

WE ARE NOT POOR! DOMINANT AND SUBALTERN DISCOURSES OF PASTORALIST DEVELOPMENT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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Abstract: This paper explores a moment in a policy meeting in Nairobi in 2009, at which pastoralist customary leaders criticised development agencies' framing of their situation as poverty stricken and in crisis. Analysing the communicative moment, providing context from field research and drawing on ethnography and philosophy, I explore what we can learn about the conduct of a long battle between dominant and subaltern discourses of pastoralist development. I conclude that this is just one incident in a long war between development's universalising discourse and those of people in the rest of the world who see things differently. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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1 INTRODUCTION

It is only on rare occasions that members of aid recipient communities are heard publicly disputing the goodness of aid and development. The administration of poverty and the apparatus of aid have generated discourses that rationalise state and non-governmental organisation (NGO) provision in terms that are hard to disagree with. Nonetheless, they have generated counter-discourses from scholars like Arturo Escobar, James Ferguson and Tania Murray Li; global anti-development and anti-capitalist movements; and the people targeted for development assistance (Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995; Li, 2007). These targeted people may have less money and state backing than those they counter, but they often have political and moral weight. They constitute, as Nancy Fraser puts it, a '*subaltern counter-public*,' generating 'counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations' (Fraser, 1992: 123).

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Counter-discourses in recipient communities often disagree with mainstream understandings of poverty and backwardness and criticise the piety, naïveté or arrogance of development officials and relief personnel. Given the diversity of people that make up these communities and the multitude of agencies that take part as brokers and translators, these counter-discourses pursue their own striated channels, only occasionally emerging as clear oppositional formations (Lewis and Mosse, 2006). The most common one that I have encountered in the tea houses and under the trees of the East African rangelands frames aid as a means by which donors pay government and NGO workers to carry out activities whose primary utility is to the state. This counter-discourse is equivalent to one of James C. Scott's 'hidden transcripts', a 'discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond direct observation by power holders' (Scott, 1990: 4). When community representatives do complain about aid, they may be seen as interested in their own political ends and lacking moral concern—they are not playing according to the rules (Shankland, 2010).

At public meetings, members of recipient communities tend not to disagree with a framing of their position as undeveloped, poor, ungoverned and uneducated. The complex patronage that links aid money to layers of officials, contractors, politicians and local organisations creates a field that absorbs much if not all of the contestation that might otherwise arise in these meetings. Recipients may 'adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful', and 'the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery' (Scott, 1990: xii). For a beneficiary to suggest to a benefactor that aid, or indeed the title 'beneficiary', is problematic can seem both ungrateful and unwise. Instead, she or he will find ways to reconfigure implementation (Mosse and Lewis, 2006; Rossi, 2006). Some deploy the language of the 'objectifications of foreigners' in strategic ways, for example, defining themselves as 'oppressed people' or 'environmental custodians', to build alliances and win supporters (Bending and Rosendo, 2006). Most take the development project and implement it in ways that reproduce and strengthen the existing order, rather than make the social changes envisaged by donors (Corbridge *et al.*, 2005; Doolittle, 2006: 70).

The people who do the face-to-face work in participatory and consultative aid meetings are heterogeneous—poor people, local leaders of various stripes and representatives of community organisations interact with one another and with governmental and international players in a theatre of political participation. They deploy their different powers in a struggle at once material and symbolic (Scott, 1990: 188). Their material interests involve employment, food, cash, contracts, positions, services and land; their symbolic interests concern the way they are understood and treated. This theatre is situated within a field of governmentality in which authorities assume the right to direct conduct and define what is rational (Lemke, 2001; Li, 2007). They generate 'a politically functional morality' that provides a rationale for intervention, based on a particular deployment of information and moral argument (Marriage, 2006). The interaction is suffused with inequalities and a conspicuous failure to confront 'the conditions that position some social groups to accumulate while others are impoverished' (Li, 2007: 276). It involves an elaborate ritual of terminology that on the surface is respectful of poor people, while casting them and their representatives as incorrigible and undesirable. Duffield describes how the targets of development are framed in northern discourses as barbarous and corrupt. Aid should be just sufficient to create acquiescent 'self reliance' and keep the recipient at a distance (Duffield, 2005). Levels and modes of disparagement vary, yet they are always somehow present as a condition of being a subject of aid. The script closes down debate and leaves the positioning of the poorest just where it always was (Scott, 1985: 308).

