewish Jews, outsiders like Walter Benjamin but also outside messianism, both cast into exile, that most modern of experiences.

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Heller's path took her out, to the new world, to Australia, and to the United States, and then back to Hungary. Bauman's path took him to Leeds via Tel Aviv and Canberra, where with frequent trips to Europe in particular (more so Spain and Italy than Germany and France) he remained until his death on January 10, 2017. Both thinkers, in other words, experienced multiple and alternative modernities, and in different ways. Heller was able to return to Hungary, whatever the daily difficulties of this later reunion; Bauman's path was blocked, even after an initial thaw after 1989. Neither of these great thinkers has been welcome as latter day critics in their countries of birth. Both of these independent intellectuals were exiled from their homes, and both found their later lives made difficult by the present political climates in their countries of origin. Both thinkers needed also to confront the ghosts of the modern past: of communism and fascism as modern phenomena. Both came out of the Marxist humanist tradition, for which the prominent cultural problem was communism, but the Marxist tradition was historically strong rather on the critique of the preceding capitalism than it was sufficiently agile to make sense of the Soviet experience. And both, in different ways, needed to make sense of the brave new globalized worlds of relative or extreme abundance and its mixed blessings for the prospects of human flourishing, living in hope of human autonomy in a world of division and individualized conformism in the west.

The path of thought in each project also indicates changes of mind, these understood both as a necessary intellectual process of self-development and as a necessary response to the process of societal change itself. For if modernity is understood first of all as a culture, then the object of analysis for each thinker, Bauman and Heller alike was different, decade by transformative decade. There is indeed much here that is good to think with, and in both cases this involves engaged and moving intellects as well as moving targets. Our worlds keep changing, and we must change the way we think along with these processes. Modernity is motion (Beilharz, 2011a).

1. Modernity and culture in Bauman

What does Bauman have to say about modern culture, modernity, and its cultures? For the purposes of this article, I will suggest that there are at least three phases or leading motifs in his work. The first involves a puzzling over radical and everyday culture, focusing on the idea of culture as praxis. The second opens the issue of totalitarianism, and in the first instance Nazism as a culture of modernity. The third opens with an insight about postmodern culture and develops into the argument for Liquid Modernity.

Zygmunt Bauman used two lodestars in his early work in English: socialism and culture. Radical or socialist culture he first essayed as the culture of the English labor movement, from its alternative beginnings to its corporatist outcomes as labor more and more entered and became incorporated into the state across the path of a hundred years (Beilharz, 1972, 2000). Socialism Bauman originally defined as the counterculture of modernity, its alter ego, its other voice, its storehouse of alternative possibilities. *Socialism*, for Bauman, began as *The Active Utopia* (Bauman, 1976). This radical character of socialism as a counterculture is diminished into the seventies as, to borrow an image from Castoriadis, socialism comes to share the capitalist imaginary. There is a

new counterculture, of hippie culture into the sixties, but it also dissipates into the new individualism over the path of the next decades. Via the labor movement, socialism becomes incorporated into the social system itself. Labor's great success after World War Two is a pyrrhic victory. The utopia of the alternative society becomes subsumed to the consumerist imaginary. The goal is no longer the Good Society, but the Goods Society, the dream of non-labor and material abundance, leisure for all or at least for those with the means (Bauman, 1983).

In this same early period, Bauman writes the major work called *Culture as Praxis* (1973; Beilharz, 2016b). This is a very interesting, if still a formative moment in his thinking, when he is working under the influence of both humanism and structuralism, the former as a political orientation, the latter perhaps especially as an intellectual impulse via the field of structural anthropology. Levi Strauss and Mary Douglas are foremost among his own interlocutors, though as the title of *Culture as Praxis* clearly indicated, Bauman wants also and especially to view culture as an activity, in the manner of Gramsci and the theory of praxis. Culture here appears not only in terms of the traditional distinction between high and low, or as, for example, in the semantic and historic precedent of agriculture, or cultivation: culture is also essentially what human beings do: they make, create, adapt, invent, make do, innovate, make anew (Beilharz, 2006).

Up to this point of his project, Bauman is still working within the Marxist tradition, for which it is capitalism which is construed as the dominant force, rather than modernity. In his earlier Polish work, it is needless to say still actually existing socialism which is the immediate frame of reference, though evidently Bauman continues to work within the sixties hope of humanist Marxism, where the regime would be held against the claims of Marx and especially the ideals of the early Marx. Like Heller in Budapest, Bauman is a kind of renaissance Marxist. He seeks to hold the regime to its claims, until it becomes clear that this strategy is a dead end. Surveillance, persecution, and eventually exile are then to follow.

