

Chapter 4

A Critique of the Cultural Turn

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I. Turn: ‘Move around so as to keep at the same distance from a center’

There have been quite a few ‘turns’ in geography recently. There has been a ‘moral turn,’ an ‘institutional turn,’ and, a little while ago now, maybe even an ‘empiricist turn’ (this latter label was not meant as a compliment, unlike most other turns). But it is the ‘cultural turn’ that has attracted the most attention, and the one that has generated the most passionate debate. And it is not only geography that has been turning to culture. So have sociologists and historians (Bonnell & Hunt 1996), theorists of the state (Steinmetz 1999), international relations theorists (Ninkovich & Bu 2000), to name but a few. There is even a set of arguments that the world itself has turned cultural in ways it apparently never used to be (Jameson 1998). Lots of these other fields also seem to have been turning geographical (see Cook et al. 2000), so that suddenly, everybody seems to be talking about culture *and* geography *at the same time*, even though the depth and extent of this geographical turn has been questioned by some (Agnew 1994; Martin 1999).

In this chapter, I want to worry away at the significance not so much of the cultural turn, as if there were such a thing, but rather at the rhetoric of ‘the cultural turn.’ In so doing, I want to air a pet hypothesis I have about the ways in which geography engages with theoretical ideas. This is the idea that size matters. Some people think the cultural turn is a turn for the worse (Martin 2001; Hamnett 2001), while some people think that it is a turn for the better (Philo 2000; Thrift 2000). Either way, there is a tendency to evaluate the pros and cons of shifts in intellectual fashion in terms of their overriding significance for the *whole* discipline. As either salvation or catastrophe, the idea of a cultural turn is only intelligible within a context in which commentators (like me) can imagine themselves to be part not so much of an imagined community, but of an actual, knowable community. Geography, after all, is a small discipline. I suspect the imagined coherence of a cultural turn depends in no small part on the sites and routines of academic gossip (Passmore 1998). The passions raised by the cultural turn in everyday academic settings (conferences, tearooms, pubs, lecture theaters) only makes sense if it is possible

to imagine that a whole discipline either could, should, or should not, completely swerve from one path onto a wholly new one.

The rhetoric of a turn or turns tends to present academic disciplines as totalities. But more than this, the sense of a turn, with its strong undertones of progress, is perhaps an indication that geography is a discipline too small to be comfortable with its own intellectual pluralism. I realize this is a wholly counterintuitive proposition. I do not mean that geography does not allow the co-existence of all sorts of different ideas and methodologies. But geographers are not very relaxed about the degree of pluralism that does exist. This is evidenced by their chronic tendency to define the particular work they do in relation to what is going on elsewhere inside the discipline, even when the relevance of the connection is very tenuous indeed. A large part of the heat generated by the cultural turn depends on this inward looking orientation. As rhetoric, it is a turn around an axis very firmly anchored in geography.

II. Turn: '*Change from one side to another, invert, reverse*'

Everybody in geography seems to be talking about culture these days, but it is rather difficult to find anybody actually conceptualizing culture or the cultural as such. In fact, and here comes another pet hypothesis, I think the cultural turn in geography has worked in no small part through the determined *non*definition of culture. So, while human geographers have gone to great lengths to legitimize culture as a field of study by arguing that the predominant approaches to economic, political, and social phenomena have underestimated the cultural dimensions of this or that activity, it is never quite clear just what the neglected cultural dimension actually refers to. Most of the time, the sense of the cultural and culture derives from an oppositional staging of highly generalized, ontological categories which set the cultural off against the economic, the social, the material, and so on. The peculiar status of culture and the cultural as nonconcepts is registered by the fact that they are often held in suspension by quotation marks ('culture,' 'the cultural'). Citing 'culture' and 'the cultural' signals a deferral of conceptualization, either to a future moment, or to another academic field.

A recurring feature of discussions of the significance of the cultural turn in geography is the resort to diacritical narratives of distinction. In large part, the importance of the cultural turn emerges from declarations of what it is *not*. This helps to explain why substantive conceptualizations of culture and the cultural are fairly sparse in human geography. There are (at least) three axes of judgment and taste around which the importance of the cultural turn has been established.

