

Walking Away from Chaco Canyon: Gift-Giving, Trust, and Environmental Decision Making in a Pre-State Urban Society

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Around 750 A.D., new settlements in Chaco Canyon in the Southwest United States began moving toward intensified urban form, monumental architecture, and increased hierarchical social organization that bordered on nation-state authority. But around 1140 A.D., the relatively concentrated populations in Chaco Canyon dispersed over just a few generations. At new destinations emigrants from the canyon did not reinstate the urban intensities and political hierarchies that had dominated there. Four lessons from this history can be drawn. First, the model of social and political coordination that best fits the history of Chaco Canyon is one of escalating and deescalating gift-giving. Models that instead appeal to purely transactional relations, such as contracts, are historically and philosophically inadequate. Second, and more broadly, the real power of any well-functioning, complex, and urbanized society must be a reserve of generalized social trust. This was true then, and remains true today. Third, while environmental pressures play important roles in the formation of foundational urban settlements such as those in Chaco Canyon, we should be careful not to explain too much by them. As then, our own environmental challenges call upon us to nurture political arrangements, especially in our cities, that can address environmental constraints and challenges. Except perhaps when circumstances become impossibly dire, we should treat environmental constraints as the boundaries into which we must fit ourselves through political means. Finally, philosophers should investigate developments in historical urban settlements. Such cases are indispensable for understanding human cooperation, forms of social authority, and environmental decision making.

I. TRANSACTIONS AND GIFTS

Beginning around 750 A.D., thousands of people began living in relatively dense urban settlements in and around Chaco Canyon in what is now northwest New Mexico. The evolving modes of social authority seemed to be moving toward something like what we see in contemporary nation-states.¹ This push was embodied in cultural unity, extensive road construction, and daunting monumental building. But around 1140 A.D., the people migrated away from the canyon.

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¹ For a discussion of what it takes to be a nation state, see Joseph Tainter, "The Nature of Complex Societies," in *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 22–38. Also see Monica L. Smith, "What It Takes to Get Complex," in *The Comparative Archeology of Complex Societies*, ed. Michael E. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 44–61.

Exactly what happened there and why has been the subject of many debates. So far most of these debates have been taken up within archeology and anthropology. Part of the significance of this history is that the human experiment there seems to lie at the crucial junction between pre-state societies and modern nation-state societies. Contemporary labels for the social integration reached at Chaco Canyon include *pre-state societies*, *middle-range societies*, or *intermediate-level societies*.² It is especially important that Chaco Canyon sites are examples of foundational urban settlements. Foundational settlements are settlements that are not merely the extensions of already established urban centers.³ For example, outposts, trading seaports, and colonies are not original settlements. These are more like extended organs of societies and cities, rather than whole and self-sufficient organisms in their own right. Foundational settlements are especially important to understanding the nature and evolution of unified forms of authority in human societies. Descriptively, we can see in foundational settlements how ecological, technological, and social elements can be drawn together in ways that make condensed urban forms and increased social cohesion necessary. The intensification of human civilization into urban centers is not a mere choice among other options. It is a solution to several environmental and social challenges. Philosophically, foundational urban settlements offer us lenses through which we can see social possibilities and their pre-conditions. We can see, sometimes in contrast to what came before foundational settlements, and what came after them, the outlines of the promises and limits of urban organization. We can see what goods they enable and what goods they may foreclose.

My discussion proceeds as follows. Section two briefly outlines the history of Chaco Canyon spanning its coalesce and dispersal, focusing especially on its pre-state years. In section three, I argue that there are good reasons to hazard philosophical histories in a Hegelian vein of the social and political organization that was reached there and why it then dispersed. Such histories are aimed at understanding deep motives driving foundational settlements and their dissolution. In sections four and five, I discuss two broad models of social organization. Transactional models include at least contracts, bargaining, and debt. These models share two ideas. First, they hold that even *widespread* and *collective* cooperation can be understood primarily in terms of the interests of individuals or small groups. Second, transactional models hold that such cooperation can be modeled in terms of their *transparent* and *discrete transactions* with other individuals or small groups. Such models, I argue, fail to account for the ways that Chaco culture took shape and the ways it dispersed. Instead, I propose a model that features gift-giving as the central social

² See Susan Keech McIntosh for a discussion of such terms in "Pathways to Complexity: An African Perspective," in *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa*, ed. Susan Keech McIntosh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–2.

³ Ben A. Nelson, "Mesoamerican Objects and Symbols in Chaco Canyon Contexts," in *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center*, ed. Stephen H. Lekson (Sante Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), pp. 366–67.

interaction that enabled foundational settlements to arise. On this model, in contrast to transactional models, coalescing social and political organization traffics primarily in shared cultural interests and in social ambiguity. It does not establish social power vested in a determinate authority. Rather, it builds a general and widespread trust. Section six is a reflection on how issues of trust in contemporary urban settings continue to be related to environmental decision-making.

II. COALESCENCE, FLORESCENCE, AND DISPERSAL

Chaco Canyon lies just to the west of the continental divide of North America at an elevation of 6,200 feet. There is general agreement among experts that ancestral Pueblo settlements began there around 800 A.D. for reasons of ecological prudence. The canyon and area around it provided relatively more reliable water, a slightly extended growing season, and the relatively close provision of materials such as trees and wild food such as rabbits and deer. While preferable to other nearby areas, in absolute terms, the environmental challenges to permanent human settlement in the canyon and the plateaus around it remained formidable.⁴ For those that settled there, some degree of shared cooperation was established through the need for collective subsistence.

