

the American Dimension

Cultural Myths and Social Realities
2nd Edition

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ALFRED PUBLISHING CO., INC.
15335 Morrison Street
Sherman Oaks, CA 91403

man would be "nasty, brutish and short." Society, then, exercises a tyranny over the individual. This experience of the tyranny of form over life is presented in potentially subversive media, such as art and ritual. The Marx Brothers, in their movies, express an attitude of rebellion towards this tyranny.

GOOD MARX FOR THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

Structure and Anti-Structure in "Duck Soup"

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It might strike the reader as a dubious exercise but I intend to take some of the concepts developed in the study of ritual in non-Western societies and apply them to the movie *Duck Soup*. The intention is to make sense out of apparent nonsense. Ritual, in this sense, does not necessarily refer to religious action—behavior directed toward "non-empirical beings."¹ Thus I use a definition that regards ritual as an aspect of social behavior directed toward making statements about how the actor "thinks and feels about . . . [social] relationships and about the natural and social environments in which they occur" (Turner, 1969: 6). Some social behavior is more oriented to saying things than to getting things done, although there are elements of both in everything that people do. Social behavior that is predominantly expressive (oriented to saying things) and performed on special occasions is called "ritual" by anthropologists.² The analysis of the meaning of behavior on these occasions draws connections between what the ritual expresses and other dimensions of social life or other situations in which the actors might find themselves.

There is not always a direct relationship between what is ex-

pressed and what the ritual refers to. In fact, most anthropologists who are interested in understanding rituals agree that if something can be expressed directly, then there is little reason for it to be expressed in a ritual format. If there is one aspect of ritual that may be referred to as the "function" of ritual, it is that it allows for the expression of what is otherwise inexpressible. This is why anthropologists often fail to obtain significant results from questioning people about their rituals. How can they explain what they are otherwise not allowed to say or cannot say except through ritual? Thus it is not so paradoxical that the best informants for anthropologists are often persons who are marginal to their own society and, as a consequence, are more involved in questioning the social conditions of their existence.³

One anthropologist whose work has been very influential in this regard is V. W. Turner, who in a series of essays and monographs on the Ndembu of Zambia has examined the relationship between what is expressed in ritual and the experiences of the actors—particularly to their social and personal conflicts (1967, 1968, 1969). In the course of his analysis, Turner has evolved the concept of "anti-structure," which he uses to examine the relationship of what is expressed in ritual to the structure of society, and also to explain why ritual helps to resolve or at least mediate conflicts in which participants are involved. My concern however is not with conflict resolution or mediation; instead I want to use the concept of anti-structure to describe *Duck Soup*. This is done in order to demonstrate that anti-structure is a useful analytical tool for examining the interrelations among roles played by actors (in the theatrical sense) on some expressive occasions, such as in movies, and the roles played by actors (in the social sense) on formal and public occasions during which the hierarchy of etiquette prevails. Thus, this is a modest attempt at academic imperialism since I am convinced that there are as yet no theoretical reasons for asserting that there are substantial differences between what is called a "primitive ritual" and an expressive occasion such as a movie.

Turner's conception of anti-structure derives from the theoretical position which views social structure as a system of constraints applied to social persons to coerce them to behave in ways antithetical to their immediate self-interests.⁴ Structure is not the only aspect of society that merits description, however. For Turner, structure can only be effective as a system of constraints because the persons involved alternate their participation in structure with occasions that are anti-structural in nature and meaning. Turner views the alternation of structure and anti-structure as the major unanalyzed aspect in the study of society. I shall not be concerned here with the relation of anti-structure and structure to social stability and change. Rather, I want to use Turner's important insight that there are in many societies occa-

sions reserved for the expression of attitudes, opinions, and feelings that are not tolerated in the etiquette of other, and especially public, occasions. The importance of these ritual expressions of anti-structure is that these publicly intolerable attitudes are positively valued on ritual occasions instead of being negatively sanctioned. Hence, the expression of anti-structure bears a dialectical relationship to the constraints imposed on other, more structural, occasions.

