

GEOGRAPHY, ASSIMILATION, AND DIALOGUE:

Universalism and Particularism
in Central-European Thought*

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There are many advantages and disadvantages to central locations. These have shown themselves in the long course of European history. In times of peace, there are important economic and cultural advantages (to illustrate: the present area of the Czech Republic was the richest country in Europe between the two World Wars). There are cross-currents of trade and culture in central Europe of great advantage. For, cultural cross-currents represent a potential benefit in comprehension and cultural growth. But under threat of large-scale conflict, these locations have proved extremely dangerous.

Historically, Germany and Austria may be regarded as having had two chief models of their relationships to Europe. In the Holy Roman Empire, Germany was at the center of an aspiring “universalistic” European cosmopolitanism. (In some ways similar to the present situation of the European Union.) Austria maintained a great multicultural empire, until it was destroyed in the First World War. Generally, middle-European powers have promoted the integration of European diversity, when peace and stability have been plausible objectives. But when European diversity has declined toward ethnic or national conflict, Germany has drawn away from Europe and into itself, seeking inner unity and distinctness to protect it against possible combinations of enemies. This is true of central Europe generally, in degree, but interest often centers on Germany. Generally, central Europe is a cultural pressure cooker.

1. Geography and cultural orientation

Thus a plausible thesis is that location in the center of Europe has contributed to historic excesses of both rationalistic “universalism” and romantic “particularism.” Counting Marx among German philosophers,

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Marxism may be looked on as an important example of aspiring Central-European universalism. But obviously, nationalistic ideologies are a primary example of the opposite tendency, and a source of such ideologies might be sought for in the intensive social particularisms of Europe. The most dangerous sort of combination seems to be an intensive particularism clothed in universalistic ideology.

Ruth Anna and Hilary Putnam recently quoted Santayana to the effect that “A demon drives [the Germans] on; and this demon, divine and immortal in its apparent waywardness, is their inmost self,” represented, as the Putnams suggest, by Goethe’s Faust.(1) We can have little doubt that many Europeans and Americans hold, or have held, similar views of Germany, though Santayana was more optimistic overall than this quotation may suggest. I’m convinced that if there is, or has been, a demon in the German soul, it is a product of a history of intense conflict at the center of Europe and the protective intensity of sociality (“solidarity”) which grew up in response. I’m convinced too that Germany differs only in degree from the rest of Europe. What is needed is less of Europe’s traditional romantic collectivism.

This perspective could contribute to the contemporary evaluation of plans for European integration or the idea of a federal Europe. Fundamentally, these are kinds of questions which Europeans must themselves answer, but in view of world-wide interest, these questions concern friends of contemporary European integration. This paper proceeds on the hypothesis, or leading idea, that Europe’s history of religious and ideological war, conquest, and conflict, in the modern era, is rooted in vicious cycles of universal aspirations (starting from the medieval Christian-Aristotelian synthesis which helped evoke the reformation), conflict, and intense particularisms of cultural, religious, political, and ethnic identity.

We are naturally interested in the character of European integration, and Europe’s relations to the wider world, since this effects the prospects for peace. Especially since the end of the Cold War has unearthed historic ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and elsewhere, thoughts turn to the plausibility of integration proceeding on the basis of Europe’s historic ethnic identities. Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, wrote of his own country, that “because of our geographical situation, our destiny is more tightly tied to general European developments, and

those in the wider world, than is that of many other lands which do not have such an exposed position.” Havel rejects the idea that the Czechs can merely look to their own interests. “In our case, perhaps more than others, we must look out beyond the horizon of our narrow particular interests. We must develop a global image of the desirable general future and engage ourselves with it.”(2) Havel’s view here is fairly representative of many others in Europe. Given the similarities between the positions of the Czechs and the Germans, a similar stance recommends itself to Germany. A firm relation to America is an important part of the contemporary geo-political orientation of both nations. We would do well to encourage these relations. But at the same time, it is important to appreciate that no “global image” can fully replace the working out of concrete human relations on a day-to-day basis.

