

## AGAINST SMARTNESS: THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE OF SMART SOCIETY

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the critique of smartness. Scholarly dicta over the years have developed lines of critique of smartness that can be summarised in the strands presented in this paper: technological, institutional, and social. Leaving the technological critique in the background, the work presented here focuses on the institutional and social critiques. The aim is thus to draw attention to how the concept of smartness, although seen by many as a panacea for all ills, is not free from criticism. The uncritical assumption of this conceptual phenomenon runs the risk of disconnecting the concept of a smart society from society itself.

### Keywords

Smart society, critique, smartness

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When we talk about smart society, we are talking about an idea of society that increasingly seems to be that of the not-too-distant future. There is no doubt that the idea behind this type of society has a highly innovative impact on social processes. However, far from being a description of the smart society, which has already been discussed in detail by Iannone (2019), the focus of this paper is instead on its points of friction. It is precisely from the scientific world that various critiques have followed one another over the years, even if their number has always been small in comparison to the vast number of articles in favour of smartness.

Attempting to critically rethink the theoretical and practical implications of the smart model seems to be a valid approach to give coherence to the same model, while overcoming its limitations and contradictions. Depending on the area, the smart paradigm takes on different meanings. Over the years, neoliberal and commercial logics have emerged that are detrimental to the idea of smartness, as recalled by Bria and Morozov (2018), Hollands (2008), Söderström (2014) and Vanolo (2014; 2015), but also concerns about the sphere of social control and privacy (Kitchin 2014), or the oxymorons of a society with strong sustainability but equipped with huge energy-consuming devices whose disposal is complicated (Hollands, 2008). Again, we have often encountered self-celebrations of smartness that turn out to be nothing more than propaganda banners. Despite the differences and caveats identified, it is therefore of strategic importance to engage in a critical examination of smartness, given that «as a sexy and appealing concept, it has aroused enthusiasm, asceticism, fierce criticism, millions of investments and has led to changes in governmental, economic and social models» (Cuppini, 2020: 15). Analysing the scientific debate on the subject, it is then possible to categorise the criticism of the smart society into three different directions. The first, in terms of conceptual proximity and volume of studies, is undoubtedly the technological one. This emphasises the role of technology in smart processes. In fact, the criticism of this discourse seems to be linked to the idea of smartness of the early years, the idea that presented the smart society as a technology-driven society.

The second strand of criticism, on the other hand, relates to the institutional narrative of smartness, which sees the public aspect as opposed to the private aspect. The institutional critique introduces the idea of measurable and governable smartness.

The third and final strand of the critique of smartness is the social critique, which asks whether smartness, and therefore the smart society

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itself, is one of the social properties we are used to analysing.

In this paper, we will not focus on the first critique, the technological critique, but rather on the critiques that are more related to the idea of society. The decision to leave the technological critique in the background stems from the fact that it seems to be the one most methodologically ‘explored’ in studies of smartness. As will be seen below, there seems to be a lack of studies that instead peel back the technological veil of the smart society and examine its social and institutional aspects.

What is society and what does society do?

## 2. SOCIAL CONTROL

In the whole strand of critique that emphasises how the question of social control is also and especially central to the smart society, institutional critique seems to take shape in the dictate of smartness.

In the classical formulations of sociology, the question of social control has always been at the centre of countless debates.

More recently, it has become even more central as new technologies that can do and see everything have become extremely pervasive. In this sense, however, the institutional critique of smartness will not deal with social control in general. As Ragnedda (2008: 173) reminds us, the rational control typical of modernity was blatantly rigid, panoptic, a top-down, centre-periphery control. In a postmodern society based on consumerism, this system of surveillance has no reason or purpose to exist.

There are two sets of problems inherent in this shift in meaning:

- First, there is a relationship between smart technologies being widely used and social surveillance being equally widely used.
- The second set of problems appears to be a redefinition of social control itself, no longer perceived as a means of containment/elimination of deviant behaviour, but rather as a means of promoting homologation.

Far from being exhaustive, these two broad categories seem to capture the differences between pre- and post-smart social control.