But altogether it does not appear that ecological need necessitated the particular form of hierarchical political authority that seems to have begun in earnest around 900 A.D. To be sure, some version of social cooperation was required, but Chaco culture developed far beyond what was needed for subsistence. From around 1040 to 1135 A.D., about a dozen family residences were expanded in size and extravagance from previously existing family dwelling into what are called Great Houses—the four most prominent being Pueblo Bonito in the canyon, Chetro Ketl next to it, Pueblo del Arroyo down the river a little, and Pueblo Alto on a mesa above. This period is sometimes referred to as Chaco Canyon's florescence.⁵ These Great Houses were focal points of what has become known generally as Chaco culture, which seems to have encompassed beyond the canyon itself to include much of the San Juan river basin. In all, Chaco culture seems to have dominated roughly what is now the northwest quarter of present day New Mexico and into the modern four corners region until about 1140 A.D.

To build these monumental structures hundreds of thousands of pieces of timber were carried by hand, sometimes at distances of fifty miles. Housing clusters became unified and architecturally integrated into monumental residences. Multi-story buildings such as Pueblo Bonito were placed at stunning locations, framed

⁴ R. Gwinn Vivian, Carla R. Van West, Jeffrey S. Dean, Nancy J. Akins, Mollie S. Toll, and Thomas C. Windes, "Ecology and Economy," in *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center*, ed. Stephen H. Lekson (Sante Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), pp. 45–65.

⁵ William Lipe, "Notes from the North," in *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center*, ed. Stephen H. Lekson (Sante Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), pp. 261, 280–95.

against dramatic cliffs and geological features such as Threatening Rock, which is an immense outcropping of the canyon wall. Extensive foundations were laid for Pueblo Bonito that reached well beyond its monumental walls.⁶ Collections of smaller satellite farmhouses proliferated in and around the canyon. Networks of dams and irrigation ditches were extended and reinforced. New roads were overbuilt to be wider, flatter, and straighter than what was required for travel or trade alone. Specialized, artisanal trade goods such as pottery, jewelry, lithic tools, and exotic birds were imported, some from hundreds of miles away, and disproportionately concentrated in the great houses.

Most archeologists agree that Chaco culture reached an important level of social stratification, and the standard view is that at the height of its complexity Chaco Canyon hosted distinct social classes. Evidence for such social distinctions comes from, for example, differences in burial placements and the artifacts associated with them. Those of higher status in Chaco were buried in the oldest, and therefore presumably the most prestigious, parts of the Great Houses. Such burials certainly contained the greatest wealth and most significant cultural symbols. Then there are the monumental Great Houses themselves. The Chacoan Great Houses were architecturally distinct in their size and formalization. Evidence suggests that only a few families seem to have occupied these structures all year long. Other family groups seem to have mostly lived nearby in far smaller shelters, and came and went to the Great Houses, though perhaps thousands at a time, for shared ceremonial events.⁷ As Lekson, Windes, and McKenna put it,

If we are correct that Great Houses were elite residences, then Chaco was also socially and politically hierarchical, within itself and within its region. Different groups at Chaco labored at different tasks: ruling, priesting, building, crafting, and so forth. While almost all may have farmed, there was also (we think) a division of labor or, at least, of tasks.⁸

Scholars of Chaco agree that settlements associated with Chaco culture centered in the canyon achieved a high level of coordination with respect to cultural unity and political authority.⁹ But archeologists and anthropologists examining Chaco sites are still in some dispute about the nature of this coordination. They roughly divide on this issue between treating Chaco culture and its monuments as either grounded in ritual ceremony and symbolism or instead grounded in political power.¹⁰

⁶ John R. Stein, Dabney Ford, and Richard Friedman, "Reconstructing Pueblo Bonito," in *Pueblo Bonito: Center of the Chacoan World*, ed. Jill E. Neitzel (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 33–60.

⁷ Lipe, "Notes from the North," pp. 286–95.

⁸ Steven H. Lekson, Thomas Windes, and Peter J. McKenna, "Architecture," in *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center*, ed. Stephen H. Lekson (Sante Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), p. 112.

⁹ James Judge and Linda Cordell, "Society and Polity" in Lekson, *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center*, pp. 189–210.

¹⁰ Lynne Sebastian, "The Chaco Synthesis," in Lekson, *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center*, p. 407.

This debate is illustrated by their contrasting accounts of Chaco Canyon, which explain social goods such as food and construction. On the one hand, the enormous energy required for projects such as the Great Houses suggest that perhaps there was political power and coercion at work, perhaps backed by some emerging authority of force. The amount of human labor required for the completion and maintenance of the grand houses and overbuilt roads is simply astonishing, especially given the regional distribution of resources such as trees, compounded by the lack of beasts of burden such as horses.¹¹ It may be difficult to accept that such toil could have been done without some sort of tangible threat behind it.

A first natural thought is that the Great Houses stored food, and that gaining access to such insurance in hard times required first the labor to produce these buildings. But this simple hypothesis is undermined by the fact that even the largest Great Houses did not seem to have permanently stored exceptionally large amounts of essential goods. Moreover, Wilcott Toll argues that typical patterns of food sharing were diffuse, likely ranging across linguistic groups, and that “Most organization took place at the household level, the primary unit of production for most tasks.”¹²

Another thought is that the organization of Chaco culture may have been built on centralized violence and threats of violence. There was a system of line-of-sight communication towers between Chaco and other nearby settlements. While it is possible that some degree of coercive control may have been passed this way, it was likely limited. Mechanisms for dispatching violence systematically are undermined by large geographical distances.¹³ Furthermore, though violence did occur, it was not especially pronounced at the times when it would have been most politically useful. Violence was no more likely at times of increased food production and construction, or later when people were dispersing at the highest rates.¹⁴ Moreover, what violence there was is entirely compatible with small-scale group violence, which occurred before and after Chaco’s cultural dominance. Violence does not seem to have been integral to the intensification of social organization. Violence did not put people to work, and it did not keep them in place.

Overall, the most plausible outline is that elites played primarily social advisory roles, most likely coordinating religious knowledge and ceremony, perhaps in conjunction with prudential concerns such as planting and harvests.¹⁵ As an embodiment of their role, such families were housed in structures that projected their social and cultural status, especially in relation to the cosmos.¹⁶

At least in the popular mind of some, it is not Chaco Canyon’s coalescence that is

¹¹ Mary P. Metcalf, “Construction Labor at Pueblo Bonito,” in *Pueblo Bonito: Center of the Chacoan World*, ed. Jill E. Neitzel (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 72–79.