2. Reflections on the revolution in Europe

The fall of the Soviet system has changed our perception of Europe. What once divided, neatly and terribly, into East and West is now more a matter of continuous gradations. The grand discontinuity of Cold War conflict has been replaced by a more continuous economic, political, and cultural gradation from West to East and from North to South. We witnessed the reunification of Germany and its problems. We speak of “one European house” in which all of Europe is to find a place, consider the extension of the European Union to the East, and also the extension of the NATO Alliance to newly freed nations. We recall the old Hapsburg Monarchy which governed much of Southeastern Europe and left its cultural imprint, in degree, from Northern Italy to Prague, Bratislava and Budapest, Southern Poland and further East. There is some talk of “Middle-European” culture, and we begin to think of Germany, though anchored in its post-war Western orientation, standing at the center of this New Europe: the most enthusiastic advocate of European integration.

The objective of German foreign policy, in Hans Dieter Genscher’s famous phrase, is not to “germanize Europe,” but to “europeanize Germany.” These phrases repay thought. Consider what these verbs mean: “to Germanize,” “to Europeanize.” We are invited to think, not only that Europe must avoid being Germanized, but

also that Germany must be Europeanized, thus becoming less “Germanized.” We are invited to think, too, that one need not be German to be Germanized and that being German, Genscher would like to see his country not less German, but still less “Germanized.” The overall objective is to make Europe more comfortable with Germany at its center. The slogan de-emphasizes traditional ethnic identity.

But the objective may sound no less paradoxical than the imperative to “become what you are.” After all, Germany is already European. What does the present cultural and political reality of Europe tell us about what Europe and Germany can be? Is there a danger of some new and oppressive universalist ideology? Put into social scientific rather than merely (European) common-sense terms, what does Genscher’s imperative to Europeanize Germany amount to, and what might this mean to its neighbors?

In his last book, F.A. Hayek, an important European social thinker of Austrian origins, traces the errors of socialism to a “fatal conceit.” He puts his point very broadly at times: the idea to be rejected is that “man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes.”(3) The claim is surely anti-nominalistic and anti-rationalistic. If we are unable to shape the world around us according to our own wishes, then, this extends to creations of human culture.

We must be *unable* to shape the cultural world around us, language included, simply by reference to our own wishes. But this is no fatalism or quietism. Looking to other passages, we see that Hayek is arguing against revolutionary change as an ideal and against overly centralized control. He was surely not arguing against the possibility of resisting revolutionary change, and he did not think it impossible to remove or avoid overly centralized control. It is part of Hayek’s idea that centers of power and human institutions grow up without an overall plan. Government is needed to guard against or dismantle overly concentrated power which otherwise presents the danger of tyranny.

What he contests is the rationalistic idea that “anything produced by evolution could have been done better by human ingenuity.”(4) What Ralf Dahrendorf, borrowing from Burke, characterized as the “revolution in Europe”(5), we might better see as a matter of devolution from Hayek’s point of view. Devolution of power,

according to Hayek, is something humanly doable, and it is desirable, since it enables us to resist the temptation to start over with a blank slate, trying to design or redesign the entire system of human relations. From this perspective, centralizations of power grow up naturally. We do better to plan for devolution as needed, avoiding the temptations of power involved in the idea of definitive solutions.

What is most plausible in Hayek's perspective is the idea that no one knows enough, or can know enough, to redesign human affairs *de novo*, and no one knows enough, or can know enough, to exercise centralized control over human affairs for the good of all. This idea is exactly what makes us doubtful of the prospects of great empires, spread over extensive areas of the earth. The disintegration of the Soviet Union comes to mind.

No one can know enough to exercise continuous centralized control over the lives of other human beings, and when the attempt is made, it eventually fails. Because overly centralized authority cannot really understand all that it must control or regulate, forced conformity is substituted for knowledge of human needs, wants, abilities, and the consequences of action. The attempt to force conformity, in turn, leads to growing social and political conflicts. In spite of increasing global interdependence, we are wary of attempts at international empire, because we are wary of the effects of forced conformity. This is a relatively conservative idea, though separable in degree from Hayek's economic and political thought. This relatively conservative idea has much to recommend it.