Has modern culture then exhausted itself? Bauman begins to engage with postmodernism before he published *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), but that is a part of a longer interpretative story, to which I return later. For the sake of clarity, it is best at this point to shift momentarily out of chronology and deal with the Holocaust book.

Modernity and the Holocaust was, at the time of its publication in 1989, received with hostility or contempt. This was, initially, because Bauman insisted on coupling the two, but in this particular way, which indicated not that modernity and the Holocaust were equivalent or identical, but that they were necessarily connected. The Holocaust was, for Bauman, a problem inconceivable outside of the culture and technology of the modern. Its anti-Semitism was not that of the pogrom, but of the total onslaught of modern state power against the Jews and the others of Nazi Germany. The means of destruction, the death camps, their transport regimes, and the bureaucracies that enabled them were not creatures of the past, of old tradition, but new. These were the technologies of modernity. This was a kind of murderous Fordism, an industrial mode of killing which applied the strategies of factory production to mass human destruction (Beilharz, 2000, 2011b). This was a modern story, and it told about modern culture and ethics. As Bauman said, the most chilling fact to contemplate about the Holocaust was not that it could have happened to me, but that I could have done it.

Eichmann may have been a monster, in this way of telling the story, but he was also a modern everyman, the one who simply says yes or no longer knows how to say no. This is the reason why Bauman introduces other forms of moral quandary into his discussion, such as the Milgram and Zimbardo tests. Modern culture and technology makes it possible for us to inflict pain and suffering upon others, not least because we do not see their faces. The dark side of modernity is apparent. Modernity rests on the power of state and capital to generate and punish enemies or surplus populations. This becomes more readily possible in modern times as host cultures and states seek to implement either anthropophagic or anthropoemic strategies, looking either to expel or vomit out alien cultures or else to assimilate them into themselves, to devour them up, to swallow them without trace.

The message of *Modernity and the Holocaust* is clear: the culture of modernity is also toxic, or at least is open to this kind of toxicity. Modern civilization, as Walter Benjamin would put it, also always rests on barbarism. Little wonder, then, perhaps that Bauman and others were attracted to the idea of the postmodern, something after this, and different to this way of thinking and of being. Though its theses are complicated, *Modernity and the Holocaust* is a sequel to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Rationality here has turned back on itself; there is little room for radicals left to move.

Into the eighties Bauman begins to take in the postmodern turn in the human sciences for several reasons. One is phenomenological: if enough people are now talking about the idea of the postmodern or of “being after” modernity, then we need as sociologists to register this turn and to seek to make sense of it. Another reason is more self-reflexive. Who talks about the postmodern? People like us; intellectuals, those who fancy themselves as cultural leaders and innovators, artists, architects, and then those working in the human sciences. Bauman’s approach here was to suggest a distinction between those who aspired to be Legislators and those who were content to act as messengers or Interpreters. He had already anticipated his own enthusiasms in *Hermeneutics and Social Sciences* (1978), and he now established an implicit critique of Bolshevism as the will to legislate (Beilharz, 2002). Bauman found himself in the predicament of those who follow the path to critical theory Marxism as critique. How it started with Marx, before Bolshevism, needed to be separated out from Marxism as a will to power in the twentieth century. This was a central yet submerged task of *Legislators and Interpreters* (Bauman, 1987).

Like others, Bauman may have at first been stimulated by the promise of the postmodern, which played on the modernist precedent, to innovate, to begin anew, to break with tradition including the new tradition of the modern. More generally, as I have indicated, he viewed the postmodern as explanandum rather than explanans. He called not for a postmodern sociology, but for a sociology of postmodernity (Bauman, 1991a). He viewed modern and postmodern as mutually constitutive. Throughout his intellectual life he argued against the tyranny of classificatory reason, based on the insistence that A is not B (Bauman, 1991b). A can indeed be B; it all depends. Again, the argument here resembles Adorno, and the critique of identity theory. But Bauman’s disposition also led him to avoid intellectual celebration and self-congratulation when it came to the promise of the postmodern. There is a cautionary note and sensibility which informs his work. Neither Bauman nor Heller runs with the pack.