1. Firstly, the cultural turn is about taking one's distance from a certain sort of Marxism. Of course, culture has long been a privileged locus for announcing the inadequacies of Marxist forms of social explanation. After all, one of the standard accusations levelled at Marxism is that it is *vulgar*. The 'Vulgar Marxism' tag tells us a lot more about the accuser (who is by definition staking a claim to be cultivated, sophisticated, able to appreciate complexity) than it does about the weaknesses of the tradition so impugned. The implication is that, by even suggesting that there may be some relationship between the higher things in life (opera, good wine,

pop music) and base considerations like work, causal explanation itself is guilty of bad taste. In turn, the appreciation of ambivalence and complexity come to be the benchmarks of social science endeavor.

The cultural turn has been heavily dependent upon a derivative postmodernist critique of 'totalizing' and 'essentialist' epistemologies of which Marxism is the primary suspect. Allied to this simplistic dismissal is the easy equation of Marxism with political economy, an effect of the particular empirical and theoretical emphases of geography's Marxism since the 1970s. In both its presences and its absences, Marxism in geography is distinguished from the Marxisms that have most influenced the development of cultural studies. But even the self-declared Marxist versions of cultural geography (e.g. Mitchell 2000) largely ignore the existence of a diverse tradition of Marxist *cultural* theory. Consequently, it has become common-sense for Marxism to be presented as unremittingly productionist, economicist, reductionist, deterministic, and class-based. This characterization underwrites an implicit understanding of the cultural as referring to an overlapping set of concerns with consumption, with forms of social relations other than class (which are also frequently conflated with being overwhelmingly about identity), with a focus upon agency rather than structure, and with an appreciation of contingency in social life. More generally, the hegemony of Marxist political economy over radical geography allows the cultural turn to be presented as a key moment in the flowering of theoretical diversity in the discipline. Contrary to this image, however, I think it is quite plausible to suggest that the theoretical reference points of the cultural turn have actually remained quite restricted, not least because of the sense of comfort provided by the 'not-Marxist anymore' narrative of progress. It certainly seems true that once cut adrift from Marxism, a poststructuralized critical human geography still tied to a rhetoric of radicalism only drifts further and further away from a normatively reflective tradition of liberal social science and political theory (Katznelson 1995). Insofar as its trajectory remains resolutely centripetal, the settling in of the cultural turn as an orthodoxy of its own might actively close off as many avenues of intellectual curiosity as it opens up.

2. But enough of this unseemly whining about Marxism. It is time to move on. If the cultural turn is about not being Marxist, or at least about not being caught dead being vulgar about one's residual Marxism, then it is just as much about proudly declaiming any tendencies towards positivism. This is the key methodological axis around which the cultural turn has been defined: it is about *not* being 'quantitative.' In this respect, the rhetoric of the cultural turn builds on and confirms a set of assumptions inherited from a previous generation of apostates (geography's theoretical involutions always seem to be distinguished by the vigour of renunciation). 'Cultural' has become synonymous with the use of certain methods of analysis, the thickly descriptive and thinly ethnographic. This is the sense in which whole swathes of work have come to be understood as being cultural, not least by those who do not use these qualitative methodologies. In geography, methodologies tend to be ascribed an enormous amount of political, and even moral efficacy (cf. Hammersley 1995). Yet the methodological self-righteousness that has become characteristic of critical human geography betrays a rather shaky pattern of political evaluation. The 'positivist' Vienna Circle was made up of liberals and radicals, after all.

Heidegger, on the other hand, one current favorite in geography, *was* a Nazi, and worse, he never even said sorry (Lang 1996). He is probably best read today as a salutary reminder of the moral hazards that attach themselves to an overly aestheticized disdain for the familiar, the countable, and the technological.

It is only by clinging to a somewhat discredited avant-garde conception of culture as an essentially aesthetic realm of self-realization that the value of numbers in progressing human welfare can be denied. In this respect, I wonder whether a progressive program for the analysis of culture can actually do without numbers. There are two senses in which this might be the case. Firstly, even the most resolutely qualitative of analyses tend to fall back on statements of quantity and numerical forms of reasoning to establish the general significance of the very detailed research findings they report (see Murdock 1997). Secondly, understanding the politics of culture in contemporary society with an eye to making a difference might depend on the use of numbers. The ability to intervene in public culture in pursuit of a progressive agenda of democratization depends in no small part on having the capacity to measure, compare, and assess cultural practices, tastes, and values (e.g. Barnett 2000; Ruddock 1998). Culture, in short, is too important to be defined against the instrumental, measurement, or numbers (Bennett et al. 1999; Lewis 1997). In this respect, perhaps the news is not all bad, insofar as there is an emerging interest in critical human geography in reassessing the importance of numbers not just as tools of domination, but as key resources in struggles for the extension of citizenship (e.g. Hannah 2001; see also Brown 1995). Perhaps we need a quantitative turn in cultural geography?

