

Developing Heterodox Economics Curriculum: The case of John Jay College

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Abstract

This article seeks to be a contribution to heterodox teaching initiatives by focusing on curriculum building and institutional opportunities and constraints at John Jay College, the City University of New York. The article first focuses on the need for alternative curriculums in the context of the global crisis and the crisis of economics as a discipline. Then, after some historical context to John Jay College in which opportunities arose to develop a heterodox program, the focus is on the core of the current economics curriculum and its contrasts with the mainstream. Finally, there is a discussion of institutional constraints.

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Those who take the meat from the table
 Preach Contentment...
 Those who eat their fill speak to the hungry
 Of wonderful times to come...
 Those who lead the country into the abyss
 Call ruling too difficult
 For the ordinary.

-Bertolt Brecht, 1937

Introduction

Nine years after the start of one of the worst downturns in the history of global capitalism, some observers/analysts out there still believe that they

were not caught with their pants down with such an earth-shaking event, an event that to this day is convulsively manifesting itself throughout the world in ways that go beyond economics. It turns out that these “few” individuals basically comprise the whole economics profession.

The relevant question about what has changed since the so-called Great Recession within the economics discipline is one that has both motivated and frustrated many who, for years, have stood on the margins and observed how the hammer blows delivered by reality against mainstream theory have barely made a crack to “one of the most impressive

monuments to pure ideology ever erected” (Kanth, xvi). To make matters worse, the great priests of the profession have not faced any significant repercussions:

“Neoclassical economists, having worked hard to convince the world that everything was hunky-dory circa 2005, and concurrently having invented the rationales and the theories behind the financial time bomb that went off across the landscape, don't seem to have suffered one whit for the subsequent sequence of events, a slow-motion train wreck that one might reasonably expected would have rubbished the credibility of lesser mortals. Individually and collectively, they have only become more dominant in academia and government. No one among their number was fired for incompetence; no one was forced to endure status degradation ceremonies” (Mirowski, 2013: 158)

Dissent and frustration against economics and its current mainstream is not limited to events surrounding the Great Recession. Other historical crises have both buried and revived theories and schools of thought, and have redefined in one way or another what was taken to be the mainstream.

Still, the latest capitalist convulsion has not shown any visible signs pointing to substantial changes in the discipline. Even those who occupy the center-left of the economics ideological spectrum, and who have prominent public exposure, do not want to negate many of the pillars of what has become a zombie-like paradigm.

The theme that we would like to highlight in this generalized exercise of negation by the mainstream of the discipline is that the teaching of economics, especially at the undergraduate level, has also not suffered any major observable change. Student appeals to curriculum change, walkouts by students from long-running courses taught by prominent faculty in a prestigious university, and general dissatisfaction with the discipline, are some of the

immediate symptoms pointing to the need of an urgent change in the economics curriculum. Some organizations have recognized this need and have allocated resources for the endeavor, but their overall impact has been marginal at best. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the same economists who deny the crisis of the discipline populate most departments around the world and are part of an all-encompassing network that rests on an apologetic and self-referential institutional scaffold (Lee, 2007).

The adoption of new undergraduate curriculums within existing economics departments, or the development of new heterodox departments from scratch, seem to be some of the biggest challenges for counter-hegemonic struggle within the discipline and in relation to society as a whole. Even the maintenance of already existing departments with a heterodox bent is not a secure bet, as the recent events at the University of Notre Dame showed.

In this article, we want to provide a general description of the recent development of a heterodox undergraduate economics curriculum at the John Jay College of the City University of New York (CUNY). We provide some historical background pertaining to the institution and highlight the opportunities that were created to develop a heterodox program. We then focus on the core of our new curriculum and its contrasts with mainstream and other current alternative projects. For this we will use concrete examples from courses we have developed. Finally we discuss some of the institutional constraints, both in terms of the college and in relation to the tendencies for the transformation of higher education along the criterias of the so-called “neoliberal university.”