For reasons like these, Bauman began to take a distance from the postmodern enthusiasm, coming by 2000 to claim rather that the newly emerging reality might be understood as *Liquid Modernity* (2000). What might this mean? Though he settles on the metaphor of liquidity, his thinking is also suggestive of the mercurial, slippery, shifting, elusive. Bauman posits a distinction between solid and liquid modernity. It is cultural, but also implicitly historical. The postwar western world of Fordism is comparatively solid. Its institutional forms, from families to companies and universities, are relatively stable and predictable. For better or worse: and this is a standard trope for Bauman, they become normalized, a matter of second nature or conformism, of normalized behavior. The normal expectation in the Long Boom after World War Two was one of long-term full employment for men, nuclear families, and marriages for life. Into our own times, the new individualism upsets these norms. Disposability becomes normalized, in both material and emotional life. Institutional loyalty evaporates; redundancy becomes normalized, the file box now always ready to take all our stuff when we are fired at short notice. None of us is any longer irreplaceable, either in employment or in our personal relationships. Other relationships like love also become compromised, and sex/love comes to replace love/sex. In short, for Bauman as earlier in the cliché accredited to Marx, all that is solid melts into air. All our relationships and lives are “until further notice.”

Does this view risk nostalgia? Perhaps. But it also invites us to contemplate the issue of social gains and losses that modern social arrangements dispense or encourage. In this regard Bauman’s work is a critique of modernity as progress.

For Bauman the idea of liquid modernity is also an extension of his concern with the western culture of consumption. He risks the generality that whereas the dominant western figure or personality-type until recently was the worker, now it is the shopper. Where the previous site of life was the factory, now it is the shopping mall. Now our identity is indicated less by what we do than by the brands we buy, wear, and endorse. This is a world after Marx, though of course it still depends on the distant proletariat in the now-industrial east and south. Inequality remains a significant issue for Bauman, whether local or global. For as Weber understood, inequality matters because it is a major determinant of life chances. And as Marx put it, the point was not that we should all be Rembrandts, but that all who had the capacity to flourish should be able to do so.

Bauman’s is, in short, a theory *inter alia* of culture as waste, excess, and of the wasted lives of those who are declared as superfluous to systemic need. It is a theory of surplus, and of surplus populations. His is a concern not only for globalization but also for glocalization (Bauman, 1998). It indicates an ongoing concern with the dialectics of master and slave, these refigured now as tourist and vagabond.

And yet, amidst all this social asymmetry and suffering, Bauman retains his interest in culture as praxis. In terms of his own interest, literature becomes the source of enthusiasm for cultural innovation and renewal (Bauman, 2014, 2016). Writing becomes for Bauman a personal obsession, expression a daily need (Bauman, 2012). Toward the end of his life, Bauman still gave the sense that even though we live in chaos, we nevertheless remain order-seeking animals. This is not the paranoid will to order of the Nazis or Stalin; it is small scale, given to the minutiae of everyday life and its needs and struggles. Unlike say Marshall Berman, with whom he might otherwise be thought to have much in common, Bauman was not a celebrant of the chaos on the street, the swirl of everyday life

on the asphalt and the teeming crowds (Beilharz, 2016a). Bauman's sense of temporality was closer to that of Yorkshire, Leeds and its surroundings, or to the civic life of the continental cities than to Manhattan or Times Square. As he put it earlier, his temperament was more that of gamekeeper than gardener. Bauman did not share the Faustian conception of culture. His attraction to the values of Marxism did not extend to the idea of Permanent Revolution. Bauman's ambivalence extends to the value of modernity and modern culture itself.

2. Modernity and culture in Heller

Agnes Heller's thinking might at first sight seem to be the positive complement to Bauman's. Where Bauman brings the bad news, Heller tends to focus on the bright side of modernity. Heller seems closer to the idea of holding modernity to its promises. Yet for Heller, too, the experiences of the twentieth century, of the Holocaust and Stalinism are fundamental points of orientation. The Holocaust was central to her own life story. Her father, an exemplary figure, died in Auschwitz. Auschwitz was her portal into modern life. And where Bauman's intellectual path goes directly through modernity and the Holocaust, Heller's takes the path of making sense of modernity directly through the Soviet experience, in *Dictatorship Over Needs* (1983). For if fascism is no throwback, then neither is the story of Soviet-type societies. Modernity takes on many faces and forces.

The ghost in the background of both these cases, Bauman and Heller alike, is that of Max Weber. While the history of capitalism is a serious issue for Weber, not least in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber is also the premier theorist of the historical phenomenon of bureaucracy. Weber is the critic of rationalization, which becomes a core theme for the Frankfurt School through to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. While Weber is too far away from Hegel to follow up the interest in the idea of second nature, he is fundamentally attracted to the idea of culture, and here of personality. The point about capitalism and bureaucracy is that their institutions modify our patterns of behavior. Men and women behave differently after Weber, or after Kafka.

