



Sociology *in* America or a Sociology *of* America?

Navigating American Academia as an
“International” Scholar

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Abstract

Over the past six decades, several prominent American sociologists have gone on record to lament American sociology’s “ethnocentric” focus on American society. In the 1980s, some American sociologists addressed themselves to trying to understand the reasons for this phenomenon and some of its implications. This article discusses these debates and the struggles of American sociology to internationalize. I then turn to discussing how the “parochial” focus of American sociology impacted me as an international scholar, working on non-U.S. and non-Western topics and how it led me to switch to working on U.S. topics, although always with a global or transnational lens. I conclude with a brief discussion of why it is important for American sociology to become more open to comparative and non-U.S. work in order to remain relevant in an era of globalization, and the forces that might push it to internationalize.

Key Words: American sociology, ethnocentric sociology, parochial sociology, globalization, international research

Over the past six decades, several prominent American sociologists have gone on record to lament American sociology’s “ethnocentric” focus on American society. One of the earliest pronouncements goes back to 1961, when Everett Hughes, then a member of the sociology department at the University of Chicago, “America’s single most influential sociology depart-

ment” (Calhoun, 2007, p. 14) and President-Elect of the American Sociological Association presented a paper entitled “Ethnocentric Sociology” at the Southern Sociological Society in April that year (Hughes, 1961). Hughes pointed out that early American sociologists (such as William Sumner who developed the concept of “ethnocentrism”) were international and comparative in focus (see also Kennedy and Centeno, 2007). But as sociology developed in the United States, he argued, it became more focused on American society, “and less a comparison—for theoretical or practical purposes—of societies and cultures” (p. 2). Hughes (1961, p. 3) concluded:

I shall be most disappointed if sociology becomes merely the study of the American, the mass, the distribution of moderate range, of the middle of the curve, of the well-established, of the parts of the world where only minor changes occur, where everyone speaks English, and everyone—including the women—wears pants.

Hughes’s critique regarding the ethnocentric nature of American sociology was echoed again a few years later by another well-known sociologist, Wilbert Moore, who, in his 1965 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, stressed the need for American sociology to adopt a more global approach (Armer, 1990, p. 228).

In the 1980s, several sociologists addressed themselves to examining the “parochialism” (Armer, 1990; Lie, 1995; Tiryakian, 1986) of sociology, and to trying to understand the reasons for this phenomenon

and some of its implications. Surveys conducted by the American Sociological Association and by some individual sociologists in the 1980s showed that few American sociologists had comparative or international interests, that only a minority of articles in the two flagship journals, *American Sociological Review*, and *American Journal of Sociology* had any international content between 1965 and 1985, compared with almost two-thirds of articles in the two major British sociology journals during the same period (Armer, 1990, pp. 228–229). Again, of the 222 contemporary sociologists who were cited in American sociology journals and textbooks, only two were not American (Gareau, 1985, p. 49).

The reasons for the “parochialism” of American sociology (Armer, 1990), were attributed variously to “idealistic American exceptionalism” (Hollander, 1981, p. 27), a problem-solving focus, a positivistic methodology, and the global dominance of the United States (Armer, 1990, pp. 229–230). Such parochialism was however, not the case in all the social sciences. For instance, Armer (1990, p. 229) notes that anthropology, political science, economics, history, and geography had much greater international content in the 1980s compared to sociology. A global perspective was also a strong feature of interdisciplinary fields like women’s studies, and some sociologists worked in these areas (Kennedy and Centeno, 2007, p. 692).

One of the consequences of the “ethnocentricity” of American sociology could be seen in the undergraduate sociology curriculum in the United States. Not only were there few courses on global or comparative sociology, or on regions or countries outside the United States (Armer, 1990, p. 229), but most sociology textbooks were “written on the assumption that ‘sociology’ means the current social problems of the United States” (Connell, 1990, p. 265 quoted in Lie, 1995, p. 138). In 1986, Edward Tiryakian argued for the need to internationalize the sociology curriculum so that the discipline could continue to remain relevant in an era of globalization. He felt that this step would help with the enrollment crisis that sociology was facing at the time (1986, p. 158). Several other American sociologists similarly called for more inter-

national and comparative content in the standard introductory-level undergraduate sociology courses (e.g., Armer, 1990, p. 235).

