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The end of emancipation? CTS and normativity

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ABSTRACT

Although CTS can be described as a broad church, scholars working within this approach want to produce knowledge which can help shape, improve, change, or replace contemporary counterterrorism. Guided by Marx's mantra that the point of theory is not only to interpret the world but to change it, CTS has since its inception challenged the status quo of contemporary counterterrorism on the basis that it is possible to conduct counterterrorism differently, more humanly, and, put plainly, better. The concept of emancipation was identified early on as the foundation and basis for knowledge. However, a deeper debate on emancipation has largely been absent since 2010. Could it be that CTS exhausted the debate on one of its core commitments only five years into its existence? Have we reached the end of emancipation? Or could it be that emancipation is not that attractive at all for CTS and its normative projects? This article begins with a review and a state-of-the-art discussion of emancipation within CTS. While it might be the end of emancipation in its traditional conceptualisation, the article argues that emancipation can be retained as the basis for normative theorising and action within CTS when reconceptualised as a Weberian value-axiom. The article concludes by exploring a transfiguration of the concept of emancipation itself.

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Introduction

In the introduction to the edited volume, *Critical Terrorism Studies: a new research agenda*, published in 2009, the editors argued that by the mid-2000s there was a nascent but observable “critical turn” in the field of terrorism studies that they wished to “stimulate, encourage, and more clearly articulate” (Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009, 1). Academically, it was noted how reviews of the terrorism literature bemoaned the generally poor quality of much terrorism research. Empirically, the morally disturbing and counter-productive aspects of the war on terror provided a crucial impetus for this critical turn. At the 2018 CTS Annual Conference, hosted in Leeds, one of the leading CTS scholars, Harmonie Toros, described the atmosphere at the time as a cry out for change. It was evident then that the Global War on Terror (GWOT) made use of brutal and indiscriminate violence, and this created only more violence. Channelling their inner Marx, the founders of CTS, I think it is fair to say, wanted an approach to terrorism research that did not merely seek to describe the world, but to change it. In other words, the deep dissatisfaction with the use of violence in

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contemporary counterterrorism, combined with a field of terrorism studies dominated by a statist bias meant there was room, and a need, for an alternative approach to the study of terrorism. As such, CTS was born out of a real sense of urgency to challenge contemporary counterterrorism with a strong emphasis on normative action.

Given CTS' close connection with Critical Security Studies, and in particular the Welsh School (henceforth CSS), the normative agenda was early on anchored in a commitment to emancipation. Although emancipation is a contentious concept, it received only some attention in the first years of CTS' existence. Indeed, since 2011 a deeper debate on emancipation has been missing, although the debate at the time raised essential issues for an approach to terrorism studies that wants to produce knowledge that can change the world, not merely describe it. This, I would suggest, is in fact troubling, and it is time to resuscitate the debate. The reasons for this are many-fold. First, it surely cannot be the case that CTS exhausted the debate on emancipation only a few years after it was established. That would represent an unparalleled feat regarding normative questions and ethics in politics. Second, normative questions cannot be objectively proven, and should be continuously and rigorously examined, questioned and debated. This is necessary if emancipation, and indeed any other normative concept, is to be a valuable source of normativity, and to avoid a situation in which emancipation becomes a dead dogma. Third, normative claims are what we use to drive forth our own arguments, to propound our own views on a specific topic. If the point of theorising is to change the world (put broadly), then not only do we need to be clear just what exactly it is that we envision this change to entail, but this commitment also entails acknowledging and recognising the inherent normative commitments of our interventions. As such, this article begins with an overview of the debate on emancipation within CTS, and the main points of debate. It will then move on to discuss some key conceptual issues with emancipation and its appropriation by CTS. The article will explore how emancipation could more fruitfully be taken out of its traditional Frankfurt School/Horkheimerian conceptualisation, and instead reconceptualised as a Weberian value-axiom. Finally, the article will explore a possible transfiguration of emancipation as a concept. It should be noted that this article is concerned with philosophical issues regarding emancipation, and not with discussing or providing concrete examples of emancipation in praxis. This is an important caveat insofar as much critique of emancipation has centred on questions about what emancipation in praxis would look like or entail for CTS. However, such discussions would necessarily be hampered and limited by unresolved philosophical issues. The article will not be able to fully resolve these issues, but it aims to advance and add to the debate on normativity in CTS.

Initial contributions

CTS was, in many ways, modelled after Welsh school CSS which meant that the concept of emancipation would be at the heart of the new research agenda. In the first volume of *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Ken Booth, one of the primary architects of CSS, set out to provide navigation aids for the new approach to terrorism studies (Booth 2008). Summarising arguments he had made previously, Booth stated that the organizing principle for a critical theory is emancipation, which should be understood as a process and not an end-point, that true emancipation cannot be at anybody's expense,

and that the means of emancipation should be consistent with the ends (ibid., 77). Indeed, Booth noted that “emancipation is concerned with the escape from scarcity, liberation from ignorance and lies, and freedom from political tyranny and economic exploitation” (ibid). Although not part of the article in the journal, it is worth mentioning that in the context of CTS, it is common to make reference to his definition of emancipation:

As a discourse of politics, emancipation seeks the securing of people from those oppressions that would stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do, compatible with the freedom of others. It provides a three-fold framework for politics: a philosophical anchorage for knowledge, a theory of progress for society, and a practice of resistance against oppression. Emancipation is the philosophy, theory, and politics of inventing humanity. (Booth 2007, 112).

Furthermore, Booth made four propositions about emancipation in relation to the study of terrorism which reflect the points made above: (1) emancipation is inextricably bound with security, and security is conceived broadly and as a positive value; (2) there is a conceptual harmony between emancipation and security, so that the means must be commensurate with the ends; (3) the struggle against terrorism should be part of the struggle seeking to emancipate humans everywhere from the oppressions of political violence; and (4) the struggle for emancipation must be universal if it is to be successful (ibid).

