



Territory, Conflict, and Political Subjectivation: Rethinking Power Asymmetries through the Case of Southern Apulia

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Abstract

This article reconceptualises territory as a historically situated configuration of power relations—not as a neutral administrative container or cultural repository, but as a field where domination, resistance, and subject formation are constitutively intertwined. Drawing on conflicts in Southern Italy—migrant labour struggles and disputes over large-scale energy infrastructures—we examine territorial conflict as generative: a process through which underlying power asymmetries become visible and contestable. Political subjectivities emerge contingently within such conflicts, yet face systematic neutralisation through technocratic, legal, and administrative translation that depoliticises dissent without eliminating it. The central problem is not conflict's disappearance but its reconfiguration under neoliberal governance. We trace how territory, conflict, and subjectivation operate together to both reproduce and contest asymmetries of power, arguing that territorial conflict constitutes a distinctive form of non-institutional political participation through which subordinate actors challenge existing configurations of power.

Key words

Territory; political subjectivation; conflict; power asymmetries; non-institutional participation

1. Territory as a Field of Forces and Power Asymmetries¹

Territory has acquired renewed significance in sociological debate, increasingly connected to contemporary capitalism's transformations

¹ The overall structure and conceptual architecture were jointly developed by both authors. Fabio de Nardis was primarily responsible for Sections 1, 3, and 5; Angelo Galiano for Sections 2, 4, and 6. The Conclusion was jointly written and revised.

and shifting modes of power exercise. Yet this renewed interest remains shadowed by persistent theoretical confusion. Territory continues to be reduced either to an administrative scale within multi-level institutional arrangements or to a repository of collective identities. These readings capture real dimensions but obscure what matters most: territory's relational and conflictual character. They treat territory as a spatial support for dynamics originating elsewhere, as if it were a reified, pre-political given rather than the historical product of practices, institutions, and power relations (Mazzoleni, 2024).

We proceed from a different premise. Territory is a historically determined form of organising power relations. It operates as a field of forces traversed by divergent interests, governmental mechanisms, and practices of resistance—a space where conflict is structurally constitutive, not residual. Power asymmetries do not sit upon territory as though on neutral ground; they shape its internal structure through historically specific, institutionally mediated configurations. In the strategic-relational terms developed by Jessop (2002), territory emerges as the contingent sedimentation of territorialisation and institutionalisation processes through which boundaries, uses, and meanings crystallise.

This conceptualisation grounds our exploration of the nexus between territory, conflict, and political subjectivation. Contemporary territorial conflicts operate not simply as localised reactions to specific interventions but as generative contexts: spaces where political positionings, identities, and forms of collective action are produced, transformed, and renegotiated. Conflict exceeds mere opposition; it reshapes relations between actors, institutions, and frameworks of meaning, articulating new repertoires of mobilisation and claim-making (Tilly, 2004; Della Porta and Diani, 2006).

This requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of territory and power. Territory is not the passive terrain upon which power operates; it is power's operative medium. Domination is organised, stabilised, and simultaneously opened to contestation through territory. Territory functions as a mechanism connecting material and symbolic dimensions, institutional and informal practices, generating specific asymmetrical configurations. It stands at the intersection of social dynamics and political institutionalisation, mediating between appropriation “from below” and regulatory strategies “from above” (Mazzoleni,

2024). This perspective draws on Foucauldian analytics of power's productive dimension: power does not merely repress or prohibit but constitutes fields of visibility, institutional practices, modes of conduct, and forms of subjectivity (Foucault, 1977; 1978).

Southern Italy provides particularly legible terrain for examining these dynamics. We approach territorial conflicts there not as exceptions but as privileged sites where extractive processes, governmental mechanisms, and resistance practices become especially visible. This allows us to examine with clarity certain tendencies linked both to neoliberalism's restructuring of state-market-democracy relations and to capital's spatial reorganisation of accumulation and governance (Harvey, 2005; Crouch, 2011).

Conflicts around deindustrialisation, labour exploitation, and large-scale energy infrastructure reveal how territory concentrates tensions between accumulation logics and claims for social and environmental justice. They expose something crucial: the intrinsic ambivalence of political subjectivation. Such conflicts can activate politicisation and generate novel forms of belonging and collective action. Simultaneously, they face systematic neutralisation through individualisation and technical-administrative translation of claims—processes that circumscribe their transformative capacity within broader dynamics of depoliticisation characteristic of contemporary neoliberal regimes (Crouch, 2004; Brown, 2015; de Nardis, 2017).