The American Sociological Association was responsive to these discussions and the theme of the 1987 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association focused on comparative sociology (Armer, 1990, p. 231). The need for American sociology to internationalize was picked up as the American Sociological Association prepared for its Centennial in 2005. At the 2002 International Sociological Association conference, the American Sociological Association organized a panel, “The Internationalization of American Sociology: A Centennial Challenge for the ASA in 2005 and Beyond” (Rosich, 2005). In 2004, one of the recommendations of the American Sociological Association’s task force on the undergraduate major was that “sociology faculty should include issues pertaining to globalization and multiculturalism in most, if not all, of our courses (not just in a course on race and ethnicity or on globalization)” (McKinney, Howery, Strand, Kain, & Berheide, 2004, p. 19).

Despite almost a half-century of efforts to internationalize sociology, Michael Kennedy and Miguel Centeno, based on research conducted in 2004, argued that American sociology continued to focus “substantially, if not exclusively, on American society and its intellectual products” (2007, p. 668). According to them, this tendency appeared to be “so natural, so commonsensical” (2007, p. 668) that most American sociologists did not even “recognize the national accent in their work” and adopted American perspectives and frameworks even when they conducted international research (Kennedy and Centeno, 2007, p. 667). Kennedy and Centeno (2007, pp. 671–672) also pointed out that for most of the twentieth century, American sociologists who did international work focused primarily on western and central Europe (though there was also some scholarship on other regions of the world linked with U.S. national interests). Kennedy and Centeno’s research on the American sociology “book world” showed that almost all of the books listed as best sellers focused on the United States. There was however, a higher proportion of non-U.S.-based scholarship among the books that

won the ASA-wide award for outstanding scholarly work. Here, about half of the books between 1956 and the early 2000s focused on non-U.S. topics. However, about half of these focused on Western Europe, and most of the books on non-U.S. topics were macrosociological, based on comparative historical methodology. In terms of articles, only around 17 percent of the articles in the top three sociology journals (*American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Social Forces*) focused on non-U.S. or comparative topics, and far fewer used non-U.S. epistemologies or even literature. A slightly higher proportion of professors in the top 32 sociology departments, 21 percent, described themselves as having international research interests, primarily Western Europe, but also Japan, China, and some countries in Latin America (Kennedy and Centeno, 2007, pp. 695–699). Like Armer (1990), Kennedy and Centeno (2007, p. 670) remark that the other social sciences did a much better job in terms of their coverage of international topics when compared with sociology.

Kennedy and Centeno (2007, pp. 699–700) surveyed the chairs of the top 32 sociology departments. Most chairs admitted that U.S. sociology was parochial, or provincial. They felt that “international” topics were merely a subfield in the discipline (such as comparative and historical sociology) and that in other substantive fields the emphasis on the United States was “expected and even desirable” (p. 700). However, some chairs felt that the situation was improving, largely driven by rising numbers of international graduate students in American sociology departments. Like the other scholars discussed above, Kennedy and Centeno (2007) conclude by calling for an American sociology that is responsive to the global transformations taking place around the world. Not only should American sociologists turn their attention to international topics, they argue that in order to make a real impact on the discipline, non-U.S. research “must challenge, and transform, an American sociology still ethnocentric by reflex” (p. 694).

II

As a sociology graduate student from India studying in the United States in the 1980s, I was not aware of any of these issues or how they would come to impact me and my career. I obtained my Master’s degree in sociology (in practice, a blend of sociology and anthropology) in Delhi, India. The curriculum was very international, and we were exposed to work on a variety of countries and groups around the world. This of course, included research on India by sociologists and anthropologists of Indian, and non-Indian backgrounds. I remember first wondering about the division between sociology and anthropology in the second year of my Masters’ program in Delhi. I discussed this issue with some classmates and we decided that anthropology focused on topics such as culture and ritual, while sociology looked at the economy, politics, and social stratification systems. Since I was interested in the social consequences of economic development, sociology seemed a better fit for me and I decided to apply to Ph.D. programs in sociology. I was hungry for more coursework which the Indian and British Ph.D. programs did not provide, so I applied to departments in the United States. In 1986, I joined the sociology department at Brown University which was known for its strong global demography program but which also had an international development program.