These propositions can be, as the article will demonstrate, found throughout the debate on emancipation within CTS. In particular, making emancipation the philosophical anchorage for knowledge, as well as a theory of progress, is an interesting move which entails a specific approach to normative action. The edited volume, *Critical Terrorism Studies: a new research agenda* from 2009, contained two key chapters on emancipation which built on the Boothian approach. The first is a chapter by Toros and Gunning where they explore what contribution a Frankfurt School-inspired critical theory (FSCT) approach could make to the study of terrorism (Toros and Gunning 2009, 88). Their approach draws heavily on CSS, but also adopts Booth’s pearl-fishing approach (originally an Arendtian approach) to find pearls of ideas that might be strung together. The pearls for this particular approach are found primarily in the works of Max Horkheimer and Robert Cox, but this method was not without its problems, a debate we will return to. The analysis is conducted through two moves proposed by Booth in the context of CSS, namely, deepening and broadening terrorism research (Booth 2007; Toros and Gunning 2009, 89). Briefly summarised, the deepening move aims at uncovering the ontological and ideological assumptions and interests behind terrorism studies, while the broadening move aims to broaden the perspective from only non-state actors to include other forms of political violence, such as state terrorism. Importantly, the broadening move aims to analyse and account for the various social and historical contexts within which these acts of violence take place. The central insight of the deepening move is that theory is always from somewhere, for someone and for some purpose (Booth 2007, 150). Research on terrorism is therefore not objective in the positivist sense, but shaped and influenced by “our perceptions and ideological leanings, by the social processes we are part of, by the particular political and economic structures we inhabit, and the material and ideational interests that derive from them” (Toros and Gunning 2009). The rejection of any notion of an idealised objective stance or

approach to research on terrorism is key to the emancipatory position. The deepening move destabilises seemingly stable categories and assumed facts, such as terrorism as an exclusively non-state activity, or that the state is the ultimate referent to be secured. Such assumptions, or facts, come from somewhere, and they are ontologically unstable. The authors therefore suggest that CTS should adopt the doctrine of minimal foundationalism to retain terrorism as a category of violence to be understood within a particular socio-historical context. More specifically, “rather than collapsing the ontological distinction between object and subject, it maintains it, while acknowledging that the two shape each other in a dialectical, never-ceasing dynamic” (Toros and Gunning 2009, 92). Following the deepening move it is clear that it is impossible to retreat to an Archimedean vantage point when investigating human activity, and from there deduce universal laws. The benefit of a minimal foundationalist approach is that the notion of regularities, or positivist laws, in human activity can indeed be useful within defined historical limits. Toros and Gunning draw on both Horkheimer and Cox to support this argument and a type of Critical Theory approach that “does not reject problem-solving or traditional theory as such, but rather recognises its importance in this particular phase of human history and incorporates it while accepting its understandings as contingent on socio-historical context” (Toros and Gunning 2009).

A concept which enjoys an objective-like quality in the current socio-historical context is the state, but a key objective of CSS and CTS has been to challenge the state as the ultimate referent to be secured. Indeed, armed with the methodological tools described above, the state’s naturalised position can be challenged given its temporal nature, and replaced with human beings. While the state is not rejected a priori as a potentially legitimate entity for providing security (ibid., 94), it should be judged on how well it provides security for its citizens, but also in the context of humanity at large. Thus, theory in the context of CTS is for the emancipation of human beings. This position follows from the process of deepening described here, and combined with a minimal foundationalist position, it forms the basis for an emancipatory, normative framework. The influence of CSS is further strengthened when Toros and Gunning draw on Wyn Jones, and argue that the *sine qua non* of Critical Theory is emancipation. Indeed, the possibility that emancipatory potential exists is paramount to Critical Theory, and “it is only this possibility that gives critical theory coherence, and indeed, purpose” (Wyn-Jones 1999, 56). As such, emancipation is tied to the development of possibilities for a better life already immanent within the present and is not concerned with reaching a state of emancipation, but how to realise concrete utopias. Emancipation is thus understood as a process of emancipation for all from all forms of violence (Toros and Gunning 2009, 100). Finally, Toros and Gunning argue that emancipation in this context aims to transform terrorist violence through means that are compatible with the ridding of direct, structural, and cultural violence. Importantly, emancipation demands the recognition of a common humanity, and that we are capable of imagining a better future (ibid.,107).

The debate on emancipation is continued in the edited volume with a chapter by McDonald, who sets out to address the question of what a CTS research agenda defined in terms of a concern with emancipation might look like. Drawing on CSS scholarship, and echoing points made by Toros and Gunning, McDonald focuses on the possibilities for emancipatory change through advances in non-repressive dialogue and deliberation.

Discourses on terrorism and counterterrorism are understood to be central to the dynamics of this kind of political violence, and thus, it is important to focus on communicative actions, and the process of freeing up space for alternative voices to be heard (McDonald 2009, 113). As a way of structuring the exploration of emancipation within a CTS research agenda, McDonald suggests a series of questions which might guide it. For example: who defines terrorism?; who defines terrorists?; and who defines the dominant response to the “terrorist threat”? (ibid., 114). These questions could be viewed as part of the arsenal of the “deepening” move described above, and centres on the issue of “whose security” is prioritised. They can be seen to operate along the dictum that “theory is always from somewhere, for someone and for some purpose”. In this regard, the emancipatory focus is on how current spaces for dialogue are constructed or limited, how dominant definitions of key concepts and responses have become dominant, and on locating silenced and marginalised articulations of terrorism and responses to it. Importantly, as the questions build on the CSS framework, they rest on the assumption that there are immanent possibilities for emancipatory change. As mentioned above, emancipation in both CSS and CTS has been defined as a process, and this process works closely with the theoretical tool of immanent critique. The latter is a “dialectical method of inquiry that engages with core commitments of particular discourses, ideologies, or institutional arrangements on their own terms, in the process locating possibilities for radical change within a particular existing order” (ibid., 113). For McDonald, one emancipatory goal for CTS could be that of identifying, empowering, and amplifying silenced voices in concrete contexts. He notes that this should be done rather than articulating one’s own vision to be imposed externally. The main idea conveyed here is that theorists should look for concrete utopias that can be realised, and these might be found by identifying and amplifying marginalised voices, but also by focusing on the fissures, tensions, and inconsistencies within discourses, and institutional arrangements. The obvious disjuncture between Western states’ articulated goals of winning the war on terror, and ridding the world of evil terrorists, and how these goals are realised through counterproductive practices can provide a basis for critique that might change actions and policies. As such, there are immanent possibilities for emancipatory change. Wyn Jones argued that it was only this possibility that could give Critical Theory coherence and purpose, and McDonald’s approach is quite concrete in its focus on discourses and how to amplify silenced and marginalised voices with promoting inclusive dialogue and debate.