Society (*societas*) seems to be a process rather than a thing—a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and *communitas*. There would seem to be—if one can use such a controversial term—a human “need” to participate in both modalities. Persons starved of one in their functional day-to-day activities seek it in ritual liminality. The structurally inferior aspire to symbolic structural superiority in ritual; the structurally superior aspire to symbolic *communitas* and undergo penance to achieve it. (1969: 203)

It might be added that Turner’s “dialectics” differs from classical Hegelian-Marxian dialectics in that the alternation of structure and anti-structure does not imply a *transcendence* of one by the other. In Turner’s formulation structure and anti-structure chase each other in a perpetual equilibrium.

In his most recent essay on this topic Turner (1974) distinguishes “liminality” and “*communitas*” as the two dimensions of anti-structure. Liminality is typically found during transition rituals, in which persons move from one identity to another. In these instances individuals are stripped of one identity and before they assume another, they exist in a state that is “betwixt and between.” Their liminal state expresses a contravention of the structure without an assertion of other social possibilities. *Communitas* is expressed during liminal states. It is the ritual opposite of structure in that it unites persons whom structure separates in terms of social distance, and exists in continual tension with structure at all levels of organization (1974: 274-275). The form that *communitas* might take is related to but not determined by the structure of the society in which the ritual is embedded. Turner stresses the *dialectical* and *necessary* relationship between structure and *communitas* or, more generally, structure and anti-structure.

In what follows below I describe the relationships expressed by a set of characters in the Marx Brothers’ classic film *Duck Soup* to the structural relationships expressed by the etiquette of public occasions. I trust that if the following analysis does not illuminate the reader’s understanding of the Marx Brothers’ movies, it will not lessen his enjoyment of them. It hasn’t mine.

Duck Soup is an appropriate vehicle for analysis because it is generally acknowledged as the zenith of the Marx Brothers’ art. However, it was not a commercial success and their contract with

Paramount Studios was not renewed after this film. This initiated the Marx Brothers' sad artistic decline—guided initially by the capable but crass Irving Thalberg (Adamson, 1973). The film was created in order for the Marx Brothers to express their artistic personalities without the regard found in many of their earlier films for plot constraints or the conventions of the Broadway or vaudeville stage. Therefore, in *Duck Soup* we have the Marx Brothers at their best and in a vehicle that expresses what is most distinctive about them.

For those who may be unfamiliar with the film's plot, I will present a brief synopsis, which I preface with the warning that plots are the creatures of structure. Consequently, to pay too much attention to twists of plot in a vehicle of anti-structure such as *Duck Soup* is to refuse to enter into the spirit of the occasion. First, the title. Unsubstantiated rumor has it that the title refers to the Marx Brothers' opinion of the quality of the food at the Paramount dining room—Duck Soup! Groucho has another explanation: "Take two turkeys, one goose, four cabbages, but no duck, and mix them together. After one taste, you'll duck soup the rest of your life" (Adamson, 1973: 224). Back to the plot. The imaginary country of Fredonia is in the midst of a financial crisis. The crisis is resolved by Mrs. Teasdale (played by Margaret Dumont), the wealthy widow of a former prime minister. Her price is to have her candidate installed as chief of state. The new prime minister, Rufus T. Firefly (played by Groucho Marx), appears to be installed at a grand ball where his first words as prime minister are, "take a card." His first official act is to dictate a letter to his dentist. He then sings a song about the policies he will follow in office. The refrain goes: "If any form of pleasure is exhibited, report it to me and it will be prohibited." A recent commentary on the film tells us:

the only difference between him and any other head of state is that coming from his mouth it sounds funny. Disrespect for crowned heads is what we're all set to see Groucho perform, but he executes the most ignoble sacrilege on the whole condition of sovereignty just by taking office. . . . He cheerfully proclaims he'll accept all the power due his office and none of the responsibility, and it gets a rise out of the people instead of an uprising. His conversation about Margaret Dumont's husband (who . . . [he says] died of a surfeit of Margaret Dumont) gets the same response out of her: Groucho is a bald-faced opportunist and makes no bones about it. He is the ideal ruler. (Adamson, 1973: 227).