The physicality of social control changes in terms of the first order of critical issues. The fact that the new form of surveillance transcends distance is the first major difference between smart and non-smart social control. In this version, smart technologies are outside the life of the

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individual and inside, in the intimate life of the social actor, overcoming the technical limits that previously did not allow state control. Nuvolati (2020: 71) defines this as «the (over)arrogant modernity that penetrates the places of everyday domesticity, but also of the man and woman considered smart».

Based on the data that can be generated by smart systems, the new surveillance is ubiquitous and immaterial. Without compromising its reliability, the data can be used at different times and in different contexts.

In this smart society, the structure of social control is also revolutionised. The set of actors who 'control' social control seems to coincide with those who have the power to hold the data of that control, i.e. the condition of surveillance capitalism that Zuboff (2019) speaks of. More data in the hands of fewer corporations. Social control becoming corporate as well as the smart society narrative.

It is in this direction that what Vanolo (2014) defines as *smartmentality* is developing: a disciplinary device that takes place only in relation to the presence of smartness. Looking more closely at *smartmentality* and linking it to the context of social control, it becomes clear that although the approaches dedicated to smartness promise a paradigm shift - in terms of optimising services and maximising efficiency - the perspective underpinning these services is top-down and vertical. A good example of this vertical exchange model is the institutional and corporate assertiveness used to decide who should be smart and who should not. It is clear, then, that Vanolo's (2013) model of *smartmentality* is a model that describes the power dynamics behind smartness that, on the one hand, support a new concept/phenomenon and, on the other, introduce specific technical and moral parameters that betray the disciplinary model that ended up under the name of *smartmentality*.

Society, and in this context its control, is being tamed in the same way as the social actor is being "tamed". As Vanolo clearly points out, when the social actor is called upon to participate in the process of building the smart society, he is implicitly made responsible for the achievement of the objectives: this is why Vanolo calls this type of discipline *smartmentality*.

It is therefore logical and automatic to think of the risk of unquestioning adherence to the "smart" paradigm, which, as we have seen, is by no means neutral, but an instrument of power.

The fear of an "opaque" adhesion to smartness, without limits, dictated by a social control that is no longer only external but also internal to the life of the individual, gives rise to the second order of criticality: the new type of social control found in the smart society seems to privilege homologation rather than the repression of deviant behaviour.

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Similarly, according to Nuvolati (2020: 61), «the beauty of the imperfect» is abandoned in the name of a uniformity based on «generic procedures and protocols, spuriously democratic because they do not apply to everybody, but only to those with the appropriate skills, and particularly those capable of keeping up with innovation by means of a thorough update» (*Ibidem*).

The centre of gravity of control is thus shifting, dictated by a certain strong pervasiveness. The capillarity of the new forms of control found in everyday places has thus acted as a driving force in this sense. But how has such a shift in meaning come about?

The first variable to be considered concerns smart people. These are the new individuals of the smart society who, by virtue of the smartness process, may be voluntary - but also involuntary - users of surveillance (think of smart home control devices). Smart people often participate in surveillance and in their own surveillance. In this way, we are witnessing a new paradigm shift: If social control used to emanate from society to the individual, the situation is now reversed, and we are moving from the specificity of control over the individual back to society as a whole. In other words, we move from monitoring the individual deviant to potentially monitoring everyone, even if they are not deviant. This transition is facilitated - and desired - by smart technologies. As we have seen, these technologies allow for a capillary diffusion of control and, consequently, for continuous surveillance.

Following this shift, the system of social control is designed to prevent transgressions by homologating individual behaviour. In other words, instead of sanctioning deviant behaviour, it encourages conformist behaviour, as Iannone (2007) says.

The final element of this second crucial point is, of course, the extension of the new control. New categories of subjects become controllers and new subjects are controlled. This increases both the pool of those who control and the pool of potential controllers.

Seen in this light, control in smart systems can be seen as a double guarantee: guaranteeing social inclusion and guaranteeing freedom.