This analysis pursues two objectives: first, it contributes to a theoretical redefinition of territory, rescuing it from reductionist and merely descriptive treatments; second, it demonstrates how the territory-conflict-subjectivation nexus illuminates how power asymmetries are produced, reproduced, and contested. Territorial conflict constitutes a specific form of non-institutional political participation: the practice through which subjects in subordinate positions articulate agency that challenges, however circumscribed, existing configurations of power.

2. Barriers and Obstacles: Processes of Disaffiliation and Spoiled Identities

When territory is grasped relationally, conflict ceases to be merely contingent reaction. It becomes a specific form of political participation,

often non-institutionalised, unfolding within territorial configurations themselves. The question shifts: it is no longer how to define territory, but how power relations inscribe themselves in space, producing hierarchically differentiated arrangements.

Territory operates as a set of mutually defined positions. The distribution of these positions reflects and simultaneously reorganises power asymmetries specific to each historical-geographical context. What matters is not spatial boundaries per se but the web of relations governing access, use, and valorisation. Territory does not precede these relations; it crystallises them into provisional, partial forms through territorialisation, institutionalisation, and scalar restructuring of power (Jessop, 2002; Brenner, 2004; Massey, 2005). Territory emerges from territorialising processes that articulate strategies, appropriation practices, and political institutionalisation of space.

Power functions as an immanent principle structuring territorial configurations. It operates through arrangements connecting institutional, economic, and symbolic dimensions—shaping available courses of action and their margins. Development policies, investment strategies, labour regulation, and planning do not simply intervene upon territory; they produce it, selecting functions, hierarchies, and priorities. Territory takes form as delimited, multi-scalar, and relational—a space traversed by networks and boundaries that constitute both its structure and its possibilities for action (Mazzoleni, 2024).

Territory is fundamentally selective. Certain uses are legitimised and promoted, others discouraged or marginalised, still others rendered invisible. This selectivity is not the product of isolated decisions but of power configurations sedimented over time, incorporating structural constraints and strategic orientations (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore, 2010; Theodore, Peck, and Brenner, 2011).

Contemporary capitalism's transformations have intensified this selectivity, generating territorial reorganisation that continually redefines relations between valorisation and abandonment, centrality and marginality. Territory thereby becomes one of the privileged domains through which accumulation operates—not only economically but through producing the specific social and political conditions that make its reproduction possible.

Power asymmetries are constitutive of territorial configurations, not incidental to them. They are not merely imbalances between actors

or unequal resource distributions; they point to dynamic relations produced and transformed through social interaction. Asymmetries both emerge within territorial configurations and simultaneously stabilise them, generating always-provisional equilibria.

Conflict acquires decisive significance in this relational space. Rather than interrupting an established order, conflict is inscribed within territorial configurations themselves, contesting their hierarchies and operating logics. It exposes the fault lines that traverse territory, rendering visible the contingent and contestable character of existing arrangements.

Territorial configurations do not mechanically constrain actors; they structure the possibilities and margins of action. Within these conditions, political subjectivation unfolds—individuals and groups interpret their location, formulate claims, and construct collective action.

Territory is thus constitutive of conflict's intelligibility. Understanding how power asymmetries are reproduced and contested depends on grasping the relation between territorial configurations and subjective positionings—how subjects locate themselves and act from those positions.

3. Conflict as a Generative Process

Conflict operates as internal to territorial arrangements—a process through which latent tensions surface and existing modes of operation become contestable. Conflict does not simply express pre-existing oppositions; it intervenes in social relations themselves, redefining positionings, meanings, and possibilities for action. Political subjectivation is not merely the emergence of collective identities but the situated, differential access to participation that varies along class, gender, and ethnic lines.

This permits moving beyond viewing conflict as defensive reaction or circumscribed episode. Contemporary territorial conflicts constitute processes of politicisation that reshape both specific claims and the conditions enabling their formulation. What is at stake extends beyond individual decisions to encompass how priorities are set, resources allocated, and territorial uses legitimised.