While the plot gets far more complicated, it doesn't make any better sense. Groucho gets into a series of disputes with Ambassador Trentino of the neighboring country of Sylvania who is after Mrs. Teasdale's money. Somehow the fights lead to a declaration of war between the two countries. The manifest reason is a contest of honor between Groucho-Firefly and Trentino that would put the fiercest Mediterranean countryman to shame. Chico (under the nom de guerre of Chico-

lini) and Harpo (who doesn't have a name at all)⁵ are spies for Trentino and, when not stealing plans of war, they are working for Groucho and vending peanuts. Finally the spies are caught, but their trial—made into a travesty by Chico and the worst puns anyone has ever heard—is interrupted by war with Sylvania, Ambassador Trentino's country. The events of this particular conflict are not reducible to mere words. Fredonia wins after Trentino is caught in the door of a house in which the Marx Brothers are blockaded. They pelt him with fruit until he surrenders. The victory stirs Mrs. Teasdale to break into the national anthem of Fredonia; so the Marx Brothers pelt *her* with fruit. We aren't allowed to stay around long enough to discover if she surrenders.

Plot takes us exactly where the movie intended—nowhere. In the world of anti-structure a logical, linear progression has no particular place. There must be a beginning and an end in order to leave and return to structure again, but it matters little if we begin at the middle and end before the beginning. If sense is not to be made of the film at the level of a sequence of events, it must be found at another level. Otherwise audiences would not still be overcome with hysteria by this film 40 years after it was made. I suggest that the level at which sense is to be found is in the logic of social relations and in the relationship of that logic to the audience's experience of the participation in social relationships having a similar structural pattern.⁶ In pursuing this mode of analysis I am not departing in any way from the conventional anthropological analysis of ritual. Social anthropologists from Van Gennep (1960) on have examined the patterns of transformations that the normative content of social relationships undergo on ritual occasions. Studies of ritually privileged license and obscenity bear this out.

The pivot of most of the Marx Brothers' movies is the relationship between Groucho and those he victimizes. They are, by and large, persons in social positions that demand respect and deference, and are naturally offended when they receive less than what they require as their social due. Ambassador Trentino of *Duck Soup*, or Herman Gottlieb, the pompous and self-satisfied manager of the New York Opera from *A Night at the Opera*, are good examples of this type, but the ubiquitous Margaret Dumont, the archetype of the dowager matron, provides us with the purest representative of the kind. There is nothing especially mean or malicious or even particularly self-seeking about Mrs. Teasdale and the other dowagers that Margaret Dumont usually plays. She is merely a pompous woman (often a widow) who either represents or wants to represent the pinnacle of social prestige. She is always wealthy and willing to use her wealth for philanthropic purposes—as she understands them. Groucho, on the other hand, is willing to use her. She is destined to be Groucho's foil. His intention is to flatter her, seduce her, and marry her in order to enjoy her wealth. His exchanges with her start out with Groucho expressing admiration for her beauty, figure, intelligence, culture, or whatever else comes to

mind. Groucho's trouble is that he can't keep *his* mind on the job at hand. His distaste for Dumont always gets the better of him, and he winds up expressing his genuine and very funny opinion of her. In *Duck Soup* he impugns her honor, insults her figure, portrays her as overcome by uncontrollable sexual desire, and implies that she drove her husband to his death. Otherwise they get on fine.

We might conclude that Groucho is not polite to her. And that is precisely what strikes us as particularly funny about their relationship. Proper behavior in a given situation is very important to the characters that Margaret Dumont plays. She stresses both for herself and the people around her proper dress, proper demeanor, and proper etiquette. The formal garden party and the inaugural ball are her milieu in *Duck Soup*. Even in her boudoir she presents us with a formally and impeccably well dressed presence. Her major concern appears to be that the social forms are maintained; and she directs a sense of outrage at persons who do not defer to and recognize the importance of such socially eminent persons as ambassadors and cabinet ministers. She is the type of character who remains a stock figure in satires, from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (which has a good deal in common with *Duck Soup*) on to the present.

Because of her emphasis on the structural (i.e., public) characteristics of individuals rather than on their personal qualities, she is a stifling and constraining presence. The very existence of Groucho (not to mention what he says and does to her) liberates the audience from Margaret Dumont. In classical structuralist fashion the differences between Rufus T. Firefly as portrayed by Groucho and Mrs. Teasdale as portrayed by Margaret Dumont can be represented through a series of oppositions.

