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# Ecologically Sustainable Rural Development and the Difficulty of Social Change.

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the importance of environmental perception in the context of alternative agrarian social relations. Because environmental perception is socially constructed, the article is concerned with how those with an alternative agenda for agrarian practice attempt change, and the likely difficulties faced due to the structural requirements and effects of the dominant paradigm of development. It explores the need for a clear model of change, both in its outcomes and its change strategies, and the difficulties that may be faced. The article draws on a case study of a rural landsharing collective in Australia to contextualize these broader issues, and considers some of the implications of the findings for instigating the broader concern of an ecologically sustainable agrarian practice based on permacultural design.

**KEYWORDS:** Permaculture, rural land sharers, sustainable agriculture, sustainable rural development.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen the emergence of social movements which attempt to alter the relationship between development and the environment. Particularly evident are those concerned with agrarian production, the most visible manifestation of this, in Australia, being the rural landsharing movement (see, for example, Munro-Clark, 1986; Sommerlad, Dawson and Altman, 1985).

Rural landsharers attempt to instigate alternative agrarian practices and social relations through some form of collective ownership of land and/or collective decision making processes. They attempt to provide a model of devolved agrarian social, economic and political formations which has as its basis an ecologically sustainable practice, frequently one of permacultural design.

Agrarian production in an ecologically sustainable form is implicitly related to a conceptualization of development as a social process, that is, as a particular relationship between the individual, society and nature. Both the environment and social relations are transformed by economic growth. Redclift (1988) argues that therefore, within social relations there are explicit notions regarding nature and its use, which I term 'environmental perception'. Environmental perception, or the social construction of environmental use, thus has implications for the use of nature and the form of its nexus with agrarian social relations.

It should be noted that in what follows I am concerned with the social organization of ecologically sustainable agrarian practice and also the difficulties social agents have in bringing about social change. In this sense, I am interested in the social construction of the relationship between the individual, society and nature.

#### THE DIMENSIONS OF THE PROBLEM: AGRARIAN PRACTICE WITHIN CAPITALIST SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS

I have argued elsewhere (Furze, 1987; Furze, in press) for an alternative agrarian practice to that found within what I call the dominant development paradigm (the results of the logic of capitalist industrialization in its global form). This paradigm has had a specific impact on agrarian practice, one which results in producers being faced with a structural contradiction between the private purpose of agriculture (accumulation of surplus by monopoly capital) and its public purpose (that is, human health and survival resulting from ecologically sustainable methods). Further, agrarian producers face an alteration to their class location (for example, proletarianization through the production contract as opposed to their previous petit-bourgeoisie class locations) as well as the incorporation into an unsustainable global agrarian practice (see also Lawrence, 1987; Lawrence, Vanclay and Furze (editors), in press; Fox, 1986).

Superficially then, one could expect rural producers to be involved in searching out and implementing alternative agrarian practices. However, producers have an environmental perception or a view of nature which is influenced by the above structural contradictions, and consequently their response tends to be based on economic rather than ecological considerations. These economic considerations themselves reflect the dynamics of the dominant development paradigm, incorporating such things as the rationality of the capitalist marketplace, the reification of nature as a factor of production and, to use Schumacher's (1983) phrase, the application of the principles of industry to agrarian production.

Whilst this is the case for agrarian practice which is institutionalized, the corollary is that social movements, as noninstitutional social agencies, have the potential to instigate alternative social, economic, political and environmental

agendas. I would argue, however, that these agencies require both a vision of an alternative practice and a means of achieving it.

### THE RELEVANCE OF UTOPIAN VISION

Humans have long been involved in the search for alternatives. Lewis Mumford (1962:1) has suggested that utopia can mean the ultimate in human hope or in human folly. As an ambiguous term it can suggest 'what ought to be' or what cannot be achieved – the striving to achieve alternative social and economic formations or the futility of trying to achieve the impossible.

There is a tension between what Max Weber (1963, 144) describes as “the actually existent and the ideal”, and it is this tension which accounts for the importance of utopian thought in the search for alternatives. As Weber (in Gerth and Mills 1958, 128) suggests, humankind “would not have attained the possible unless time and again [it] reached out for the impossible”. Mannheim (1952, 236) goes on to suggest: “with the relinquishment of utopias, [humankind] would lose [its] will to shape history and therewith [its] ability to understand it”.