If the breakout case in Bauman is the modernity of the Holocaust, for Heller, here writing together with Fehér and Markus, it is the modernity of Soviet-type societies. For the purposes of this article, I shall suggest that there are again three key moments or themes in Heller's work on culture and modernity. The first is in the diagnosis of Soviet type societies. The second is to be found in Heller's theory of modernity. The third is in Heller's writing on postmodern culture.

Heller's earlier work in English built upon Marx and, via Markus, on the marxian interest in questions of anthropology and needs (Beilharz, 2015). She begins then to map out a personal theory in installments, in books like *A Theory of Instincts*, *A Theory of Feelings*, *A Theory of History*, a theory of justice in *Beyond Justice*, and so on, and then *A Theory of Modernity*, in 1999. Like Bauman, her work often also takes on the essay form, and some of her most powerful books, such as *The Power of Shame*, are made up of essays. Finally, when it comes to the postmodern, the *essai* is again a favored form. Everyday life invites it.

Dictatorship Over Needs is one of the most important books of its kind. Here there are three collaborative essays stitched together, by Fehér, Heller, and Markus in turn. Bauman's book, as we have seen, was controversial and often at first rejected for conjoining modernity and the Holocaust. If the effect of *Dictatorship Over Needs* was

less revelatory than that of Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, this may be because of the special symbolic place given to the Nazi experience in the western democratic imaginary. Given the anti-Enlightenment, antiuniversalist foundations of Nazism, in contrast to the humanist and internationalist claims of early communism, there has emerged a western obsession with Nazism which tends to occlude Stalinism from sufficient scrutiny. It is as though Stalinism is less open to analysis as it involved evil deeds putatively done for good reasons, whereas Nazism is reviled as it authorized and carried out evil deeds for bad and repulsive reasons. Perhaps, alternatively, the fascination with Nazism still reflects the awkwardness that Germany before Hitler was thought of as a core carrier of civilization, whereas the Russian tradition could always be stigmatized as backward and eastern. Nazism can be regarded as culturally anomalous, as a puzzle, where Stalinism can be made to fit the caricature of the authoritarian Russian past. But to follow this way of thinking is to push the Soviet experience away from modernity, rather than looking more carefully to make sense of it as also modern.

The point, rather, in the context of this discussion, is that social forms are always mixed, modern and postmodern, modern and traditional all at once. Jeffrey Herf captured this brilliantly in the title and text of his 1984 study of formative German thinking: *Reactionary Modernism*. There's the rub! The two go together. A is also B. As Heller argues, it is not technology which is determinant here, but the imagination which carries it. Yet the technological or its imagination is not enough to carry modernity or reactionary modernism. Modernity is also founded on the hope of freedom. For Heller, this further evokes the historical imagination, the sense of the possible and the contingent.

This kind of bifurcation between tradition and modernity was precisely what Bauman and Heller set out to upset, by insisting that modern totalitarianism was just that: modern, in terms of both the culture and technology set to work by Hitler and Stalin, and for this reason speaking to other moderns about the nature of their situation and its possibilities. Both principal forms of totalitarianism were invented traditions, drawing as Marx put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* on the ghosts of the past to legitimate the present and lay claim to the future. Both called up the past in order to seek legitimacy for the future.

History thus becomes a matter of legitimation, as per Weber, even if historicity itself always contains the possibility of other futures. Politics rules: totalitarianism is not dictated by the economy, but driven rather by the state, bureaucracy, political parties and elites. Both Bauman and Heller can be characterized as Weberian Marxists, at least in their formative stages of development. Sobriety and caution are the motifs here. This means that they both have an acute sensitivity to the power of the state, and not only that of capital or of capitalism. Modernity cannot be conceptually reduced to capital or capitalism, as the Marxian project in the nineteenth century might suggest. These matters become especially significant given that the key agency of totalitarianism is in fact the state. Heller's approach is additive, or analytical. She argues, together with Fehér, that there are three key dynamics or logics of modernity: capitalism, industrialization, and democracy. This view is first articulated in the essay "Class, Democracy, Modernity," from 1983. The logics of capitalism and democracy here work in counterpoint; they work together in struggle. Industrialization is present here as it is not reducible to capitalism; there are non-capitalist forms of modernization, the Soviet and Nazi models being two such leading examples. Industrialization thus stands here for the logic of bureaucracy or other noncapitalist forms of social imperative.

