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Elite Theory versus Marxism: The Twentieth Century's Verdict [2000]

*John Higley & Jan Pakulski**

Abstract: »*Elitetheorie versus Marxismus. Lehren des 20. Jahrhunderts*«. Noting that Marxist and elite paradigms birthed competing theories on social and political change and that the differential development of these theories depends less on evidence than on ideological leanings, the epilogue to a collection of essays on postsocialist elites compares these paradigms in terms of their polarity in the 20th century. Although fading by the end of the 19th century, Marxism saw renewed vitality as it was embraced as a theoretical and ideological tool of radical and reformist leaders of the European Left. Elite theory's decline is attributed less to a lack of its plausibility than to a lack of ties to organized political forces. However, Marxism's emergence as a major global intellectual and political movement had a concomitant destructive impact on its explanatory power. By the end of the 20th century, Marxist theory comprised many dissipating streams. The decline of elite theory is delineated, noting that its tenets remained intact despite its unpopularity among activists and intellectuals. The negative effect of fascism – i.e., the dubious notion that elite theory leads to fascism – is noted, along with the idea that a combination of socioeconomic and sociocultural factors further eclipsed elite theory's development and popularity. Latter-20th-century elite theory lacked urgency in discussions on Western democracies and non-Western developing countries. However, three trends led to the reinvigoration of elite theory: economic advances of Japan and the Asian tigers, state socialism in Eastern Europe, and the elite-driven Soviet collapse. Thus, political developments driving the revival of elite theory include the centrality of elite choices and actions guiding these changes; and the theoretical developments include the exhaustion of Marxist theory's credibility and the reformulation of elite-centered democratic theory. Five suppositions underlying the analyses of contributions are delineated.

Keywords: elites, Marxist analysis, political theories, paradigms, theoretical problems, twentieth century, class analysis.

The Marxist and elite paradigms have always pointed toward starkly different – one may say mutually incompatible and fundamentally opposed – theories of political and social change. This polarity reflects the paradigms' divergent philosophical roots, sociohistorical origins, and political functions. Marxism had strong Hegelian roots and it was deeply embedded in the radical tradition

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of Utopian socialism; the elite paradigm was rooted in the neo-Kantian fact-value distinction and it was firmly anchored in the positivist tradition. The Marxist paradigm was shaped by the new political order that gestated in the Vienna Peace of 1815 and then froze; the elite paradigm was the product of that order's eventual collapse in the revolutionary upheavals sparked by socialist, communist, and fascist movements during the years surrounding World War I. Most important, Marxism claimed to be both the theoretical tool for unlocking history's secrets and the ideological and political tool of a rising social force, the industrial proletariat; the elite paradigm had more modest explanatory aims and a much more somber tone, and it sought to ride no political horse. Its formulators – Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Michels, and Max Weber – pursued a rigorous science of politics, and they dismissed and ridiculed the Marxist claim of revealing, not to mention shaping, history's logic.

In the Marxist paradigm, class membership influences all aspects of social and political life. Class divisions articulate themselves in social disparities and in conflicting norms, solidarities, identities, and political allegiances. Arising from fundamental economic relationships, classes are the principal actors on history's stage, with all major social and political changes propelled by their struggles. This explanatory focus is supplemented by an eschatology that sees class conflicts as moving history toward a classless end when all people will enjoy a free, equal, and prosperous condition. In the elite paradigm, by contrast, tiny but powerful minorities are made up of autonomous social and political actors who are interested primarily in maintaining and enhancing their power, so that their power struggles are not reducible to classes or other collectivities. By holding that it is elite choices and power competitions, rather than economics and class-like collectivities, that shape political and to some extent wider social orders, format political and many social divisions; and enflame or contain major conflicts, the elite paradigm reverses Marxism's causal arrow. As for eschatology, the Marxist vision of a classless society is replaced by a sobering projection of continuous – one is tempted to say “eternal” – elite circulations and struggles.