The Context of Opportunity: Building Heterodox Economics at John Jay

“Some Cops Hit Books After Pounding a Beat,” read a Daily News headline after John Jay College opened in 1965 as a “college for cops” within the City University of New York system (Markowitz 2008, 1). John Jay grew quickly after its first classes

were held in the Police Academy. With the start of the era of open admissions in 1970, the college went from 2600 students (80% of whom were police officers) to over 8600 students (less than half being police officers) in 1973 (Markowitz 2008, 43). The new students and new faculty, many coming from the 1960s social justice movements, transformed the college into a college with many liberal arts majors. In 1976, a fiscal crisis ended the open admissions era and threatened the very existence of John Jay College. John Jay survived with a “shift from major status to service status” (Markowitz 2008, 95). John Jay College became a college focused on the development of Criminal Justice and it eliminated all liberal arts majors. Its goal became to be an “outstanding, nationally recognized institution of criminal justice” (Markowitz 2008, 96). The college offered associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees and housed a Ph.D. program in Criminal Justice.

In 2004, Jeremy Travis, a former director of the National Institute of Justice, became the College's fourth president and he quickly tried to reform the college's functioning and develop a new, refined mission. Some of the major changes were the hiring of new faculty, raising admission standards of incoming students, phasing out associate's programs, and transforming the college from a comprehensive college to a senior liberal arts college within CUNY. He introduced a new initiative In the summer of 2006, whereby faculty were encouraged to develop liberal arts majors over the next four years. The development of an economics major and an economics department, in particular, was to be an important milestone for the college's transition to a liberal arts college. While talking about the changes taking place at the college, Jeremy Travis even mused about future graduate students having started their university journey at John Jay College, asking whether “[it wouldn't] be wonderful if there was Ph.D. economist ten years from now who was an economics major at John Jay” (Markowitz 2008, 209).

Economics at John Jay was its own department in the 1970s. With the restructuring of the college after the 1976 fiscal crisis, the economics department was eliminated but economics courses continued to be necessary to teach as service courses. Economists were housed in different composite departments over the years. In 2006, four economists were housed in the Department of Public Management. Under the leadership of Professor Joan Hoffman, who had started working in the Economics Department at John Jay in 1972 while working on her Ph.D. at the New School, and Jay Hamilton, who received his Ph.D. at the University of California at Riverside, a new Economics Department was formed in 2008 with four economists and two accountants. They prepared the start of a new hybrid economics/accounting major in the Fall of 2009.

The brand new Economics Department was also authorized to hire two new economists to start in the Fall of 2009 and a third in the Fall of 2010. With the additional hire of an economist in the Africana Studies department, four new economists were hired. All four of them received their Ph.D.'s at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, one of the few heterodox Ph.D. programs in the United States, and were tasked by Professors Hoffman and Hamilton to develop a new economics curriculum focusing on “Educating for Justice,” the larger mission of the college. This curriculum was developed in the first few years of the hybrid economics/accounting major and eventually led to a major revision of the bachelor's program in 2013.

The economics major started In the Fall of 2009 with less than 100 students and at that time it was divided into three specializations. One specialization was more or less a standard economics program with some accounting, the second one was an accounting program with some economics, and the third specialization was a weird mix, but with more economics than accounting. The major grew quickly and by 2013 had more than four

hundred majors, and by 2014 over five hundred. A new revised economics curriculum started in the Fall of 2013 and at the same time the accountants left the Economics Department and went back to the Department of Public Management, where they continued into a new interdisciplinary major in fraud and accounting.

Currently, John Jay has around 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students, who come from diverse backgrounds. The student body is 60% female, 39% Latino, 21% Black, 28% White, and 12% Asian. The vast majority of so-called white students are first- or second-generation immigrants from Eastern Europe. Nearly half are first-generation students, a third are foreign born, and 95% are New York State residents. Four hundred are veterans. Most students work while going to school and are able to come to the college only two days a week. Other students work each day and come to school in the evening after work. John Jay offers classes Monday through Saturday between 8am and 10pm. Interestingly, most students do not have student loans, as many receive funding from the federal government and through New York State's Tuition Assistance Program.

The mix of students at John Jay and the fact that most come from working-class families create a great atmosphere for teaching economics from a radical perspective. Contrary to many private liberal arts colleges, students have direct experience with actual work and can relate to heterodox economic theories at an instinctual level. As one student explained discussing Gary Becker theory of Rational Choice, "Gary Becker obviously has never experienced poverty."