By 1999, Heller in *A Theory of Modernity* has modified the three proposed logics of modernity. Now Heller suggests that the three defining logics are the logic of technology; the logic of the functional allocation of social positions; and the logic of political power. This suggests a different way of thinking to Bauman. For while Bauman's analysis of the Holocaust is also multivariate, his general view of modernity remains that of masters and slaves, with the difference that consumption becomes the postwar utopia, or as he puts it, the societal emphasis on security gives way to the renewed pursuit of freedom, this understood as the freedom to consume, to cultivate the self at the cost of others. Heller, in contrast, puts more weight upon the principle possibility of democracy, or of the need to choose ourselves as good people and good citizens. In spite of all, for Heller, we can still seek the good life in league together with those with whom we disagree. Pluralism and totalitarianism are simply incompatible, for Heller: capitalism has its dangers, but the possibility of pluralism at least persists (Beilharz, 2003; Heller, 2005a; Ward, 2016). This was also the lesson she says she learned from her father: to struggle to be decent, just and courageous is already a big ask, and a necessary one.

Where, then, does the postmodern fit into this way of thinking? Like Bauman, Heller takes the postmodern seriously because others like us do. We share, into the nineties, some sense of Being After. As for Bauman, postmodern also means in some sense post-Marx. It all comes together: its key symbol is not the collapse of the Pruitt-Igoe Towers, as Charles Jencks playfully suggests, but the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in the old Soviet lands. Heller also has her moments of playfulness, not least in the use of dual voice for example in *Philosophy of History in Fragments* (1992) and in *The Ethics of Personality* (1996). But she also values the early postmodern impulse, and its revival of the earlier modernist avant garde. Humans always remain capable of the creative impulse, as they do of more commonplace but fundamental values and practices such as friendship and gratitude. For Heller, comedy returns, and it is as fully human and as necessary as tragedy. Comedy, indeed is also inseparable from tragedy. As Heller puts it in *Immortal Comedy*, “[f]or the comic to exist certain things must be serious. They must be meant and done in earnest” (Heller, 2005b, p. 127). From the English language beginning in *Renaissance Man* in 1978 to *The Time is Out of Joint* in 2000 and *Immortal Comedy* in 2005, her work describes an arc as well as a more open itinerary. Her intellectual life's companion across these writings in English is Shakespeare, rather than Lukács or Marx. Yet there is also a postmodern attitude here, as Bauman says, a hope of a modernity without illusions, anchored always in the sense that we can do better. The postmodern thus extends and renews the self-critique of modernity initiated by cultural modernism around the Great War. If modernism as an historic form loses its modern dynamic, then it will also be necessary to move on. Even amidst the ruins of modernity, there will always be the new and the need for the new.

3. Conclusions

Is small then beautiful, for these Weberian Marxists working out into the postmodern? Not in the romantic, but certainly in the pragmatic register. Finally, in both Bauman and Heller, there is a sense of the importance of little things, the local, the work of repair and maintenance, of choosing the self and caring for others. Both are in this sense sociologists or philosophers of everyday life. Both Bauman and Heller are in a

sense existentialists, though this not in the same sense. The animating spirit of existentialism in Bauman is closer to that of Camus, the absurd, the defense of beauty, and the revulsion against humiliation: Sisyphus rather than Prometheus. The spirit of existentialism in Heller has always been closer to Kierkegaard, to the sense of contingency in which I must choose myself. There may be warring gods here, as Weber insisted, but none in particular is chosen or compulsory. This means that both Bauman and Heller are critics of conformism, but Heller's sense of the light in the distance seems stronger. Heller remains closer to the humanist attitude across the path of her thinking. Bauman is closer to Foucault in this regard, where humanism remains more fundamentally part of the problem of modernity and its dominant culture.

In popular parlance, we might then say that Bauman's theory of modernity is more pessimistic, or indeed perhaps even romantic, while Heller's is more optimistic, or oriented to the Kantian values of enlightenment. But optimism and pessimism are dispositions, rather than theoretical attitudes; and romanticism and enlightenment have always been entwined, like modern and postmodern, and remain so (Beilharz, 1994). Better, perhaps, in the tradition of Critical Theory to suggest that Bauman's views are more skeptical or ambivalent and Heller's closer to the philosophy of everyday hope. However, when we decide exactly to characterize their views, it becomes apparent that it might be useful to consider them together, as this article has suggested. If Heller is right that we need to choose ourselves, then we may need also to remain open to theoretical choices like these. There will always need to be more than one voice, even inside our own heads. In the big discussion of the nature of modernity and culture, smaller voices like those of Bauman and Heller will always echo, at least for those who know also how to listen to the babel of plurality. The critical horizon here is less that of the Great Republic, than that of little democracies, smaller places where we can seek to exercise the choice of self and the ethic of care for others. Modern culture is fateful; yet it is also always contingent. These are some of the implications and possibilities opened up to us in conversation with Zygmunt Bauman and Agnes Heller. Modernity, in this way of thinking, is indeed its cultures. These are its hopes, as well as its challenges.

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