These paradigmatic polarities have pervaded the assumptive and normative underpinnings of Marxist and elite theories of political and social change. Regarding politics as the outgrowth of economics, Marxist theory has depicted industrialization as diffusing power in a propertied ruling class and as heralding that class's showdown with an ever larger and more self-conscious proletarian class. Elite theory, by contrast, stresses the autonomy of politics and the vital link between political power and bureaucratic organization, rather than property. It denies that unorganized masses have the capacity to form a solidary class that could undertake politically and socially transforming actions. According to elite theory, all that can realistically be hoped for in an age of bureaucratic organization is effective rule by powerful, organizationally-based, self-interested, but nonetheless responsive and responsible elites.

During the twentieth century, the confrontation between the Marxist and elite theories was only partly weakened or blurred by a third paradigm and set of theories. This third paradigm consisted of the more participatory and citizen-oriented democratic precepts that derived principally from the liberal thought of Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill. But the democratic theories that emanated from these precepts have always had a more limited reach than the Marxist and elite theories. They have been concerned primarily with the foundations and workings of mainly Western (especially Anglo-American) political systems during the twentieth century. Attempts to apply democratic theories to other parts of the world and other historical periods have focused on many phenomena: economic growth and market economies, middle classes, political cultures, civil societies, religious beliefs, political institutions, state autonomy, and foreign pressures. However, these applications have been vitiated by disagreements about the causal importance and interrelations of such diverse phenomena. Moreover, claims that democratic theories have a global reach depend to an uncomfortable degree on assuming that the democratic politics of a score of Western countries, during some or all of the twentieth century, approximate the destination toward which the politics of all other countries are moving. Yet, the huge demographic, environmental, natural resource, and ethnonational barriers to such a worldwide democratizing trend, as well as the malfunctioning of Western democracies themselves, make this assumption dubious at best. Consequently, democratic theories have not achieved the explanatory force and scope of the Marxist and elite theories; they have served more as a normative vision than as an explanation of political and social change.

Two points need stressing. First, the Marxist and elite paradigms gave birth to competing theories about how social and political change occurs and what is, therefore, possible. Second, the differential development of the Marxist and elite theories has depended less on evidence for and against them than on their ideological attractiveness, that is, their capacity to give normative and programmatic backbone to organized political forces. Let us briefly examine the twentieth-century fortunes of Marxist and elite theories in light of these points.

Marxism's Hard Twentieth-Century Road

The plausibility of Marxist theory, with its strong emphasis on class formations and interests, was closely linked, as we have said, to conditions in nineteenth century Western Europe at a relatively early stage of industrialization: the spread of large factories in growing cities; the movement of impoverished peasants into urban ghettos and the disorders that resulted; the repressive Vienna Peace orchestrated by aristocratic and autocratic states that neither the budding socialist movements accompanying the industrial revolution nor the abortive "Springtime of the Peoples" in 1848 managed to undermine. The plausibility of elite theories was linked to conditions in early twentieth-century

Western Europe at a more advanced stage of industrialization: the rapid growth of strong interventionist states; the rise of corporate bureaucracies, both public and private; the proliferation of charismatically led political mobilizations, especially of communist and fascist varieties; the emergence of powerful and manipulative mass communications media.

Given the different conditions to which the Marxist and elite theories were linked, one would expect to observe a decline in the fortunes of Marxist theory during the twentieth-century age of étatism, national mobilizations, and totalizing wars. In fact, Marxism's attractiveness began to fade as the nineteenth century neared its end. In the years immediately before and after World War I, however, it was embraced and reformulated as a theoretical and ideological tool of radical and reformist leaders of the European left – Communists, socialists, and social democrats alike.

The elite theory adumbrated by Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Weber also enjoyed a brief period of popularity in those stormy early decades of the twentieth century. But the decisive factor shaping elite 's subsequent fortunes was less a decline in its plausibility than a lack of ties to organized political forces. Unlike Marxist theories, elite theory did not find a powerful "theory carrier" and it consequently went into a long eclipse. This happened, paradoxically enough, at a time when elite theory's plausibility was probably greater than that of the reformulated Marxist theory. The "carrying" political factor was, thus, decisive. Later, the defeat of fascism in World War II, in which the Soviet Union played a major part, gave a powerful boost to Marxist theory in continental Europe (though much less in the Anglo-American countries, whose liberal leaders and intellectuals claimed the primary credit for fascism's defeat), and it enabled the European left to gain the high moral ground, especially in the universities. In addition, after World War II, Marxism became the ruling political formula in the Soviet-controlled state socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe; and it became a fashionable blueprint for economic, social, and political development in emerging Third World countries.