Conflict thus performs generative work. It produces effects exceeding the immediate dispute: reinterpreting social reality, redefining collective boundaries, reorganising action. Conflict operates as a rela-

tional process capable of transforming the social field it traverses (Coser, 1956; Touraine, 1977), not merely as interaction between actors.

This becomes particularly legible in Southern Italian territorial conflicts. Mobilisations around deindustrialisation, labour exploitation, and large-scale energy infrastructure do not stop at contesting single interventions. They challenge broader models of development and territorial governance. Territory becomes the site where tensions between accumulation, institutional regulation, and populations' living conditions crystallise and are articulated.

What matters most is not the empirical particularity of individual conflicts but their capacity to expose power configurations normally obscured. Territorial mobilisations function as revelatory devices: they render visible relations that ordinarily remain opaque or naturalised. Conflict discloses what appears given, making explicit the historical contingency and political contestability of existing arrangements.

Yet this generative capacity should not be read as unambiguously emancipatory. Politicisation processes are intrinsically ambivalent. Conflicts can foster collective subjectivity and novel forms of action, but simultaneously face neutralisation dynamics that constrain their transformative reach. These neutralisations operate through translating claims into technical-administrative language, fragmenting them into individual demands, or gradually reabsorbing them into institutional mechanisms that attenuate their conflictual force. Conflict becomes reabsorbed into regulatory forms that dampen political intensity without eliminating dissent—a dynamic characteristic of post-political governance, where conflict is channeled into consensual, technocratic, and administrative frameworks (Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2010).

This ambivalence reflects how conflict is governed within territorial configurations. Institutions and dominant actors operate not only through repression but through regulation and rearticulation of claims—processes rendering them compatible with existing arrangements. Conflict is neither simply suppressed nor fully accommodated; it is reformulated and partially reabsorbed, generating controlled participation and negotiation processes that reshape its contents and limits.

Territorial conflict thus cannot be understood solely as opposition between actors. It is a complex relational process in which

production, contestation, and reorganisation of power asymmetries intertwine. Political subjectivities emerge within this space—contingent outcomes of practices, discourses, and positionings.

The cases examined here matter not as isolated examples but as moments when these dynamics become especially visible. They show how conflict, rather than interrupting territorial order, participates in its continual production, interrogation, and occasional transformation.

4. Territorial Conflict in Practice

The preceding sections have theorised conflict as structurally inscribed within social configurations. The empirical cases from Southern Italy demonstrate these dynamics in operation. Rather than contingent events, the mobilisations examined here illuminate structural tensions generated by capitalism's contemporary reorganisation—tensions where territory, labour, and governance become inseparable. Conflicts do not interrupt established order; they expose its operative conditions, making visible forms of extraction and domination normally concealed. We examine two conflicts in the Salento area where these dynamics are especially pronounced.

4.1 The Nardò strike and agricultural labour

The first case involves migrant worker mobilisations in agriculture, particularly the Nardò strike of 2011.² The caporalato system functioned not as archaic remnant but as a mechanism perfectly suited to contemporary agro-industrial supply chains: it enabled rapid labour

² The conflict was located in the rural territory of Nardò (Lecce, Apulia), an area that, from the late 1980s onwards, became incorporated into intensive agro-industrial circuits and increasingly characterised by the extensive use of seasonal migrant labour. It erupted in the summer of 2011, against a backdrop of exceptional labour-force concentration resulting from the effects of the 2008 economic crisis and the intensification of Mediterranean migratory flows. The mobilisation took shape around Masseria Boncuri, an informal settlement later institutionalised, which functioned as a space for the concentration and reproduction of labour power. Within this framework, the farmworkers' strike – triggered by a dispute over piece-rate payment in tomato harvesting and mediated by the caporalato system – made visible the structural conditions of exploitation governing migrant agricultural labour within European agri-food supply chains, based on the ethno-racial segmentation of the workforce and on a differential distribution of rights, protections, and vulnerabilities.

mobilisation, cost compression, and diffused responsibility across fragmented production networks.

Material conditions—piecework, extended workdays, discretionary employment access—intersected with legal and spatial vulnerability produced by migration regimes and residential segregation. Workers concentrated in informal settlements like Masseria Boncuri faced extreme labour precarity and weak union presence. This created a regime of differential inclusion: productive incorporation paired structurally with social exclusion.