According to the NSF 2016 Science and Engineering Indicators, each year about 30,000 bachelor degrees in economics are granted. Hispanics make up 6% and Blacks 5% for all undergraduate degrees in economics. In 2016 John Jay granted 107 bachelor degrees in economics; in strong contrast to the nationwide trend, hispanics made up 33% and Blacks 23% of the graduating

class. Nationally, women receive only 30% of all bachelor degrees, but at John Jay, 52% of all degrees in economics were awarded to women in this male-dominated field. The working class nature of our student body is reflected in that 48% of our graduating students received pell grants.

The makeup of the department faculty has also changed since the department was created in 2008. At that time, there were six faculty in the department and only one of them is still left in the department. Joan Hoffman retired in 2016, while one accountant left and went to the Department of Public Management. One faculty member was denied tenure, another was not reappointed and a third one died in 2009. At the same time, we have hired nine new faculty members between 2009 and 2017, all with a radical political economy bend, of which only one left the department in 2015.

Throughout its creation and transformation, the economics department had relative autonomy and support from the administration. The president, provost, and deans have been enablers of the advent of pluralism in the department, agreeing with our argument that in the wake of the crisis, there was a need to develop an economics department focused on "educating for justice," the mission of the college. They did not particularly care about the stance of the faculty hired with respect to economics, being more preoccupied with the success we had in the classroom and throughout the university according to their own metrics. The provost liked the candidates that were brought in and did not intervene much in the hiring process. She also emphasized how the economics department was very "student-centered." The faculty in the department was focused on teaching and actively involved with the students. Professors received great teaching evaluations, succeeded in putting bodies in the seats, and the major quickly became one of the fastest growing liberal arts majors at the college. Several faculty members won college-wide awards for service to students and teaching. Efforts were put into the assessment of our

major, developing new courses, and hiring faculty to teach those courses in order to address the shortcomings identified in the assessments. The economics department was very successful in the eyes of the administration. There will be continued support from the administration, but in an environment of scarce resources, there is always an underlying obligation for success.

New Curriculum

In thinking about a new curriculum, we sought to achieve three related objectives. The first, and perhaps most important, objective was for the program to increase the level of economic literacy of our students, in a way that would be useful for their everyday experience and democratic involvement. Most of our students are from working class backgrounds and many are also immigrants, which implies that they come to John Jay College with varied experiences both in terms of schooling and knowledge of the society in which they live.

This can be a strength. For example, most students have an intimate experience of a capitalist economy, having often had to work from an early age to support themselves and their family, which gives them great intuition about the inner working of capitalism. It can also be a challenge, notably when we try with analytical frameworks requiring a certain level of quantitative skills. We tackled this diversity directly in formulating our curriculum.

The second objective was to build a curriculum that would reflect the paradigmatic plurality of economics while offering a coherent view of the economic system. The point was not so much to show the variety of theories in existence, but rather to take the best components of what is available in order to build a radical alternative to the mainstream. The treatment of alternative paradigms to the neoclassical synthesis too often hovers between a complete refusal to acknowledge they could constitute science and a museum display of past curiosities, to be admired on the same level as an old typewriter in the computer age. Relegation to

that status risks turning the museum into a mausoleum... To be kept alive, paradigms must be taught in a way that anchors them into contemporary reality; they must be grappled with, transformed, and adapted in a shifting context. In pursuing this, we also wanted to revive an older tradition of interdisciplinary investigation within the social sciences and integrate approaches from other social sciences as we went. We sought to do radical political economy, not simply economics.

Caught in the middle of an unfolding economic crisis of global proportions, we also set ourselves a political objective. The point was not going to simply be to do better science, but also to equip students to understand the turmoil in which they were, to make them realise that there is no such thing as an autonomous, objective economic science. Economics is steeped in the political and social context in which it is elaborated; economic policies are designed to serve precise political goals and interests. In this jumble, our *parti pris* was clear: we would teach economics to and for people in the lower rungs of the economic edifice. This involved equipping students with tools to interrogate reality in a way that revealed the political under-bearings of the science and its “laws,” tools that would allow them to be actors in that reality. To do this, it was impossible to resort to the traditional, top-down and abstract way of teaching economics, so we resolved to work on the pedagogical methods and techniques as well. This was to be our own attempt at a *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

With these objectives in mind, we set out to build a curriculum that would be accessible and radical. On a more individual level, we tried to make it practical and flexible enough so it could be helpful and adapted to a majority of our students. The structure that emerged can be seen in tables 1 and 2 in the appendix. We describe the overall structure and some of the specific courses in the remainder of this section.