Some years later, I had a conversation with my German-born U.S. dissertation advisor, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, regarding the difference between sociology and anthropology. He told me that traditionally in the United States, sociology was seen as dealing with Western societies while anthropology dealt with non-Western societies. But, he added, this distinction was disappearing. This was an abstract conversation at the time. Due to the relatively unusual nature of the sociology department at Brown (something I recognized only in hindsight), I did not encounter the parochialism of American sociology until much later. Brown’s sociology department had several faculty members from non-U.S. backgrounds, the graduate student body came from all over the world (in my

cohort, students of American background were a small minority), the course content included a lot of comparative and non-U.S. content, and I also took courses in political science, economics, anthropology, and postcolonial literature, which were very international.

My areas of specialization in graduate school were international development and sociological theory. For my dissertation research, I planned to conduct ethnographic research to examine the impact of large-scale, short-term migration to the Middle East from Kerala, a state in southwest India, on the high-migrant areas. I knew that the migration and rapid enrichment of largely lower-class migrants had fundamentally transformed Kerala and particularly the migrant communities. As a graduate student specializing in the sociology of development, I wanted to examine the socioeconomic changes brought about by migration. I was primarily interested in the effects of the migration on class, caste, and status in migrant communities, and on gender and intergenerational relationships in migrant households. A few studies seemed to indicate that some migrant communities in different parts of the world manifested “conservative change” while others “modernized” or manifested “progressive change” as a consequence of out-migration. Based on this literature and conversations with local scholars in Kerala, my expectation was that rural–urban differences would turn out to be crucial in shaping which sending communities might manifest which type of change. However, sometime after I started my field research, I found to my surprise that rural–urban differences were not very significant and that instead, ethno-religious variations (between Ezhava Hindu, Mappila Muslim, and Syrian Christian communities) played a crucial role in shaping patterns of out-migration, remittance use, and the impacts of migration on households and the community in high-migrant areas. It was also hard to describe the changes taking place in particular communities as either “conservative” or “progressive” since the consequences were mixed and very complex (see Kurien, 2002).

My first encounter with the U.S.-focus of American sociology came when I started writing the dis-

sertation. I knew that I needed to frame my work within the theoretical paradigms and concepts prevalent in the United States. However, I ran into several problems when I tried to do this. First, migration studies in the United States at that time (early 1990s) focused on immigration to the United States and other Western countries and on the socio-cultural impact of migration on the receiving society. There was very little discussion of the impact on sending countries. Second, ethnicity in the United States and within sociology (in contrast to anthropology, for instance) was defined as the socio-cultural characteristics of immigrant groups from different countries, but I was interested in the differences between long-established, indigenous groups in one cultural region. Finally, neither modernization theory nor dependency theory, the two paradigms through which the experience of international development was examined in the United States, fit my project. Both paradigms had been heavily criticized but there were no alternate paradigms at the time.

I faced more challenges when I started looking for a job. After my job talk summarizing what I found in my dissertation research, people would often ask, “But what is the relevance for us?” Perhaps not surprisingly, my first job was a Visiting position in a combined Sociology and Anthropology department at a small liberal arts college. There, I developed and taught 10 courses, six different preparations on a range of U.S. and global topics over a period of two years. Realizing that I could not continue my research focus on India due to restrictions on international travel as a result of my teaching schedule and the process of switching to a permanent resident status, and also that it would be hard to find a tenure-track job in the United States based on ethnographic research in India, I changed my focus to examining how religion (which was now on my radar due to its unexpected appearance in my dissertation research) might shape the experience of community formation in receiving countries and might be reformulated as a consequence of being transplanted in a new context (see Kurien, 2007 and Kurien, forthcoming 2017). In order to provide a more “national” picture, I conducted research at different sites around the country,

though all focused on Indian American communities. At the same time, I continued my research on India focused on sending communities and the impact of international migrants on the homeland.