¹² H. Wilcott Toll, “Organization and Production” in *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center*, ed. Stephen H. Lekson (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), pp. 117–51.

¹³ Lipe, “Notes from the North,” p. 287.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 291–94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹⁶ Stein, Ford, and Friedman, “Reconstructing Pueblo Bonito,” pp. 58–59.

the most striking aspect of its history. Rather, many focus instead on what is sometimes characterized as its collapse, which is typically dated to about 1140 A.D. This terminal event seems to be the last of several natural fluctuations in population that occurred for a few hundred years prior, and was concluded within a few decades. Sometimes this final dramatic drop in population is accompanied with lurid tales of cannibalism, sometimes as part of modern cautionary tales against ecocide.¹⁷ But while everyone agrees the dispersion from Chaco Canyon was rapid—within a generation or so—it appears it was not especially turbulent or violent all things considered. There is some evidence suggesting violence, but there were no wars. The dispersion was dramatic and terminal for at least several hundred years, but it was not apocalyptic.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the dispersion from Chaco Canyon is clear and notable for at least two reasons. First, its centralized and hierarchical social structures, epitomized by a few high status burials and the elite residences of the Great Houses, were lost. Second, also lost was Chaco Canyon's regional dominance as a culture. Its importance had been declared by the fact that most monumental roads converged on the Great Houses in "downtown" Chaco. Especially striking is the fact that descendants of Chaco, who appear to have mostly migrated to the south and to the north to places such as Mesa Verde in present day Colorado, did not recreate the hierarchical features of Chaco culture at their new homes. This fact also undermines any account on which ecological necessity or disaster *alone* required the pre-state forms of cooperation and authority that Chaco culture took. The places that emigrants from Chaco Canyon landed were not so different that it would have been impossible to reproduce much of Chaco culture if they had chosen to do so. But they did not. Environments do place boundaries upon the cultures people can adopt, but environments do not uniquely determine them.

In all, the most reasonable interpretation is to believe that people came to reject the forms of cooperation and authority political elites were developing and testing there—so much so that even decedents continued to reject them for centuries afterwards.¹⁹ It does not appear that those who moved away from Chaco Canyon were forced to do so *merely* out of ecological desperation, though fluctuating drought conditions certainly put strains on possibilities for cooperation. Rather, they judged the overall situation socially undesirable and pursued other possibilities available to them.

III. PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY

Hegel outlines three approaches to history.²⁰ First, the *original* history of a time

¹⁷ See a response to this sort of explanation in Michael Wilcox, "Marketing Conquest and the Vanishing Indians," in *Questioning Collapse: Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability, and the Aftermath of Empire*, ed. Patricia A. McAnany and Norman Yoffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 113–41.

¹⁸ Lipe, "Notes from the North," p. 310.

¹⁹ Judge and Cordell, "Society and Polity," pp. 189–210.

²⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, "Introduction," in *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 1–115.

and place is the history generated at the time in writing, monuments, and speech. Second, the *reflective* history of a time and place is composed after that time has passed, and interprets the past in light of new agendas. Finally, for Hegel, *philosophical* history interprets history as manifesting the underlying rational processes of the world and humanity. Notice that his taxonomy ranges from what can be the most objectively certain—namely, original history—to what may seem to reach too far—the interpretive postulates of philosophical history. But also notice that this movement goes from the least philosophically significant to the potentially most profound.

Many archeologists have cautioned against overly ambitious interpretations of life in places like Chaco Canyon. Archeologists have long warned against trying to read too much about culture and social organization—especially claims about ideas, behavior, and motives—out of material artifacts such as pottery, roads, and buildings.²¹ Many tend to be the most comfortable with original history, less comfortable with reflective history, and even less comfortable with philosophical history. They rightly point out that the uncontroversial material relevant to understanding Chaco is largely original, for instance in the archeological evidence. But forms of evidence such as potshards, seed sedimentation in riverbeds, the placement of buildings, and so on, all underdetermine the deeper meanings of important social events, for example, possible changes in social organization, such as the rise of hierarchies. Even the most plausible explanations can only ever be explanations of best fit with current empirical evidence. Reflective histories, such as those that can be found in oral traditions, may not be as neutral as one would hope if we are trying to reconstruct events and choices of the past.²² In any case, neither archeological evidence nor oral histories can alone establish with certainty how people there conceived of their world or why people made the choices that they did.

Additionally, we should heed David Harvey's reminder that even forms of life that broadly fall under some shared category still often exhibit wide variations within. For example, we should not presume that the real substance of Athenian democracy bears any important similarity to the real substance of democracy in modern Sao Paulo.²³ Forms of cooperation cannot be fully separated from their instantiations. Cooperation is constituted by how it comes to be, how many people it involves, who it benefits, how it replicates itself, exactly which combinations of opportunities and responsibilities it sets in place, and so on. The precise nature

²¹ Though for some insight on the nuances, see Robert D. Drennan and Christian E. Peterson, "Challenges for Comparative Study of Early Complex Societies," in *The Comparative Archeology of Complex Societies*, ed. Michael E. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 62–87.

²² See Leigh J. Kuwanwisiwma "Yupkoyvi: The Hopi Story of Chaco Canyon," in *In Search of Chaco: New Approaches to an Archeological Enigma*, ed. David Grant Nobel (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2004), pp. 41–47. Also see Richard Begay, "Tse Biyah Anii'ahi: Chaco Canyon and Its Place in Navajo History," in *In Search of Chaco: New Approaches to an Archeological Enigma*, ed. David Grant Nobel (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2004), pp. 55–60.

