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Book Review Article

'Cough a Little upon Entering': Some Reflections on the History of Surreptitious Spectatorship - an extended review of: **Locke, John L. (2010) *Eavesdropping: An Intimate History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press**
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Darkness has us covered....
When you're headed for the border Lord
you're bound to cross the line.

K. Kristofferson, Border Lord

How and why has the surreptitious gathering of information on others changed since the appearance of modern *Homo sapiens*, the arrival of permanent settlements and urban societies? John L. Locke, who teaches at the City University of New York, pursues these modest questions (and more) in a series of loosely connected essays. Locke, a linguist with wide ranging interests, reports that most languages have a term for the interception of words or deeds by a person for whom they were not intended. The author seeks to understand the presumed 'voracious human appetite' and the 'lifelong quest of all humans to know what is going on in the personal and private lives of others' (6).

As a teenager growing up in Hollywood during the 1950s who voraciously read revelations about movie stars and politicians in *Confidential Magazine*, I know what he is referring to. But now, as a social scientist (or, more accurately, a social studies scholar) aware of the astounding variation across contexts and individuals, I am wary of any statements about a 'life long quest of all humans'. But that does not prevent a strong endorsement of this learned and clever volume. The text overflows with wonderful examples and little known facts:

Solitary animals that can not rely on their fellows for warning against predators evolved mechanisms such as heads that swivel like periscopes or if not, like the iguana, became adept at appropriating the warning signals of others species.

The ability to tactically deceive (frequently an element of data collection or its avoidance) is particularly strong in baboons and chimps and is predicted by neocortical volume.

Among primates, adult males are distantly vigilant. They attend to the periphery of the troop's territory. In contrast, adult females are proximally vigilant focusing on the well being of infants.

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The Zinacanteco of southern Mexico had fenced dwellings without windows that afforded privacy (villagers were even forbidden to go through the fence without permission). Yet staying indoors or having closed doors was a violation. The ordinary activities of the group were expected to be carried on where others could see or hear.

In medieval England among common categories of arrest were for eavesdropping (males) or expressing its fruits through the crime of scolding. The latter defined as 'a troublesome and angry woman' who by brawling and wrangling breaks the public peace and creates discord. (p. 135)

The development of bell ropes, dumb waiters and the swinging covers over key holes were intended to keep the conversations of the more privileged from the inquiring ears and eyes of the servants.

The ostensible subject of the inquiry is eavesdropping, but the book also deals with information about the lives of others obtained through reading and film and from subjects who are aware of the listening or watching agent and may even consent to sharing their personal information.

The book's 34 images—engravings, paintings and photographs (along with its well endowed bibliography) are worth the cost alone. The pictures, folklore, anthropological research, literature and poetry depicting covert information collection in prior centuries and distant places, are immediately understandable to the contemporary viewer.

Every card-carrying Surveillance Studies scholar should have a visual image to go with the story of Asmodeus—that classic Spanish data goniff who lifted the rooftops of the rich and famous to expose their doings to lesser mortals, not to mention images of neighbours listening through thin walls or from under the eaves, servants peeking through keyholes, strolling *flâneurs* and impressionistic *baduads*.

The book's strength lies in Locke's polymorphous erudition and rendering of such a wide range of examples. I strongly recommend the book for anyone seeking broad historical understanding of developments in the gathering of personal information. Locke sees the forest, the trees and even some blades of grass and weaves them into an informative and at times elegant landscape. He mines various disciplines and little-known secondary sources rarely offered together (e.g., research on the gaze of the chimpanzee, Plato's invisibility ring, 17th century poetry warning of the dangers of gossip, early English and French court records, histories of architecture, and anthropology field studies such as those of the Mehinacu of central Brazil who can keep track of each other by recognizing footprints).

As a linguist with an occupational advantage Professor Locke has a great ear (or is it eye?) for mean metaphors, alluring allegories and apropos quotes. Consider this selection from a 1678 essay characterizing the 'scold', a frequent defendant in English courts who spread tales about her neighbours:

A devil of the feminine; a serpent, perpetually hissing, and spitting of venom; a composition of ill-nature and clamour...animated gun powder, a walking Mount Etna that is always belching flames of sulphur...a real purgatory. (138)

He is attuned to meanings in language that link 'the visual sense to domination and control' as with the evil eye and more:

we 'have' someone in our sights, according to linguistic custom we 'hold' them in our gaze, possibly even 'capture' them, much as wildlife photographer might be said to have 'captured' a moose drinking from a pond. (112)

However, the 'power over' emphasis must be matched by words involving the 'protection of' aspects. Consider a rescue plane having a missing boat 'within its sights' or a police officer telling another 'watch my back.'