Critique

The appropriation of FSCT scholarship has proven to be a contentious issue for CTS, and while much of this critique is of the utmost importance to a CTS research agenda, it has not necessarily received as much attention as could be desired. There were of course people who critiqued CTS with varying degrees of seriousness and quality. Jones and Smith, in their now infamous article (Jones and Smith 2009) poured scorn on CTS and its proposed agenda, including how Ken Booth, in the article described above, assumed the manner of an Old Testament prophet handing down commandments to his disciples. At the more serious end of the scale, an early substantive critique of how CTS had adopted FSCT and emancipation was presented by Michel and Richards (Michel and Richards 2009).

In their article, they contend that, so far, there is almost a “complete absence of any meaningful and substantial engagement with the epistemological implications of Critical Theory and its close – but again partly problematic – relation to the normative-ethical agenda of emancipation” (ibid., 410). This is a serious critique given the prominent role of Horkheimerian and FSCT-inspired theory in both CSS and CTS – not least because of how CTS has articulated a research agenda of emancipation which, as the authors correctly argue, explicitly and consciously draws from Marxist-inspired FSCT. One of most salient issue centres on the notions of relativism and truth, arguing that CTS has committed itself to a historicist notion of truth which acknowledges and focuses on the contextual and historically contingent nature of our knowledge. The concern is that, if not properly substantiated, this position leaves itself open to a relativist position in which knowledge claims cannot be evaluated against a common basis. Violent acts could then be legitimised by “claiming their rootedness in a specific historical environment that cannot be judged by standards outside itself” (ibid., 404). This is of course a serious charge, and to avoid a position of epistemological relativism, CTS has, as discussed above, advanced a minimal foundationalist position. Michel and Richards argue that this position maintains a commitment to an ontological dualism, although in a minimalistic fashion. As such, the minimal foundationalist approach leaves open the issue that it, on the one hand, cannot maintain that human beings can grasp “objects” for what they really are – what Kant called *das ding an sich*. On the other hand, “if it maintains a nominalism that places these concepts at the mercy of intersubjective, and therefore eventually, mind-dependent processes, how does it escape from a relativist commitment?” (ibid., 404–405). Subsequently, Michel and Richards connect this potential flaw in the CTS research agenda with Critical Theory’s more general struggle to pursue a notion of truth. Following Rush, they argue that Critical Theory has utilised and reconceptualised Hegel’s teleological account in the form of a coherence theory of truth in an attempt to maintain a meaningful notion of truth. However, Critical Theory has rejected the teleological element in which a specific movement will reach a pre-given end, and instead opted for an everlasting dialectic at the heart of human existence. The material point here is that the possibility of truth is integral to the concept of emancipation because without it, emancipatory projects are left without epistemic authority (ibid., 405). As such, a relevant question in this regard is how do self-appointed emancipators know that they are emancipating? And do emancipatory projects need a basis – a fixed standard – against which it can measure progress towards a better society or social freedom? In this regard, there is perhaps not much help to gain from Horkheimer who pointed out that “in regard to the essential kind of change at which the critical theory aims, there can be no corresponding concrete perception of it until it actually comes about. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the eating here is still in the future” (Horkheimer 1972, 221).

What becomes clear is that minimal foundationalism leaves important issues unresolved, and this greatly impacts emancipation as the normative basis for a research agenda. The carry-over from the lack of substantial engagement with the philosophical aspects of Critical Theory is evident when Michel and Richards discuss emancipation more specifically. Emancipation, they argue, is in CTS understood as emancipatory rationality, and directed at the individuals and groups who suffer from the rigid and hegemonic discourses that dominate contemporary terrorism studies and praxis. Moreover, CTS has made the assumption that not only is “universalising a specific set of values (i.e. Western) a good thing but

that every community will ultimately, when it comes to its senses, pursue a path of emancipation which will lead to a universalistic conception of a just society and a harmonisation of norms and values" (ibid., 406). Although this critique seems a little too harsh, it does raise serious issues regarding emancipation as a totalising global project. The key point remains, namely, that "a normative aim (in this case liberating or emancipating or simply helping the oppressed of the world" is not a viable ground on which scholarship or action for that matter can be based" (ibid., 408). In 2010, another major critique was brought by Heath-Kelly who argued that CTS had appropriated emancipation without regard for the philosophical context that made it intelligible (Heath-Kelly 2010). Similar to Michel and Richards, she argued that if CTS is a critical endeavour which supports an emancipatory project, it needs to fully account from where it obtains the necessary justificatory force to assert its normative function and projects. A key problem was that CTS had fused and utilised both Coxian and Horkheimerian Critical Theory, which could be said to have addressed the ontological and epistemological flaws of positivism and traditional theory which follow from the dualist position. But what about the *function* of knowledge? In relation to the issue discussed above, the question is how do self-appointed emancipators justify the normative function of their knowledge claims? In Heath-Kelly's reading, the main reason CTS has come into problems with its appropriation of emancipation, and concomitant failures to justify the normative function of its knowledge, is largely due to the "pearl-fishing" method. In the context of CTS, this method has led to slices of arguments and devices being appropriated without regard for the whole context (Heath-Kelly 2010, 249). For example, Coxian critical theory is attractive to CTS with its concise mantra that "all theory is *for* someone and *for* some purpose", and the description of traditional theory as "problem-solving theory". Despite making no reference to Horkheimer, Cox argues in a Horkheimerian manner that problem-solving theory contradicts itself because of its claim to be value-free. Cox explicitly links problem-solving theory to politically stable historical epochs, while he implicitly links it with support of the state. The failed objectivity of problem-solving theory means that its proponents are, in a way, co-opted by the hegemonic system, and unable to reflexively engage with the possibility of this situation. This understanding of problem-solving theory has proven useful for CTS critiques of the orthodoxies in the field of terrorism studies, among which is the prioritization of the state as the primary referent to be secured. However, Heath-Kelly argues that an instance of the naturalistic fallacy has occurred in Cox's theory. The term naturalistic fallacy denotes improper delineation of an "ought" from an "is" within argumentation, and was first advanced by Moore in his critique of utilitarianism. The main idea is that the natural existence of something is incorrectly understood as creating a "good", and therefore right. In the utilitarian case, Bentham assumed that because pleasures *are* what make people happy, therefore it *is* right to pursue pleasure. Moore contended that this was a fallacy, and that in Ethics one cannot get from "is" to "ought" that way (Moore 1903). When Cox equates the function and content of reason he argues that instrumental/objective reason should be superseded by objective/critical functioning reason on the basis of content-errors and contextually constituted function. Instead, reflexive traditional theory is actually the response that should logically follow these problems (ibid, 247). Cox establishes a natural reality in which "problem-solving theory 'disguises' its ideological identity – concealing the partisan nature of all theory – and then seamlessly proposes that counter-hegemonic theory *ought* to explicitly declare its values in response" (Heath-Kelly 2010, 247). What remain absent in Cox's proposals are the reasons for why