²³ David Harvey, "Contested Cities: Social Processes and Spatial Form," in *The City Reader*, ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (London: Routledge), p. 232.

and scope of any form of cooperation is changed by irrigation, by trade networks, by the telegraph, and by the nuclear bomb.²⁴

Archeologists, cultural anthropologists, and political scientists working in historical cases sometimes address the issues above by describing stage-wise taxonomies of social and technological evolution. Human societies are put on various charts that can range from hunter-gathering to the mega-cities of India and China. This way of representing cultures has been debated for particular cases, including Chaco Canyon.²⁵ Importantly, a trend among archeologists is to acknowledge that patterns of development are likely more varied than previously assumed. The lines from hunter-gatherers to mega-cities are not always straight, and there are many different kinds of paths that move back and forth toward one or the other. Such variations are yet another reason to be cautious about too rigid interpretations of social evolution.

What can be reasonably said, then, about the deep histories of social cooperation at the pre-state threshold? Must all interpretation fly beyond the objective evidence? We should attempt to build up a philosophical history of Chaco Canyon that does more than chronicle a series of separate and accidental details. We should try to discover the social origins of the urban forms there, and ideally these origins would count the relationships there as something beyond mere collections of people who happen to have found themselves together.²⁶ We should seek some middle ground between overly rigid stage-wise taxonomies and too much muddling about in every detail. Whether, as Hegel may have thought, all history can be shown to be a working out of some rational principle, it is independently plausible that humans are acting on reasons when they put themselves together into urban forms. We should care about modeling those reasons as best we can.

We should care especially about cases like Chaco Canyon even though it presents its own evidential challenges. One comparative challenge is that other histories more obviously reveal themselves with greater archeological and cultural clarity. We know a lot about the urban developments of the Greeks, the Romans, the Mayans, the Chinese, and the Persians — all of which left relatively straightforward evidence detailing what they believed they were up to in discursive representations, such as writing. But there are at least three reasons to dwell on the social experiences of pre-state societies such as Chaco Canyon, and hazard interpretations of them.

²⁴ Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994); Sam Bass Warner, "Evolution and Transformation: The American Industrial Metropolis, 1840–1940," in *The City Reader*, 5th ed., ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 55–64.

²⁵ For a comprehensive view of the Chaco Synthesis project involving many experts on Chaco culture, see Stephen H. Lekson, ed., *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006).

²⁶ Augustine appeals to a distinction between genuine cities and mere collections of people. See Augustine, *City of God against the Pagans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), bk. 2.

One reason to entertain deeper interpretations is that we should not suppose that people writing in and about their own times can or do succeed in peering through the ambiguities of their own situation. Various impulses toward coordination are not always more clear to their wielders or to their subjects than to outsiders. A closer proximity in space and time does not necessarily mean clearer insight. This is also a reason to not merely defer to oral histories. It is possible to be so close to an event or social arrangement to not be able to fully grasp it.

Second, seemingly anomalous sites may reveal things not found in more expected sites. If our descriptive and normative models of urban authority are too neat, it may be because we have pre-emptively—though perhaps unknowingly—already excised those experiences that fall outside of the patterns more commonly discussed.²⁷ I submit that one especially important kind of human settlement experience that is difficult to fit into standard, Western accounts of cooperation is that of a rapid coalescence and dispersion in foundational pre-state societies. In this essay, I focus on Chaco Canyon, but several other societies have seemingly avoided—perhaps *intentionally*—intensified social and political authority. Some have argued that this deliberate choice can be seen in some societies in southeast Asia,²⁸ potlatch traditions of the U.S. northwest,²⁹ and some settlement patterns in sub-Saharan Africa.³⁰ More philosophical study of such places and what they have to teach us about social cooperation and authority is certainly needed.

Third, such near-state episodes can too easily be treated as instances of aborted human political evolution—as if modern nation-state societies are the natural and best outcome of human living in minimally hospitable circumstances. On this loaded expectation, societies that do not bend toward nation-state arrangements have failed. While the modern terminology of “pre-state” societies tries to imply an evaluative neutrality about the historical worth of various societies, overall popular discourse nevertheless seems to suggest that pre-state societies that never came into full statehood, or perhaps have fallen from it, must be internally deficient or unlucky. As a corollary, such societies are treated as useful only insofar as they promise to reveal to us how we might avoid sharing their fate. For example, the title of Jared Diamond’s popular book, which features the history of Chaco prominently, is titled *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*.³¹ It is mostly left unexplored that such societies purposefully chose, all things considered, to avoid or abandon greater cultural intensification.

²⁷ McIntosh, “Pathways to complexity: An African perspective,” pp. 1–2.

²⁸ James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

²⁹ Aldona Jonaitis, *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch* (New York: University of Washington Press, 1991).

³⁰ McIntosh, “Pathways to Complexity: An African Perspective,” pp. 1–30.

³¹ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (London: Penguin, 2006).

IV. CONTRACTS

Now it can be asked: what is the most plausible philosophical history of Chaco Canyon that comports with the evidence?

In addition to the evidence already given, there are general reasons to doubt that Chaco Culture, as a foundational settlement, was first and foremost organized by means of systematic violence or threats of violence. Consolidation of social cooperation does not necessarily require the centralization of violence that we often see in more socially complex societies. Anthropologists and archeologists have rightly emphasized that powers of centralized violence are late arrivals to foundational social organizations. Authoritative force cannot be the primordial source of stable foundational societies because it is something that itself first requires an existing stable order. To be sure, the authority of force can bootstrap itself up once it is sufficiently established. As Niccolo Machiavelli pointed out, along with many others, leaders can use organized violence to control or instigate further violence.³² But force cannot cobble the shoes for its own bootstraps.

It is easy to forget that one common feature of current nation-states is that they attempt to unite forms of social power and authority that are originally very different in nature and scope. This can conceal the nature of their coalescence and how they might come back apart. It is important to build up a picture of the transitions into and away from state-like organizations that does not assume that the forms of power and authority we find in them now must also explain their very origin. It is important to have a picture that does not assume that where people end up was intended by them all along.