In this article, I offer a view on an encounter between beneficiary representatives, brokers and benefactors in the Horn of Africa. It was one of 'those rare moments of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power' (Scott, 1990: xiii); something I had witnessed only once before in a 25-year career as a development agent in the region. The dispute revealed the deep fissures that divide benefactors, brokers and beneficiaries, which, although obscured by pragmatic agreements between them, nonetheless continue to grate with those who have made the greater part of the compromise.

I begin by describing the provocation, giving an account of a meeting in Nairobi in which I introduce the people and the place and sketch what happened and what followed. In the next section of the paper, to shed light on my own standpoint and those of community elders and members of local organisations, I give some contextual background drawn from field research in Ethiopia and Kenya. I then propose a reading of the phenomenon as a battle waged for political and moral legitimacy and leadership. I conclude with a suggestion drawn from Bruno Latour that in a long ontological war, it pays to find ways of making peace.

2 PROVOCATION

In 2009, I was asked to co-facilitate a meeting organised by members of the United States Agency for International Development's Regional Livestock and Pastoralism Project. The meeting of the 'Horn of Africa Pastoral Network' concerned the future of pastoralists in the region, some 20 million people living in the arid territories of Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somaliland and Somalia. Fifty officials from donor agencies, international and local non-governmental agencies, consultants and community leaders were invited to agree on a common analysis and long-term strategy and prepare a statement for a policy meeting of the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). My colleagues and I, working on a UK government-funded governance project with pastoralists in Ethiopia and Kenya, had contacts with a number of elders from different areas and pressed the organisers to invite some to the event. These particular elders are members of customary institutions, people, usually older men, who fulfil judicial and spiritual roles. Their base is in the rangelands rather than in towns, marking them as leaders of the tradition, distinct from those urban-based individuals who lead local organisations or take up political or administrative roles with the state. In the ceaseless round of meetings that make up pastoralist governance, the elders' task is to convene and use their years of training in listening to 'cut' to the essence of the debate and to offer possible consensus positions (Legesse, 2000: 117–119; Bassi, 2005). I knew their opinions of the situation in pastoralist areas—and its demands—would be different from those of the development and relief agency representatives and believed I was justified in bringing about an encounter. A growing number of traditional representatives in the region were engaging with government at this point and also had begun to be more visible in discussions with donors, NGOs and the United Nations (UN) (Brocklesby *et al.*, 2010; Scott-Villiers *et al.*, 2011).

The meeting organisers did not want to allow too much space for participation by these elders—they claimed they would not have the required level of language and might take political positions. They suggested that local relief and development organisations would afford sufficient representation; after all, their representatives were from pastoralist backgrounds. I argued that an agreement on situation and strategy could not be achieved

without pastoralists whose responsibilities within their communities included situation analysis and strategy. We agreed on seven people.

It was a conference hall in a Nairobi hotel: scattered tables each hosting five or six people, a high table at the front, and an array of brochures and research papers at the back. The event began with an appeal by my co-chair for a 'pooling of ideas' and a 'commonness of purpose.' We opened the floor for discussion of the pastoralist situation. In one relief coordinator's view, it was 'desperate' and becoming worse. Others added similar perspectives: even following decades of aid, increasing drought, over-population, violence, crime, vulnerability to disease, broken infrastructure, hopeless services and destitution added up to a crisis. UN and donor officials who lead disaster offices spoke, followed by NGO representatives who work on development and relief projects and consultants who advise and evaluate. They sketched a grim picture of desiccated grazing lands and profligate birth rates, dissolute leaders, hidebound tradition and heroic attempts to assist.