Utopian thought is thus important. However, in the socially constructed rational world of the dominant development paradigm, it is frequently dismissed as irrelevant to social life. Consequently, those who seek alternatives within a utopian framework may be marginalized on the basis of the perceived lack of usefulness of their thought, the assumptions of their thought, and/or the lack of potential for achieving that which they seek. Nonetheless, it does provide an agenda for social action and a potential force for change.

### THE RESEARCH

This case study focuses on the results of research conducted on a rural landsharing collective in Victoria, Australia. The collective (which I call Quindalup) aimed to instigate alternative agrarian social relations and an alternative agrarian practice through the incorporation of the principles of permacultural design. A fuller discussion of the dynamics of the collective has been published elsewhere (Furze, 1989), and need not be reiterated here. The findings of the earlier research did however raise three important issues which are directly relevant to this discussion, namely:

- (i) the difficulties the collective faced in instigating an alternative agrarian practice
- (ii) the source of these difficulties
- (iii) the implications for achieving an ecologically sustainable agriculture

## THE UTOPIAN MODEL

Permaculture seeks to establish an ecologically sustainable agrarian practice. The term itself comes from the words permanent and agriculture, and has been coined to mean a “conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems” through the “harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way”. Further, “without permanent agriculture there is no possibility of a stable social order” (Mollison, 1988, ix). The foundation for permaculture is the integration of the individual, society and nature, based on a holistic model of agrarian production forms.

Underlying this is a recognition that cooperative species and associations of self supporting species make healthy communities. What Mollison (1988) terms ‘permanence’ seeks an altered environmental perception for the individual, an altered form of social relations within the community and altered relations with nature within the bioregion.

Communal permanence is an ethic which seeks to establish a specific relationship between the individual, society and nature based on the notion of sustainability and using the ethical basis of permaculture as a guideline for social relations. Whilst Mollison (1988, 3-6) quite specifically states that there is more than one way to achieve permanence, the ideal of communal permanence is integral to all possible paths, and through it all change paths seek a common goal.

In attempting to elaborate a model of communal permanence, Mollison believes it is possible to establish an ethical basis for permacultural communities from the local level to the nationstate, consisting of the following six principles:

- (i) emphasis of the duties and responsibilities of people to nature and people to people
- (ii) adoption of an ethic of ‘right livelihood’, which emphasises the use of labour and skills in ethical pursuits
- (iii) consumer societies (which are the basis for consumption in the permaculture nationstate) should be a mosaic of small, well managed and effective systems
- (iv) the meaning of life should be realised through action toward common ideals, in serving the whole
- (v) security should be found in the renunciation of ownership over people, money and real assets
- (vi) leisure time is time to express individual (as opposed to group or communal) capacities and should be a plentiful resource (Mollison, 1988)

Communal permanence is thus the antithesis of the relationship between the individual, society and nature found as a result of the dominant development paradigm.

## CHANGE STRATEGIES

An important aspect of any ethic which seeks to instigate alternative social and economic formations is the question of change. It is not simply enough to develop an alternative ethic, there must be an enunciation of pathways to achieve social change. In other words, there needs to be a statement concerning the linking of theory or model building with practice.

Mollison (1988:1) suggests that:

There is no longer time to waste nor any need to accumulate more evidence of disasters; the time for action is here. I deeply believe that people are the only critical resource needed by people. We ourselves, if we organise our talents, are sufficient to each other. What is more, we will survive together, or none of us will survive... A person of courage today is a person of peace. The courage we need is to refuse authority and to accept only personally responsible decisions.

Here, Mollison is locating a source of change – that of the individual. There is not, however, any recognition that individuals who attempt to implement alternative notions of development are going to encounter very specific structural obstacles which result from the antithetical nature of communal permanence *vis-à-vis* the dominant development paradigm (for example, institutionalised acceptance of the dominant development paradigm, the needs of monopoly capital, the class positions of rural producers). The assumption which Mollison builds into his model is that the individual has the capacity to bring about specific social change.