Sometimes it is thought that extended, stable societies have formed in order to create surpluses over and above what was required for subsistence, and a deeper aim of this was to create a means of power over others. But even the indirect coercion of withholding food and support also seems to only come *after* some high degree of cooperation is already established. Across a wide range of cases, it appears more likely that foundational urban settlements were generated to cope with shortages. Social cooperation helped to distribute more reliably ecological and biological scarcities than would be possible without cooperation.³³

For these reasons, I focus on models that account for cooperation—in at least pre-state, foundational societies—predominantly in terms of some version of voluntary choice. In this section I focus on the transactional model of contracts. In the next I focus on systems of gift-giving. The transactional models discussed here share in common two main ideas. First, widespread and collective cooperation can be understood primarily in terms of the interests of individuals, or perhaps their own small groups. Second, such cooperation can be modeled in terms of

³² Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. James B. Atkinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976).

³³ Tainter, "The Nature of Complex Societies," pp. 31–38.

their transparent and discrete transactions with other individuals or small groups. Instances of cooperation are transparent insofar as the terms are set in advance and known to all parties. Instances of cooperation are discrete insofar as they can be wholly completed without any residual obligation.

Contract models take promising to be the central mechanism of cooperation into pre-state societies, and take successful use of this mechanism to be the basis of social and political organization. Broadly speaking, contract models hold that societies are held together by promises that individuals make and keep, where the terms of these contracts are fairly clear and explicit in what they expect to gain in return, such as loyalty and labor in exchange for protections of life and property. There are at least four problems with contract models as far as Chaco culture is concerned.

First, admittedly, such foundational settlements would have to find innovative ways to concede to their ecological circumstance—the provisioning of water, food, shelter. But thinking carefully through cases like Chaco pose serious problems for all accounts of political organization grounded in purely transactional contracts. When people began to settle in Chaco Canyon and surrounding areas, conditions would have been harsh enough to require some minimal level of cooperation, for instance, the courtesy of not raiding one another. But conditions were not so harsh as to require a comprehensive political organization of the sort that would prompt monumental constructions for cultural elites that went well beyond the personal interests of others.

One response available to contract theorists is to present a notion of contract as something held more broadly. Instead of supposing that contracts between individuals explain successful organization, figures such as Hobbes may present the notion of promising contracts as something directed at some shared, collective authority. For Hobbes, instituting an overwhelming political force was a pre-condition for the binding nature of contracts. If one can escape promises, he supposed, then there can be no reliable system of promise-making that will reliably allow social cooperation. Thus, establishing social cooperation, for Hobbes, meant allegiance to a larger political authority, and not primarily to other individuals themselves.³⁴ Such a move runs into the second problem with contract models, and one that will be a reoccurring issue for other transactional models. The problem is that the original explanation, a simple one involving promises, in order to fit the phenomenon, must be so stretched that it has become a different explanation. People can speak of a social contract, and they even sometimes do, but this notion is unrecognizable as the notion of contract with which we began. The notion we began with is the idea that contracts are discrete promises between individuals or small groups. The new proposal is amended by now requiring promises to collective authorities. The

³⁴ Here the seminal illustration of working through these sorts of issues is probably his discussion of the “Laws of Nature” in chap. 14. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994).

expectation of explicit terms is also amended such that one can agree to the general terms of abiding by that collective authority. Both of these changes are significant modifications of the original model. The modified proposal is no longer so simple in its transactional nature.

Third, as social intensification increased it would have been impossible for people to consciously and explicitly agree to a rising political organization at the time it was occurring. This impossibility rests on the fact that cultural and political forms achieved in Chaco were genuinely new and novel. They were geographically unique and socially original. It would have been impossible for anyone then to know what political organization in the particular world of Chaco would really amount to in the future, and impossible to know how needless or oppressive it would have to become before it would be reasonable to abandon it.

Fourth, notice that the notion of a contract or promise is not especially explanatory as far as social cooperation goes. Promising is a mechanism for agreement, but not an explanation for *why* people would seek agreement. Insofar as we are making conjectures about the philosophical history of Chaco culture, pointing to contracts as an explanation for agreement is not that far from explaining agreement by claiming that agreement occurred.

V. GIFT-GIVING, BARGAINING, AND DEBT

I have so far argued that what we know about Chaco Canyon does not comport well with philosophical models of its history that feature as their fundamental explanation coordinated violence, extortion through withholding necessary goods, or simple notions of contracts. In this section, I argue that we should look to models that take systematic gift-giving as the central mechanism of social cooperation.

It should be emphasized that gift-giving is serious social business, not less serious than explicit promising or written contracts, and not less serious than the exercise of governmental force. I have absolutely no intention of romanticizing gift-giving as a basis for utopian visions. What I do propose is that the concepts and social logic of gift-giving offer important resources for understanding the overall cooperative shape of foundational societies such as Chaco Canyon. I suggest below that gift-giving remains an important foundation even in contemporary cities.

The central thread of the argument is as follows: a gift-giving model fits well with, and explains, the levels of social organization and social authority that seemed to have been reached in and around Chaco Canyon. It furthermore does a good job of explaining why the coalescence and dispersion took the form that it did. I make my case now by laying out several of the central features of the social logic of gift-giving, and how they fit with and explain the Chaco case. Along the way, I address two final transactional explanations: bargaining and systems of debt.

One important aspect of any system of cooperation in larger, complex societies is that it must somehow address incommensurability and diversity of participation. In such circumstances, there need to be means for cooperation even when equivalent or similar goods or services cannot be exchanged, even over long scales of time. For

example, a system of gift-giving can work even when food now cannot be traded for food later. Gift-giving is appropriate in situations in which people are somehow expected to contribute to general projects, but where they can only do so in very different ways, for example, to monumental buildings that are publicly shared as cultural goods. Gift-giving is also especially appropriate in circumstances of social inequality. As Aristotle notes, people cannot coherently treat their relationship to their parents as an obvious debt that must be repaid in kind since children cannot possibly return the benefit of bringing their parents into existence. Instead a child's proper response is to ungrudgingly offer meaningful gifts of honor and respect.³⁵ Similarly, in places like Chaco, people gift their efforts to community projects—some with labor and the sustenance of food, others with craftsmanship, and others with ceremonial skills. This is because there were clearly specializations of skills.