objective/critical reason is to be preferred. Horkheimer, the primary source of Critical Theory, does not equate content and function of reason, but instead relies upon a philosophy-of-history approach to support his normative project, emancipation and the transformation into the right kind of society. Reality and the progression of history is understood to be a self-unfolding whole, which is already morally and developmentally progressive. History is, for Horkheimer, the validator of ideas, and theory is correct, or perhaps true, if it is brought with effort to power (Held 1980, 191–93). In Horkheimer's reasoning, then, using 'a philosophy-of-history, "is" (i.e. truth) can be determined via "ought" (the normative progression of history) (Heath-Kelly 2010, 248). As such, there is immanent potential for rational organisation as the normative foundation on which progressive groups can move society further down the path of development. However, the philosophy-of-history approach with its teleological character, offers little evidence outside conjecture to validate itself. Held argues that Horkheimer inadequately explains why the interest in a rational society is universal, and why critical theory is the correct theoretical expression of this interest (Held 1980, 248). In a similar vein, one could ask why emancipation is the correct normative expression or goal of theory, and indeed, the goal for research on terrorism. Thus, when Heath-Kelly argues that CTS has shown "no signs of recognizing the presence of a philosophy-of-history approach, and utilises Horkheimerian theory, alongside its Coxian foundations, *in a Coxian manner*- possibly exposing itself to the 'naturalistic fallacy' charge" (Heath-Kelly 2010, 248), this is a serious critique. In an attempt to highlight the ontological and epistemological flaws in traditional terrorism studies, CTS has relied on Critical Theory as the source for its normative agenda. The consequence is that CTS is unable to provide sufficient normative force to sustain an emancipatory agenda because 'there is simply no way of proving by logical argumentation that objective theory is better than instrumental theory, as the grounds on which to make the judgement are unavailable (ibid, 246). As such, Heath-Kelly suggests that for CTS to retain its normative function it would have to (1) describe the existence of contemporary human suffering; (2) delineate why such suffering is bad, and why it necessitates counter-action; and (3) legitimate itself within the academic terrain by exposing the non-objectivity and contextual constitution of the traditional academic project, and introduce its own legitimacy which stems from the conceptualisation of the emancipatory project as a solution to the suffering in the world (ibid, 252). If CTS were to explicitly justify its moral cause to prevent avoidable human suffering with normative arguments, it could then utilise and make reference to Critical Theory to legitimate the presence of this moral agenda within academia. In other words, the rejection of traditional terrorism studies as "instrumental" would be logically sound, and anchored in a separate and explicitly stated moral cause. Then it delineates a way in which the perspectival knowledge produced by CTS scholars could be anchored in an explicitly stated moral cause, or value-orientation. The final contribution to the debate on emancipation that I have chosen to include here is made by Joseph (Joseph 2011). He continues the line of philosophical critique of the appropriation of critical theory arguing that CTS has made little effort to engage with critical theory, and instead relies on many ideas of the post-positivist turn in IR. Crucially, this philosophical confusion has resulted in CTS taking an overly discursive approach which fails to properly engage with terrorism as a social relation. There are a great many important aspects of this article but I will focus one specific discussion because it relates to the discussion on minimal foundationalism, and the later discussion in this article regarding Weber's arguments about values. Joseph points out that

adopting a minimal foundationalist approach is important as it allows for an extra-discursive reality in which it is possible to move from first to second-order critique. Thus, while there are no ultimate grounds for believing that our statements are true, this is due to “the mind-independent nature of reality rather than the endless play of signification within discourse” (ibid., 26). This is a material point because this mind-independent reality provides the basis for assessing knowledge claims and allows us to “combine epistemic relativism with ontological realism and therefore judgmental rationalism” (ibid.). The latter concept allows us to judge competing theoretical claims on the basis on their explanatory adequacy. The existence of a mind-independent world allows for the possibility to produce knowledge about the world, but this knowledge is a social product and the mind-independent world cannot be understood and studied in a positivist fashion. As such, we might say that while we all have different perspectives on the world, there has to be a shared reality on which we have those perspectives. This is perhaps what CTS has tried to achieve by adopting a minimal foundationalist approach, and indeed, Toros and Gunning use this as a basis on which to distance the CTS research agenda from post-structuralism. They suggest in the chapter discussed above that Horkheimerian Critical Theory does not “reject the notions of ‘regularities’ in human activity (what positivists would call laws) or the usefulness of the positivist approach in establishing these” (Toros and Gunning 2009, 92). The key here is that, following a minimal foundationalist approach, regularities may be observed but within particular eras and within defined historical limits. Toros and Gunning contend that this approach could serve as a bridge between critical and traditional scholarship. However, Joseph argues that they are wrong to suggest a compromise with positivism because the latter confuses the knowledge we produce as scientific laws, and “these laws are defined according to the methods that search for empirical regularities, the consequence is that positivist science adopts a flat ontology that takes the world as it appears to us, rather than considering its underlying reality” (ibid., 26). The proposed bridge between traditional and critical theory might therefore be a poorly engineered construction based on a shaky foundation. As such, a common element in the critique of the appropriation of emancipation has focused on the lack of substantial engagement with the philosophical context of Critical Theory and emancipation. This has resulted in what Joseph labels an overgeneralised notion of emancipation (ibid, 30), and Michel and Richards argues that emancipation “is used without any substantial clarification as to its conceptual and practical content” (Michel and Richards 2009, 407). Thus, it is perhaps a little disappointing that in the CTS textbook, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*, published in 2011, the authors did not address the critique of the appropriation of emancipation. Although such a discussion was perhaps not within the remit of an introductory textbook, for our purpose it is still worth noting that a broad commitment to the concept of emancipation was highlighted and maintained (Jackson et al. 2011, 41).