The strike temporarily interrupted this otherwise hidden extraction regime. By halting production, migrant workers exposed their centrality to the system—its dependence on their disciplined availability. Yet as documented elsewhere (de Nardis and Galiano, 2025; Ciniero and de Nardis, 2026), the conflict's juridical translation subsequently re-framed it within an individualising logic, isolating illegal intermediary practices from the system's structural architecture.

4.2. The No TAP movement and energy infrastructure

The second case concerns territorial conflicts over large-scale energy infrastructure—specifically the No TAP movement.³ Conflict unfolded at the intersection of local and supranational decision-making: the pipeline formed part of Europe's Southern Gas Corridor, promoted as a mechanism for reorganising energy supply.

From its outset, the mobilisation functioned as knowledge production and territorial activation. The No TAP committee emerged to inform populations, formulate technical critiques, and construct critical discourse around the project. Over time, this discourse expanded into a broader challenge to extractive development models. Territory crys-

³ The conflict was located in the coastal territory of San Foca, a hamlet of the municipality of Melendugno (Lecce, Apulia), identified as the landing point of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), an energy infrastructure designed from 2006 onwards to connect Azerbaijan to European markets. The first contestations emerged in 2011, following the public disclosure of the pipeline route, and gradually developed around the No TAP Committee, established that same year out of local associational networks already active in the environmental field. The conflict intensified between 2014, when the Italian government approved the project despite the opposition of local and regional authorities, and 2017, when the beginning of construction works and the uprooting of olive trees marked the transformation of the mobilisation into a mass movement, characterised by high levels of participation and moments of confrontation with the police.

tallised as the site where accumulation logics, technocratic governance, and self-determination claims collided.

Yet what becomes most evident is how conflict underwent progressive reorganisation through multiple dispositifs. First, the decision-making process exposed marked asymmetries between governmental levels: despite local and regional opposition, central government imposed the project by designating it national strategic infrastructure, thereby recasting the boundaries of political decision-making.

Second, conflict was managed through security arrangements. Militarised construction sites, restricted zones, and systematic police deployment reframed dissent as a security problem, restructuring citizen-state relations. As testimonies collected by Imperatore (2023) and de Nardis and Galiano (2025) demonstrate, this produced a profound fracture in institutional legitimacy, transposing conflict from the political to the repressive register.

Third, indirect neutralisation strategies operated. Companies functioned as "total social actors," intervening through corporate social responsibility, sponsorships, and legitimisation campaigns generating consensus and economic dependency. Simultaneous European and national-level lobbying oriented decision-making, amplifying large corporations' capacity to shape policy.

4.3. The recurrent pattern

These cases reveal a pattern: conflict is neither simply repressed nor accommodated. It is translated, dispersed, and redirected into mechanisms constraining its generalisation capacity. Conflict persists but assumes sectoralised, technicalised, or individualised forms.

This confirms a central observation: the problem lies not in conflict's absence but in its transformation within governance arrangements that neutralise political force while leaving dissent intact. Conflict resurfaces continuously but remains reabsorbed into configurations limiting transformative reach.

Yet neutralisation never fully succeeds. Contained conflicts generate effects exceeding their immediate outcomes: new repertoires of action, solidarity networks, shifts in collective perception, rearticulations of society-institution relations. Contemporary territorial conflict dynamics unfold precisely within this tension between neutralisation and re-emergence.

5. Subjectivation and the Limits of Conflict

Conflict operates as a structural relation inscribed within social configurations; subjectivation is the moment when that relation becomes experienced, interpreted, and potentially mobilised into collective action. Yet subjectivation is neither automatic nor guaranteed—it is contingent, situated, and reversible, emerging only under specific material and institutional conditions.

Exposure to exploitation or domination does not automatically generate subjectivation. Among migrant agricultural workers, legal precarity, spatial fragmentation, and dependence on intermediary systems severely constrain collective action. Workers concentrated in segregated spaces, differentially included in citizenship regimes, face vulnerability that more often than not remains internalised or managed individually rather than channelled into organised conflict.