Twentieth-century political developments thus turned Marxism into a major worldwide intellectual and political movement. But the same developments had a devastating impact on Marxist theory's explanatory power. Arraying the twentieth-century evidence for and against fifteen key hypotheses of Marxist theory, the American sociologist Richard F. Hamilton (1995) has found none of them confirmed, seven flatly disproved, and the other eight hypotheses receiving contingent, situation-specific support, but with their causal implications either problematic or rejected. Thus, the predicted showdown between a dominant bourgeois class and a de-skilled, impoverished but ever-growing proletariat did not eventuate, and proletarian revolution did not occur in any of the advanced capitalist countries where it was expected. In those countries, the petite bourgeoisie did not collapse into the proletariat but instead formed part of a growing and prosperous middle class, the dangerous lumpenproletariat

disappeared, and intellectuals, who were supposed to join and help lead the proletarian revolution, dispersed in all directions, not a few of them playing important roles in fascist movements and regimes aimed at arresting the spread of socialism. Concentration of private property, while great, stopped short of the predicted "monopoly" configuration. Likewise, the state's autonomy and scope remained much greater than would be characteristic of a state that functioned as an executive committee for managing the bourgeoisie's common affairs. Mid-century corporatist deals paved the way for the incorporation of working-class parties into governments and for egalitarian reforms. Although economic crises punctuated the century, they did not display the cumulating intensity expected by Marxist theories, nor did nationalism wither in the face of international capitalism; rather, nationalism remained a dominant force that strongly shaped even the proletariat's actions, most conspicuously during the century's two world wars.

At the twentieth century's end, Marxist theory consisted of several dissipating streams (Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Its more orthodox streams had degenerated into empirically confounded, vague, or highly dubious concepts and contentions. Its adjusted "critical" streams had fragmented and lost their distinctiveness. They appealed primarily to intellectuals who regarded capitalism's market mechanisms with special distaste, and who, in spite of everything, continued to believe that a truly egalitarian society is somehow possible. To a considerable extent, Marxist theory's adherents were confined to those who simply could not stomach an explanation of political change based on what was always the principal twentieth-century alternative: elite theory.

The Eclipse of Elite Theory

Political and social developments during the twentieth century left the tenets of elite theory comparatively unscathed, though they contributed to a precipitous decline in its popularity among political activists and intellectuals, and thus sent it into prolonged eclipse. During the 1920s, fascism's demagogic appeals to nationalist and racist sentiments, which were used to justify the crushing of socialist forces, displaced the rationalistic rebuttal of Marxist theory that Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Weber had offered. Seizures of power and its undisguised concentration in small cliques of fanatical leaders led to elite circulations in Italy, Germany, Austria, several countries of Eastern Europe, and, to a lesser extent, Spain, Japan, and some countries of Latin America. While it is doubtful that the early elite theorists accurately predicted the rise of fascist elites, there was nothing about this rise that was inconsistent with the theorists' emphasis on the inescapability of elite domination, the forms this can take, and the inexorable circulation of elites.

The ugliness of fascism and its threat to Western civilization sobered many persons who had blithely regarded the gradual progression of Western coun-

tries toward a vague socialist condition as unproblematic. To a limited degree, the rise of fascist elites rekindled interest in elite theory (for example, Mannheim, 1940; Burnham, 1943; Lasswell and Lerner, 1965). Overwhelmingly, however, the revulsion against fascism translated into a strong reaffirmation of democratic beliefs, so that the explanation for fascism was mainly sought in other directions: as lower-middle-class extremism reinforced by authoritarian tendencies among working classes (Lipset, 1960); as the product of an “authoritarian personality” syndrome (Fromm, 1941; Adorno et al., 1950); as the result of an antidemocratic stream in European philosophy (Arendt, 1951); or as the consequence of mass society (Kornhauser, 1959). Indeed, without convincing reasons being given, some came to view elite theory itself as leading to fascism (for example, Beetham, 1977).