Then, a young consultant stood and, picking up a marker pen, drew a large triangle on a flip chart. 'Here', he said, pointing at the pinnacle at the top of the page, 'are the political elites'. Then, he drew two horizontal lines across the triangle, creating a middle-layer and a bottom-layer. 'Here', he said, pointing to the middle, 'are the development workers and government workers. And here at the base is the mass of the poor. We development workers are trying to help, but we are constrained by the elites above us in the hierarchy'. He was referring to Kenya's establishment, its corrupt executive and expensive politicians. He turned over the page and sketched another diagram, this time a curving long s-shaped line like a ladle. 'Here', he said pointing at the top of the ladle, 'are the few pastoralists who have many animals and are doing well. Here', pointing to the precipitous slope, 'is what happens during each drought—people fall to the bottom. And here, in the trough, are the mass who have lost everything and can never get back up that slope again'. He had sketched the normative frame.

Four old men in traditional clothes sat listening with three younger ones murmuring a translation. One of the elders rose to his feet. 'Who built this house?' he asked, pointing to the triangle of elites, bureaucrats and poor. 'We are not poor!' He went on to say that some people did indeed come to towns and settle there to obtain access to food relief, and they became separated from the traditional welfare system that still protected the majority. He talked about the wealth of the rangelands, the cattle and camels, sheep and goats. He gave the example of one district, statistically the poorest in Kenya, whose camel population is in the millions. 'Camels are not counted in the statistics', he said. 'You say the north of Kenya has a food crisis. But we have the best grazing in a long time and milk is plentiful. Neither are we ignorant', he went on. 'This old man here is responsible for the decisions about where to take the camels of an entire clan for water and grazing. Any mistake and the clan loses everything'. He explained that sharing between richer and poorer pastoralists is central to their self-understanding as a society.

His message, as I interpreted it, was that people in his locality do not see themselves as part of a mass of incapables living underneath a roof of helpful bureaucrats and squabbling national elites. They see themselves as a society at the centre of an intricate system of environmental, religious, economic, legal, political and cultural relationships that they manage in various ways.

A brief silence followed. Then, different relief and development players rose to their feet. 'How can you say your community is rich? You may be personally rich, but you ignore the poor!' 'How can you say that food aid is not needed? We have seen the poor people and measured the levels of malnourishment and drought!' 'Your communities are

poor!’ The room was in an uproar. My co-facilitator called for order. A woman from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs muttered and passed notes—‘they are elites’, she whispered. ‘If they go on I will leave’. She did. After a break, the house settled down to an attempt to prise apart the viewpoints. Different perspectives filtered on to the tables, but the conversation was flat. The discussion moved on to matters of animal health and trade.

Members of local community organisations, their laptops open on the tables where they sat next to donor representatives and Nairobi consultants, their holdalls emblazoned with the logos of indigenous conferences, had joined the chorus of disgust. The next day, as the meeting turned its attention to making recommendations for policy, I noted how their physical and verbal positions shifted. A number of men and women moved towards the back of the room to seats closer to the traditional leaders. They began to echo the words ‘we are not poor’.

The third day, some of the delegates took part in the Regional Livestock and Pastoralism Forum of the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa, contributing to a policy document. One pastoralist leader was allowed to attend among the many from the government, donors and NGOs. His intervention, labeled in the report—‘Pastoralist Voices’—noted that pastoralism requires disaggregation of statistics, adequate research, policies for cross border mobility and reform of the way pastoralists are treated in governance. The meeting tackled matters of livestock mobility and trade (COMESA, 2009a). Later that year, the preamble to the draft policy began with the discourse of backwardness: ‘In the COMESA region pastoralist communities are among the most food insecure and vulnerable groups, who are repeatedly affected by natural and man-made disasters...’ (COMESA, 2009b).

3 PEOPLE AND CONTEXT

I am a British woman who has worked with relief and development agencies in the Horn of Africa for three decades. My perspective is informed by Gadamer’s philosophy of provocation, Mouffe’s ideas of ‘agonistic pluralism’ and what Olivier de Sardan calls ‘ideological populism’—always on the lookout for a way of putting things right between development players (Gadamer, 1990; Mouffe, 2000: 101–103; Olivier de Sardan, 2005: 9). In describing different positions, and despite my positioning as someone who is inclined to take seriously the elders’ claims, I am not making a judgement as to whose argument has greater validity here. When I asked the meeting to put forward opinions, I knew that it would produce contrary claims. It was a manoeuvre to subject the crisis narrative to debate and bridge the communicative gulf. However, prejudice becomes open to amendment only when there is readiness to believe that what is said to counter it could be true, useful and sensible (Warnke, 2003: 111–112). That readiness is affected by our apprehension of the source—is it trustworthy, believable, legitimate and respectable? In this case, the elders had none of these virtues as interlocutors.