My subsequent jobs were fortunately all tenure-track, and all in sociology departments. However, I found myself being channeled into American race and ethnicity positions even though I understood my areas of specialization differently. For instance, one of the schools that I applied to had a theory position and a race and ethnicity position. I applied to the theory position, but my file was moved to the race and ethnicity position! As a non-white individual who had been a teaching assistant for a U.S. Race and Ethnicity course for several years while in graduate school, had started teaching race and ethnicity courses herself, and had also begun to conduct research on Indian immigrants in the United States, I think most search committee members felt that I could be categorized as a “race and ethnicity” scholar. At the same time, the issue of whether, as a foreigner, I was really qualified to teach students about American society came up during several job interviews in the early days. At another school, the Provost asked me whether I knew the meaning of “multiculturalism” (this was a relatively new term within academia at the time). He seemed skeptical about whether I would be able to conform to the norms of American multiculturalism in his school. I told him that I came from a very diverse and multicultural country (India), and had grown up among people from a variety of backgrounds. Consequently, I said that I felt equipped to navigate a multicultural campus. It was clear that the Provost did not like my response. I did not get that job!

My first sociology position at a small liberal arts institution involved founding and directing a “Human Diversity” program (i.e., a U.S. Race and Ethnicity program). This was in a part of the country that was known to be very conservative, and was also very anti-immigrant at the time. I faced a lot of hostility from my students (to be fair, only a minority actively vocalized opposition, the others remained silent) about why I was in the United States, taking a job away from a deserving American, and about why

I was teaching them about U.S. race and ethnicity! A phrase that I heard constantly through many of the class discussions on racial and ethnic disparities, historical and contemporary, was, “but who says life is fair?” I only stayed in this job for a year. I left for a position at a research university, something I had always wanted.

This research university was large and quite diverse, and it was a pleasure teaching Social Inequality and Race and Ethnicity to students from different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, all eager to discuss their life stories and opinions. But because of my earlier experiences, I stopped talking about my own background (not immediately identifiable from my appearance) in class, whereas other professors would include a lot of stories about themselves and their families as a way to connect with students. In this school too, students would challenge me, particularly in the large, lower-division sociology courses (e.g., Social Problems). The course material (from widely used sociology textbooks) presented a version of American society that was often different from the personal experiences of students, and they thought that as a non-white woman/foreigner (I never knew which attribute was more significant in their eyes), I had picked “biased” texts that portrayed America in a bad light. These incidents led me to opt to teach sociological theory whenever possible, at both graduate and undergraduate levels, because my expertise would be unquestioned in such courses.

Although I was interested in teaching at least one course that was related in some way to my own research interests, I discovered that the curriculum at large universities is often more inflexible than in small, liberal arts institutions. This means that the course offerings in sociology, particularly at the undergraduate level, tend to be fairly standardized (whereas they are a lot more tailored to faculty interest at small colleges) and there is not much scope to develop new courses on topics that will not get a large enrollment. At the first research university where I worked, I was told that I could teach a course on a topic of personal interest if I wanted, but only as an “overload,” and on my own time. Of course, that did not happen! Consequently, with the exception of one

graduate course, my teaching never connected with my research in any way for 13 years, until I started teaching courses on Asian Americans at Syracuse University to which I had moved. This “double life,” one in the classroom, and another in my research, was again unlike the experience of many of my colleagues.

One of the reasons that I was interested in the Asian/Asian American Studies program was due to these personal frustrations. There was student demand for the program at Syracuse University and I was able to found and direct the program (which linked together existing courses on Asia across the university, and developed and added new Asian American courses) over a period of five years. However, one big issue that never entirely went away during this period was the fact that in the United States, the term “Asian” tends to refer to “East Asian” even though East Asian Americans (i.e., Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Americans) are a minority within the Asian American population. While my goal was to ensure that the program and the courses were inclusive of the full range of Asian American groups (i.e., East, South-East, and South Asians), the constituency mobilizing around the program at Syracuse University was comprised almost entirely of East Asian American students (there were no South Asian American students involved) and one of their primary demands was that they wanted courses taught “about us and our experiences, by people who look like us.” When the administration withdrew support from the program during a period of financial trouble, I turned to teaching in a large, team-taught, interdisciplinary, lower-division globalization course.