Something quite similar seems to be involved in European resistance to more thorough-going unification. The Europeans surely recognize that their national economies are too small to be self-sufficient. But they still resist directives for the uniformity of products from Brussels, there is considerable resistance to the surrender of national currencies, and greater resistance to the surrender of elements of their national ethnic identities. We have witnessed some slowing of the movement toward European unity, since the fall of the Soviet system; and the goal of a European Federation has lost some of its luster. The slow unification of Europe has been mostly a matter of liberal economic policy, but economic unification eventually brings divergent national cultures into contact, and in the extreme, the forces of homogenization in mass-market societies present a challenge to *any* ideal of relatively stable community. Liberal economic policy, and its apparent political implications, eventually face challenges

stemming both from the conservative attachment to ethnic identity, and from the left's aversion to disruption of established community relations and customs by market forces. This amounts to a powerful subterranean alliance of the left and the right balanced against economic liberalism. Yet European economic liberalism persists, and it also has an important role to play.

3. Invasion of the life-world?

If we cannot hope to provide an overall plan for human societies which will dictate the terms of their development, if we lack a "God's eye view" of the overall potentialities of human societies, then we are forced back upon knowledge and practice within existing structures, to appreciate their problems and the potentialities of growth. Among these structures are the European nation states and the local communities which constitute them. Europe is a patchwork of ethnic identities and nations encompassing one or more such ethnic identities.

But Europe can also be viewed from an economic standpoint as a system of interacting economic institutions, businesses included. The idea of the "invasion of the life-world" is essentially that liberal economic institutions have important adverse affects on the cultural, social, and ethical structures of every-day life, though the latter are expected to restrain the invasion. This presents the problematic prospect of purely economic considerations and practices pushing aside and dominating every contrary force of social life, ultimately undermining the very processes of socialization upon which the reproduction, and development, of morality, the family, local community, and social life generally depend. To put the point in a common-sense nutshell, we do not have great confidence that moral scruple alone will hold out steadfastly against economic incentives and temptations. This is particularly so where immigration diminishes the cultural and linguistic uniformity which facilitate the reproduction of particular cultural norms. We naturally turn to consider the prospect of legal regulation.(6) European unification has been primarily economic, and the speed of unification has been resisted by emphasis on the life-worlds of local communities.

We cannot easily over-emphasize the dangers of nationalistic and ethnic chauvinism. The two great World

Wars of the 20th century, together with the horrors of the holocaust, and continued ethnic conflicts in Europe will not allow us to ignore the dangers. The human race has paid a very high price to learn the terrible lessons of ethnic or national chauvinism, and though we see that the lessons have not sunk in everywhere, the new Europe of international cooperation and growing integration is a paradigmatic result of the lessons learned. Episodes of “ethnic cleansing,” in Bosnia, in Africa, and reflections on the European slaughterhouse of 5 or 6 decades back, give us every reason to think that strict and exclusive organization of human community in terms of conflicting ethnic identities is capable of turning almost any group into a killing machine. This is a powerful argument for cultural pluralism and in favor of Europe’s economic integration.

It is within this context that we can perhaps better appreciate the value of local community, family, locality, and even European national ethnic identities, where they are not strictly and exclusively defined in opposition to others. We best look on the outsiders living within ethnically defined communities, such as the European states and regions, as the natural alarm signals of any growing antagonism among these communities. This is to say that the genuine democratic health of any community is shown in its capability of including those who are other and different. Where those who are other and different have no real chance, this is the warning signal of some worrisome particularism. Thus, European institutions need to do more to put flesh on the bones of the right to free movement of people within the European Union. We must doubt that uni-directional assimilation to local language, culture, and custom is a reasonable price to ask of those who might better mediate between cultures and peoples. Moreover, it seems clear that long-time foreign European residents of European countries should be offered citizenship on the basis of constitutional allegiance rather than with reference to ethnic background. All of this is a call for integration within local communities.