The end of emancipation?

Despite considerable criticism on a key issue for a CTS research agenda, the debate on emancipation quietened down after 2011. This is not to say that every issue in the journal should have an article on emancipation, but the lack of discussion is somewhat surprising given the ramifications of the critique on an articulated core commitment of the research agenda. In fact, it was not until the publication of the CTS

handbook in 2016 that emancipation received more attention. In a chapter on ethics and emancipation, Toros argues that traditional terrorism studies have homogenized a great many different groups under the single category of terrorist groups, and that “this homogenization leads to a dangerous disconnect between the analysis of the violence and the context of each conflict. [...] Terrorism is understood as a dysfunction in the social order rather than as a symptom of a dysfunctional social order” (Toros 2016a, 72). This is an important distinction, and right in line with a Critical Theory approach. From here Toros argues, in familiar CSS and CTS terms, that critical theory-based scholars need to be reflexive about how they can understand the social world and engage with it. Again, the proposed notion of emancipation rests on the minimal foundationalist position, meaning there is a world out there, but that we can only access it from within our social, political, economic and historical context. As such, terrorism can be said to exist as a category of violence which is comprised of both the material acts of terrorist violence, and the social construction and reconstruction in competing discourses (ibid., 74). Addressing the ever-present concern of how to operationalise emancipation, Toros suggests that it could be understood as emancipation from both terrorist and counterterrorist violence. It could also entail supporting nonviolent responses to conflicts marked by terrorist violence, such as dialogue and negotiations, as well as studying the contexts of terrorist violence to identify those nonviolent voices which are subjugated or silenced. Importantly, she argues that all actors are capable of using and working towards both emancipatory and counter-emancipatory means and ends. This is a key debate because it pertains to the possibility of what elements of the state are open to and engaging in emancipatory means and ends. Toros and Jackson added to this debate in 2016 about whether an emancipatory agenda is commensurate with the ambition and goal to be policy relevant. Jackson voiced considerable doubt about whether this is possible, noting that under contemporary conditions “it is virtually impossible to maintain an ethical commitment to human rights, human welfare, non-violence, and progressive politics – that is, emancipation – while simultaneously participating in an inherently violent and counter-emancipatory regime of counterterrorism” (R. Jackson 2016, 122). Yet, CTS has been quick to adopt Marx’ urge to change the world, and not just interpret it. At base, there must be a belief that emancipatory change is possible. This is at the heart of Toros’ response to Jackson in the same volume. While she agrees with Jackson’s assessment about the state of global counterterrorism, she disagrees about how to engage with states to change it, arguing that:

the global counter-terrorism regime run by states is ‘deeply anti-emancipatory, anti-human, and regressive’ and certainly does not fit the definition of emancipation adopted by CTS, but this does not exclude states and state actors from having fissures or internal contradictions through which we can foster and promote change. (Toros 2016b, 127).

Both Jackson and Toros make valid points regarding the discussion on emancipation, although I am personally sympathetic to Toros’ approach. Evaluating the CTS critique of counterterrorism in 2016, I argued that CTS should explore its reconstructive potential (Lindahl 2016). There was no shortage of de-constructive work and critique, but comparatively little in terms of concrete alternatives. For many of the same reasons as set

forth by Toros, I argued that emancipation should be at the centre of the research agenda, and that states are not excluded as potential locations or drivers for emancipatory policies and actions. Working from this foundation, I attempted to construct a model of counterterrorism based on CTS scholarship to explore the reconstructive potential, and use this model to analyse Norway's approach to counterterrorism (Lindahl 2017, 2018). The initial analysis showed that Norway did engage in actions and policies, such as negotiations and conflict resolution, which could be described as having emancipatory potential. The purpose was not to establish Norway as an emancipatory actor, but the analysis did identify and locate emancipatory potential within one state's approach to counterterrorism.

Where from here?

As the above review showed, CTS received serious criticism for its appropriation of critical theory and emancipation, and ten years on these criticisms have not been addressed or inspired a second substantial debate on emancipation. This is surprising and somewhat disappointing, given its status as a core commitment and as one of the features that is supposed to set CTS apart from traditional research on terrorism – not least because it goes to the core of what CTS is, and what it should be. CTS has, from its inception, been described as a broad church that welcomes scholars engaging with terrorism through a range of methodologies and theories. At the same time, the founders placed great emphasis on emancipation, understood in a Horkheimerian fashion, as the guiding concept for normative action. The above review would seem to indicate that this is the fundamental tension which is not yet resolved or addressed adequately. As it stands, emancipation as the source for normative action is drying up. In this regard, one could ask whether emancipation is really needed for CTS as a broad church. An argument can be made that deconstructing, analysing and discussing contemporary theories, discourse and praxis might be considered critical activities in themselves. As such, emancipation might hinder or serve as an obstacle to such activities and processes. Stump and Dixit have, for example, argued for a critical approach to studying terrorism which is not centred on emancipation (Stump and Dixit 2013, 6), and it is not surprising that scholars might be unwilling to embrace emancipation and the FSCT-tradition which it traditionally is part of. Connecting knowledge production with a teleological account of truth is a potentially dangerous philosophical move which can help legitimise a range of nefarious policies and practices in the name of emancipating subjects.

However, in this regard it might be useful to recall critical theory's overall argument that knowledge production is never a neutral undertaking. Two important strands of critical theory, namely Gramsci's argument that all those with the social function as intellectuals fall into two groups, traditional and organic (Gramsci 1971, 5–23), and Horkheimer's critique of the role of traditional theory (Horkheimer 1972), illustrate the importance of this argument. Continuing this line of reasoning, a strong case can be made that scholars should recognise the inherent normative commitments of their interventions.