Further, he suggests that:

It has become evident that unity in people comes from a common adherence to a set of ethical principles, each of us perhaps going our own way, at our own pace, and within the limits of our own resources, yet all leading to the same goals, in our case that of a living, complex, sustainable earth. Those who agree on such ethics, philosophies and goals form a global nation (Mollison, 1988, 3).

Here Mollison implicitly recognizes the rise of social collectives with a common goal, in this case permacultural agriculture. What binds these individuals is therefore permaculture. There is little recognition of the disparate social backgrounds from which these people may come, and little recognition of the potential for different environmental perceptions arising from different interpretations of the notion of alternative rural development. The rather large assumption is that the ideal of permaculture is enough to make any potential differences

irrelevant.

For Mollison, the paths to achieving such a society are varied, and it is here that he attempts to account for individual differences. Because there is no well defined model (and little discussion) of what change strategies are to be employed, the question is left flexible. Mollison and Holmgren (1989, 95) advise that “we are shaping a tool and an idea, how the application of either of these is made is for each of us to decide, and to refine.” The commonality of all paths though, is still found in the goal of communal permanence.

#### ATTEMPTING THE IDEAL AND OBSTACLES TO CHANGE: THE CASE STUDY

Quindalup had a series of eight principles, drawn from permaculture, which were to act as a guideline for the establishment of alternative agrarian social relations:

- (i) development of a cooperative spirit of living
- (ii) self sufficiency in food production
- (iii) conservation of the native flora and fauna
- (iv) use of natural energy sources
- (v) rationalization of transport needs
- (vi) living in the environment without polluting it
- (vii) water conservation and drainage
- (viii) self reliance in finance

These concerns formed, as one member put it, the ‘blueprint for survival’ under which the collective was to achieve its goals. The philosophies expressed through this formed an important part of the social world of the cooperative and were expected to influence the way members acted in everyday collective life.

It is important to consider what Munro-Clark (1986, 100) terms a ‘community’s ideology’ which she defines as the ‘shared myths’ or collective self-image, in which members’ practices and aspirations as a group are represented, reinterpreted and justified. The collective self image of Quindalup was created by encompassing, at least superficially, the ideals of the permaculture model. Ostensibly, this was then to govern the actions of individuals as they interpreted and justified their actions accordingly.

Whilst all members shared the ideals of permacultural design and those of the broader social movement superficially, there were significant differences when it came to finding a way of putting the ideas into practice. This was further complicated by a desire amongst the members of the collective to bring about a

form of social change in the wider community. In other words, they were not only concerned with implementing a sustainable model of agriculture within the collective, they wanted to provide a model for alternative agrarian social and economic relations which could also influence the wider community.

### *The Internal Search for Unity in Vision and Social Action*

There was a definite desire by the members of Quindalup to live by the guidelines of the long-term plan. During interviews, members repeatedly mentioned the ideals expressed in the plan when discussing events, conflict and social life. It appeared to be not only a 'blueprint for survival' but also the expected basis for social relations. The members expected all individual differences to be somehow put aside for the common good. As one member put it,

We thought we could change society ... not only us of course, but as a combined force. We really did. But all we got was conflict ... we changed nothing ... But we tried.

Cock (1985) elaborates some of the difficulties of unifying vision and social action. Referring to the 'relentless drive towards rural suburbia' he lists difficulties in creating a real sense of community, in subordinating the individual to the group, and in creating organizational structures. As a consequence:

Less is owned and done collectively, more privately ... Little effort (of socialising new members) means that rather than contradictions and paradoxes of community life being worked with, increasing pressures exist to legitimise and then institutionalise the destruction of collective purpose and organisation (Cock, 1985:13-14).

This process can be seen operating within Quindalup, combined with different motivations for joining and a resultant difference in the level of commitment to the collective. Social life became polarised with members forming two distinct groups, one I have called the communitarian group, the other the utilitarian group.

### *The Communitarian Group*

Members of this group tended to join the collective to escape the social and economic relations of mainstream society. For them, unity of philosophy and action was to be found in the rejection of the dominant society together with a mode of living which represents a holistic worldview based on permacultural ideals. For example, one couple came to the collective from a kibbutz and looked on it as an opportunity to further their collective experience; another couple joined to escape the forms of the social relations within the dominant society and instigate alternative forms based on feminism and communism.