Still, it seems equally clear that we would all be vastly disappointed, if, in the near future, a trip to Italy or Scotland were to have no cultural lessons which we could not equally learn in Ohio or New Jersey. We begin to appreciate anew the value of European diversity. Surely, few want it to disappear into a modernistic uniformity and homogeneity. Seeing that total uniformity is not desirable, and extremely unlikely in any case, we, then, better

appreciate that there are social anchors of local communities which enable them to resist homogenizing influences, including those of the market and the media. This is how it should be. In its new prosperity, this aspect of contemporary Europe can be strengthened by allowing for greater diversity, and moral support, among individuals within local communities. I don't know that Europe has yet found its Emerson. (I don't believe we can make of Nietzsche a European Emerson.) Integration is still too much a matter of assimilation to a dominant ethnic majority.

The Italians will remain Italian, the English English, and the Germans German. What does it mean, then, to say that a chief aim of German policy is to "Europeanize Germany," instead of Germanizing Europe? While I cannot pretend to know exactly what former Foreign Minister Genscher might have had in mind, I think that it is nonetheless possible to imagine what it means for Germany, or other central-European countries to be more fully European, or less distinctively nationalistic in problematic ways. Europe will not work, if it clings to the idea of intense and exclusionary ethnic unity and homogeneity. Crucial to "Europeanization" is that the other Europeans have important roles in what goes on in the geographic center of the continent. The best answer to the invasion of the life-world is reconstruction of the life-world, involving all concerned and affected.

I don't think I will be giving away any secrets, if I say that the other Europeans, the Dutch, the Danes, the Poles, the Austrians, and others have been among the severest critics of Germany and the Germans. It was chiefly Americans who spoke up for German reunification, while the Europeans more or less went along. The problems of trust on the continent have by no means all been solved, and it seems clear that a chief constraint on German influence within the European Union is that the Germans must continually earn the trust of their European neighbors. We see a reflection of this fact in German hesitancy on military undertakings around the world. But why should the Germans not concentrate on humanitarian relief, health care, and similar matters? Germany would do well to wait for the urgings of their European partners regarding involvement in military undertakings outside of NATO. If you want to understand why Europe accepts the half-century of American military presence, I believe you must reflect on the alternative possibilities for the defense of central Europe, from the perspective of

the Europeans.

I can think of few more important ways to build trust than by inviting the other Europeans within their own borders to participate fully in the life of their communities on the basis of equality and mutual respect. In this way, Europe's local communities and national societies may be better able to act in effective cooperation concerning common problems. A genuine and continent-wide European political world will be more effective in responding to economic and technological imperatives, if it is informed by experiments of interaction at the local level. As is shown by the difficulties of European foreign policy, and the problems of European integration, including those of the proposed common currency, Europe has yet to fully develop its common voice. A stronger common voice is needed, and it will ultimately depend on the prospect of local democratic consensus-building. The so-called democracy gap must be filled, particularly at the level of every-day life by more effective integration and cooperation within Europe's local communities. This is an "open communitarianism" in the Europe of regions and localities. It stands opposed to the old Hegelian dialectic of recognition through organized collective conflict.

4. Creative democracy, European style

We have heard much talk of dialogue in recent years, and this has largely come from the new Europe and from the philosophical traditions of its German-speaking countries. While we do not expect or desire Europe's ethnic and cultural diversity to disappear, I believe that substituting concern with inter-cultural dialogue for either assimilationist demands or exclusive focus on ethnic distinctiveness would be a great help in European integration. Our contemporary talk of dialogue is essentially anti-assimilationist.

We should not expect that the Europeans will conform to any single European paradigm. They will maintain their distinctive national languages and cultures. What is important is that they are able to negotiate their difference where they become problematic. The intensities or "thickness" of national identities are inversely proportional to the facility for mutual understanding. I do not see any great danger of a pan-European identity which would suppress European diversity. At present the degree of European identity stands at the level of the recogni-

tion of mutual dependence, lacking fuller articulation of how this may need to be expressed in the solution of common problems. Hence, a need arises for greater mutual engagement among individuals of different cultural backgrounds, within and between Europe's ethnically defined states.