Antecedents and History

Locke tells the story of the move from animals watching each other as prey or predators, to humans living in the wild watching each other for protection and conformity, to more complex forms of covert watching associated with the rise of permanent settlements and later to those associated with the rise of large urban areas. The appearance of more sophisticated technologies for protecting and discovering personal information as life conditions change is a central part of the book. The development of literacy and, later, means of remote information discovery and communication qualitatively alter life conditions. Our evolved predisposition to carefully watch others and the environment comes to increasingly rely on indirect, abstract and mediated knowledge, rather than that experienced directly through the senses. The transition from animals listening under the leaves, to humans listening under the eaves, to internet lurkers consuming radiation with their messages are clearly and concisely presented.

Eavesdropping, or more broadly the disposition to attend to the lives of others, is seen as a product of evolution. Apart from any moral judgments we might slap on it, it is a natural 'biologically mandated' phenomenon cutting across species. Birds do it, lizards do it, even dik-diks tune in to their neighbours. Eavesdropping appears to have contributed to the development of the modern brain's neural controls and processing systems. Those who were better at discovering and interpreting the signals of others, at protecting their own signals and disguising their discovery behaviour had a clear survival advantage.

The first humans and their descendants with the strongest auditory and visual senses and the smarts to hide their data collection and give it meaning had an obvious advantage over those less favoured.

There is nothing natural about the physical privacy and potential for solitude brought by living behind walls—a move that radically uncoupled and blocked the face-to-face linguistic and visual communication of living in open space (or that at least blocked it until 20th century new surveillance tools appeared to provide a mediated facsimile of these).

Why should those living in pleasant climes none-the-less eventually come to live in closed structures that so radically broke with the previous visibility? The work of anthropologists Peter Wilson (1988) and Thomas Gregor (1970) suggests that the new spatial borders are a technical by-product of domestication. As settled groups grew in size being so visible to others brought new conflicts and too many people to be vigilant of. Closed structures brought relief from the constant surveillance that was presumed to become increasingly abrasive. It also gave relief from the need for constant vigilance of ever more people as the population increased.

These changes in the use of space brought new issues that continue to bedevil us 15,000 years later as well as new opportunities: increased curiosity and suspicion of what went on behind the walls; new possibilities for hiding monkey business and worse; the need for new means of control; new 'spaces' in several senses for experimentation and innovation and the appearance of a more private and differentiated self and, eventually, our emphasis on individualism. The walls (and their functional equivalents whether physical or cultural) brought new reasons (both legitimate and illegitimate) to pry.

Attitudes towards, and the conditions for, watching and being watched gradually changed in the move from hunting and gathering tribes living in the wild, to permanent settlements, to urban, industrial and global societies.

Hunting and gathering bands living without walls were proximally available for others' senses. There were likely fewer secrets, less to be secret about and fewer means of discovering or protecting information than was the case once settled communities appeared. The small size of the groups meant that reputation

from knowing others was well established. There were no strangers. With the continual surveillance we associate with the cloying of dystopic fiction, there was less need for trust and fewer chances for violations. Thus people who had food were likely seen with it and were expected to share it.

Of course some information protection was possible by whispering, removing one's activities from the group and not expressing thoughts in words or deeds. Research by anthropologist Nurit Bird (1994) finds that people who live openly in each other's immediate presence may still create some insulation from other persons by oblique sitting arrangements and by staring in different directions (much like the feigned aloneness of Japanese subway riders squeezed together). However, with the appearance of settled communities, increased stratification and increased population, public visibility decreased as technologies for protecting personal information expanded and, so too, did the frequency and stealth of eavesdropping.

The book summarizes anthropological evidence indicating the ambivalence some groups felt as technologies of separation (fences, walls and building structures) brought less visibility and access to others.