In the euphoria that attended the fascist powers’ defeat in 1945 and during the two halcyon decades of sustained economic growth that began a few years later in the most advanced Western countries, elite theory went into deeper eclipse. Pareto, Mosca, and Michels fell into a disciplinary no-man’s-land between political science and sociology, being relegated by each field to the status of minor figures (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993). Weber’s legacy was reinterpreted in the sociological tradition as a corrective to, rather than a confrontation with, Marxist theory, and the elite-centered theses in his work remained underdeveloped, subsumed under the headings of “charisma” and “bureaucracy.” More important, influential parts of the academic and intellectual establishments – especially the liberal left in America and democratic socialists in Western Europe – condemned elite theory as inherently conservative, simplistic, and antidemocratic (see, for example, Bachrach, 1967; Beetham, 1977).

It was not that scholars and intellectuals were unaware of elites and their role in social and political change. Rather, a combination of socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions hindered the development and restricted the popularity of elite theory. It was Marxist theory’s diluted and diverse streams that provided the idioms for intellectuals who were critical of liberal democracy’s shortcomings. This was partly a matter of preemption because, as noted, Marxist theorizing emerged from the horrors of World War II wearing an anti-fascist mantle, and it had powerful carriers in the form of large Communist, socialist, and social democratic parties. The popularity of Marxist theory was also partly the result of terminological adjustments made to it by the New Left during the 1950s and 1960s. And, finally, its popularity was in part a consequence of elite theory’s perceived guilt-by-association with fascism.

On both sides of the Atlantic, moreover, the postwar period was marked by exceptionally promising conditions. Economic growth and the consolidation of welfare states enabled governing elites to avoid hard choices and to placate discontented groups with subventions and other seemingly cost-free redistributive measures (Field and Higley, 1980, 1986). A belief that the welfare state was perhaps the final solution to major social conflicts and problems became

widespread (see, for example, Tingsten, 1955; Myrdal, 1960; Briggs, 1961; Beer, 1965). Many commented on how domestic issues were being reduced to discussions between bureaucrats and experts, and how the function of political leaders was more and more that of shaping and selling to mass electorates the justifications for specific policies that bureaucrats and experts produced (for example, Meynaud, 1965; Thoenes, 1966). Steady economic growth and welfare state expansions increased social mobility from a variety of non-elite statuses to elite positions. Many newly arrived elite persons consequently tended to see themselves as identified with the social categories from which they hailed and in which they continued to have close personal ties.

All this made elites seem less socially and politically distinct, less threatening to and more empathetic with mass populations. As a result, the global and historical reach of elite theory was largely ignored, the elite concept was seldom employed in public and scholarly discourse in other than a pejorative way, and a view of elites (often dubbed “policymakers,” “decision makers,” or just “opinion leaders”) as a relatively prosaic aspect of the democratic landscape prevailed. Within social science circles, this view was reinforced by the ascendancy of survey and other quantitative research methods better suited to investigating mass attitudes and behaviors than to studying the dissembling political opinions, secretive behaviors, and situationally contingent actions of elites.

What passed for elite theory during the twentieth century’s third quarter was, therefore, a protracted discussion, which exhibited little urgency, about the roles of elites in Western democratic political systems. This discussion centered on the modifications of classical democratic theory made principally by Joseph Schumpeter (1941), Raymond Aron (1950), Giovanni Sartori (1965), and Robert Dahl (1971). The discussion is familiar and well reviewed elsewhere (Parry, 1969; Putnam, 1976; Sartori, 1987), so it is enough to say here that thinking about elites was sidetracked onto a set of essentially empirical questions about their existence, social composition, and policy attitudes at community and national levels in democracies. Were there elites at all? If so, as C. Wright Mills (1956), Robert Dahl (1960), Arnold Rose (1967), and many other (mainly American) scholars asked, were they of a “power” or a “plural” kind? To what extent was elite social composition unrepresentative of the wider citizenry? How did research methods used to study elites shape the answers to these questions? These were a-theoretical matters because they seldom linked elites to basic patterns of political change or continuity, they were explored in an historical and comparative void, and they were mainly concerned with measuring trivial correlates of elite status (Zuckerman, 1977).