There are three layers of courses. At the introductory level, instead of the usual intro to microeconomics and macroeconomics classes, we chose to build two different bases: a general introduction to capitalism and a course on the nature and handling of economic data. At the intermediate level, we build on these two courses with a statistics class, a political economy course, a microeconomics course, a macroeconomics course. The idea here was to teach four important strands of economic thought: Post-Keynesian economics in macro, Marxian economics in PE, neoclassical and institutionalist theory in micro. Thirdly, at the advanced level, we cap the program with a course that mixes economic history and history of thought as well as an undergraduate seminar. Finally, we complement this basic structure with electives that do at least one three things: explore a paradigm that is absent from the core, a specific economic terrain that is not covered elsewhere, or an issue of current political importance in the United States.

Introduction to Economics and Global Capitalism

For many students, this introduction is the only economics course they'll ever get, so we felt it was important to give a general overview of the capitalist system instead of specific micro or macro material at a basic level. It also allows us to motivate the study of economics through an examination of past and current events that can be analysed with the many paradigms that we develop later on. That way, those who continue onward get a flavour of the many themes to be explored in the rest of the curriculum.

In a sense, we feel that the most important task for an introductory course is not content, but it is to excite students about the study of the economy and how it is relevant to their lives. With this priority in mind, we selected the textbook *Understanding Capitalism* (Bowles et al 2005), and designed a large part of the course around it. We especially liked the fact that it has a surplus model of the economy at its core, a model that is present

throughout when various issues, such as inflation, are discussed. This political economy approach makes it easy for our students to relate to the material, as it fits well with their everyday experience and puts theory on much of the intuition they already have about the functioning of the economy. The book is also structured in a way that allows us to bring a historical thread that we can keep throughout and that allows a contextualisation of the issues and theory studied.

We reinforced the historical component by designing an exercise for the early lectures that addresses the three objectives above. Shortly put, we use the dichotomous view that students typically hold about states and markets as an entry point to discuss the dialectical method that we employ for the remainder of the class. In the process, we introduce the thought of four thinkers - Hobbes, Smith, Marx, and Keynes - and discuss their stance vis-à-vis state and market in the historical and political context in which it was formulated. We end with a discussion of the contemporary period and the possibility to transcend this dichotomy in the current context. This exercise sets the tone for the rest of the course and opens the eyes of many students with respect to the nature of economic discourse and its potential.

We put a lot of effort in designing *Introduction to Economics and Global Capitalism* and, early on, a lot of time teaching it. As we note above, we had a fair amount of margin of manoeuvre at John Jay College, but to keep it, we had an obligation for success, which in administrative terms meant enrollment growth. This course was our main recruiting tool. We wagered that if we could excite student about economics and make them feel its relevance in that introductory course, we could build a strong program. It worked.

Understanding US Economic Data

The idea for this course was long in coming, a mix of a long standing preoccupation for our students' quantitative skills and the desire to revamp the

major into something more integrated and scaffolded. We observed in the early years that economic majors often had difficulties reading, understanding, using, and generating statistics in the different courses they were taking – and the use of data and statistics is certainly a key component of many economics courses. While it is important to teach data handling skills throughout, we figured that it could be a good idea to provide a good basis to our students at the outset, by having them take an introductory course dealing with data and measurements in economics.

At the same time, in working on the reframing of the economics major, we reflected on what could be useful to our students once they graduated and went on the job market. It occurred to us that data handling skills would probably be useful for most jobs in economics – and many besides. To have an introductory course on this topic could then act as a jolt, a basis upon which we could build throughout the program so that the students end up with strong data handling skills. We also figured that such skills could be useful in many areas besides economics, which led us to design the course not only for economics major, but also for any student who would be interested in the topic.

We also think that having a basic understanding of economic data and measurements is important for economic literacy. From simple things like reading the newspaper and evaluating a graph or a table presented in an article to deciphering the meaning of various policy proposals, economic data is everywhere. Understanding statistics is important, but not sufficient: it is crucial to know how economic data is generated and economic phenomena measured, and to be able to assess the validity of these measurements and the conclusions they support. For this, we needed a different kind of course than the statistics course that was already in the program. So we set out to build one.