*The Utilitarian Group*

Other collective members joined for what could be described ultimately as an attempt to increase their participation within the wider society. This however, did not mean that they disregarded the long term plan, but what appeared to occur was a different interpretation of it. Their primary motivation was to further themselves in some way within the dominant society by endorsing, through action, significant aspects of its ideology. For some, this was to be achieved through consumption, (buying cheap land, for example) whilst for others it was a quality of life issue (a holiday house in the country, for example).

The result of the formation of these two groups was the development of an arena of conflict, founded within the gap between vision and social action. This was particularly obvious when looking at the difficulties the collective faced when it came to instigate alternative landuse practices and their attempt to instigate broader structural change by holding themselves to be models for the wider community.

*Farming and the Form of Agriculture*

The differences between the two groups emerged sharply when it came to put the permaculture model into practice. As one member wrote in Quindalup's newsletter:

I never thought I would have to write anything on this as this was the one thing I supposed we had in common.

The problem arose when a number of members wanted to farm the land in what was seen as a utilitarian manner which would impact on the environment in a way that implied rejection of some of the basic principles of permacultural landuse. As one member suggested:

Man is a superior creature – this premise is supported by the fact that man is responsible for the wellbeing of animals e.g. cows and chooks (sic). As we aim to self-suffice on this land without the direct aid of the capo (sic) society we have, how else can we do it without fitting into the ecological pattern ... some of us are upset at the turning of a rock, the clearing of branches, the cutting down of trees, the utilisation of grassed areas for livestock, the digging-up of the earth, and the shooting of rabbits. All those things and many more are part of our survival and therefore are totally justifiable even if animal populations are temporarily disturbed.

For this member of the utilitarian group, the 'ecological pattern' quite obviously was centred on humans.

Another of the same group wrote:

The people of the co-op who call themselves 'conservationists' frighten me with their dishonesty. They are conceited and arrogant in assuming that conservation of this

bush environment necessarily involves us in knowing exactly what animal is doing what, where and when.

This represents the utilitarian view quite forcefully. For these members the issue is land use, and land is viewed in the context of an economic resource, though this is tempered with some of the ideals of the broader movement (for example, recognizing the exploitative nature of the dominant economic and social system, though only in terms of the relationship between the individual and society).

On the other hand, members of the communitarian group wanted to live 'at one with nature' (as one member put it). For them, if you were at one with nature the earth-mother would provide. Writing on the use of livestock, one suggested:

This one (sic) of the reasons why I, living on this property now for six months, do not have a cow or chooks etc. Mainly because I cannot care for them properly and they would damage what others hope to have also. I have gone on about car tracks and the breaking up of the mosses on rock faces etc. I realise that conservation and our part, self sufficiency, are not compatible, but we must try to do the first and let the second come in time.

Once again the differing interpretations of how the goals were to be achieved emerged. On the one hand was an anthropocentric view which was however tempered by some of the ideals of the broader social movement, and on the other was the view which saw nature providing the needs of the group, with the proviso that human intervention occurred on the basis of care for nature.

The importance of this relates to the operation of conflicting environmental perceptions within the members of the two groups and the resultant schism between utopian vision and individual action. Threads of the dominant worldview were found in individual interpretations of the vision of Quindalup. The implications of this relate to the ways individuals act in the context of the interpretation of reality. This is explored by Cock (1985) and also Berger (1981) who looks at the notion of 'false consciousness' amongst rural communards. This is where:

actors are so wrapped up in the rhetoric or symbolic content of their ideas that they overlook the fact that those ideas are grounded in the aims and premises of the community that validates them, or when they ignore or are selectively inattentive to the consequences those ideas help to bring on (Berger, 1981, 179).

What both Cock and Berger are suggesting is that the operation of a form of false consciousness within rural landsharers affects the dynamics of collective operation, dynamics which are set up by (and are influenced by) both social relations within the collective and specific aspects of the outside society.

*Relations with the Wider Community*

The final point I would like to make regarding the case study is the role the relations between the collective and the outside community played in social life. Landsharers are both critics and members of the wider community, and the way these two often conflicting roles are balanced is important to the whole question of altering dominant agrarian social relations.