Nor did elite theory fare any better when discussion turned to the politics of non-Western developing countries. Many political adventurers in those countries were strongly attracted to Marxist theory because they could use it to justify their revolutionary seizure and wielding of government power. Elite theory’s denial of the Marxist program and its emphasis on the inevitability of

elite domination were hardly useful to such adventurers. Although it was clear to Westerners who looked at them that all developing countries were dominated by elites, most of which were internally divided, thoroughly corrupt, prone to violent struggles, and, hence, incapable of operating democratic regimes, this tended to be seen as a temporary problem that Western example and aid would in time overcome. Even when, in the 1970s, the failure of most developing countries to move in democratic directions became so apparent as to require explanation, the strong tendency was to seek answers in Marxist notions of dependency and the workings of a capitalist world-system (for example, Wallerstein, 1974).

The End of Elite Theory Eclipse

Three major trends during the twentieth century's final two decades forced more serious consideration of elites. The first trend was the economic advances of Japan and the "Asian Tiger" countries. These advances occurred against the predictions of dependency theorists and, until the late 1990s, without the recurring economic depressions that Marxist theory prophesied for capitalist countries. The Asian successes involved tutelage and reforms from above carried out by strong state elites (Johnson, 1982; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985; Kataoka, 1998). The economic performances of Japan and the Tigers thus helped to revive interest in elites and their role in fostering economic development. The political liberalizations that were eventually initiated by elites in Korea and Taiwan, and the ways in which elites managed the two countries' transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes, heightened this interest (Higley, Huang, and Lin, 1998).

The second elite-centered trend unfolded among the state socialist countries of Eastern Europe. As the early elite theorists had anticipated, state socialist regimes testified strongly to the centrality of elites. Once such regimes were consolidated in Yugoslavia, Albania, Central and Eastern Europe, China, North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam, it became less easy to view the dominance of ruthless party elites, such as the Soviet Union had experienced under Stalin, as merely a transitional or aberrant condition. Rather, it was obvious that revolution and military conquest in these countries had led only to a circulation of elites, with the new state socialist elites being more thoroughly entrenched than those they displaced. The extreme longevity of elite tenures under state socialism, the repression of all competing elites, and the fiasco of Mao's ostensible effort to combat elite entrenchment through "cultural revolution" were strikingly consistent with elite theory.

This did not escape the attention of some scholars in the state socialist countries. But in seeking to use elite theory to illuminate power relations in their countries, these scholars confronted difficult political-ideological and censorship restrictions. They accordingly embraced elite theory by stealth, under the

label of “developed class analysis,” studies of “political-ideological leadership,” the “new class,” and, in one case, a survey of national “opinion leaders” in state socialist Yugoslavia (Barton, Denitch, and Kadushin, 1973). One of the authors of chapter 5 in this volume, Polish sociologist Włodzimierz Wesolowski (1977), drew a clear theoretical distinction between Marxian economic class divisions and elite-mass relations. He argued that the political elite in state socialist countries like Poland should be viewed as autonomous from the dominant class in its articulations, actions, and general social functions. Among Western students of the state socialist countries, elite-centered analyses formed the scholarly mainstream, even if they were conducted with little reference to classical elite theory. In this enterprise, typologies of elites more complex than those offered by the early elite theorists were constructed, the organization and dynamics of elite-mass relations were studied, and close attention was given to the political effects of elite successions in the state socialist countries (for example, Beck 1973; Welsh, 1979; Bunce, 1981; Lane, 1988; Brown, 1989).

One may view these scholarly developments as an ultimate historical irony. The triumph of Marxist-inspired politics in the state socialist countries contributed to the waning of Marxist theory by generating social and political configurations clearly at odds with its tenets and very much in line with the predictions of its most ardent critics, the original elite theorists. The Soviet Union’s demise between 1989 and 1991 further attested to the relevance of elite theory. It was driven by elite conflicts and elite-imposed reforms that, in turn, opened a window of opportunity for reformist elites in the Soviet satellite countries, backed in a few instances by sudden mass mobilizations (Higley and Pakulski, 1993, 1995; Tokes, 1996; Lane, 1996; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Hough, 1997; Kotz and Weir, 1997). As earlier and elsewhere during the twentieth century, the rise and fall of state socialism was in largest measure a story of elite struggles, circulations, and failures.

