

MANAGING CULTURE, LOCATING CONSENT:
THE SOCIOLOGY OF MASS CULTURE IN SOCIALIST ROMANIA,
1960s–1970s

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the development of the sociology of mass culture in 1960s–1970s Socialist Romania from a newly formed discipline meant to provide scientific guidance for the formulation and implementation of cultural policies (producing hegemony), into an instrument for the criticism of the cultural basis for consent. First, it addresses the broader context of the discipline's configuration, and the initial debates about the sociologist's relationship to his object of study. Second, it analyzes two versions of the "systemic" approach in the sociology of mass culture and mass communication, with a focus on the ways in which they conceptualized consent/coercion. Third, it details how several empirical studies reflected on the issue of hegemony in 1970s Socialist Romania.

Keywords: sociology of mass culture, cultural hegemony, systems theory, empirical studies of mass culture in 1970s Socialist Romania.

In 1980, three years after it had been brought to the United States, the manuscript "The Syncretic Society" by Felipe García Casals, translated from French, was published as a book and in the *International Journal of Politics*, with a forward by the political scientist Alfred G. Meyer. Casals, Meyer explained, was the pseudonym of "an East European official occupying a high managerial position, [...] a veteran member of the country's ruling communist party"¹. His study amounted to "the sharpest, gloomiest, and most desperate critique of Soviet and East European systems yet produced by any Marxist"². The West, of course, had known and debated several other potent "critiques from within" before, from

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¹ Alfred G. Meyer, forward to Casals, "The Syncretic Society," VII.

² Ibid., IX.

Milovan Djilas's *The New Class* to Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. "The Syncretic Society," otherwise an extremely dense Marxist analysis of the emergence and endurance of Stalinism, caught the attention of the Western eye, if only briefly, for its strange affinities with Talcott Parson's structural-functionalism and with the theoretical work of Louis Althusser³.

Stalinism, argued Casals, was the heir of "premature socialism," a syncretic society brought about violently by the Leninist revolution – a combination of precapitalist (economic underdevelopment) and postcapitalist (class structure predicated on abolishing private property) elements, governed by an autonomously organized power structure. The result was not "a *system* [...] but [...] a nonsystemic conglomerate, each real system of which constitutes one of those elements. What binds this artificial construction together could hardly be other than coercive force"⁴. Moreover, syncretism was based not on the Marxist concept of contradiction, but on incompatibility, which meant that it was static, rather than dynamic, and tended to reproduce itself indefinitely rather than grow into conflict and transform. "Contradiction," concluded Casals, "stimulates the self-regulating energy of any system, whereas incompatibility opposes a systemic existence, presupposing a regulating energy from without"⁵. In a language resonating with both cyberspeak and structural-functionalism, animated by anti-totalitarian Marxist feelings, "The Syncretic Society" insisted that the endurance of Stalinism up to the present day was based not on consent, but on extra-economic coercion by a regime whose will was itself already determined in the revolutionary moment.

The author of "The Syncretic Society," the Romanian sociologist Pavel Câmpeanu, went on to publish three other books in the United States, in his own name: *The Origins of Stalinism* (1986), *The Genesis of the Stalinist Social Order* (1988), and *Exit: Towards Post-Stalinism* (1990)⁶. Since 1967, when it was first set up, and up until 1980, when he retired, Câmpeanu had been the director of the Office for Studies and Polls of the Romanian Radio and Television broadcasting companies, and had established his professional identity as a sociologist of mass culture. Indeed, most of his publications in the 1960s and 1970s were on radio, theatre, and television. Since 1971, he had been working on his theorization of the Stalinist social order in parallel with his professional interests, in private, and in secret⁷.

"The Syncretic Society", which might otherwise not seem the best introduction to the sociology of mass culture in 1970s Socialist Romania, raises several questions that put into focus the main lines of inquiry around which I

³ Editor's note to Casals, "Theses on the Syncretic Society", 233.