The whole course is taught in a computer lab. We start with a discussion of method and epistemology,

of the place statistical data has in economics and policy making, and what it means for economic analysis. We then have a short Excel tutorial. For the rest of the course, we cover a different area, such as price indices, the US census, or inequality measures every week. For each topic, we have a theoretical presentation followed by practical exercises on Excel with real data retrieved by students. The evaluation is then largely based on a further series of these exercises that they have to do on their own. As a term paper, we ask them to replicate chapters of *The Field Guide to the US Economy* (Teller-Elsberg et al. 2006), which is more or less the level at which we try to push them by the end of class.

In terms of skills and literacy, the course has been a success. Students use the techniques they learn in that class in latter courses and can not only read and understand descriptive statistics in newspaper articles or economic literature, they can replicate them as well. The improvement was such that we even collectively won a teaching award at John Jay College for the design and implementation of this course.

Still there is at least one issue which requires continued work. With this curriculum, we seek to build an alternative to the dominant framework and to do that, we feel that students have to be made aware of the paradigmatic origins, potential, and limitations of current data offerings. That part we are fairly effective in teaching. The prospective corollary of designing studying or designing alternative statistics is not explored as much. For example, having designed a course on political economy from a Marxian perspective, it would be useful to teach how one could do class analysis with the data available or possible ways to generate new and better statistics and indices to that end. While these aspects are touched on during the class, it remains a work in progress.

Intermediate level courses

Here we did not innovate much in terms of structure and simply put one statistics class and three theory classes: political economy, microeconomics, macroeconomics. The specificity of the curriculum comes in terms of content, but as we argue below, this can be problematic depending on who teaches the class. In any event, the original intent was to take what we considered to be the best paradigms to understand the economy from a radical perspective in each of the three classes.

We designed political economy so that students would go through a careful study of Volume 1 of Marx's *Capital*. Coming out of the course, the students would have a good handle on Marxian categories for economic analysis and could apply them elsewhere. Macroeconomics was given to Post-Keynesianism, as an antidote to the neoclassical consensus and austere policy-making under neoliberalism. Neo-classical theory we kept for microeconomics, but contrasted with institutional and behavioural economics throughout, or even Marxian theory in studying the labour market. In this way, we do present the dominant paradigm, probably where it is most relevant, but in a critical manner. Microeconomics thus has the double objective of providing economic literacy in revealing the underpinnings of current discourse and to introduce alternatives.

Economics in Historical Perspectives

The last layer of the core curriculum is made of a capstone seminar and a history course. The capstone seminar is fairly standard, in that students are required to produce an original research paper that uses some of the material they saw in previous classes. Economics in Historical Perspectives is more different from mainstream curricula.

The intent of the course is to give a history of the concurrent evolution of capitalism and economic analysis. The course is thus a cross between economic history and history of thought. One of the main themes of the course is to reveal the historical

roots of the various paradigms taught in intermediate classes. We feel it is important to do things in that order, so that students first see different economic traditions brought to life in a contemporary context and thus as tools and methods they may use to understand their reality. Bringing historical underpinnings as a second step enriches students' understanding of these traditions without giving the sense that they are simply artifacts of past contexts and no longer relevant today. In this way, we seek to undermine the oft-promoted vision that the current dominant paradigm is what is to be considered economic science, while other traditions simply paved the way to it over the course of history. On a more practical note, if students come in with a good understanding of the various theoretical traditions, they don't have to spend as much time in class understanding the theories brought forward and can really focus on the historical contextualisation of it all.

At the same time, we feel that economic theory cannot be divorced from its context, while theory does help to understand that context. This is why we teach a joint course in history and history of thought. In practice, the course has taken various forms. One way was to focus on particular themes (inequality, trade, etc.) over the period, another to focus key moments during the ascendancy of capitalism (e.g. Sugar, Cotton, and Oil), while a third route was to simply follow a linear historical progression. Regardless, by the time students made it to the class, they typically had a good command of economic theory and were able to navigate the historical stream along with us, creating a seminar atmosphere in class.