3. Finally, if the cultural turn constantly defines itself conceptually against Marxism and methodologically against quantification, then it also defines itself epistemologically as *not* being naively realist about knowledge claims. We are all social constructionists now, of one sort or another. This might have as much to do with taste as anything else, insofar as the cultural forms favored for analysis in canonical cultural theory tend to display a characteristically modernist aesthetic of difficulty. It is from this doubled canon of Works and Theory that one can trace the corollary of the overinflation of the political significance of different methodologies, which is the tendency to define cultural politics in narrowly formalistic terms by reference to a vocabulary of transgressing and disrupting established norms and conventions.

The operative understanding of 'social construction' that underwrites a whole genre of cultural analysis in human geography runs together a conceptual argument about the construction of identities with a methodological hodgepodge of 'textual' and 'discourse' analysis. Underwriting all of this is a generic recognition model of identity formation, in which individual and group identities are constituted by exclusion of the cultural other (see Oliver 2001). As a theoretical truth, the notion that identities are differentially constructed in relation to images of others, sanctions a methodology of reading texts, images, discourses (let's not be too fussy about the conceptual distinctions between these terms) on the grounds that these are the material out of which identities are made. This proves to be a very malleable assemblage of concepts and methods, which can be applied to the analysis of interview transcripts, geopolitical discourse, urban policy documents, colonial cartography, and much else besides. Social life thus gets reduced to a never-ending dance of Selves

and Others, in which the focus of methodological analysis (representations of identity) is folded up with the main explanatory framework (identity formation has a self-confirming dynamic of desire, power, or intention).

Narratives of the cultural turn often bundle together all three of these diacritical gestures, the conceptual (not vulgarly Marxist), the methodological (not knowingly quantitative), and the epistemological (not naively realist) (e.g. Barnes 2001). The defining *not*-ness of the cultural turn is a symptom of a tendency to cling to geography ever more tightly as the whirly-gig of successive theoretical turns revolves more and more quickly. Each and every new idea or name stumbled across must be made to appear dramatically important to everyone, rendering all previous approaches old fashioned. The significance of the cultural turn is thus established by taking one's distance from both an 'uncritical' mainstream-mainstream (quantitative social science) and a 'not-critical-enough' critical-mainstream (Marxist social science), so that the cultural turn emerges as the route to attaining the genuinely critical 'critical' position. And it is from these sorts of stories of distinction, rather than from any explicit work of conceptual elaboration as such, that the dominant senses of culture and the cultural emerge.

III. Turn: 'Give new direction to, take new direction, adapt, have recourse'

My main point in all this is that geographers have not engaged in much detailed analysis of the concept that appears to be animating so much debate at the moment. Neither the proponents nor the detractors of the cultural turn move much beyond a rag-tag set of understandings of culture. So, culture is vaguely understood to be a generic feature of all social activity, referring in particular to the processes that make the world meaningful. A taken-for-granted symbolic understanding of culture is easily connected to the idea that culture is inherently differential. Meanings are contextual, specific, and contingent. And this is where geography comes in: because of culture, *things happen differently in different places*. Both the cultural and the geographical get defined as residual to general and abstract processes, and a culturally inflected geography emerges that provides contextual supplements to theoretical speculation that is carried on elsewhere.

This might seem an unlikely claim – that the cultural turn has been insufficiently theoretical – since the cultural turn has come to epitomize theoretical excess. But my argument is that while geographers have become very pluralistic in the use of culture and the cultural, this undefined usage is indicative of certain sort of theoretical discourse that might have negative as well as positive implications. In general, geographers have been content to construct 'theory' in terms of a set of propositions whose truth-status is already established by virtue of coming from somewhere else. The cultural turn has been legitimized by a two-way movement, referring to what is already going on in other fields while also insisting on the opportunity for geography to gain from broader engagements. This is also probably another side effect of being a small discipline.