The Nardò strike temporarily ruptured this configuration, activating collective subjectivation that exceeded ordinary conditions. Yet its very situatedness reveals its limits: it could not penetrate the deeper structures producing exploitation. As the conflict was progressively channelled into juridical and institutional tools, its transformative reach contracted.

The No TAP movement demonstrates similar but different constraints. Subjectivation assumed explicitly political form—crystallising around territorial self-determination, commons defence, and critique of extractive development. Conflict reorganised collective identities, reactivated community bonds, and reconfigured citizen-institution relations.

Yet here too, stringent constraints bounded subjectivation. The gap between local and supranational decision-making limited mobilisations' capacity to affect governance. Security systems and legitimisation campaigns simultaneously fragmented the protest front, restricting its generalisation.

These cases resist linear theories of conflict-to-subjectivation. Conflict does not automatically generate transformative political subjects; it opens a space of possibility that may be activated, neutralised, or reabsorbed. Subjectivation emerges at the intersection of material conditions, institutional arrangements, and collective practices—specifically when individual experiences of subordination are reworked into shared frameworks. Yet this transformation depends on specific ena-

bling conditions: spatial proximity, organisational infrastructure, cultural repertoires, capacity to connect struggles across scales.

Their absence explains why intense exploitation often produces no visible conflict, while in other cases mobilisations temporarily reshape existing equilibria. Yet even when subjectivation occurs, institutionalisation, fragmentation, and depoliticisation constrain its duration and efficacy.

Conflict's effects persist nonetheless. Even in circumscribed forms, it reshapes collective perception, generates new political languages, and exposes power relations otherwise naturalised. Social movement scholarship confirms this: outcomes are not merely political but fundamentally biographical (Amenta and Young, 1999; Bosi, Giugni and Uba, 2016). Subjectivation should be assessed not only against immediate victories but against longer-term processes through which the politically possible expands.

The relationship between conflict and subjectivation remains fundamentally tense. Conflict enables collective subject formation—yet the very configurations generating conflict constrain its transformative capacity. This never fully resolved tension defines the political space of conflict in contemporary societies.

6. Rethinking Conflict: Asymmetries, Participation, and Power

Conflict cannot be reduced to regulated competition among interests or to pathological disorder. It is a constitutive relation of social configurations within which power asymmetries are produced, stabilised, and contested. This position avoids both functionalist subsumption of conflict within systemic integration (Coser, 1956) and romanticist readings of destructive antagonism. Conflict operates as relational practice within structured fields where actors occupy differentiated, hierarchically organised positions (Bourdieu, 1994). It does not stand opposed to social order; it constitutes one of its modes of operation and simultaneously one of its possible transformative trajectories.

6.1. Conflict and power asymmetries

Analysis of the cases demonstrates that conflict emerges under conditions of asymmetry—marked by profound inequalities in access to resources, capacities for influence, recognition, and the very ability to define contention's stakes. Political participation is not a neutral space

of equivalent actors but terrain structurally traversed by relations of force that condition its possibilities, forms of expression, and outcomes (Lukes, 2005). Conflict functions as a specific form of political participation under asymmetrical conditions, often outside institutional channels. It enables subordinate actors to articulate agency temporarily exceeding imposed constraints—yet this agency unfolds within structures that selectively enable and constrain it, according to a logic where constraint and capacity for action intertwine.

Local movements constitute developmental processes within which power asymmetries are both reflected and reworked. Their capacities for action and reflection vary with scale, social composition, and permeability. As collective action extends beyond single organisations or homogeneous contexts, movements must make their principles explicit, translate them across settings, and mediate heterogeneous needs and struggles. This involves both cultural and material dimensions—deeply connected to unequal resource distribution and capacity to re-shape power configurations.

Critically, as Cox (2024) emphasises, movements require cognitive and reflexive integration: discussion, learning, and knowledge production woven into organisational practice. This determines whether a movement constitutes itself merely as an aggregate of demands or as a collective subject capable of elaborating shared orientations, strategies, and social interpretations. Shared reflection on "what we are doing," coupled with strategy coordinating individual practices, constitutes a crucial threshold—especially in asymmetrical contexts. Consolidated processes strengthen movements' capacity to intervene in the power relations they traverse (McAdam, 1999; Ganz, 2009; Han, 2014; della Porta, 2013). Weak processes tend toward the merely representational—style over transformation.