The point evokes a quotation from John Dewey's essay "Creative Democracy, the Task before us" (1940). Dewey wrote, "I am inclined to believe, that the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on street corners to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day and in gatherings of friends in living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another."⁽⁷⁾ This is a call for communicative interaction among people from every walk of life. As Dewey puts the point, "everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sets and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life."⁽⁸⁾

This point, in turn, argues against the traditional European ethnic definitions of citizenship. It argues too against traditional European treatments of ethnic minorities. Cultural assimilation, understood in terms of conformity to a pre-existing cultural paradigm, is too much to demand as the price of full citizenship, or fuller interaction; and, flaws also exist in the traditional policy of organizing and separating people within a state in terms of their distinctive cultural and ethnic identities. The demand for assimilation does not take full advantage of diversity, and neither does sponsorship of cultural separation.

There is a need to sponsor or facilitate inter-cultural dialogue on a personal basis, within local communities. In consequence, local communities would be better prepared to resist either definition in narrow ethnic terms or homogenizing forces. At a time when the population of Frankfurt is 14% foreign, and parts of Wiesbaden are upwards of 30% foreign, Europe must look to the most effective means of integration on the local level. International cooperation and effective action may ultimately depend on the opportunities for advancement and interaction of Europe's foreign populations.

Interaction is worth thinking about in some detail. Consider, for instance, the planned expansion of the European Union to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. How are the nations of central Europe to

interact within this potential new political environment?(9) What will the free movement of people within the European Union, as guaranteed by the treaty of Rome, and the expansion of economic interaction, mean for the relations between Germany and its neighbors to the East? If current German citizens, descendent from the old *Sudenten* Germans, returned to the Czech Republic for instance, are there social and legal conditions under which they could function as good Europeans, or should free movement be restricted?

I recall another passage from Havel, speaking of a proposed treaty with Germany: "...that we will make suggestions on a definite step to accommodate the *Seudetendeutsch*, I will not hide from you."(10) This was written in 1991, yet I believe the matter is yet to be fully settled. I cannot help but think, in this connection, that mutual respect for European ethnic identities cannot be merely formal and purely universalistic. The weaker groups are deserving of some protection. Considering this point, the Eastward expansion should go slowly and with all due deliberation. Expansion of opportunities for interaction and economic cooperation should precede further expansion of NATO.

I want to close by briefly arguing that the problem of European integration are simply too complex to be solved without experimentation. We must look to political means to outline constraints on solutions, but on the other hand, legal constraints must be informed by the actual problems and every-day solutions of actual concrete interaction and local community life. Contemporary European critics of Deweyan democracy are much inclined to political reductionism with respect to the social problems of everyday life, and they do not sufficiently appreciate the continuities of the political with the potential for evolutionary development in the ethical governance of everyday life.

Thus, a student of Manfred Riedel's, Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, sees the contributions of American pragmatism to recent debates as an attempt to "separate political action from insights into the supposedly true or real world and its supposed normative consequences."(11) But nothing could be further from the pragmatic emphasis on the continuity of the political and the social-ethical. It appears that the author reads his Dewey with too many of Richard Rorty's annotations concerning the separation of public and private values and affairs.(12)

The central critical argument seems to be that since for Dewey, new forms and combinations of human cooperation have an “absolute and singular value,” such interaction of individuals “will not be permitted to be reduced to mere means in service of the state and its glorification.” There is frank suspicion of the Deweyan theme of self-realization through social service and interaction. This is viewed as deeply problematic, since it makes the state of war a “a very problematic condition, for political theory,” since “the power of the state and its sovereign position become abnormal.”(13).

The importance attached to war and the need to be prepared for war is instructive. Viewing moral community from the perspective of forms of political reductionism, it would seem natural that Dewey’s political thought, with its emphasis on creative democracy, and broad participation, should appear as a modernist “demystification” and a communitarian anti-statism. But in fact Dewey’s political thought requires us to make use of the results of communicative interactions within and between particular communities as a means to inform the political reconstruction of legally binding norms and guides of action. I’m inclined to remark, as well, that local interaction may serve international cooperation, even when it does not facilitate assimilation within the nation-state.