Conceptual Looseness

The big organizing ideas offered—if viewed as sensitizing perspectives, help order the disarray. If treated as explanatory possibilities the book's claims are most welcome. But sometimes they are stated more strongly. Explanation by illustration is risky. As a Yiddish proverb says, 'for instance is not proof', even if it is often a first step. The book's cornucopia of intriguing examples is useful for teaching and suggestive of ideas for more systematic research. The specialist, however, will find little new in the way of concepts or hypotheses and will want to analyze how data taken against the will and without the knowledge of the subject can be systematically linked to other personal information variables. There is need for a broader, integrated approach capable of corraling the empirical variation.

The book's conversational, even breezy (and in places Time-magazine-speak) interrogatory style is well suited to a humanist's essay, but does not fit as well for social scientific explanation. The book is interesting and provocative precisely because the sources of data and ideas are drawn from such a broad reservoir. Yet, this very breadth can be unwieldy and does not lend itself well to grounded and precise explanations.

Are the images and literary treatments representative of all such offerings? How accurately do they portray reality as it would be experienced by members of that society, rather than only reflecting the perspective of the artist or author?

The book's conceptual looseness does not help matters. The book's title, (*Eavesdropping: An Intimate History*), violates the first consumer protection rule for the reader: truth in book titling. A more awkward, but honest, title would be *Some Observations Across Species, Societies, Time Periods and Disciplines Regarding Spectorial Curiosity*. Eavesdropping is only one of the topics covered. This is history in a very casual sense of temporal ordering across millennia. Intimate is clever given the salaciousness of some of the examples, but it is misleading as noted below; it is intimate in only one of the term's several meanings.

Two properties define eavesdropping for Locke: it 'is inherently intimate and is so because the actors are unaware of the receiver of their information. They therefore feel free to be 'themselves' (p. 3). The second feature refers to how information travels: 'it is not donated by the sender. It is stolen by the receiver'. But many of the examples and some of the discussion deal with the broader topic of taking in information from an aware subject who offers a donation.

Blackmail is a case in point. The compromising data might be known to the collector as a result of surreptitiousness, but often it will be as a result of the blackmailer directly participating in its generation. That was the case with the fabled 19th century courtesan, Harriet Wilson, who is said to have blackmailed many of the British aristocracy, including Prime Ministers and the Prince of Wales. She collected an

'exclusion fee' so that her clients would not be mentioned in her book *Memoirs* (Wilson 2003). She was a scallywag to be sure, but not an eavesdropper. Not surprisingly her book sold very well.

This case suggests the need to distinguish between the motivations and actions of the agent of collection and the consumer of the information and the subject. For example, the paparazzi as collectors are driven by a desire to sell the information to the audience of tabloid readers (although, as with the voyeur, the two roles may be combined in the same person). There can be a symbiotic rather than a conflictual or nonconsensual relationship between the paparazzi as agent and the subject.

The core of Locke's book focuses on the actor as spectator, interested in the personal details of others. The spectator most often obtains the information as a third party, rather than as a result of direct interaction with the subject. The spectator is a passive recipient overseeing (or hearing) what others offer, whether willingly or unwillingly. Information may come from reading novels and magazines, movies, and reality television as well as the various forms of interception that do fit under the term eavesdropping—from overheard conversations to hidden stalking and wire-taping.

Nothing is inherently anything until so labelled and then it might not 'be' what it appears to be. Given the many forms and degrees of the intimate, a definition going beyond the subject's lack of awareness of the observer is often needed. Yes, something intimate might be revealed, but so might something mundane and impersonal. The emotional wallop of a violation of the intimate will often lie more in the content of what is discovered than in the fact of unauthorized access *per se*. The core of intimacy in poking around in someone's bathroom medicine cabinet or going through their trash lies not so much in the subject's lack of awareness of the action, but in what might be found. In the taking of personal information informed and consented subjects are valued in our society. Yet those conditions are distinct from the substance of what is discovered.

The conflict setting that involves the agent's desire to know about the other and the subject's desire to be unknown needs to be contrasted with other settings. Using the term 'stolen' catches the reader's attention, but applies to only some of the data taken from others. Much information gathering of which the subject is unaware (at least of the precise identity of the observer) is voluntarily provided. By Locke's standard the provocative window dancer in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* is not a subject of eavesdropping, although she is discussed. She chooses to dance in a back lit room without closing the blinds. Or consider the loud braggart in a restaurant showing off for those sitting nearby. Exhibitionists and voyeurs are sometimes in a cooperative relationship.