Inclusion, because lack of control leads to marginalisation, and «not being controlled means being marginalised, not being noticeable, not being important». The person who is not under control is par excellence the clandestine, the excluded, the person on the margins of society and who is the embodiment of danger as far as he or she is out of control (Ragnedda, 2008: 110).

At this stage, control also becomes the guarantor of freedom since, in fairly straightforward terms, the greater the degree of control, the greater

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the sense of security. Therefore, «increasing the perception of security also increases freedom» (*Ibidem*).

Certainly, one could argue that this seems rather paradoxical: greater security comes from greater control, which makes one feel “safer”, but in order to do so, it is necessary to accept greater pervasiveness of the control itself, which actually limits personal freedom.

In reality, then, the new social control emerging in the smart society demands conformity to a model of behaviour imposed from the centre and does not allow for autonomy of choice. The world of the excluded in this version thus coincides with the world of the excluded in the digital divide, those who are marginalised because they are not technologically and digitally compliant. The social actor is left to ‘apply the rules that are designed to be user-friendly’ (Sennet 2018: 189). On the other hand, a society in which the promise of smartness is synonymous with the creation of a connected glass house, where everything is managed and monitored, «risks becoming pleasant, perhaps, but utterly predictable and therefore devoid of any creative drive. In a word, stupid» (Koolhaas 2014: 58). Stupidity and a lack of creativity that clashes with what the smart people need instead.

### 3. THE SMART DIVIDE

When we talk about the technological society, we cannot help but think of the «society of the excluded» (Iannone, 2007), the kind of society that is created by interacting with the technological, with it.

It is only through subtraction that we are aware of our interconnectedness: that is, when we cannot be (Epifani, 2020: 180). Put another way, when it comes to the use of technology, there is always a gap between those who have it, use it, live with it, and develop it, and those who do not have it, either by choice or by circumstance. In observing the smart society, it is not so much a matter of repeating the ranks - already sifted in the literature - of the apocalyptic and the integrated (Eco, 2001), or of the haves and have-nots (Bentivegna, 2009), nor of dwelling on what Merton calls the St. Matthew effect (1981: 551), but rather of focusing on the new forms of digital divide that the smart society seems to have created. Indeed, as is well known, the digital divide debate regularly tends to develop analysis along dichotomous theoretical lines, with technoutopians on one side and technodistopics on the other, sometimes apocalyptic, sometimes integrated (Eco, 2001). However, this binary articulation of the issue tends to oversimplify the analysis. The scenario is rather complex. In this sense,

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the digital divide moves on two levels.

A first plan analyses the digital divide along two different conceptual lines related to ownership and understanding. In other words, it highlights the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not, and the gap between those who know how to use technology - digital literacy - and those who do not.

However, as the poles of this gap narrow, i.e. as the number of users without access to technology decreases in favour of increasing penetration, the second type of gap - that of understanding - becomes more complex, until we reach the state of the smart society. In the smart society, the previous categorisations of the digital divide are joined by others of increasing complexity.

It is because of this exponential growth in complexity that it seems useful to think about the relationship between smart inclusion and social exclusion, not by making exclusion relevant, but by focusing on what smart inclusion means today. That is, not to rely on this dichotomous reasoning, but to dig deep into what the smart divide is, asking whether not being smart is actually a condition of social exclusion, or instead a new dimension of the social. In this sense, as Iannone (2007) says, the digital divide takes on three simultaneous aspects:

- It is a problem in the present.
- It becomes a false problem in terms of the lens through which it is examined.
- And finally, it is a most urgent problem in terms of elements and dynamics that could find more parallels in the relevant literature.

So, the debate between “apocalyptic” and “integrated” remains, but it is no longer about how the gap develops, but about the meaning of the gap itself. Putting aside the material dynamics of property and all its adjuncts, it seems that what divides in the smart society is human capital and its changes in pre-existing levels of interaction. In this sense, the question of the smart divide within smart society is nuanced. According to these divisions, the smart divide is the degree to which human capital manages to improve its condition by using the tools of sustainability, i.e. the line between those who use smart technologies without fully exploiting their sustainable potential and those who instead use them to improve their social position. The second group is made up of those who are making the most of the potential of smart technologies in terms of time, flexibility, and sustainability. Thus, the new digital divide, which replaces digital with smart and sustainable, operates in the present but looks to the future.