The appeal to extradisciplinary sources of authority is just one means of resolving a fundamental paradox raised by postfoundationalist epistemologies of knowl-

edge. Presuming to have undercut the grounds of truth-claims based on, for example, quantitative methodologies, dialectics, or critical realism, the newly encultured geographer is still left with the problem of what sorts of authority their own critical statements can carry. If one way round this uncomfortable conundrum is the appeal to other disciplines, then another closely related tactic is the recourse to the authority of the proper name of a *Theorist*. The cultural turn is thus associated with a distinctive style of conceptual exposition whose most characteristic rhetorical device is "As X said," or "As X shows," followed by a more or less lengthy, more or less intelligible, citation. Deriving the truth-value of a statement from the simple fact that it was *said* only works as a persuasive argumentative strategy by implicitly calling on and reinstalling an aura of seriousness around select names. The names may alter (it could be Foucault or Lefebvre, Baudrillard or Haraway, Latour or Deleuze, Butler or Beck), but the textual apparatus of exposition and persuasion remains remarkably constant. It gives rise to a cut-and-paste style of writing, in which a whole subgenre of theoretical writing takes the form of extended quotations from a limited assortment of writers, interspersed with generally approving commentary, and uninterrupted by an excessive concern with critical analysis or clarification. The almost total lack of irony characteristic of this genre encourages a suffocating degree of deference that closes down more avenues of serious thought than it opens. Even more seriously perhaps, it works to alienate a large part of any likely audience of students or fellow scholars (and in this, it again betrays an implicit avant-gardism, insofar as this alienation effect easily comes to be celebrated as an objective in and of itself). The reduction of theory to a set of slogans, bolstered by the author-effects of famous theorists' names, makes in particular for really bad pedagogy. There is now an orthodox narrative of critical human geography, supported by textbooks, journals, and student dictionaries, in which the main characters are 'Positivism,' 'Structuralism,' and 'Poststructuralism.' This narrativization of the cultural turn has helped put in place a set of images of other research traditions that is at best a series of caricatures, and at worst involves teaching a series of half-truths and errors. This is perhaps the price of success. When 'critical' intellectual ideas become the basis of taught programs of instruction, being taught to a generation of students (including me) who do not share the contexts of personal struggle and engagement from which they earned their initial value, then the professionalization of 'being critical' becomes dependent upon inducting students into certain sorts of dispositions and attitudes by reference to heavily moralized constructions of 'mainstream' positions (Billig 2000).

In suggesting that the cultural turn has been insufficiently theoretical, I am not denying it has been the occasion for lots of theory-talk. But this is talk of a particular sort. 'Theory' has become a kind of space-sharing performance art, in which what is registered is a set of common reference points. This theory-talk is an effort at constructing an audience in often unfamiliar, even hostile contexts. I have stolen this idea from someone else (probably more than one person, actually), so let me quote a favorite theorist of my own, Meaghan Morris, who has a good take on the nature of cultural theory in the contemporary English-speaking academy: "Cultural theory is a medium of diplomacy. This is why the term simultaneously refers, in media as well as academic usage, to a small but internationally recognized canon of names; to a subphilosophical jargon; and to a populist performance mode that

aesthetically signposts its mixing of expository and narrative (or 'academic' and 'personal') rhetorics. All three practices are ways of creating a partial and often temporary commonality between people with little in common" (Morris 1998: 6). I think this description has a lot to commend it, and it certainly chimes with my own experiences, as both awed spectator and sometime bumbling performer. And in case you think I am being overly cynical about the whole enterprise, I do think there are all sorts of ways in which theory in this sense registers some welcome changes in the way academics do their thing (see Barnett 1998).