A standard is needed to accommodate the fact that some data are more stolen or volunteered than others—hiding in a closet to observe a love affair is not the same as overhearing a conversation in a restaurant. Between donated and stolen information there are many continua, tangled paths and hybrids. At some point what appears donated may better be seen as theft (an offer that can't be refused). The information may be 'volunteered' as a result of hard or soft coercion or lack of resources to prevent the offering of the data. When a surveillance camera captures the image of a person who chooses not to wear a mask and to walk down the street, is this theft or a voluntary offering of personal data?

The rules about information control as these apply to an agent accessing another's data and to the subject's revealing or concealing personal data need to be considered together. To view this primarily from the standpoint of the agent's behaviour as the book does is like viewing a tennis match by only watching one of the players.

Distinctions are also needed between the will or motivation to acquire information about others (including its absence as well as its presence), the possibility of acting on the motivation, and outcomes—what actually happens. Curiosity is one thing; satiation is another. Consider the wonderful manners example offered by a 13th century advice giver regarding walking by a residence:

be careful never to look in and never to stop. To stand agape or idle in front of a person's house is not wise or courteous behavior. There are things that one does often in private, in one's own home, that one would not want others to see should someone come to the door. And if you want to enter the house, cough a little upon entering to alert those within to your arrival, either by this cough or by a word. (22)

If we assume that the disingenuous cougher would really like to be able to eavesdrop, then we see the highest expression of what it means to be human—as culture blocks the possible dictates of instinct and evolution.

Equivalent dimensions for the subject of surveillance are also necessary (regarding the motivation, possibility of action and behaviour). Is the subject's motivation to conceal or reveal the information and can the subject act on the motivation? When the subject has a genuine choice about what to do, how does the subject actually behave?

The universal human interest in the topic is taken to new heights (or sometimes depths) by the social scientist. The scholar driven to surveil the surveillance behaviour of others may gain something extra from reading this book. Perhaps there is a parallel to the chef judging a cooking contest who learns from what is evaluated, but also gets to have it for dinner. Reading the book necessarily engages one in participant observation and reflection. Paradoxically, as readers, we are the book's subjects, but we are also agents watching our selves watch others. Maybe as the man might have said, the ability to play contradictory roles is the mark of a first-rate intelligence. Yet we can also note the challenges in trying to step out from one's shadow.

Organizational Uses

No one can cover it all and it is a cheap shot to criticize a book that covers so much for what it does not cover. But given the topic, it is hard not to note some omissions. The index contains only two references to surveillance—one dealing with stalking and the other with the deterrent impact of a poster encouraging office coffee drinkers on an honour system to pay up. Much of what is discussed, however, is one form of surveillance and the consumption of its fruits.

The book emphasizes the low-tech or no-tech gathering of information by the individual for the individual rather than by the individual for the organization. Apart from a chapter on servants and discussions of sexual politics, the book says very little about the role of information as a social stratification issue and that may be why it also fails to say much about ethics. Driven by evolution, eavesdropping is largely viewed as an individual (often gender-linked) endeavour. Communal goals are discussed early in the book as part of a functionalist explanation. Here eavesdropping and going public with the results replace direct observation as a means of social control. But overall this type doesn't receive the attention it merits.

The individual type is a neglected and important strand. In its various forms (sport, spite, instrumental) it needs to be contrasted with, and located along side of, organizational uses. Such uses include government intelligence agencies using spies for intelligence and counter-intelligence; criminal justice agencies using informers and undercover work; total institutions using surveillance tools to watch inmates and clients; and of course the monitoring of workers and of shoppers and information gathering by social scientists and investigative reporters.

Given the emphasis on the individual, the book makes no reference to Foucault, or to any Surveillance Studies scholars whose names are household words (at least in their own households). Nor is there any reference to major works of fellow travellers on the fringes of surveillance inquiries such as Martin Jay (1993) on the history of the visual, David Flaherty (1972) on the history of privacy, Alan Westin (1967) on types of privacy, Barrington Moore (1976) on comparative questions and Ralph Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine (1976) on gossip. They are in good company—even the better cited William Shakespeare, the

literary master of the overheard conversation, is unmentioned. However, this trove is so filled with bibliographic treasures that a few missing gems hardly matters.