I have now done this each semester for several years and enjoy the global perspective that the course provides on pressing contemporary issues. I finally feel I have an academic location where I fit in and where my personal background and interdisciplinary orientation are assets, not liabilities! As part of the course, I get to make presentations on my research in India and the United States and on the transnational connections forged and maintained by the Indian diaspora. The course has readings and lectures on many countries around the world, including several on

India, and students in the course are very interested in international topics. Consequently, I have come to realize that many American undergraduates, even in a less cosmopolitan location like Syracuse, *are* interested in global issues (in fact the International Relations program has among the largest numbers of undergraduate majors in the social sciences in my school). It is just that sociology, with its traditional focus on U.S. issues, attracts a self-selective group of students who are primarily interested in American society.

In their investigation of the “ethnocentric” nature of American sociology, Kennedy and Centeno (2007) briefly examine the publication difficulties faced by sociologists conducting non-U.S. research. I could certainly relate to the issues they discussed. I had trouble finding a publisher for the book based on my dissertation because the research was conducted in India and was not macrosociological, about “all of India” as one editor helpfully pointed out. I was able to get a book contract for my first book only many, many years afterwards, by pledging my second book (based primarily on research in the United States) to a press in a two-for-one deal! The increasing focus of academic presses on books likely to be used in undergraduate classes becomes a particular problem for sociologists doing research on countries which are not of particular geo-political interest to the U.S. public. Kennedy and Centeno (2007, p. 671) also write that sociologists working on non-U.S. contexts “frequently complain about journal editors who ask them to justify the significance of a set of findings since they apply only to country A or region Y beyond the United States.” I too have had U.S. journal editors rejecting my work (both my work based on India and my work based on Indian Americans) on the grounds that “it will not be of interest to our readers.” The expectation that research needs to engage with American literature and theoretical frameworks (which may not be relevant to non-Western contexts) in order to appear in highly ranked sociology journals creates further barriers to publication (Kennedy and Centeno 2007, p. 668). Those who work on non-mainstream groups and topics also have to provide a lot more

context for the reader which can be an additional problem, particularly given the increasing restrictions on the length of articles that journals will accept for publication. It is also much harder to find suitable reviewers (and even copy-editors as in a recent case where my book was held up in press) for non-Western work. Finally, based on my experiences on a large number of grant review panels, I have seen that non-U.S. projects face particular challenges. American sociologists on grant review panels often do not have the expertise to evaluate proposals dealing with non-U.S. work. If the topic deals with a major international event that has been in the news, or fits in with the American “social imaginary” regarding what might be considered a pressing issue in a non-Western context, reviewers sometimes defer to the author of the proposal. But often, they challenge the significance of projects which do not seem to contribute to understanding the American social world.

This summer, I attended the International Sociological Association (ISA) Forum of Sociology in Vienna. According to data provided at the opening ceremony, there were 5,000 sociologists from around 126 countries there (including a large contingent from the USA). This was my first time at an ISA conference and it was an exhilarating experience to participate in and listen to panels featuring sociologists from around the world. Here, I was able to see sociology as I had imagined it, over 30 years ago when I decided to become a sociologist, as a global enterprise, dealing with important contemporary social concerns. The ISA President, Margaret Abraham (an Indian American sociologist herself) gave a powerful speech about the need for sociologists to get involved in the pressing issues of today. In particular, she mentioned the anti-immigrant mood in Western countries, religious fundamentalism, and the rise of xenophobic parties and leaders around the world. Since my work touches on all of these issues, attending the ISA conference made me feel validated and invigorated.

III

The experiences of non-U.S.-origin sociologists aside, is it a problem that American sociology is “parochial” and “ethnocentric”? Or is a focus on American society “desirable” in most subfields of sociology? It is certainly important for students to learn about their own societies and communities and to be able to develop a “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959) that enables them to see the links between their personal experiences and larger social structures and trends. During the course of my two and a half decades of teaching in the United States, I have been surprised at how little American undergraduate and even graduate students know about U.S. society. The problem, however, is that most sociology courses focus only on the United States which means that students learn about American society without any comparative context. They think they are learning about “society” or “culture” in general, or at least in Western countries, but as Armer (1990, p. 232) points out, “Students need to learn that American society is not typical. Indeed in many respects the U.S. political system, economic structure, history, laws and legal procedures, geography, population composition, consumption patterns, and so forth are highly atypical and hardly a reasonable basis for world-wide generalization.” For this reason, I think that students should certainly be taught about American society but should also be able to identify in what ways it is similar or different from other Western societies.