The elite-driven demise of the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes constituted an especially dramatic category in the “third wave” of transitions from authoritarian to putatively democratic regimes that coincided with the twentieth century’s final quarter (Huntington, 1991). This was the third major trend that helped end elite theory’s long eclipse. In the extensive literature studying the third wave transitions, the calculations and actions of elites figure on nearly every page. Summarizing more than two dozen such studies carried out under their direction, Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (1995:19) observed that “Time and again across our cases we find the values, goals, skills, and styles of political leaders and elites making a difference in the fate of democracy.” Samuel P. Huntington’s (1991) comprehensive analysis of thirty-five third wave countries highlighted the interplay among political elites in the courses and outcomes of democratic transitions. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan’s (1996) rigorous analyses of the democratic transition paths taken by thirteen Southern European, South American, and East European countries

between 1974 and 1991 showed the decisive importance of relatively unconstrained choices made by elites during those transitions.

In sum, a mixture of political and theoretical developments revived interest in elite theory during the twentieth century's last decades. The main political developments were the obvious centrality of elite choices and actions in guiding the spectacular economic and political changes in Asian societies, in fostering but also managing the collapse of state socialism, and in shaping many of the other regime transitions in democratization's third wave. Principal theoretical developments were the exhaustion of Marxist theory's credibility and the reformulation of democratic theory in a more elite-centered direction (for example, Sartori, 1987; Zolo, 1991).

Elite Theory in the New Century

The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by the birth of elite theory, and, after the circuitous route we have summarized, the century ended with a marked return to the discussion of elites. References to elites are today ubiquitous in political discourse. Journalists and commentators speak regularly about elites when dissecting events in Washington and Moscow, Belgrade and Beijing. Social scientists and historians regularly assign elites pivotal roles when analyzing political regimes, revolutions, social movements, democratic transitions and consolidations. Elites are at the core of the emphasis on "political" causation that is now so prevalent in macro political analysis, even though many scholars continue to use synonyms such as leaders, rulers, power groups, power networks, and state actors.

The discussion of elites is once again in vogue. As yet, however, elite theory has not been renewed. Scholars have not followed up on the attempts of Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and, in his own way, Weber to make elites the centerpiece in theories of political and social change. Consequently, the many who today focus on elites in their analyses do so in something like a theory void because there is no well-accepted body of definitions, interrelated concepts, and propositions guiding their focus. "The elitist paradigm," George Moyser and Margaret Wagstaffe have observed,

suffers from argument and confusion over key terms, a relative dearth of testable hypotheses, a failure clearly to separate normative from empirical theory and, not least, the lack of a firm data base in which the latter could be solidly grounded (Moyser and Wagstaffe, 1987: 1).

This book has tried to address some of these problems, but it is obvious that much remains to be done. The kinds of overall elite configurations that exist among contemporary societies, the means by which transformations from one configuration to another occur, the limits that mass publics place on elite actions, and the examination of what is, therefore, possible in the political world of the twenty-first century demand better theory and analysis. These are com-

plex and difficult issues. In concluding, we can only list some of the suppositions that underlie the theories and analyses presented in this book and that, we believe, must inform further thinking and research if elite theory is to be renewed. Stated in their baldest form, these suppositions are:

- The internal workings, commitments, and patterned actions of elites constitute the basic distinctions to be made among the political systems of all independent countries.
- The extent to which elites do or do not trust and cooperate with each other is logically and factually prior to constitutional and other institutional arrangements, to the existence of political stability or instability, and to any serious degree of democratic politics.
- The existence and centrality of elites make all Utopias impossible to achieve; major political and social changes stem mainly from basic transformations of elites.
- Elite transformations take place within, and are somewhat limited by, wide parameters that are set by the political dispositions and orientations of mass populations; to this extent, the relation between elites and mass publics is interdependent.
- At the end of the day, basic choices in politics pertain mainly to the desirability of some kinds of elite configurations over others, and to the wisdom, in any concrete situation, of trying to modify or transform an existing elite configuration.

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