Where Teasdale is always impeccably tailored, Firefly is always dressed in an ill-fitting outfit. Both Mrs. Teasdale and Firefly are aware of the rules of etiquette but while she is concerned with upholding the rules of conventional morality, Firefly pokes fun at the people who live by the rules and respond emotionally to their violations. Thus, the net effect of the Groucho-Dumont opposition or the Firefly-Teasdale opposition (they amount to the same thing) is to provide the audience with a spectacular and ongoing relationship of continual status reversal. By victimizing her on the basis of publicly displaying her disconcerting (for her) personal characteristics, her claims to superiority are turned to a position of social inferiority. The relationship is based on Mrs. Teasdale's claims about her superior status vis-a-vis the rest of the world (including Firefly). Firefly exploits those claims by providing information and attitudes that poke fun, often cruel fun, at the pretensions of Teasdale and most of the people he is surrounded by. The audience participates in what becomes the disruption of claims to deference on public occasions. The audience is able, in fact willing, to participate because these claims are based on the assumption that the

norms of social behavior express differences of quality between the actors. Firefly expresses what many of the audience will have felt many times but had been forced to repress—that their definition of the situation does not merit the assumption of inequality, which they see themselves as forced to acknowledge and legitimize on public occasions.

Firefly and Teasdale represent an important starting point for this analysis. Other dimensions are to be found in the characters played by Chico and Harpo. Chico's character is called, with startling originality, Chicolini while Harpo's character has no name, or at least it is not revealed to the audience.

Chicolini is, as with all the characters Chico plays, an immigrant. He wears funny clothes, talks with an accent, and works at what are almost archetypically immigrant occupations. In *Duck Soup* he runs a combination peanut and hotdog stand and supplements his income with a little espionage on the side. If he were an organ grinder and had a monkey on a string, I don't think we would be surprised. But this is no immigrant made for poking fun at. Although he represents the image of the greenhorn so dear to vaudeville and later burlesque comedians, he is not the one who is taken in and fleeced. The fleecing, with an appropriately mixed metaphor, is on the other foot. Chico's main contribution to the Marx Brothers' movies in general, and *Duck Soup* in particular, is through a series of outrageous puns. His wit makes no more linear sense than Groucho's or Harpo's. The major difference is that, while Groucho's humor is aimed at deflating pomposity, Chico's humor is aimed at taking advantage of his victim's image of Chico as ignorant and gullible. In *Duck Soup* Chicolini plays with that image by perpetrating on us a series of puns and by taking advantage of the same people that Firefly mocks. Consider the following dialogue:

The Shadow

Trentino: Oh! Now, Chicolini, I want a full detailed report of your investigation.

Chico: All right, I tell you. Monday we watch-a Firefly's house, but he no come out. He wasn't home. Tuesday we go to the ball game, but he fool us. He no show up. Wednesday he go to the ball game, and we fool him. We no show up. Thursday was a doubleheader. Nobody show up. Friday it rained all day. There was no ball game, so we stayed home and we listened to it over the radio.

Trentino: Then you didn't shadow Firefly?

Chico: Oh, sure we shadow Firefly. We shadow him all day.

Trentino: But what day was that?

Chico: Shadowday! Hahaha. Atsa some joke, eh, Boss?
(Adamson, 1973: 227)

or again when Chicolini is on trial for espionage:

The Trial

Groucho: Chicolini, give me a number from one to ten.

Chico: Eleven.

Groucho: Right.

Chico: Now I ask you one. What is it has a trunk, but no key, weighs 2,000 pounds, and lives in the circus?

Prosecutor: That's irrelevant.

Chico: A relephant! Hey, that's the answer! There's a whole lotter elephants in the circus.

Minister: That sort of testimony we can eliminate.

Chico: Atsa fine. I'll take some.

Minister: You'll take *what*?

Chico: Eliminate. A nice cool glass eliminate..

* * * * *

Minister of Finance: Something must be done! War would mean a prohibitive increase in our taxes.

Chico: Hey, I got an uncle lives in Taxes.

Minister of Finance: No, I'm talking about taxes—money, dollars.

Chico: Dollas! That's-a where my uncle lives. Dollas, Taxes!

Minister of Finance: Aww!