Who and what are the ‘we’ who are ‘not poor’? My research with pastoralist communities in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia suggests that the ‘we’ invoked by customary leaders from the rangelands is a whole society. The ‘we’ embraces an idea of lineages, genders and age sets, and a multiplicity of connected livelihoods, as well as formal customary institutions of justice, religion and welfare (Bassi, 2005). It has centres and peripheries and plenty of issues of difference: ethnicity, gender, age and wealth. There are those who identify more

with the tradition than others and whose economic and social trajectories have taken them closer to or further from the idealised pastoralist lifestyle (Dahl, 1996).

In 2009, I worked on a study of voice and well-being in communities across southern and eastern Ethiopia. The *Raising Voice, Securing a Livelihood*¹ study found that well-being in pastoralist society is achieved by being a competent and active member of it, and competence means to do well for ones family and clan including providing welfare to whoever becomes poor to bring them back into competence (Brocklesby *et al.*, 2010). Individual competence encompasses productiveness and being able to speak and listen well in society; to take part in the weaving of a web of information exchange and connection between everyone, everywhere, which underpins the competence of the whole.

Women and men of different age and social position explained that the development apparatus penetrating their communities, although bringing useful things, was undermining welfare institutions and reconfiguring social connections. Accepting aid, they said, has meant accepting and then enacting a label of backwardness and a status of second-class citizenship. Most, but not all, still trust their customary leaders, but as government offices, churches, mosques and charities extend new administrative posts across the drylands, they spoke of new authorities, languages, curricula and politics, accompanied by a continuous drizzle of external assistance, much of it in the form of food aid. In response, poor people are moving to the edges of small settlements and becoming more visible to administrators and technicians. The welfare they receive from government and aid agencies separates them from the rest of society.

Development interventions have tended to promote a shift to a settled life, more administrative forms of organisation and more settlement-based economics over which ordinary pastoralists have little say. Pastoralists criticise the interventions for neglecting the other forms of competence they value—power, voice, connectivity and mobility (ibid: 68). External agencies in turn criticise pastoralists for their rejection of the poorest (Anderson and Broch-Due, 1999). Today, poverty is more entrenched, and welfare relationships are changing, a fact recognised in internal as well as external debates. In southern Ethiopia, Boku Tache found that support by the rich to the poorest is in decline, even as support from the rich to the less rich remains vibrant (Tache, 2008). With land privatisation by the state and investors, and latterly, by pastoralist urban elites as well, the basis for the egalitarian ‘we’ is under threat. The challenge of elitism is not without its grounding in truth.

4 FIGHT

Most of those present at the Nairobi event were certain that the evidence for crisis was sufficient. There may have been some disagreement as to detail but very little as to the fundamentals. They were upset when the crisis narrative was questioned. I frame it, like Scott (1985: 241), not just as an argument but as a *fight*: a battle, not between different life worlds but between differently positioned players in a struggle for legitimacy (Rossi, 2006).

The disagreement unleashed a play of power. The customary leaders arrived in the capital city from days of travel on foot and by bus, wearing their traditional clothes, and stepped into an invited space (Gaventa, 2006: 26), organised and funded by one of the wealthiest aid providers in the region. It was a space suffused with power: the ‘hidden

¹The study was led by Mary Ann Brocklesby and Mary Hopley, who were joined by Borbor Bulle, Nuria Gollo, Abdi Hussein, Boku Tache, Abdia Mahmoud, Murha Abkari, Daresalem Bereda, Mumina Konso, Guled Ismail, Ugas Mohamed Gura and I.

power' of pre-meeting conversations and long determined policy directions; the 'invisible power' of people's sense of where each stood in different hierarchies of knowledge and legitimacy; and the 'visible power' of organisational budgets, traditions, alliances, performances and forces (ibid: 29). The contending parties deployed their arsenals: global studies of pastoral decline, weather satellite maps and statistics, national policy documents, empirical research data and experience on ground.