If theory functions in this way as a *lingua franca*, then it might be a very good thing indeed, providing a way of talking across divisions that might once have seemed unbridgeable. And this is not only about getting along with people from other disciplines. Kathryne Mitchell (1999) has argued that the vocabulary of culture has facilitated all sorts of *intradisciplinary* dialogues within geography, using work on immigration as her example. This is an argument that would see the vagueness of culture and the cultural as a huge advantage, insofar as it enables people from different perspectives to converge on a set of topics that have a high degree of overlap even if they lack strict conceptual coherence. Another field where culture has been doing this sort of work is in economic geography (see *Antipode* 2001). The culture and economy connection might take various forms, including a focus on cultures of work, cultures of the firm, culture as a synonym for consumption and identity, culture as subject to distinctive practices of commodification, or cultural as a reference to various qualitative methodological approaches (Ray & Sayer 1999). But one of the characteristic features of debates about culture and economy is a persistent tendency to present culture and economy as opposed principles in need of resolution. In most cases, the economic comes to stand for the abstract and the universal, and the cultural for the concrete and the particular. And geography invariably gets to be the site where these two sets of values are combined in context. So, *things happen differently in different places*.

In the final analysis, however, in all of these usages, even if culture remains only vaguely defined, it is never an entirely empty concept into which one can pour any sense at all. Culture can only serve its diplomatic function because it does indeed invoke a set of shared, overlapping understandings that do retain a degree of family resemblance. In particular, if we can all get along now by talking about culture, it is because there is something about culture that feeds on a particular understanding of what the geographical is all about. Culture and geography get connected as one side of an evaluative dualism that opposes specificity and difference to abstraction and universality. Here is another quote, one of my favorites, that makes the point very nicely: "You can't go wrong when you call something cultural, for it is the one term that, without necessarily specifying anything, carries the full weight of all possible forms of specificity" (Gallagher 1995: 309). I think this captures the essence of how geographers have used culture and the cultural, namely as a short-hand for specificity and difference: as what empirically escapes structural determination, and what conceptually disrupts abstraction and universalization. So it is that so much work that sits under the broad cultural banner combines very specific empirical case-studies with highly abstract explanatory categories (the West, Power, Desire), never quite stopping in between to flesh out the relays between the two.

IV. Turn: 'Remake (garment) with former inner side out'

So far, I have suggested that culture has not really been defined in geography, and that this might be what allows it to do the sort of work that it does as a nonconcept. But I want to conclude by suggesting that the real problem with the cultural turn might not be the nondefinition of culture. It might instead be the way in which this nondefinition almost completely elides the conceptualization of power and politics. Power and politics have become ubiquitous in culturally inflected research. It might be supposed that this is derived from Foucault, certainly subject to a standard reception that elevates a specific figure of power (the Panopticon) into a general theory (Barnett 1999). However, at a more mundane level, cultural analysis in geography has been heavily dependent upon an implicitly semiotic conception of power. Without necessarily being the subject of explicit conceptual discussion, the dominant strands of cultural theory upon which geographers have drawn have been shaped by a particular combination of post-Saussurean semiotics and Gramscian Marxism. What Saussure in particular bequeaths to cultural theory is a set of conceptual oppositions that have become the political unconscious of mainstream cultural studies: oppositions between arbitrariness and motivation, freedom and constraint, individuality and the social, the concrete and the abstract, the ideal and the material, use and system. If you splice these onto a reformulated notion of hegemony, liberally sprinkled perhaps with some psychoanalytic *linguisterie*, then one can quickly arrive at a notion of cultural power operating primarily through the semiotic process of coding and recoding signifiers (see Osborne 2000). Cultural politics comes to be defined in terms of the politics of meaning (cf. Grossberg 1998). And if meaning is an 'arbitrary' effect of articulating signs, then so one can understand not just cultural politics but *all* politics as a process through which interests and subjectivities are constructed through the (dis)articulation and (re)signification of identities. In this model, power is understood in a two-dimensional fashion to operate through *closure* (of the properly open play of signifiers), or *naturalization* (of the properly arbitrary nature of meanings), or *exclusion* (a necessary moment for the suturing of identity). The evaluative force of each of these categories turns on a zero-sum logic of *power* and *resistance*. And it follows that cultural politics, either in the classroom, the street, or sitting in front of the television in your living room, is understood on the analogy of critical reading, as the work of actively reinscribing chains of signifiers in order to produce new political subjectivities. It is worth noting that cultural politics in this sort of semiotic model of resistance still rests on a quite conventional, and distinctly un-Foucault-like conception of power, understood as the quantitative capacity of an individual or collective subject to realize their will (see Hindess 1996). In this case, politics is understood to turn on the differential capacity of social groups to make meanings stick, but the name of the game is still a battle between different actors to realize their own clearly defined interests.