⁴ Casals, "The Syncretic Society", 48 (emphasis in original).

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ For a recent reappraisal of Pavel Câmpeanu's Marxist theoretical work, see Alex Cistelean, "Pavel Câmpeanu".

⁷ See Câmpeanu, "Povestea unei cărți apărute în Statele Unite."

construct my analysis in this paper: 1. How does the sociologist's position towards his object of study format the research produced?; 2. What was the currency of systems theory, and how did it become a preferred language of criticism?; 3. Why is there no will other than that of the power structure/regime considered in the model of the (neo-)Stalinist social organization? Were there alternatives to coercion theorized? Was there any room to imagine consent?

In what follows, I analyze how the sociology of mass culture in 1960s–1970s Socialist Romania evolved from a newly formed discipline tasked with providing scientific guidance for the formulation and implementation of cultural policies (producing hegemony), into a potentially critical account of the cultural basis for consent. First, I discuss the broader context of the discipline's configuration, and the initial debates about the sociologist's relationship to his/her object of study. Secondly, I look into the versions of the "systemic" approach in the sociology of mass culture and mass communications, asking how they conceptualized consent/coercion. Thirdly, I discuss how a number of empirical studies reflected on the issue of hegemony in 1970s Socialist Romania.

LOCATING THE SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGIST OF MASS CULTURE

The sociology of mass culture emerged mostly around a group of sociologists from the Philosophy Institute of the Academy of Social and Political Sciences, who conducted empirical research at the end of the 1960s. The introduction to the 1970 collective volume *Contributions to the Sociology of Mass Culture*, in which the preliminary results of the research were published, made a bid for the scientification of planning and carrying out cultural policies: "It is paradoxical that despite their breadth, [. . .] the activities of spreading culture [. . .] did not have a science of their own – that is, a corpus of systematized principles for the optimization of the technical side of these activities, which would, at the same time, methodically reflect back upon the activities themselves. [. . .] A policy of mass culture cannot do without a sociology of mass culture"⁸. Sociologists presented themselves as "managers of culture", offering technical expertise, promising an increase in the efficiency of cultural work, and taking on the task of evaluating and advising cultural policies. This came in the context of a broader relaxation of centralist and disciplinary administrative strategies and a move towards limited decentralization and management⁹ in the second half of the 1960s¹⁰.

⁸ Cernea, "Sociologia și cercetarea procesului culturalizării", 7.

⁹ I follow Mark Beissinger's classification of the six broad administrative strategies pursued by Soviet leaders to overcome bureaucratic rigidity within the institutional framework of central planning: delegative, managerial, mobilizational, normative, centralist, and disciplinary. Although the chronology differs, the cyclical logic identified by Beissinger in his analysis of the communist leadership's responses to over-bureaucratization applies, in broad lines, to the Romanian case as well,

Apart from the general consensus that sociology could improve the management of mass culture, there was little in the way of a common research agenda. Indeed, institutional and ideological fault lines were quickly drawn to argue for ascendancy. One target of the up-and-coming sociologists, at least for the purpose of rhetorical legitimation, were the representatives of the interwar sociological tradition of monographic research, former members of the Bucharest School of Sociology founded by Dimitrie Gusti. Gusti had formulated and institutionalized sociology as a “science of the nation”, which relied heavily on “cultural work” carried out in the countryside by interdisciplinary teams of university students, for the modernization of rural life¹¹. Due to its close ties to the monarchy, as well as to some of its members’ right-wing leanings and involvement in the Romanian fascist movement in the 1930s, after 1948 sociology was disbanded as a discipline, Dimitrie Gusti fell from grace with the communist regime, and several of his most prominent disciples were exiled, imprisoned, or marginalized¹². Attempts at re-establishing a continuity of expertise in the 1950s by divorcing the “realist” monographic method from Gusti’s “idealist” theory were met with immediate resistance. The “scientific research of society,” the argument went, did not hinge on the researchers’ unbiased, objective observation of the social reality, but on their “partisanship and militancy”¹³. By the second half of the 1960s, when a selective reappraisal of the interwar scientific canon also allowed for the “rediscovery” of Gusti and of the Bucharest School of Sociology, it appeared that the expertise as scientists in service of the state would recommend the sociologists trained in the interwar period to take on the new managerial tasks, but their theoretical and methodological assumptions did not remain unchallenged, and their professional reintegration was limited¹⁴.