Indeed, the inescapable consequence of dismissing the positivist approach of producing value-free and objective knowledge about politics, and terrorism more specifically, is that scholars base their research on specific value-judgements, whether or not this is

explicitly and rigorously spelled out (Jackson 2008, 147). The inherent normative commitments should therefore be acknowledged, and this article argues that a broad (re-)conceptualisation of emancipation could actually encompass these commitments. Thus, emancipation does not become a dogma or normative straight-jacket that limits critical research. Wyn-Jones once argued that, “without the ability to claim that a better world is possible or even conceivable, there is no means by which the present can be criticized” (Wyn-Jones 1999, 56). He suggested that this is the reason why many poststructuralist-inspired writers imply notions of emancipation, and one could argue that even when CTS is understood as a broad church, it is the concept of emancipation that gives critical approaches to terrorism their purchase on that reality. As such, while CTS should not be reduced to just a specific emancipatory research agenda, it seems to me clear that there are solid reasons for why emancipation is essential to a research agenda which, at its core, is centred on non-violent normative action. Coming back to the very reasons that motivated a group of scholars to establish CTS, and echoing Wyn-Jones’ argument for why emancipation should be at the centre of critical theory, I should like to put forth the argument that normative action is what gives CTS coherence, and indeed, purpose. The following paragraphs will therefore explore a possible reconceptualisation of emancipation to address the philosophical concerns discussed in this article.

A Weberian approach to emancipation

The argument admittedly advocates that CTS broadly should embrace and explicitly endorse emancipation, and the remainder of the article will focus on a possible reconceptualisation, or even a transfiguration of emancipation. The following paragraphs will explore how a different approach to emancipation could be of great use in producing methodologically sound and critical knowledge, but more importantly, perhaps, how emancipation provides a guideline for normative action.

The exploration starts with a discussion of Weberian scholarship, and although Max Weber has not occupied a prominent role in IR scholarship, and unsurprisingly nor in CTS, his scholarship could be of great value and utility for a CTS research agenda. Preceding the Constructivist turn in IR by several decades, Weber’s ontological and epistemological positions are close to the contemporary social constructivist position in which knowledge is understood as a social product. Weber contends that humans are cultural beings with the will and capacity to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and lend it significance. Based on the *Methodenstreit* of his day, Weber dismisses the positivist approach of gathering presuppositionless facts to explain social events, and labels such an approach absurd. Instead, he advocates a philosophically monist position when he argues that the category of facts, from which knowledge is constructed and produced, is the meaning social actors bestow on their actions. Furthermore, he defined sociology as a science that concerns itself with the interpretive understanding of social action, and that “we shall speak of ‘action’ insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behaviour” (Weber 1968, 4). Human action, and the associated bestowal of meaning, form the horizon within which the facts for social analysis take place. Moreover, human action takes place in a great many different contexts, and to apprehend and analyse this concrete reality is a difficult task. Weber notes that attempts to investigate the ways in which life confronts us in immediate concrete

situations represent “an infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistently emerging and disappearing events” (Weber 1949, 72). Moreover, this multiplicity remains undiminished, even when we turn and fix our attention on a single object of study. This position holds that any aspect of reality cannot be apprehended without presuppositions, that is, without assuming a certain point of view. Weber therefore turned his attention to the presuppositions that are necessary conditions of investigations and research on social issues. Talking about the chaos that defines the infinite multiplicity of social reality, Weber argues that “order is brought into this chaos only on the condition that in every case only a *part* of concrete reality is interesting and *significant* to us, because only it is related to the *cultural values* with which we approach reality” (ibid, 78).

As such, Weber argues that we cannot apprehend reality in its totality. Instead, all knowledge is abstraction from the concreteness of reality, which means that knowing anything or any aspect of this infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistently emerging and disappearing events, necessarily involves abstracting particular elements. Thus, no knowledge is possible without conceptualisation, because “concepts are the means by which abstraction from the concreteness of reality is effected” (Hekman 1983, 20). The question then becomes how an investigator chooses a particular segment of facts as topic for investigation, or as worthy of being known.

To answer that question, Weber is insistent on the importance of personal value-judgements, arguing that “without the investigator’s evaluative ideas, there would be no principle of selection of subject-matter and no meaningful knowledge of concrete reality” (Weber 1949, 82). Furthermore: “all the analysis of infinite reality which the finite human mind can conduct rests on the tacit assumption that only a finite portion of the reality constitutes the object of scientific investigation, and that only it is ‘important’ in the sense of being ‘worthy of being known’” (ibid., 72). This describes, I would argue, rather accurately the critique set forth by CTS of traditional terrorism studies insofar as the latter is seen to present its research as formed by presuppositionless facts, and that what they deem worthy of being known is presented as objectively true. In comparison, Weber argues convincingly that investigators select a finite portion of a complex and infinite reality as the object of study based on specific value-judgements. That naturally implies that as researchers, we prioritize certain aspects of this reality and base our inquiry on specific value-judgements, whether or not we are explicit and rigorous about spelling them out (Jackson 2008, 147).

Weber uses the term value-judgements to denote the “practical evaluations of the unsatisfactory or satisfactory character of phenomena subject to our influence” (Weber 2011, 1). He argues that no scientific procedure, be it rational or empirical, can provide a decision in matters of conflicts between several conflicting ends. Philosophical disciplines, however, can lay bare the “meaning” of evaluations, and indicate their place within the totality of all the possible evaluations, and delimit their spheres of meaningful validity (ibid.,18–19). Because the data and areas of interest in the social sciences are selected by value-relevance of the phenomena in question, a discussion of value-judgements is necessary and should be considered as integral to social scientific inquiries. Such a discussion can have three functions: first, an elaboration and explication of the ultimate and internally consistent value axioms; second, a deduction of implications which follow from the irreducible value - axioms, when the practical evaluation of factual situations is based on these axioms; and third, the determination of the factual consequences which the realisation of a certain