The Cold Shower: Reality and Constraints

The conception and implementation of John Jay's heterodox curriculum in economics is still a work in progress. The experience gained throughout the years has contributed to our understanding of the delicate balance between flexibility and the need to have some degree of scaffolding to make sense of the relationship among courses. Student input and

direct faculty experience have provided the basis for these and other adjustments. Still, there are constraints, both internal to the college and the CUNY system as a whole, and external in terms of trends in higher education in the United States, that are important for understanding the limits of any project that seeks to transform education in the economics' discipline.

One of the major constraints we have faced in the economics department has to do with the availability of personnel to teach, their training/background, and the pay they receive for their work. As a small department with 7 full-time faculty, an important percentage of our classes is taught by adjuncts. Many of them are simultaneously finishing their Ph.D. degrees while teaching at other institutions to supplement the meager salaries offered by CUNY. This has caused some immediate and understandable problems for us, such as the following:

1) The amount of time spent on campus devoted to students tends to be minimal because of their responsibilities elsewhere. It is difficult for faculty to accommodate students whose own work times do not configure to the established office hours.

2) It is hard to expect adjuncts to invest in an approach not found elsewhere. Given the time constraints of adjuncts, we try not to impose on them specific texts that they might be uncomfortable with. This is especially problematic for our "Introduction to Economics and Global Capitalism" course, where, as noted above, we prefer the use of "Understanding Capitalism" (Bowles et al. 2005) as a text, a book rarely used in other departments across the country. Adjuncts typically prefer using Goodwin et al. (2014), Mankiw (2014) and Krugman & Wells (2015), which are not only ideologically and methodologically problematic for us, but also expensive for our students.

In general, the low pay our adjuncts get severely limits the possibilities for bridging the gap between our ideal and actual outcomes. Given the cost of

living, moving to New York City is basically not an option for those who could potentially come from outside the city, and those who do come from the NYC area have multiple jobs. On top of that, there are sometimes challenges with respect to the content of the curriculum and the ability of adjuncts to prepare courses aligned with it.

This issue was partly alleviated through the use of a "substitute line" (a visiting lecturer with a 4-4 teaching load), whenever there have been resources to do so granted by the administration, but it has not fundamentally changed the situation. We also opened online sections for some of our courses, both to help students who could not make it to class at regular teaching hours and to expand the pool of adjuncts. It has certainly helped in both regards, but we have found teaching online very limiting in terms of our ability to explore radical alternatives in economics. Moreover, the pay is not better, so there remains a problem with respect to the time we can reasonably ask adjuncts to put in their online classes.

A further issue related to our human resource constraints has to do with the recent approval of a Master's Program in Economics (effective Fall 2017), which is also explicitly focused on heterodoxy. Although not required by the College, our department wants to make sure that a substantial amount of the courses offered, if not all, are covered by full-time faculty. This would further deplete our human resources at the undergraduate level, potentially undermining the student base that provides the primordial pillar for our graduate program. With cuts to CUNY's budget being the order of the day, the administration has been hesitant to provide us with new lines to cover our new teaching needs. Under these circumstances, our desire to reproduce ourselves intellectually through a graduate program makes it difficult to maintain a healthy undergraduate program, a challenge we will have to face in the next few years.

Conclusion

The example we provide in this paper of an economics curriculum that was both conceived and applied at the John Jay College of the City University of New York recognizes precisely that certain conditions came together to provide an opportunity for the taking. In this we admit the limits that our contribution might have for an eventual reproduction somewhere else, while also hoping that certain details and examples can help others in their endeavors to craft and materialize their own alternative projects. The need to explain and account for the current problems engulfing the world, a mission ill-suited for conventional economics, makes this transformative task all the more urgent.

We understand the importance of recognizing the limits to what one can and cannot do under a particular historical conjuncture but we encourage and applaud the politics - both inside and outside the academy - that try to shape and move those historical and institutional constraints. To succeed, this project will have to be steeped in society, to coordinate with other progressive movements seeking to shake the status quo. Simply put, the message needs to get out beyond obscure journals of university walls through precisely those who are both the victims and potential undertakers of an irrational, exploitative and oppressive system. In our own small way, we have tried to go as far as the institutional context would let us, without censoring ourselves or latching on to a mainstream which would certainly not have the same consideration.

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