Just because modern Hegelianisms have wanted, paradoxically, to treat the state always as sovereign active subject, and never as object of democratic reconstruction, the old Hegelian Absolute continues slumbering on, bound by narrow interests and mere dreams of final absolute unity. The focus is on power and the organization of social-cultural forms to guarantee centralize power, instead of looking to the genuine social problems which political power may need to address. The chief problems of contemporary Europe include many which traditional-power politics cannot solve. This point is widely understood in Europe, and thus we speak of a New Europe. The impulse to hide intense particular interests under a veil of universalist and utopian ideology is—mostly—gone.

The insight that may be missing is that Dewey’s “cooperative intelligence” is intended to provide organized and informed input to political deliberation which is not otherwise available. Europeans continue to speak of their “democracy deficit.” I believe that this deficit needs to be made up, in part, by deeper interaction across ethnic boundaries, both those between states and those within them. Following the Deweyan triad of “freedom, equality,

and cooperativeness,” the international cooperativeness which might do so much to facilitate equalities among Europe’s ethnic diversity, will depend in significant degree upon the freedom of individuals for experiments in creative democracy, at the level of every-day life. While this can be facilitated by political reforms, it cannot be planned by isolated and overly centralized political power.

The perspective here is based fundamentally in the fallibilism of the pragmatist tradition. To say that our beliefs are subject to error and that we may benefit from the contributions of others is not to suspend our beliefs or throw our own abilities into question. The fact that one may be wrong or deficient, just because it applies to everything, applies to nothing effectively. It generates of itself no genuine doubts, unless a Cartesian anxiety is already present, undermining self-confidence. On the contrary, it is only by making use of our present beliefs and abilities that we can hope to come to any reasonable and effective assessment of differing beliefs and the contributions of others. I cannot find the genuine value others have to offer except by trying to estimate it from my own perspective. Similar points have been made by Richard Bernstein in his *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*,⁽¹⁴⁾ in discussions with H.-G. Gadamer. ⁽¹⁵⁾ Put in other words, this is to say that genuine dialogue depends on a non-chauvinistic and anti-assimilationist stance.

It is only by maintaining such a stance that we can avoid the overly concentrated nationalistic or international powers produced by the assimilationist demands of power politics. Europe can best diminish rigid nationalism and still avoid over centralization by facilitating genuine dialogue among and within its marvelously diverse populations in every locality.

Endnotes

1. Ruth Anna and Hilary Putnam, “The Quarrel Between Poetry and Philosophy,” *Bulletin of the Santayana Society*, No. 14, Fall 1996, p. 1.
2. Václav Havel, *Von Welcher Zukunft ich Träume*, translation of “*Letní Premítání*,” (Berlin: Rowohlt Verlag, 1992), pp. 11-12.

3. F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit, The Errors of Socialism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 27.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
5. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Betrachtungen über die Revolution in Europa*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1990).
6. Cf. for instance, Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung, Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992).
7. John Dewey, "Creative Democracy, The Task Before Us," in Jo Ann Boydston (ed.) *John Dewey, The Later Works*, Vol. 14, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 227.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-28.
9. Cf. Gregory Treverton, *America, Germany, and the Future of Europe*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 199ff.
10. Havel, *Zukunft*, p. 30.
11. Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, *Postmoderne Theorien des Politischen, Pragmatismus, Kommunitarismus, Pluralismus*, (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996), p. 17.
12. Cf. H.G. Callaway, "Sidney Hook, *John Dewey, An Intellectual Portrait* (with an Introduction by Richard Rorty)" *Canadian Philosophical Reviews*, 1995 Vol. XV, No. 6, pp. 403-407.
13. Schönherr-Mann, *Postmoderne*, p. 62.
14. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. 137-38.
15. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in Rabinow, Paul and William M. Sullivan (eds), *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 151-52.