practical evaluation must have (a) in consequence of being bound to certain indispensable means; and (b), in consequence of the inevitability of certain, not directly desired repercussion (ibid., 20–21). For our purposes, this process can be useful as a way of reflexively engaging with “emancipation” as the ultimate, internally consistent value-axiom in a research agenda. This discussion addresses a key critique discussed above that the idea self-reflexivity ironically has been missing from CTS scholarship (Joseph 2011; Michel and Richards 2009). As Heath-Kelly showed, Critical Theory in itself cannot generate sufficient normative force to assert its normative claims and function, and emancipation would have to be, to some extent, reconceptualised to form the normative principle on which to launch projects to realise concrete utopias. Thus, Heath-Kelly could give an example of how emancipation was *not* internally consistent within the CTS research agenda. Following Weber, emancipation could simply be understood as the ultimate value-axiom, which cannot be proven by any rational or empirical inquiry. While this may seem like a move towards relativism, it is nothing of the sort. The major illusion and fallacy of traditional theory is that it tries to validate its explicit, or non-explicit, value-axioms through empirical science. Instead, following Heath-Kelly’s suggestions, it is possible to describe the existence of contemporary human suffering as a consequence of contemporary counterterrorism, explain why it is bad based on the notion of the individual as the primary referent to be secured (and that we cannot enjoy true security when it comes at the cost of another’s security) to evoke emotive force which legitimates our approach in the academic terrain. Not only does it avoid the problems of traditional theory in terms of the content of knowledge, but the function of knowledge is justified and connected to the value-axiom which lends coherency to the overall theory. We can then turn to the implications which follow from the irreducible value-axiom of emancipation, when the practical evaluation of factual situations is based on this axiom. The major implication is that all theory of social and cultural life is understood to be political. As such, we may borrow from Cox’s excellent terminology and confidently state that all theory is for someone and for a purpose. It would, however, not try to legitimise normative arguments through ought-is argumentation by establishing emancipation as the “truth” or the best universal expression of the normative interest. Emancipation as the moral cause would be about preventing avoidable human suffering, and it can only make claims to how research, actions, and policies *should* be enacted based on this axiom. Like an ideal-type, it can describe and make the case for what *could* happen, but also what *should* happen. It seems to me there is a difference here between emancipation as the value-axiom connected with ideal-types of knowledge, and emancipation as the normative foundation based on a minimal foundationalist approach. The point of discussion is whether the minimal foundationalist approach still establishes certain categories like terrorism and emancipation as “truths”, only within a defined context which itself is an ideal-type.

To develop this discussion a little more, Michel and Richards argued that minimal foundationalism maintains a commitment to an ontological dualism, although in a minimalistic fashion. As such, it rejects the possibility of knowing “objects” for what they really are, but simultaneously maintains a nominalism that places these concepts at the mercy of intersubjective, and therefore eventually, mind-dependent processes. Similarly, Joseph, on his side, was concerned that CTS saw minimal foundationalism as a potential bridge between traditional and critical scholarship, but this approach would ignore the important philosophical differences between the critical and traditional scholarship. This concern is further highlighted by Weber’s insight that

the quality of an event as “social-economic” event is not something which is possessed “objectively”. It is rather conditioned by the orientation of our cognitive interest, as it arises from the specific cultural significance which we attribute to the particular event in a given case. (Weber 1949, 64).

Thus, when minimal foundationalism is used to posit that objective regularities within socio-historical epochs exist, this existence rests on the subjective notion of what constitutes a socio-historic event or era. As such, utilising a minimal foundationalist approach might bring about the paradox that, on the one hand, it is possible to critique positivist attempts to approximate the objective “truth” of terrorism, or neglecting values by assuming the existence of presuppositionless facts. On the other hand, it attempts to approximate the “truth” but now within a subjectively-defined specific context. Given the philosophical context of Critical Theory, it is not surprising that the quest for some notion of truth is inherent to minimal foundationalism and emancipation. Without due consideration, however, this move might just resemble a more refined dualistic and positivist stance. This postulation of truth might be what is making scholars sceptical or hesitant to embrace emancipation. As such, this is a tension that CTS needs to engage with in a more substantial manner if it is focus on normative action and change.

Truth and relativism

The Weberian approach also addresses and overlaps with the key issues discussed in this article. Joseph argued that minimal foundationalism allows for the existence of a mind-independent reality which provides the basis for assessing knowledge claims and opens up for the ability to combine epistemic relativism with ontological realism and therefore judgmental rationalism. As mentioned above, Weber begins from a practical standpoint stating that, “the type of social science we are interested in is an *empirical* science of concrete reality” (Weber 1949, 72). Out of this concrete reality we select certain facts and deem aspects of this reality as worthy of being known. As such, Weber holds a position which is similar to minimal foundationalism, but this foundation is not for seeking the “truth” or progressing society towards a more rationally organised society. It simply means that knowledge is a social product, and our values are integral in this process. It seems to me that Weber conducts the kind of judgemental rationalism which Joseph highlights because in Weber’s conception there is no apprehendable “world”, externally existing objects, that could be used to limit the application of an idea-type or to falsify and improve it. Instead, Weber notes that we

must recognize that general views of life and the universe can never be the products of increasing empirical knowledge, and that the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as our are to us. (Weber 1949, 57).

Thus, empirical research cannot serve to validate a particular way of constructing the world through value-judgements. This, however, does not mean knowledge claims collapse into intersubjective meanings so that they are only valid for one person and not others. Instead, he argues that even someone who rejects our values should be able to appreciate the results of the analysis by applying those values to a particular empirical problem, or reality. Moreover,

the successful *logical* analysis of the content of an ideal and its ultimate axioms and the discovery of the consequences which arise from pursuing it, logically and practically, must also be valid for the Chinese. At the same time, our Chinese can “lack a sense for our ethical” imperative and he can certainly often deny the ideal itself and the concrete value-judgements derived from it. Neither of these two latter attitudes can affect the scientific analysis in any way. (ibid., 58–59).

The Chinese, to Weber, represents someone with different value-orientations than our own, and he should appreciate the results others produce by applying those to the study of empirical reality. As Jackson notes, the essence of this framework is that it is on the basis of a more or less technical question of application, and not on the content or character of the value-orientations thus applied, that the scientific character of an investigation can and should be valued (Jackson 2008, 148). In this regard, Weber argues that concepts, abstractions and knowledge claims should be evaluated according to their heuristic and expository qualities, which is similar to Joseph’s argument for judgemental rationalism. This is the basis on which CTS can, and indeed have critiqued, traditional terrorism studies on the content of knowledge.