(Adamson, 1973: 242-243)

If Groucho inverts the norms and values of the social reality that is accepted by the Teasdales and Trentinos of his world, we may say that Chico has a *tangential* relationship to that same reality. He approaches reality from an oblique angle. Chico, however, does not usually act alone. He is accompanied by Harpo, who presents us with a persona entirely different from Chico and Groucho. *Duck Soup* is Harpo's finest hour. All the innate anarchy and formlessness of his character is expressed in this film. Perhaps his finest scene is during his and Chico's conference with Ambassador Trentino. His voluminous clothes produce an assortment of tools from scissors to a blowtorch used for lighting cigars. He consistently, persistently, and absolutely destroys every premise on which social action can be based until the scene can continue no longer. There is no way that the everyday rationality of the Trentino character can deal with the phenomenon of Harpo.

Even Harpo's appearance and manner deny the categories of

everyday life. He is more than just a stock vaudeville clown figure as he is sometimes interpreted. Immediately, one recognizes that his appearance conveys a remarkable kind of sexual ambiguity. His hair, figure, and face cannot be placed in either of the two sexual categories. Perhaps this is because of his childlike manner. His systematic inarticulateness, his lack of social knowledge, his naivete and polymorphous sexuality (in *Duck Soup* he winds up in bed with a horse after chasing a voluptuous blonde)⁷ are all reminiscent of the condition of infancy, or at least the Freudian version of infancy.

For whatever the reason, Harpo is not easily placed into basic and perhaps even universal categories of the social world such as man-woman and child-adult. I suggest that this is because Harpo expresses an attitude to the world that is, to quote Turner, "betwixt and between" the world of structure. Harpo is preeminently a *liminal* figure and as such contradicts the most basic values and distinctions of his and our society. Thus, the figure of Harpo represents for the audience the inversion and obliteration of structure in its most elementary forms.

We have in the Marx Brothers' personae three stock figures from drama and comedy, the flimflammer or con man, the immigrant, and the clown. None is admirable by the standards of our society; they are all marginal to the central concerns of anyone trying to get on in life. What these characters have in common, and what the audience responds to, is that they say *NO* to the application of constraints on behavior to which the rest of their world unthinkingly acquiesces. Of course, their very marginality makes them less liable to the imposition of sanctions. They aren't likely to receive the rewards that everyone else is striving so hard to get. Therefore, they are not obliged to accept the discrepancy between the personal perception of a situation and the acknowledgement of a social norm that is part of the audience's experience of the social world. In the case of Harpo, the audience is given an example of freedom from the constraints imposed on action as a result of being placed by other people into basic social categories such as man-woman or child-adult. With Groucho and Chico, the audience is given an example of freedom from constraints (such as being "nice" or "polite" or "paying attention") that are the necessary baggage that accompanies the achievement of social goals through other people.

In fact, I think this is a major aspect of the appeal of the Marx Brothers. Their characters *express* attitudes to the social world that are coterminous with unexpressed attitudes experienced by large portions of the audiences that have appreciated *Duck Soup* and other Marx Brothers films over the years. This is why so many of the Marx Brothers' best scenes are concerned with public occasions such as balls, parties, trials, and operas. On these occasions the presentation of self is limited to the expression of social rather than personal attributes to a far greater degree than on more intimate occasions. In the Marx Brothers films this ritual separation of persons is stood on its head and

the brothers and their audience form an unstructured community united through laughter at the structure. *Communitas* is to be found in the interaction between the audience and the Marx Brothers. In this sense, anyone who attends a performance of *Duck Soup* is engaging in an action akin to taking part in a ritual. How the person responds is, of course, a matter of personal history and temperament. I cannot help but think, however, that the continuing popularity of this movie is based on its ability to strike deep and responsive chords in the experience of the audience.⁸

I have tried, through the use of the concept of anti-structure, to discover within *Duck Soup* elements that correspond to the experiences of the audience that enable it to respond to the movie. I have tried to show that the social world of the Marx Brothers has structural features in common with that of the audience. Instead of viewing *Duck Soup* as an entity in itself, I have stressed a relationship between what is expressed in the film and the social experience of the actors. This relationship demonstrates that anti-structure is not chaotic and formless: it derives its form and meaning from structure.⁹ In the case, for example, of Groucho and Margaret Dumont the form of anti-structure is derived from an antithetical relationship of deference expressed in the etiquette of hierarchy. In this sense, anti-structure is like Monica Wilson's (1951) definition of witchcraft as "standardized nightmares" that derive their meaning from tensions found in social relationships (Middleton and Winter, 1963). The difference is that in witchcraft beliefs, the uncertainties that are elements in social action are developed into a moral theory of causation. In Marx Brothers' films the irritants that accompany social action are expressed.