Members of Quindalup sought their ideal community outside the boundaries of the collective and expected their *gemeinschaft* notions to be shared by their more 'mainstream' neighbours. Whilst the level of interaction with the wider community was not extensive, it was considered important.

Some debate occurred as to the form of education to be given the children and it was finally agreed to send them to the local primary school. It was expected that this would assist in wider community acceptance both by ensuring the viability of the school and through the resultant contact with the members of the wider community. However, this support was not forthcoming. Members of both the utilitarian and communitarian groups told of the difficulties their children faced going to the local school. Not only were the adult members of Quindalup labelled as deviant, but this filtered to their children. More than one member interviewed would have preferred to have continued with the idea of having a school within Quindalup, where collective members could have more control over both the curriculum and teaching methodology.

The case of paid work off the collective was also relevant. Individual members worked either full time or part time to support their collective enterprise. Whilst the lack of community support was not a real difficulty for those who had marketable qualifications (such as teachers), it did prove a difficulty for those who did not. Whilst some seasonal work was available to these members, it had neither the consistency nor the economic gain to allow these members to participate fully in the collective, given that the collective at this stage was still very dependent on the outside world, as the principles of permacultural design had not fully taken hold.

Additionally, those who entered Quindalup to gain a greater sense of community also perceived the local region to be part of their search. They were attracted by the *gemeinschaft* qualities of both the collective and populist visions of rurality. However, the local community did not accept the ideals of either the collective or its members. Even though one of the members was a local cricket coach and another a local football coach (both usually accepted readily in rural communities), the collective members were still seen as the 'hippies on the hill'. Interaction (as opposed to acceptance) was thus dictated by instrumental needs (dictated mainly by the wider community), things like football, cricket, a ready source of casual labour and fire fighting.

Perhaps the most telling conflict between the collective and the wider community related to the model of agrarian production used – that of permaculture.

The rural community perceived permacultural design to be a marginal agrarian practice and the collective's members were perceived, not as farmers, but, derisively, as 'hippies'. The local community did not accept the legitimacy of the permaculture model and when the so-called 'experiment' failed (with the disbanding of the collective) it served to reinforce the views of the farmers whose environmental perception was drawn from the dynamics of the dominant development paradigm.

#### DISCUSSION: THE QUESTION OF 'ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE'

For Quindalup, structural obstacles to the instigation of alternative agrarian practices could not be overcome. Firstly, it failed to embrace the permacultural model. This can be seen in the formation of the two groups, which ostensibly shared a similar self identity (that created by the long term plan) but differed significantly in its interpretation. As a result, the basis for communal permanence was stripped from Quindalup. Because the 'alternative' agrarian practice which members wanted to instigate did not recognise the reification of the dominant environmental perception within the utilitarian group, no movement toward communal permanence was observed.

Secondly, an effective change strategy was not developed. The permaculture model does not enunciate change strategies except to say that communal permanence should be the goal. For the members of Quindalup, the change strategy employed was to lead by example, to attempt to become an island of ecologically sound agrarian practice in a sea of unsustainability. Quite apart from the impossibility of such an outcome given the impact of the dominant development paradigm, the members' practices had little local social legitimacy. Whilst the members, through their collective self identity, believed themselves to be 'changing society', the very society they were attempting to change was ignoring them.

Finally, Quindalup did not have in place a system of conflict resolution which could deal with both internal and external tensions as they arose. What they experienced was a form of Cock's (1985) drift to rural suburbia. Ultimately, social relations within Quindalup mirrored those found in the more impersonal *gesellschaft* communities, collective life was abandoned, and the land sold.

So, where does this leave the question of alternative agrarian practices? Routley and Routley (1982, 24) suggest that a self sustaining, ecologically sound future for agriculture depends on renouncing the relationship between the social character of production and its private purpose. In other words, there is a need to alter the previously held worldview. A dominant worldview must be in place which looks to an agriculture based on self determination, and which strives to achieve its public purpose – human health and survival. There is little doubt that the permacultural model potentially achieves this. What is in doubt is how it can

be achieved.