When it comes to normative questions, or the ideals that move us most forcefully, it is questionable whether emancipation can ever be what CTS wants it to be, as long as it remains underdeveloped. This concern derives from the philosophical roots of emancipation, in particular the Horkheimerian position in which it is tied to rationally creating a better society. Not only, as Held argued, did Horkheimer fail to show why the interest in a rational society is universal, and why critical theory is the correct theoretical expression of this interest (Held 1980, 248), but after reading *Eclipse of Reason*, in which Horkheimer complained about the loss of objective reason and simultaneously made an appeal for objective truth, Marcuse in a letter to Horkheimer hoped he could expound of the many trains of thoughts in the book:

Especially the one which disturbs me most of all: that the form of reason which suddenly changes into complete manipulation and domination still nevertheless remains a form of reason, so that the real horror of the system lies more in its rationality than in its irrationality. That is easily *said* – but you must still provide the development for the actual reader- no one else can or will do so, (Marcuse in Wiggershaus 1995, 350).

Concluding remarks

The above discussion has delineated how emancipation in its initial Critical Theory context was understood as part of the effort of progressive groups to move society further down its path of development towards rational organisation. However, given the problematic relationship between minimal foundationalism and claims to normative truth, it seems to me that instead of thinking about emancipation as a truth, a more fruitful approach could be to think of “true” in a manner closer to its meaning of “being true to”. Critchley describes this as an act of fidelity which is kept alive in the German word *treu* (Critchley 2012, 3), or even the Norwegian word *tro*. The idea then is that emancipation is a normative commitment we try to remain true to, instead of emancipation as an end-point. CSS and CTS have adopted a similar position, insofar as emancipation is understood to be a process and not an end-point. However, given the

unresolved philosophical issues, this normative commitment still remains liable to the critique offered by Michel and Richards that CTS makes an assumption that every community would want to pursue a path of emancipation, which will “lead to a universalistic conception of a just society and a harmonisation of norms and values” (Michel and Richards 2009, 406). If the normative aim is to provide space for emancipatory rationality (Blakeley 2007, 234; Jackson 2007, 249–50), then the emancipatory process would still be heading towards a concrete end-point. The various efforts to realise concrete utopias would be to reach a situation in which space for emancipatory rationality is the normative end-point.

These concerns notwithstanding, it seems to me that emancipation remains valuable as a value-axiom in research, insofar as our own values are part of the production of knowledge, whether we acknowledge it or not. Furthermore, in praxis emancipation could be understood as a guideline for normative action – what Benjamin calls a *Richtschnur des Handelns* (Benjamin 1996). This guideline for action is an approximation rather than a decree or commandment to be followed once and for all. Emancipation, therefore, is not, to paraphrase Critchley, “an a priori moral law from which we derive a posteriori consequences” (Critchley 2012, 220). Instead, we often find ourselves in real, concrete socio-political situations of violence, and emancipation is a guideline for action. Booth placed great emphasis on the means/end relationship and non-violence in his conceptualisation of emancipation, and Jackson more recently made the point, on which I agree, that nonviolence is central to the notion of emancipation (Jackson 2017). Indeed, the principle of means/ends consistency is clear that the means we use have to be commensurate with the ends we want to achieve. Not only is this a strong theoretical and moral argument, it is also supported empirically by the blatant failures of the GWOT. Emancipation and non-violence are two sides of the same coin, and faced with concrete situations of violence, such as the contemporary war on terror, what we have “is a plumb line of nonviolence, of life’s sacredness” (Critchley 2012, 220). In this understanding, emancipation is not an end-point, or the means to reach the reach or establish the correct normative truth. It is, in some ways, similar to Jesus’s ethical demand (love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you [Matt. 5:44]) in the sense that this demand is extreme and ridiculous. Critchley points out that Jesus’s demand puts the ethical subject in a situation of sheer ethical overload, and that “what such a demand does is expose our imperfection and failure and we wrestle with the force of the demand and the facts of the situation” (Critchley 2012, 221). Indeed, it is difficult to think of emancipation as a kind of Kantian moral law or the correct normative expression of theory, and even in its current various articulations, one could argue that it places the subject in situation of sheer ethical overload. Perhaps this is one reason why it has proven so difficult to identify and point to concrete examples of emancipatory policies and actions. However, if we think of all theory as being political, then one could argue that politics, and emancipation, is “action that situates itself in the conflict between a commitment to nonviolence and the historical reality of violence into which one is inserted, and which requires an ever-compromised, ever-imperfect action that is guided by an infinite ethical demand” (ibid., 243). Thus, emancipation could be understood in relation to an infinite ethical demand that exceeds the finitude of any context, but simultaneously is not permitted to programme political action in which

specific decisions are deduced from incontestable moral precepts. As such, emancipation must to some degree be universal, but not tied to notions of truth or the correct rational progression of society. This marks a shift from the Horkheimerian understanding of emancipation, and clarifies the argument about emancipation as a process. It is not about emancipating others, or driving society down the path towards a more rationally organised society. As a continuous process, emancipation is an infinite ethical demand which lays bare two key consequences for research and praxis. First, to follow the plumb line of emancipation (means/ends consistency and nonviolence), and second; to accept responsibility for choosing not to follow it.

In a complex and often chaotic reality we are faced with concrete situations of violence and counter-violence, and there no transcendental guarantees. Dewey argued that human activity is continuous, and 'nothing happens which is final in the sense that it is not part of any ongoing stream of events' [...] (and) "ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences" (Dewey 1922, 232). As such, what we have is an infinite ethical demand and a plumb line of nonviolence. If emancipation is about realising concrete utopias, I would argue that this process is best approached by being true to emancipation. Our research, actions and policy suggestions will never be completely emancipatory, but we must struggle to remain true to emancipation as a normative commitment. Reducing the use of military violence to counter terrorism, and not using drones to kill indiscriminately in the war on terror would be two ways in which Western countries could work to be true to the principle of emancipation. It would not be about imposing a totalising normative project, but about conducting research, and implementing actions and policies that struggles to meet an infinite ethical demand.

While not a finished product, it seems to me that emancipation could be of great value outside of its traditional FSCT context and understanding. There might be other, and better ways, of conceptualising emancipation or guiding normative action. The primary aim of this article has been to inspire a debate on what position emancipation should have within CTS, if any at all. It has been argued that normative action is what gives CTS coherence and purpose, and while CTS may remain a broad church that welcomes scholars engaging with terrorism through a range of methodologies and theories, a broad (re-)conceptualisation of emancipation is possible which could encompass the inherent normative interventions of scholars working towards social change, and a more humane and non-violent counterterrorism paradigm.

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