The narratives made a moral claim. For the development actors, it was to separate and protect the vulnerable from the elites and promote the modern in the face of the archaic. For the elders, it was to sustain the fairness and wholeness of their welfare and production systems and the quality of their knowledge. The arguments faced one another on the terrain of moral responsibility and attempted to sustain supporters, win converts and demolish the other. The fight emerged as a war of attrition, conducted across gulfs of incomprehension and dismissal (Mosse, 2005: 236).

The elder's intervention provoked a slow but palpable change in the words and actions of some members of local community organisations at the meeting. It was as if they had been working out how to balance their relations with the two normative discourses. In their position, they could appreciate that the elders might speak in good faith and that what they said might be true. They also saw the value of the dominant discourse, its scientific and liberal arguments boosted by its attractive link to resources and status. Members of local organisations have their feet in multiple worlds: part of the governmental aid and development apparatus and part of political society and indigenous society, they make a living by working on social issues. Elders accuse some of bringing bad development, wasting money, fomenting conflict or financing political campaigns. About others elders are kinder, recognising their contribution. The theatres for these internal negotiations between old and young leaders involve a nexus of rural–urban, men–women and tradition–modern differentiations, linked to local and national politics and to the political economy of aid. This part of the fight marks one of the dynamic sites on this battlefield. In the months that followed the meeting, elders spent time, not at more aid meetings but moving between urban centres and rural villages, building legitimacy by talking to other elders, young people and people in local organisations and government about the issues facing their society.

4.1 Compelling Explanations and Agreeable Metaphors

It was a battle for leadership in a wide and long conflict over discourses of policy and practice. As Gasper and Apthorpe (1996: 6) put it, policy is 'a kind of gloss on events: typically a position that claims to be exemplary in some way is presented in language chosen mainly to attract and persuade one of this . . . its hallmark is nonrefutability'. Its prescriptions tend to be vague, allowing a range of people to feel included, attracted by a metaphor that 'legitimises and mobilises practical support' (Mosse, 2005: 230). In the development project, this mobilisation is carried out, according to Mosse and Lewis, 'through the work of . . . *tying in supporters and so sustaining interpretations*' (Mosse and Lewis, 2006: 13 *my italics*). In a battle for supporters, the group that expounds the most compelling explanation and agreeable metaphors will be pre-eminent. They will create nodes of popularity and clouds of justification.

The crisis argument is attractive to an industry of consultants, proposal writers, aid managers, suppliers, transporters, administrators, critics, policy analysts, politicians, journalists,

brokers, early warning experts, government workers and ordinary householders who each bend and amend policy into practice and expand the development space. The script has been resilient through the decades, becoming self-evident as it produces unending work for its adherents. The organisers of the meeting expected that the strength of the dominant discourse would be maintained by a constellation of players affirming its logic. It would be democratic and well informed.

However, the elder who claimed ‘we are not poor’ argued that crisis is not a label by which to judge a society in perpetuity and offered a counter-discourse of competence. A listener might infer that the society’s material and symbolic capability is substantial: its size and command of a potential political space could pose a threat. The reaction might be to attempt to split the constituency—‘you are elites, but the majority of your people are poor’. The representatives of local community organisations were torn between the two arguments. Those who are playing both sides have an important role: their hunger for influence often is sated by projects, contracts and political positions, and they may bend inexorably in that direction, but not always and not entirely.

4.2 Rejecting the Other

The pastoralist leader threw down a gauntlet. The reaction was to dismiss him as wrong, even corrupt. The degree of indignation that met his claim indicates a move to render it and him illegitimate and therefore outside the debate (Marriage, 2006). It denotes the seriousness of the provocation, reminding us of Tilly’s point that ‘political contention puts at risk, however slightly, the advantages of those who currently enjoy governmental power’ (Tilly, 2008: 6). In the feedback after the meeting, I noted a hardening of opinion, at least among one group of development and relief actors. They described the elders as deluded and self-interested. ‘The other’, having been made untrustworthy by the discourse of development, has been made inaudible. His resistance confirms his backwardness and helps reproduce his marginality (Ferguson, 1994: 12–13).