This image of cultural politics is also, and despite first appearances, actually quite totalizing in its conceptual ambition. At its strongest, the idea of cultural politics in contemporary academic theory refers not just to the idea that there is a politics of culture, but to the much stronger claim that in a certain sense, culture is the privileged medium of *all* political conflict. It rests on the idea that 'material' power

relations of class, gender, race, and so on are symbolized and contested in cultural practices. Perhaps the strongest version of this claim is to be found in the idea of a *circuit of culture* (Du Gay et al. 1996). According to this understanding, cultural practices can be understood in terms of a series of moments (production, regulation, consumption, representation, identity), each of which is inextricably linked to the others while retaining a degree of relative autonomy from them. At one level, this is a useful heuristic for a nonreductionist methodology, enabling one of these moments to be selected as an entry point for detailed research while keeping in mind the importance of the other practices. There is a stronger claim at work, however, insofar as what ties together each of these moments is the practice of meaning-making that runs through each of them. Meaning is both methodologically and conceptually privileged as being of the essence of cultural practice in this model. In the last instance, this idea that power relations are reproduced and resisted at the level of culture depends on a totalizing expressive conception of the relationships between meaning and the social formation, without which it would not be possible to suppose that the mundane practices of everyday life were saturated in political significance (Garnham 1997). One unfortunate result of this political saturation of culture is that the *ordinariness* of everyday life gets extremely short shrift.

This set of understandings of the relationships between culture and power underwrites an entire paradigm of engaged pedagogy. If power is understood to be reproduced through contingent acts of reproducing stable relations of meaning which naturalize the contingencies of power relations, then it is a short step to present the practice of revealing the constructedness of meanings (and by analogy of identities, interests, and subjectivities) as being an inherently political act. In the critical pedagogy paradigm (Heyman 2001), the classroom itself is reconfigured as a site where students are empowered to read critically. Any act of reading against the grain of received meanings (sometimes erroneously referred to as ‘deconstruction’) can thus be presented as either a political act in itself or as an essential preparation for it. This is a highly rationalistic, implicitly gendered conception of cultural politics, in which political resistance is presented as a matter of sloughing off the ideological blinkers of entertainment and distraction in favor of a hermeneutics of denaturalization and demystification. And furthermore, by reducing political intervention in cultural practices to the teaching and learning of appropriately critical acts of reading, a whole set of mundane power relations which shape classroom dynamics are finessed. Far from breaking with traditional methods of cultural pedagogy, critical pedagogy elevates their methods of distinction and disposition to a privileged status as political acts of resistance, while at the same time dodging all the difficult questions they raise about authority and responsibility (see Buckingham 1996, 1998).

Critical pedagogy rests on a third strategy for dealing with the cultural turn’s self-induced crisis of epistemological authority. If one way of bolstering truth-claims is the appeal to extradisciplinary expertise, and another the “As X said” cut-and-paste approach, then a third is to align one’s own academic analysis with the essential political goodness and moral rightness of the idealized struggles of ordinary people by deploying a rhetoric of ‘resistance’ (Brown 1996). This strategy depends upon an unproblematic politics of voice, in which analytical issues of plausible interpretation and explanation are brushed over by presenting surrogate critical

readings of everyday practices that are couched in an all engulfing vocabulary of struggle, conflict, and transgression. In the face of scholar-activist representations of heroic everyday resistance, any purely academic questioning on methodological or conceptual grounds appears as a shocking act of moral and political betrayal.

I suspect that en-cultured geographers have been too content with displaying both the easy attitudes of critical disdain for other traditions and overt sympathy for various progressive causes, rather than working out just what culture is and how it does (and does not) connect up to power. The vogueishly vague, expansive nondefinition of culture in geography has tended to elevate the moment of coding or meaning-making and identity over other aspects of cultural practice, such as the organizational, the institutional, the role of the state, or the central role of intermediaries (like us) in shaping cultural practices (Garnham 1995). Critical pedagogy does recognize this positioning of academics, but unfortunately reduces this to simply teaching the right attitudes to amazingly receptive students. But there is more to culture than meaning, and there are other cultural effects one could trace as well as those of signification and identity formation (Barnett 2001). We therefore require concepts and methods of analysis that are neither narrowly interpretative in their focus nor exclusively cultural in their frame of reference.

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