Other models may seem equally able to address these points, however. Gift-giving is not the only sort of social engagement that can come to terms with exchanging incommensurable goods. Models of social organization that build from the notion of bargaining begin by imagining a world in which there is some competition for resources and perhaps other social goods, but where there are also potential gains to cooperation. In short, situations that call for bargaining involve some important scarcity and are such that working with others is potentially better for all, even if not everyone is made better off to the same degree or in the same way. The historical situation in and around Chaco Canyon would seem to fit this situation well. Furthermore, an actual embodiment of bargaining, namely trade, was an important dimension of social organization there.³⁶

Bargaining models share at least one problem in common with contract models. Namely, small group safety nets of exchange, and even networks of long-distance trade, do not require the comprehensive political organization found in Chaco Canyon. If a narrow notion of self-interest is assumed, as they are in bargaining models, it is unclear why people would voluntarily participate in wider forms of cooperation beyond what was required to meet prudential needs.

Within gift-giving, the challenges of incommensurability in diverse societies are readily met. The incommensurability of gift-giving is compatible with some amount of scripted exchanges. In developed forms, social gift-giving is often integrated with activities such as courtship and business relationships, public events, and holidays, and quasi-private events such as marriages.³⁷ But even when such contributions are compensated in some broad sense, it is understood that such compensation is a kind of acknowledgement and a symbol of thanks as much as it is an equivalent repayment in full. We do not need to imagine that this is all psychologically enjoyed or always appreciated. What we are looking for is a model of coalescence that can

³⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), bk. 7, 1163b15–20.

³⁶ Nelson, "Mesoamerican Objects and Symbols in Chaco Canyon Contexts," pp. 360–61.

³⁷ For example, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "Gifts Gone Wrong," in *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 67–99.

encompass the fact that in complex, pre-state societies such as Chaco not everyone was in a position to contribute in the same ways, and yet many must have found ways to add themselves to its collective projects. I am suggesting that we best understand the nature of their contributions if we interpret them in terms of cultural gifts to shared cultural projects, rather than as discharging contracts or bargains made under environmental or political threat.

Here is a second consideration. A model of gift-giving also fits well with circumstances imbued with social meaning and for circumstances of ambiguous psychological intentions. The meaningful content of what is to be given and taken in any social exchange is often itself underspecified, especially when compared to the relative precision of written agreements or explicit promises. But, of course, for gifts to work as they do, the meaning of gifts cannot be endlessly vague. To answer this problem, custom and cultural meaning give shape to the content of gifts. Cultures set boundaries on meanings of various gifts. Contributions to shared projects and ceremonial practices count as welcomed social gifts in societies in whatever ways societies choose to count them, at least on their face. Of course, the social negotiations that go on under the surface of public gift-giving are deep and complex. Systems of gift-giving can be better or worse suited for their environments. They can be better or worse suited for how people treat one another. The point now is just that social practices about gift-giving are suited to accommodate incommensurability and ambiguous motivations without becoming a free-for-all. Even within socially bounded meaning, the actual psychological intentions behind gifts can be deeply ambiguous. Gift-giving can be a means of genuine concern for others, or a sincere attempt to contribute to the common good according to ability. But they can also be a means of ingratiation, self-promotion, or even an assertion of power. Gifts can be used to humiliate their receivers. Gift-givers themselves may not even really understand their own motives or all of the social implications of the gifts they give. This will be especially true for children, or for newcomers, and especially true where gifts serve multiple purposes simultaneously. For such reasons, how we interpret the motivations behind a gift may evolve over time as more comes to be known about the concrete habits of particular gift-givers and particular gift-receivers. Again, cultures will set some bounds of what psychological intentions can be reasonably attributed to various gifts, the manner in which they are made, the customs of reciprocity that they create, and so on.

So far we have seen that the forms of organization found in places such as Chaco Canyon can emerge in part because gift-giving can traffic in incommensurable goods, can live within culturally bounded meaning, and can tolerate ambiguous intentions. Perfectly mundane acts of cooperation and sharing can be understood as gifts—gifts that can be exchanged without mathematical remainder, but which carry a meaningful and lasting residue. Shared projects such as dam construction and maintenance can grow over generations into projects such as Great Houses through the iterated reciprocity of gifts cycled back and forth and systematically shared.

Here is a third important feature of cooperation through gifts. Any conditions of what counts as reasonable reciprocity in gift-giving relationships are often under negotiation and renegotiation. Givers can attempt to strengthen relationships by offering *more* of what they already provide—more corn, more labor. Or they can offer a new kind of gift—innovations in construction, exotic trade goods from afar, new forms of agricultural prediction, or new interpretations of cosmic meaning. But even movements toward increased generosity must ultimately wait on gift-receivers to decide whether such gifts will be welcomed under the same description they are given. To even count as generosity, gifts must be received as generous, and not as, say, shaming or entrapment. Going the other direction, givers can offer less, or restrict what was given before. Here, too, the change in behavior must wait on receivers to acquiesce. For example, to preserve gift-giving relationships, withdrawal or withholding must be understood as reasonable self-preservation, and not as spite or greed. Furthermore, notions of what count as generous gifts change as some come to have more than others, or come to have monopolies on certain necessary goods, and so on. Which gifts reasonably count as generous change depending upon, for instance, whether a society is suffering a natural disaster. The very same offer of labor or corn or spiritual guidance may be taken as beneficence in one circumstance, and miserliness in another.