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This distinction is not a dichotomy between those who are users of smart technologies and those who are not. Rather, it distinguishes between those who use smart technologies and those who use smart technologies - in a positive and sustainable sense - without resorting to the dichotomous sharpness of ownership. It thus creates a further distinction based neither on materiality nor on competence, but rather on the perspective of use in a sustainable sense.

As we have seen, thinking about the smart society evokes a powerful sense of sustainability and also the two different types of digital divide. That is to say, the first type of digital divide persists, and the second type (the sustainable one) is exacerbated, despite the excellent situation presented by the smart society, which is itself a futuristic and fully technological idea.

In the smart society, two categories that combine the exploitation of the technological medium with its use for sustainable purposes are added to the categories that record only the more or less constant use of the technological medium, in particular the Internet. Epifani (2020) returns to dichotomous categories and distinguishes in this sense the sustainable from the unsustainable, but then makes a further connection by separating the analogue from the digital. So, we have four different categories:

- the analogue unsustainable, i.e. those who are not only unsustainable but also occasionally use the digital medium,
- the digital unsustainable, i.e. those who use the digital medium but do not act sustainably because of it,
- the analogue sustainable, i.e. those who manage to be sustainable without making full use of the technological element,
- the digital sustainable, i.e. the smart people, i.e. the social actors who also combine the use of the technological medium with sustainable practices.

Undoubtedly, as Iannone (2007) reminds us, «the message that can be conveyed is always the same - though solvable for some and insoluble for others»: new smart potentials are always and inevitably synonymous with new asymmetries.

Finally, the body of research on smartness highlights the ways in which smart policies tend to increase social distance rather than reduce it (D'Orsi and Rimoldi 2021: 98). Despite the promise of the smart discourse, smart solutions have minimal impact in terms of social inclusion because they do not create or deliver structural interventions in

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the fabric of society (Shelton, Zook, Wiig, 2015). The smart discourse promotes values such as open-mindedness, creativity and equality, but when the facts are proven, it contributes to the marginalisation of the population: just think - again - of the smartmentality mentioned by Vanolo (2014), which instead reflects the interests of the creative class (Florida, 2003) at the expense of the 'non-professionals'. The smartness paradigm, in this sense, then seems to exacerbate the gap between the skilled strata of the population and the socio-economic groups that lack access to or familiarity with digital technologies (Nam and Pardo, 2011; Gibbs, Krueger, Mac Leod, 2013; Hollands, 2015). The smartness model therefore not only promotes the exclusion of minorities but also determines the «prohibition of lifestyles that are not in line» (Hollands 2008) with the smartness paradigm: those who are not sufficiently smart due to economic and cultural capital can only occupy the place of the new digital «damned of the earth» (D'Orsi and Rimoldi, 2021: 98).

#### 4. WELLBEING

As we have seen, in the vast body of criticism of smartness, even before smart society, being smart is associated with being technological, efficient, and sustainable. But to these three adjectives, which by and large represent and are represented by smartness, the idea of well-being is often added.

The idea of wellbeing in smart society seems closely linked to the idea of smartness. The smarter you are, the more you can say you are in a state of wellness.

Where does this condition come from? First, it is possible to say that the idea of well-being in the smart society seems to face the same definitional problems as smartness regarding its actual meaning.

Therefore, well-being in the smart society takes different forms, which can be rejected depending on the situation analysed. Wellbeing thus becomes efficiency, formality, problem-solving, quality of life, economic prosperity.

Starting from the last of the meanings ascribed to well-being in smart agendas, Vicari and Chiappini (2018) observe in this respect that the axiom of the trickle-down effect dominates in smart agendas, that is, the ideology that economic growth automatically benefits all and, consequently, constitutes the solution to the problems of social exclusion and deprivation. Within this framework, there have been a number of specific points which have already been the subject of discussion in previous sections, namely:

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- First, the studies that emphasise the corporate vision of smartness.
- Second, the critical discourse on how the smart revolution is characterised by a strong technological determinism and the consequent pervasiveness of social control.
- Third, it seems that rather than reducing the gap, smart policies increase social distance.