But what happens as a result of the expression of these irritants? Surely, the audience's interpretation of similar experiences has been altered after seeing *Duck Soup*, just as it would have been altered after seeing any movie—no matter how banal. Since this paper has treated *Duck Soup* as a ritual it should conclude with at least some comments on the consequences for the actors of participation in the affair. Although rituals obviously serve to ease social tensions, in each society a ritual must be examined anew before such general conclusions can be reaffirmed. In the case of *Duck Soup* it would be easy but incorrect to suggest that after having seen this movie the audience can rest easier in the face of social inequities. If I did suggest that, the analysis would be dialectical in the sense that Turner uses the notion of dialectics. Instead, I wish to suggest that I find it difficult to imagine how anyone can take *Duck Soup* seriously, in the sense of laughing at what it laughs at, and return to the world of structure and accept with reverence and equanimity the received wisdom of public occasions. The consequence of joining with the Marx Brothers in laughing at structure is to formulate and verify for the moviegoer his private and inchoate experience of the structure, and thus to make that experience an objective, social fact.

In this sense the title of the paper plays on the historical accident of the identicalness of the surnames of Karl Marx and the Marx Brothers. The young Karl Marx called for "a ruthless criticism of everything existing . . . ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the power that be" (Tucker, 1972: 9, emphasis in original). The Marx Brothers similarly ask us to take nothing for granted, nor to be afraid of our conclusions. Remember Chico's famous line in *Duck Soup*. Groucho has just left Mrs. Teasdale's boudoir. Chico, dressed as Groucho, crawls out from under the bed. Mrs. Teasdale says, "Why, I can't believe my own eyes." "Lady," replies Chico, "Who you gonna believe? Me or your own eyes?"

Notes

I would like to thank Nigel Bolland, Mary Bufwack, David Jacobson, Patricia Karp, and Warren Ramshaw for their penetrating comments on earlier versions of this paper.

1. See Tyler's famous minimal definition of religion, which does not even refer to religion as expressing "ultimate concerns" (Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 25).

2. This approach is illustrated by Leach (1954) and Harris (1957), among others.

3. See Turner's fascinating essay (1967) on just such a person, Muchona, the Hornet.

4. Durkheim's own position of self and society is actually far more radical. For him the self is socially derived and there can be no distinction between self-interests and societal interests. For a discussion of this see Thomas Luckmann's analysis of Durkheim's concept of the self in relation to a sociology of religion (1967).

5. Zimmerman and Goldblatt assert that Harpo is called "Pinky" in *Duck Soup* (1968: 84). I have no such recollection.

6. In a series of works beginning with *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman has documented the assertion that the private and personal self is allowed little scope for expression on public and formal occasions. See also Meyer Fortes's "Ritual and Office in Tribal Society" in Max Gluckman (1962). In this paper I am taking this portion of the analysis as given. Clearly, I am making a number of assertions about the social experience and state of consciousness of the audience. These are derived partly from my reading of social scientists, such as Goffman, and partly from my own experience. In the absence of empirical evidence that could confirm or deny these assertions, this analysis must be taken as partial and tentative.

7. Is this the same horse whose picture he carried next to his heart in *Animal Crackers*?

8. Here again we confront the problem of assertion about the audience. One reader suggested, for example, that an audience composed largely of college students (as seems to be the case for Marx Brothers fans currently) cannot be analyzed in the same fashion as the earlier, predominantly lower-class audiences of *Duck Soup*. I suggest that the continuing popularity of the

Marx Brothers can be analyzed in terms of continuities in the experience of the audiences. One such continuity might be the marginal relationship to sources of power in our society of both contemporary college students and the 1930s audiences of the Marx Brothers.

9. It only *seems* chaotic and formless to the participants. Anti-structure derives its form through inverting and contravening the structure.

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