This continual negotiation of what falls within the bounds of reasonableness also means that there are withdrawal points at nearly every turn, and chances for cooperation to end by one-sided dissolution. Though the breaking points in systems of gift-giving are everywhere, they cannot be known in advance or in the groundless abstract. They lie at the places where the reciprocities available fail to be compelling, especially viewed within social patterns over time. But such breaking points are not as clearly instigated as someone breaking a promise by not doing something they said they would, or by doing something they promised they would not. Or, if it seems to come to this in dramatic moments, they are really a final expression of far deeper forms of distrust under the surface.

Whereas contracts, bargains, and debts are underwritten by the threat of force and retaliation, gift-giving relationships are underwritten by the possibility of abandonment and withdrawal. Failed gift-giving arrangements are not dissolved by retaliation. They are not ended by attempts to forcibly take back what was already given. They are not ended by attempts to force others to deliver on failed promises. Rather, systems of gift-giving are dissolved by intentional neglect. Geographically, failed systems of gift-giving are ended by leaving. And this is one of the most striking features of Chaco. Most people seemed to have simply left and then chose not to repeat elsewhere the pattern that had occurred there. The overall pattern of coalescence and dispersal fits far better with a model of increasing and then decreasing relationships of gift-giving than a model of broken transactions. Other forms of purely transactional arrangements are more likely ended by violently aggressive or retributive means.

At a level of sufficient abstraction, all forms of human transactions may seem to be instances of debt generation or debt repayment. This may even seem to include what appears at first to be altruistic gift-giving or reciprocal gift-giving. To be sure, history is replete with examples of nominal gift-giving arrangements that were, or became, inescapable systems of one-upmanship or forced tribute. For example, Yunxiang Yan describes gift exchanges in China as sources of anxiety; Davis describes problems in sixteenth-century French systems of gift-giving, claiming that “Gifts call forth ingratitude the way markets call forth monopolies.”³⁸ Marcel Mauss suggests something in gifts even stronger than anxiety and ingratitude. He suggests that, “charity wounds him who receives, and our whole moral effort is directed toward suppressing the unconscious harmful patronage of the rich almoner.”³⁹ And in a recent comprehensive work on the history of debt, David Graeber discusses what he calls the “final apotheosis of economics as common sense”—the idea that economies of all kinds are “really vast barter systems.”⁴⁰

Indeed, some practices in Chaco culture may have come close to this, but even then cultural symbolism seems dominant in the meaning of gifts. For example, Ben Nelson reports that copper bracelets from Mesoamerica found in Chaco Canyon were likely part of the *kula* system. In that system, status is associated with certain objects, not through their immediate ownership, but instead because they demonstrated connections with other high-status individuals.⁴¹

VI. GENERAL TRUST AND DECISION MAKING

What is really being established in networks of concentrated gift-giving is a general trust that extends beyond the historic instances of particular gifts. Prolonged and successful gift-giving carries significance for future cooperation well beyond whether some particular agreement or transaction was wholly completed. The trust that matters is the trust that other people can be reasonably counted on to not always put themselves exclusively first. As Hegel defines *trust* in relation to the state, *trust* is “the consciousness that my substantial and particular interest is preserved and contained in the interest and end of another (in this case, the state), and in the latter’s relation to me as an individual.”⁴² General trust—whether in pre-state societies or modern nation-states—is embodied by practices that assume that

³⁸ Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Davis, “Gifts Gone Wrong,” p. 67.

³⁹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton Library, 1967), p. 63.

⁴⁰ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, expanded ed. (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014), pp. 44–45.

⁴¹ Nelson, “Mesoamerican Objects and Symbols in Chaco Canyon Contexts,” pp. 360–61.

⁴² G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), par. 268. For an extended discussion of this topic, see Stephen Houlgate, “Right and Trust in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” *Hegel Bulletin* 37, no. 1 (2016): 104–16.

others are reasonable and will cooperate and aid others when this is most needed. In relationships of deserved trust, there is a purposeful simultaneity of personal and group interests.

If we think about urban social relationships in terms of a general trust built up through gift-giving, at least in foundational, pre-state societies, and especially extended beyond the boundaries of kinship networks and cross time and collective projects, we can start to see why some social relationships intensify and others flag and fail. At the same time we can see why purely transactional models do not seem to fit well. Just as appropriate gifts build societies, inadequate gifts can be early harbingers of faltering relations of social trust. Given the nature of the buildup of Chaco settlements, and the ways in which people left them—returning to more horizontal social arrangements, and maintained themselves more thinly over wider geographical distances—it seems plausible that whatever benefits political elites were offering became less and less compelling. Archeologist Stephen Lekson suggests the situation was even worse.

The remarkable shifts in Pueblo architecture, settlement, iconography, and society around 1300, when sites begin to look like modern pueblos, represent Pueblo peoples' consciousness, deliberate reaction to and rejection of Chaco, distancing themselves from that bad experience. Pueblos developed new ways and means to avoid anything like Chaco, ever again.⁴³

Any declared authority, or publically declared intentions of beneficence by cultural or political elites, even voiced from shared cultural monuments like the Great Houses, apparently became unpersuasive to those that had previously found some reasons for helpful participation in Chaco culture with all of the mutual dependencies that would have entailed. This comports with other contemporary observations made about Chaco Canyon. Rina Swentzell, an architect who grew up in the Santa Clara Pueblo, reflects:

[W]hen I first visited Chaco, the feeling of connection with the place was there—yet it was also puzzling, because it was different from being in Bandelier, Puye, or even Mesa Verde. The Chaco villages were grand, the rooms extra tall, and the walls massive and straight-edged. Even then, my response to the canyon was that some sensibility other than my Pueblo ancestors had worked on the Chaco great houses. There were the familiar elements such as the *nansipu* (the symbolic opening into the underworlds), kivas, plazas, and earth materials, but they were overlain by a strictness and precision of design and execution that was unfamiliar, not just to me but in other sites of the Southwest. It was clear that the purpose of these great villages was not to restate their oneness with the earth but to show the power and specialness of humans.