Smartness is - wrongly - associated with the idea of well-being, which helps to shape the idea that if you have smartness, you are somehow on the right side; if you do not have smartness, you fall into the oblivion of the society of the excluded. So, to be excluded in this sense is to be deprived of welfare. The new vision of smartness is closely linked to the idea of crisis, and this connection seems to be linked to what is called the «smartness mandate» (Halpern, Mitchell, Dyonysius Geoghegan, 2017). The smartness mandate «reverses the state of precariousness and risk into new opportunities and a new perspective in which resilience and continuous change become central» (Ivi: 108). In this sense, the smartness mandate transforms risk into well-being.

On the other hand, if one tries to adopt a non-smart-centric mindset, one observes that wellbeing, like technology and sustainability, is a fundamental condition of smartness, relegated to quality of life. They are located on the axis identified by Giffinger et al. (2008) as 'life'. It is therefore not a consequence of smartness, but rather a constitutive feature of it, parallel to the other conditions necessary to speak of smartness. It is therefore parallel to the presence of wisdom and not a condition derived from it. It arises together with smartness; it is not a consequence of it.

Consider, for example, the case of a village where social cohesion, integration and solidarity are at their highest. As we shall see, this village has no technology and no smartness. Could it then be said to be a place without smartness?

In the smart society, we face what was called a few lines above "technological positivism", which claims that there is a world perfectly knowable through data, numerable, where every relationship is perfectly calculable because codified by a technical system: «In short, the belief is that there can be a clear answer to every individual or collective need that is algorithmically determined» (Greenfield, 2017: 146). Well-being in this sense seems to mean 'homogenisation': smartness, by exaggerating technological aspects and limiting any reference to criticism, conflict, and contradiction, reduces complexity and, in this view, privileges well-

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being, if well-being means the absence of problems. The dominant paradigm, then, seems to be essentially that of the rational social actor, who possesses a set of technical-scientific skills and information that enable him or her to act in the most profitable way to achieve well-being, which in this case is contrasted with efficiency.

More than wellbeing, we have seen - particularly in the section on the smart divide - how smartness is associated with increasing social inequality. Much of the literature, especially in the smart city field, notes how entrepreneurialisation, privatisation of public spaces, and a dominant technocracy are the main features of a counter-wellness that tends to widen rather than narrow social inequalities. This critical literature thus interprets the politics of smartness as a corporate-led idea of development. This is a strong reference to corporate storytelling. This corporatisation of goals «ends up replacing the concept of collective well-being with that of economic competitiveness, with the subtext that such competitiveness will necessarily produce better places to live» (D'Orsi and Rimoldi, 2021: 97).

If we then narrow the field of analysis and move from society as a whole to those who live in it, i.e. social actors, not necessarily smart people, we see how the pervasiveness and complexity of smart technologies, which are forced to be constantly updated, leave little room for those who have problems in their relationship with them.

There are, therefore, «growing situations of distress and marginalisation, despite a probable multiplication of user-friendly tools» (Nuvolati, 2020: 67) which, rather than increasing well-being, increase, instead, distress.

According to what we have seen, therefore, a smart society would not only be a technological concept, but also a socio-economic concept (Dameri and D'Auria, 2014: 2). The adoption of smart technology does not guarantee success in terms of greater liveability, quality of life and well-being. On the contrary, to the extent that smartness is seen as homologation, as a standardised regulation of relationships, it seems to «reject informality» (Nuvolati, 2020: 69). That is, the use of an application to check the availability of a parking space, or an application to record the number of people in a queue, or even to book a restaurant, knows only standard procedures.