6.2. Conflict and depoliticisation

Conflict faces systematic neutralisation that reduces its transformative reach through translation into technical, administrative, or juridical registers. Contemporary governance operates not primarily through direct repression but through reorganisation of conflict within frameworks compatible with existing order. This post-political logic redirects dissent into consensual, technocratic, and administrative channels that dampen radicality and neutralise transformative capacity (Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2010; Taşkale, 2016).

These dynamics condition movements' learning, alliance-building, and strategic capacity. In asymmetrical contexts, solidarity and recognition of struggle-interconnection are not givens but must be actively constructed through organisational and cognitive work. Similarly, a movement's capacity to position itself as strategic actor—articulating not only desired ends but also means, alliances, and action sequences—depends on its field position and available resources.

Yet conflict's relationship to democracy remains structurally ambivalent. While conflict enables new political subjectivities to emerge, it guarantees no emancipatory outcome. Power configurations tend to reabsorb conflict, redefining its contents and limits, oscillating between opening and closure, inclusion and neutralisation (Brown, 2015).

The processual character of conflict ensures outcomes escape actors' full control. As established scholarship demonstrates (Tilly, 1978; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007; Tarrow, 1994; McAdam et al., 2001; Sewell, 1996; della Porta, 2008), mobilisations generate unexpected effects—struggles realised in forms actors never imagined, requiring new conflict sequences and reworking. This reinforces that social transformation unfolds as open process marked by continual power readjustments, not linear progression or teleology.

6.3. Redefining political participation

Political participation extends beyond institutionalised involvement to encompass conflictual practices through which actors intervene in power configurations. Participation is not fixed space but a field of differentially distributed possibilities within which conflict operates as a privileged—though never guaranteed—modality of political access (de Nardis, 2026a; 2026b).

Territory, conflict, and subjectivation form a nexus illuminating how power asymmetries are simultaneously reproduced and contested. The central insight is that participation cannot be understood apart from the material and relational conditions enabling and constraining its expression. Territorial conflict thus emerges as a form of participation constitutively shaped by the asymmetries it challenges.

7. Conclusion

Territorial conflict escapes two reductive framings: as merely episodic expression of local interests, or as dysfunctional residue. It operates as

ordinary modality through which power relations crystallise within territorial configurations—and through which those configurations' constitutive asymmetries become visible.

Territory functions as operative medium: the space where social dynamics are organised, stabilised, and contested. Political subjectivities emerge contingently from the relation between territorial configurations and conflictual practices. Yet these processes remain structurally ambivalent. Politicisation and neutralisation advance simultaneously; transformative capacity confronts systematic containment.

This ambivalence reshapes how we understand conflict and political participation. Participation is not neutral or inclusive space but terrain traversed by asymmetries that selectively define its possibilities. Conflict operates as a specific form of non-conventional participation—through which subordinate actors intervene in configurations constraining them, rendering visible tensions otherwise concealed. Yet those same configurations redirect conflict into registers compatible with existing order, limiting its generalisation.

The central problem is neither conflict's absence nor its disappearance. Rather, conflict undergoes systematic governance, translation, and reorganisation. Neoliberal dispositifs do not eliminate conflict; they modulate its intensity, fragment it, and displace it into technical, juridical, and administrative registers. Depoliticisation means not dissent's vanishing but its transformation into forms compatible with fundamentally unchanged power arrangements.

Yet conflict persistently exceeds containment. Even circumscribed forms reshape collective perception, generate repertoires of action, and expand the politically possible. Its critical potential lies not in producing immediate linear transformation but in reopening interrogation: how power operates, how it sustains legitimacy.

Under conditions of rising inequality and supranational decision-making reorganisation, territorial conflicts acquire acute significance. They expose tensions between where consequences localise and where decisions delocalise—revealing how power asymmetries operate across multi-scalar configurations that continually reshape political participation's margins. Mobilisations "from the margins" are not merely residual resistance but privileged vantage points from which to observe how conflict, democracy, and power currently interrelate.

Conflict examined through relational and territorial lenses illuminates both how power asymmetries reproduce and the partial, unsta-

ble conditions under which they become contestable. Between reproduction and transformation, within that irreducible tension, lies the possibility of reactivating the nexus between conflict and politics in contemporary societies.

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