For me, they represented a desire to control human and natural resources. They were not about the Pueblo belief in the capability of everyone, including children,

⁴³ Stephen H. Lekson, "Chaco Matters: An Introduction," in *The Archeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), p. 29.

to participate in daily activities, such that the process is more important than the end product. The Chaco great houses projected a different sensibility. The finished product was very important. Skill and specialization were needed to do the fine stonework and lay the sharp-edged walls. I concluded that the structures had been built by men in the prime of life with a vision of something beyond daily life and the present moment. These were men who embraced a social-political-religious hierarchy and envisioned control and power over place, resources, and people.

The caches of clay jars found in Pueblo Bonito also made me suspicious of the possible exploitation of women by such a hierarchy of men in control, who determined what and how much was made. I wondered whether the society had shifted in focus so that the process of making pottery for daily use, which nurtures relationships with the earth and other people, had been transformed to create objects for economic production and religious or political power.⁴⁴

Gift-giving relationships can become more intense or less intense over time, and can change in kind without any explicit renegotiation. As an intellectual exercise, it is perhaps possible to reinterpret every interaction of giving and taking as a contract or proto-contract, or as an instance of bargaining or proto-bargaining. It is possible to interpret relationships of decision making in early societies as game-theoretic versions of iterated Prisoner's Dilemmas or Stag Hunts. It is possible to treat them as proto-instances of quasi-mathematical debt creation.⁴⁵ But given the ecological, cultural, and political situation of Chaco Canyon, it seems most straightforward to think of Chaco culture as an extended experiment of cultural participation through gift-giving. There is no persuasive evidence that even the most extensive constructions, which certainly required hard labor, were compelled by threats of force, either directly or by threats of withholding food or water. There is no positive evidence to suggest that contributions were compelled through notions of leger-like debt. Sufficient numbers of people stayed within Chaco culture over many generations to produce astounding accomplishments even when migration elsewhere was a genuine possibility. What seems most plausible is that people contributed to the culture of Chaco Canyon as long as they found it comprehensively prudent and culturally meaningful to do so. For several hundred years this meant experimenting with novel, hierarchical social structures there that most likely began integrating various forms of authority. But when this faltered, most left and reconstituted their societies elsewhere on more egalitarian terms.

We can still feel remnants of at least the possibility of maintaining urban relationships through trust, rather than through transactional modes alone. As Jane Jacobs notes, modern cities are places where we constantly encounter strangers and depend

⁴⁴ Rina Swentzell, "A Pueblo Woman's Perspective on Chaco Canyon," in *In Search of Chaco: New Approaches to an Archeological Enigma*, ed. David Grant Nobel (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2004), p. 50.

⁴⁵ See Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, esp. chap. 5, regarding three frameworks of the moral notion of *debt*, namely, (1) as the principle of "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs," and (2) as a principle of roughly equal exchange, and (3) as occurs in conditions of hierarchy.

upon them.⁴⁶ In only the loosest sense do we have a “contract” with those with whom we share our streets. We may build houses with families and friends, but cities are built with strangers. Roads and power grids and water works and educational systems are almost always in the hands of others. We do sometimes speak in the explicit language of legal contracts when these systems fail. Promises can be made and broken. Even vague notions like discrimination can be given operationalized definitions for the purposes of impersonal legal systems. In these ways, and surely others, the social logic of contracts has been laid over a more general trust. But often when cities fail us, it fundamentally feels like a betrayal of trust. It feels like abandonment.

In contemporary cities, at least insofar as we are thinking about environmental decision making, there are two last points worth making. First, unlike those in Chaco Canyon, we find ourselves without the opportunity to walk away. Some of us may be able to escape, for a while, to places that will not be altered by climate change, natural devastation, or any number of forms of pollution. But most will not. Those who left Chaco Canyon had legitimate reason to believe that they could give up on, and walk away from, the ways of life being pursued by others. But since we do not have this possibility today, we do not really have any alternative except to find ways to support policies conducive to building a general trust. We cannot move away and start over. This will likely mean finding ways of requiring political decision makers to help us build environmental policies that are not shortsighted or that do not harm the many for immediate benefits for the few. Additionally, it will mean making sure that not only is justice done, but that it is seen as justice.

Second, and relatedly, because so much of human decision making is carried out in cities, we must be especially diligent about developing a general trust there. Several decades ago, Wendell Berry laid down the rhetorical challenge of separating the city from the farmer’s field.⁴⁷ The interconnections between urban life and rural life are certainly even more integrated now than they were then. Our collective environmental impact on the planet is set by the demands, agendas, and methods of cities. Even the farthest reaches of the planet are changed by technologies developed with levels of expertise made possible by the intensified social arrangements of cities. Unconnected, dispersed actions are not bringing the changes in our behaviors that the Earth requires. The records of nation-states are mixed. The record of the international community of nation-states has been inadequate so far. Our best hope for developing practices that are environmentally sound and that treat each other with respect is through thinking about practices and policies that are compatible with building, or rebuilding, a general trust within cities.

The outlines of such lessons can be found, I think, if we reflect on the interesting

⁴⁶ Jane Jacobs, “The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety,” in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1993), pp. 37–71.

⁴⁷ Wendell Berry, “The Agricultural Crisis as a Crisis of Culture,” in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), pp. 39–48.

history of pre-state Chaco Canyon. There we can see that at least some foundational urban settlements come into being, in part, to address environmental challenges through broad cooperation. Of the possible mechanisms for doing so, purely transactional arrangements seem to be peripheral and late to the game, and are only possible after some acceptable level of trust has already been established. I propose that the best way to explain that trust, especially in contexts of incommensurability and ambiguity, is through a model of iterated gift-giving. Our modern situation calls upon us to find modern ways of participating in environmental policies and practices that build this trust. When it failed in Chaco Canyon, the people could walk away and they did. We cannot.

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