The use of smartness in this way involves only «computerised and standardised answers that take precedence over improvised solutions» (*ibidem*). Serendipity, the possibility of making new discoveries, also seems to be lost in this move away from informality. So, while we are aware that informality, in its most extreme conditions, can turn into

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illegitimacy, it is equally true that this standardisation of solutions can have a negative impact on the conditions of well-being and freedom: conditions in which well-being is linked to the idea of efficiency.

Formality and homologation to the rules of smartness, in fact, would seem to guarantee a considerable reduction in negative externalities. Think of today's robotic chats. You can choose not only the problem, but also the answer. In the name of efficiency, the idea of community is replaced, almost annihilated, by the idea of self-service, technical, standardised individualism. In the name of efficiency, the idea of community will be replaced, almost annihilated, by the idea of self-service, technical, standardised individualism. In this way, times will be zeroed out in the name of speed, and the «gradual acceleration of working, consumption and relationship practices will result in the reduction of empty spaces and times» (Ivi: 72).

In this vision, then, in a state of total restriction of freedom in the name of total efficiency, we should not speak of well-being but of social control.

Is it therefore still possible to talk about the condition of well-being - to speak of well-being - within the intelligent society? A well-being that is discretion and freedom, far removed from the idea of the perfect integration and cooperation of smart systems. It seems not, at least from the point of view of the social actor who, in this context, is not an actor but a mere executor of the actions of smart systems.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the critiques presented has aimed to show the extent to which the concept/phenomenon of the smart society is not without its problems. Critical thinking in this sense means trying to analyse and question the processes of smartness. Though, as we have seen, smartness brings with it a sense of regeneration of society, which in a way develops the idea that it is a process of powerful problem-solving, we have instead seen that, on closer examination, it presents almost more problems than solutions.

So, given this analysis, the attempt to rethink society, which is part of the idea of the smart society, begins precisely by trying to resolve the frictions that the smart model itself creates. And solving problems means first analysing them. The direction in which the limitations and contradictions observed are useful therefore leads to the solution of a process which, if described uncritically, as is often the case, is anything

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but smart.

Those dichotomous divisions that see the technological as opposed to the analogical, and that erroneously see the former as immersed in well-being while the latter is always in a state of exclusion, are exacerbated.

A new society of the excluded is emerging, based not only on a condition that divides those who have, own and exploit technology from those who do not use or understand it. Instead, it divides those who are well off from those who are ill. Well-being, in this view, can only be achieved by being smart. And it is precisely in this view that wellbeing disappears, replaced by functionality. Here, then, the perfectly smart person is the ideal type of the perfectly “fitted” person, i.e. the socially functional person. A person, a social actor, but without relationality: he is rather an automaton.

Nevertheless, the logic promoted by smartness on the one hand depersonalises human action, making it increasingly similar to the process of updating electronic devices, and on the other hand it closes in on itself in a vicious circle, promoted by intelligent capitalism, which only responds to smartness with smartness. Investments on an international level only contemplate the direction of smartness in a continuous game of exclusions that puts on the one hand, those who are smart and therefore receive investments in a smart sense, and, on the other, those who are not smart, who are destined to succumb. Smartness in this sense, far from being seen as an impulse for social improvement, is instead a powerful control device that engulfs the life of the social actor, controlling it and turning it into a commodity for capitalist exchange. In this paradoxical vision, smartness is not only economically, environmentally, and socially unsustainable, but it also seriously undermines the role of the social actor. What seems to be lacking in this context is trust in the smart society, which subjects’ smartness itself to a kind of law of counterbalance: the smart society needs smart people to survive, but they do not trust smart devices and give up on smartness.

In this direction and according to these critical questions, far from being an obligatory passage point in society, smartness risks becoming a black hole, swallowing its social elements instead of static parametric labels and technical and technological processes.

Thus, by supporting critical reasoning, the idea of a smart society does not seem to be cast and thought out within society, but rather an abstract combination of characteristics that do not fit well with the idea of society. Indeed, the notions of conflict, consensus and social stratification seem to be missing. In other words, the concept of the smart society seems to escape the conceptualisations of society itself. Ultimately, it seems that

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the salvific and messianic character of the paradigm of smartness is overthrown by smartness itself.

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