Privacy is discussed with some one-liners from well known legal and philosophical writings, but much less is said about the reasons for, and rules regarding, its' necessary opposite—publicity. Nor is there any discussion of anonymity, confidentiality and only slight mention of secrecy. The benefactors from the violation of confidentiality share with the eavesdropper information not intended for them yet the ethics and dynamics of the two cases differ.

While the motivations and machinations of the agent of surveillance are considered in depth, greater attention is needed to how subjects present or seek to protect personal information. As noted, the highly interactive tango of agents and subjects is largely treated as a solo performance by the agent.

Sometimes there is an exhibitionistic or Dostoyevskian compulsion to reveal and at other times a Goffmanian interest in protecting information or in deceiving the observer. These varied stances need to be coupled with the equally varied motivations of the observer. As a psychologist and linguist with knowledge of the literatures of anthropology and communications, Locke must have considerable familiarity with Erving Goffman's work. The latter's themes of information presentation, manipulation, concealment and discovery run throughout the book. But Goffman is mentioned in only one sentence with respect to the concept of civil inattention—an idea that is underdeveloped.

The book emphasizes the motivation to learn about others. The other side of the equation is not mentioned. The author asks, 'why can't we resist listening in on others' conversations?' As the Lone Ranger's sidekick Tonto might have said, 'Speak for yourself white man'. Who is this 'we'?

Where do cases of *uncivil attention* thrust upon the spectator fit? Does the purported weak resistance extend to sitting next to a cell phone user on a crowded train who is talking loudly and wildly gesticulating?

What about the resistance that is exercised as a result of manners, fear of reciprocity or a desire not to drown in the details of others' personal data? Even eavesdroppers might need some solitude and reserve.

There are also many strategic reasons why persons do not wish to know about others. In studying covert police information gathering, an intriguing response I sometimes encountered from well meaning sources was, 'you don't want to know'. In cases of too detailed intimate revelation, recall how the receiver of information sometimes thinks or says, 'I don't need to know that'.

Yes, individuals can be curious (and they are likely to be more curious about unseen sexuality than unseen meals). But one could as well write an opposite book about the indifference of urban individuals to each other—whether from the overstimulation that Simmel wrote of, or a lack of identification and even antipathy toward the stranger.

Locke's interest is in the motivated eavesdropper. He states, 'we humans do have a strong and continuing desire to expose and experience the private moments in the lives of others' (p.38). I would qualify the above by saying 'many humans' rather than 'we' and plead for the study of variation. I would also recommend balancing it by saying, 'many humans have a strong and continuing desire to not expose and experience the private moments in the lives of others'. The eventual discomfort of the protagonist in the film *The Lives of Others* is an example. Explanations based on biology or functional necessity favoured by the book cannot account for the ennui.

To some observers, disinterest in others is a symptom of modern alienation and of individualism gone wild—far better to show care about others by being curious than by being indifferent.

But is it Right or Wrong?

The author is hardly an advocate for eavesdropping, although the attention to its social functionality as seen in remnants of biological and cultural evolution will suggest to some readers a begrudging acceptance, or at least indifference, in the face of an inevitable determinism ('I am sorry your honour, evolution made me do it').

A majority of the book's examples of real eavesdropping engender a sense that something is not quite right about the behaviour in its pure form. But what is it? We are offered little guidance for how the various forms should be and are judged. Secretly reading someone's diary is not the same as stealing documents that reveal a presidential candidate received vast sums from a major defence contractor and leaking this to the press (JFK, Nixon, Hughes); a parent monitoring a misbehaving teenager's e-mail or phone communications is different from the eavesdropping of a stalker.

What are the major ethical perspectives that can be applied? How universal are they? The facts and pictures do not speak for themselves. Use of the terms theft and stolen to define eavesdropping indicates that the author is not without moral sentiments on this, although much of the book's tone suggests a bemused chronicler somewhat above the battle. The reader wants to know what the author thinks after such deep immersion in the topic.