At the same time, I strongly feel that it is important for students and other readers of sociological work to learn how globalization is reshaping the United States. Writing in the 2010 inaugural newsletter of the newly formed Global and Transnational section, American sociologist of globalization, Saskia Sassen, calls for sociology to recognize that “the ‘nation as container’ category is . . . inadequate, given the proliferation of transnational dynamics and formations” which exist inside and transform the national in a variety of ways (2010, p. 4). The ways that transnational dynamics impact the national is brought out very clearly through research on international

migration, one of my areas of specialization. My work and that of others shows that we cannot understand the lives of immigrants, and even their children without recognizing their connections with sending countries and with co-ethnic communities in other countries around the world. Since immigrants and their children comprise 26 percent of the U.S. population in 2016 (Zong and Batalova 2016), it is clear that we cannot separate out what happens in the United States and what happens in countries around the world from which Americans originate. While these global connections are viewed as a recent phenomenon, the outcome of contemporary globalization, my current research on early immigrants from the Indian subcontinent on the west coast of Canada and the United States (as background to a project on the political activism of contemporary South Asians in Canada and the United States), makes clear that even at the turn of the twentieth century there were very strong transnational connections between these immigrants in North America and communities in India and around the world. In fact, a global *Ghadar* (mutiny) movement for Indian independence from British colonialism (which the North American immigrants viewed as being at least partly responsible for the appalling racism and mistreatment that they experienced in both Canada and the United States) was orchestrated from North America by these immigrants.

I also strongly agree that American sociology must include more international and comparative content into existing standard introductory-level courses in sociology so the discipline can continue to remain relevant in an era of globalization. *Teaching Sociology* has put out a call for an upcoming special issue on innovative approaches to “Incorporating Globalization in the Sociology Curriculum” which could serve as a good resource. In addition to adding such content, perhaps sociology departments could think about introducing a requirement that students should take a course on a comparative or non-U.S. topic as part of their sociology major.

There are several trends that I think will bring about an internationalization of American sociology. A fairly new phenomenon is the internationalization

of access to Western journals through lower cost digital access. At a meeting I attended a few years ago, a publisher of an American sociology journal talked about a big increase in digital subscriptions for the journal from non-Western countries, particularly from Asia over the past year. Journal editors are very interested in increasing the Impact Factor of their journals and since the Impact Factor is based on how many citations articles in the journal receive in the previous two years, the globalization of digital journal access may make publishers and editors more aware of the need to cater to a global readership. Academic social networking sites like Academia.edu and ResearchGate also allow for global sharing of research publications and many academics now have websites which provide links to their research publications. These trends are likely to result in the work of American sociologists (as also academics in other disciplines and in other countries) being read, cited, and possibly challenged, by scholars from around the world.

Again, globalization has become the mantra of a lot of schools and universities recently. American schools, even those in small, homogenous college towns, recognize that students need to be prepared to succeed in an increasingly global economy and world. One of the ways that they do this is through an increase in their study abroad programs. One hundred and fifty American schools pledged to increase the number of the students on campus that participated in study abroad programs as part of the “Generation Study Abroad” which aims to double the number of American students studying abroad by the end of this decade (Redden, 2014). Second, many cash-strapped universities are now aggressively recruiting international students. Foreign students in U.S. schools have increased 85 percent since just 2005 (Jordan, 2015). While the bulk of the increase has come from undergraduates, there are also more foreign graduate students. Even in their research conducted in 2004, Kennedy and Centeno (2007, p. 698) found that American sociology departments had large numbers of international graduate students, most of whom were likely to conduct international research (a mean of 30 percent between 1990 and 2003). This number is likely to increase over time.

My own university in upstate New York, far away from any metropolitan areas, can be seen as a microcosm of these national changes. Currently, 48 percent of students study abroad, much higher than the national average of 10 percent (Mbuqe, 2015). The university has also seen a huge increase in the numbers of international students among the undergraduate body, from 2 percent in the first year class in 2000 to 13 percent in 2014, compared to a national average of 4.8 percent (*Wall Street Journal*, 2015). Successive deans responsible for social sciences and policy studies have stressed internationalization and my department now has several faculty members who do non-U.S. research and also a number of international graduate students. All of these developments make me hopeful that the forces of globalization will soon lead to a transformation of American sociology!

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