I have elsewhere elaborated a schema of alternative development paradigms which attempt to alter the nexus between agrarian social relations or agrarian social relations and nature. This consists of state socialism, rural populism, the ecological critique and a possibility of a red-green alliance. By 'red' I mean, drawing on Pepper (1986, 10), a form of socialism that is "a social system based on common ownership of the means of production and distribution and which displays an attachment to ethical and democratic values as well as an emphasis on the distinction between common and state ownership". By 'green' I mean a set of social relations that takes into account the rights of nature (including humans as part of nature). I concluded that:

Perhaps then, what is needed is a red-green alliance which draws upon the trenchant criticisms of capitalism offered as well as the environmental ethic which any alternative form of social organisation can and should develop. Perhaps such an alliance offers the advantages of centralisation (distribution mechanisms for example) integrated with devolved political, economic and social relations based on the bioregion (Furze, in press).

Of course, one of the difficulties in instigating alternative agrarian social relations is to understand the structural nature of those existing. Without some form of this understanding, the instigation of an alternative agrarian practice is problematic because real difficulties arise in the relationship between dominant and alternative practices. Yet it is not enough to merely know the processes and outcomes of the dominant logic of capitalist agriculture. There is a real need to have a developed model of alternative practices to be put into place and it is in this context that a case can be put for an environmental management model with a red-green alliance at its base.

Potentially such an alliance would provide theoretical and conceptual foundations for both the critique of existing agrarian social relations (a task undertaken by Marxist and non-Marxist critical theorists) as well as for an alternative model of agrarian practice (a task taken up by environmentalists). The light shed on these areas by the respective camps should illuminate both perspectives.

Practically, however, there are real challenges for this. For Quindalup, the likelihood of a red-green alliance for widespread social change was remote. Whilst there is an alteration to agrarian social relations with the proletarianization of farmers and an incursion of monopoly capital with very specific social, economic and environmental consequences, the record of red-green alliances in agriculture in Australia is not particularly impressive. At the macro level there is not only the historical conservatism of the rural sector (see, for example, Lawrence, 1987; Costar and Woodward, 1985) but also the bankrupt state of institutionalized labour, socialist and communist parties (Frankel, 1987). At the regional level, as the members of Quindalup found out, there are the difficulties

of gaining (and maintaining) social legitimacy.

Therefore, in practical terms, the finding of common ground on which to form a red-green alliance for an alternative agriculture in Australia may not be that easy. Whilst there is much to be gained, the schism arises from different problematics emanating from divergent worldviews (Bell, 1986, 5). At this stage, the socialist project does not necessarily take into account the environment (Redclift, 1984, 126) and the environmental project does not necessarily take into account socialism.

### CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

What are the implications of these findings? I think one thing they do is emphasize the difficulties of instigating alternative agrarian social relations within a dominant system. Groups of individuals attempting to bring about new community formations are facing structural obstacles as well as difficulties in linking vision with practice. Whilst alternative paths to permacultural agriculture are important for flexibility, they may also be a means whereby some groups or individuals lose sight of the long term goals, or at least of the ethics which are to guide them in their search. In this sense, a developed model of communal permanence is critical and it is here that the role of utopian vision is important. It is also here that Quindalup failed.

But utopian vision is not enough in its own right, and I return to my earlier comments concerning the question of change strategies. Without support (at least in the interim) from institutions such as government, media and education, the acceptance and consequent legitimacy of permacultural ideals is problematic.

This of course raises the difficulty of the price of institutional support, and I am not talking in terms of economics. Perhaps a creative relationship between members of the permaculture movement and institutional forms of support is possible, but the bottom line has to be found in the philosophy of permacultural design, not on the economic or political balance sheet of that institutional support given. Is this possible given the logic of capitalist social, economic and political formations? I think not.

Perhaps then, the best option at this stage is some form of red-green alliance, but much work needs to be done to find common ground. It is not enough to merely argue that both socialist and environmental alternatives attempt to overcome exploitation, for one is seen as economic and the other environmental. It is not enough, either, to try to alter the relationship between the individual and society. Implicit in any search for alternatives is a recognition that as well as new social relations, there must be instigated a new set of relations with nature.

The attempted creation of new forms of social, economic, political and

environmental relations is a daunting task, but one which must be taken up. The permacultural model potentially provides an alternative form of agrarian practice and social relations. The task is to ensure the potential is realized.

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