Whimpers and Bangs

The book ends with a whimper rather than the explosion which might be expected after the panoramic fireworks of so much data and so many ideas. The author concludes, 'the desire to observe the unaware, who cannot protect or modify their images, is a product of human evolution, but what is the nature of the psychological experience?' (p.215).

Is there really a 'real' unmodified self in the quiet of one's cloister or merely one 'appropriate' to the setting of being alone? Might the unseen person be acting out (at least much of the time) the prescribed cultural script—with self-enforcement by imaging how others would view the person if present? Behaviour may also reflect the possibility that maybe someone is in fact secretly observing. This discovery of the supposed real essence of the person behind the mask (if there is such a thing) may someday get a boost from brain wave reading technology, but we are far from that now (and even farther from being able to do it remotely and covertly).

In speculating on the 'psychological experience' of eavesdropping Locke characterizes our natural born isolation from others' minds as, 'the absolute separateness of individual souls'. This creates our 'Asomodian dispositions' (p. 211). Without an invitation, these are pursued through seeking to find the real person (or behaviour) behind the door or mask. We read others to read ourselves—whether commonalities or differences are found.

What one sees in history of course depends on whose history and whose sight. Certainly, self-location by watching others (whether openly or covertly) is a strand, but not one that ought to be favoured over others such as eavesdropping for social goals or individual strategic or prurient interests.

Some conclusions I reached across the book's temporal and intellectual breadth:

Broad explanations, while welcome as guides, must be tempered by concepts that analyze variation. It is important to make distinctions such as between the agent, subject and audience for personal data; individual and communal goals; instrumental/strategic goals and those which simply reflect curiosity and are a pleasurable end in themselves; theft and donation of personal information and all points in-between; knowledge obtained by direct experience vs. that mediated by separation (of many kinds) from the subject; kinds of borders and border breaking and protection tools such as covert and overt and reciprocal or one-way; and between types of context—meaning lies primarily in the context, not in the observed

behaviour. Note how in England reporting on infidelity seen or heard from a shared wall with a neighbour was welcomed by authorities, while listening under another's eaves was a crime.

Efforts to discover or protect group, personal and private information bring a feast of paradoxes, ironies, trade-offs and surprises. Note the distortions to language from earlier eras brought by cultural and technical change. Clear distinctions between anonymity and identifiability, intimacy and non-intimacy and subject and agent have become muddled with mediated communication and remote interaction.

The internet for example mixes up the categories of anonymity and intimacy that were far simpler with the physical proximity droppings associated with the eaves and a known subject. Thus with the internet, a posting subject may gain the anonymity of the traditional eavesdropper, while the latter may lose anonymity as a result of needing a password to lurk. In this case, the anonymous subject does not experience a violation of intimacy (if this is understood to mean consenting to being observed), but if the content involves behaviour seen as personal and intimate, then intimacy is in another sense compromised. Traditional language would however apply if restricted access is breached via hacking, although the content illegitimately obtained may be bland, non-personal and far from intimate.

Conflicts in values, in what values mean and in their prioritization are a central feature. Consider how as we engage in ever more electronically mediated activities, conflicts escalate between the need for identification and anonymity and how new tools for prying are met with new tools for neutralization. Note the ambivalence toward whistle-blowers or granting corporations the privacy rights of individuals. Certain forms of informing are viewed as a civic virtue and necessity ('See Something, Say Something') even as the tattle-tale is stigmatized.

An absolutely porous person, group or society would be as unwelcome and impossible as would those that are absolutely opaque—even though each would bring some benefits.

Early in the book the author reports the biologist's story about porcupines in a cold environment who supposedly need to huddle together for warmth, but who get stuck if they are too close. This is analogous to the human need for living a social life laced with periods of apartness (from the larger community as well as from those we are closest to and perhaps even our own social consciousness). The same informational dynamics apply to groups which require informational borders, yet must be socially accountable.

The rules for individuals or groups regarding visibility and insulation from visibility (or, if you prefer, publicity and privacy or freedom of information and secrecy) are in continual dynamic tension. As environments, tools and contexts change so too does the balance—sometimes with a costly tipping point, although rarely with a categorical goring of all the oxen.

Studying the tensions and contradictions of information control with breadth and insight as this book does is the mark of the scholar. How well these are managed is the mark of a civilization.

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