Members of the development and relief community often are active in trying to prevent the worlds of beneficiary and benefactor from mixing. Professionalism and progress require a disjuncture between the world of the ‘particularistic’, ‘tradition bound’, ‘non-modern’ and the world of ‘the progressive’, ‘universalistic’, and ‘modern’ (Shrestha, 2006: 212). Claims to know the other better than she or he knows her or himself ‘function to keep the other person’s claim at a distance’ (Gadamer, 1990: 360). ‘The other’ is an image that populates the discourse—always understood as an idea rather than talked to in person (Li, 2007: 48). The construction of the other is built as much from fear of the traditional chief, his feathers and rituals and his powers to mobilise large numbers (Shankland, 2010), as from superiority over his pre-modern ways. In policy talk, development targets are constituted as ‘mired in irrational practices and ascriptive identities’ (Shrestha, 2006: 212). People living on the margins, at odds with the state because they are not subject to all its controls, are depicted as all manner of bad things; fugitive, violent and uncivilised (Scott, 2010). Scott argues that pastoralist populations, like others who live on the peripheries of states, are acting strategically. Their acephalous fluidity poses a threat to the state, even as it offers symbolic reassurance to the ‘civilised’ centres. The state has long tried to settle, concentrate, tax, control and make use of such fugitive populations (ibid: 6).

The narrative that sustains much of the aid to pastoralists is promulgated using images of despair. With fellow aid workers and journalists visiting pastoralist areas, I have gone in search of the poorest people who live in shacks on the edges of settlements. We argued that their voices should be heard, and we used them unwittingly to speak the backwardness of their societies. Doing surveys and assessments, clutching a Foucaultian clipboard, I have been guided to old, weak and sad people, waiting in quiet isolation for promised improvements. These isolated poor had become like Agamben's *homo sacer*: alive, but without energy or indignation, sacrificed to our administrative arrangements (Agamben, 2002). The poverty of the poorest, the weakness of the weakest, the incomprehension of the most battered and the perfidy of their leaders legitimates interventions in these apparently second-rate societies. The public feels a pressing need to do something about it. Little surprise then, that the members of the Horn of Africa Pastoral Network felt convinced that the elder was wrong to say his people were not poor.

4.3 Peace Talks?

Latour would see this battle as being one incident in a long war between the 'West' (in possession of uncontroversial and universal principles of development) and others who do not construct their system of reason and government in the same way (Latour, 2002). Witness how the development players spoke in scientific terms of measurements and data and the relief players in terms of rights and inclusion in global, rather than local, structures of welfare. The invitation to the elders was one of condescension to a charming but outmoded tradition. There was no offer of respect for their ontology or of negotiation. Latour suggests that were the West to recognise that there is an ontological war going on, peace talks would be called for.

5 CONCLUSION

Questioning the grounds of the development discourse unleashes efforts to demean and discredit in a battle that is waged on uneven terrain across differences of wealth, power, geography and language. The development discourse ties in not just the elites but also a great range of people and groups who do better by agreeing with it. The bearers of the counter-discourse often say nothing to disagree with their adversaries in public, while waging war all the while in conversations with members of their society and in assertions of moral authority (Scott-Villiers, 2009). I am with Latour in thinking that this is a long and serious foundational fight.

We should not assume that pastoralist elders, or others like them, will submit. Their subaltern society has a capacity to absorb, critique and amend development while sustaining the battle for legitimacy. In the case we have looked at here, we find that the powers of officials are not as hegemonic as we may have imagined: elders turn out to be powerful in mobilising and moralising, and members of local organisations in manoeuvre and connection. The fight is a struggle for definition of what is real and important and how leadership should be constructed. When the elder stood up and criticised the metaphor of backwardness so foundational to the discourse of development, it was 'a practice of democracy' (Chatterjee, 2004: 69) and an effort to put development itself on the table for discussion. The question, 'who built this house?' could have been taken as an offer to negotiate. The rejection of this opportunity for peace talks demonstrates the contempt and

condescension of many in the development and relief sector, at least in the Horn of Africa, if not everywhere.

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