Henri H. Stahl, one of the most prominent former disciples of Gusti committed to a Marxist theoretical approach to the social¹⁵, imagined the reformation of mass cultural work through a new understanding of the role of

allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the communist period, beyond the simplified model of Stalinism (up to the early-1960s) – limited liberalization (up to the early 1970s) – re-Stalinization (up to 1989). See Beissinger, *Scientific Management, Socialist Discipline, and Soviet Power*.

¹⁰ A “Report on the Measures for the Improvement of the Management and Planning of the National Economy and for the Improvement of the Administrative-Territorial Organization of Romania,” which outlined managerial measures being implemented for the increase of productivity, was presented at the 1967 National Conference of the Romanian Communist Party, with the expectation that these would be included in 1970 in the new five-year plan. See Ceaușescu, *România pe drumul desăvârșirii construcției socialiste*, vol. 2, p. 504–611.

¹¹ See Mușat, “‘To Cure, Uplift, and Ennoble the Village’: Militant Sociology in the Romanian Countryside, 1934–1938”.

¹² See Bosomitu, “In the Age of ‘Misery’. The Romanian Sociology during the Communist Regime (1948–1977)”.

¹³ Bochiș, Părăluță, and Spiridon, “Pentru orientarea științifică în cercetarea monografică”.

¹⁴ See Rostás, “The Second Marginalisation of the Bucharest Sociological School”.

¹⁵ On the development of Henri H. Stahl’s project of a Marxist historical sociology over the timespan of several decades, see Ștefan Guga, *Sociologia istorică*.

cultural activists. They would no longer act as an elite called upon to “culturalize” the un-cultured, but would have to research, integrate to, and assimilate the local culture, and do so through sociological investigation. Moreover, the cultural activists/sociologists would engage the locals themselves, especially the “social leaders,” in participatory research at every stage, effectively redefining cultural expertise and activism as a collaborative endeavor¹⁶. In Stahl’s view, therefore, sociological knowledge and practice bridged the gap between cultural policy and the masses by representing the object of research as a subject of change. Reminiscent of the interwar practice of cultural work/monographic research, this vision more importantly rested on the theorization of the dialectical relationship between local knowledge and scientific knowledge as a basis for cultural policy, as well as on the drive to recover the human agency sidelined from knowledge production by dogmatic Marxism-Leninism¹⁷.

To this understanding of the role of the sociologist, Maria Larionescu, part of a new generation of experts trained in the postwar period, argued that a researcher’s integration in the local community could be a misleading strategy, for it did not in itself guarantee the authenticity of knowledge. The “object” of research would be rather obscured than revealed by the local culture, with its prejudices and narrow-mindedness, and the deformed image provided by the local leaders, whom Larionescu called “idols,” was to be corrected by sustained theoretical investment in modelling the object of study¹⁸. On the one hand, this was a bid for the sociologists’ professional autonomy, based on the affirmation of the exclusive ability to manipulate an esoteric body of expert knowledge for the benefit of the state. This particular self-positioning has been read as a sort of “resistance through science” strategy, where sociologists insisted on the technical aspects of their discipline, and engaged with ideology only superficially: “even if formal affiliation to Marxism-Leninism was a must, sociology re-imagined itself as a purely scientific, even technical, discourse”¹⁹. On the other hand, if the distance between science and ideology was never explicitly articulated, that between the researcher and other social actors (cultural activists, workers, peasants, etc.) clearly was. It rested on the sociologist’s professed mistrust in the transparency of the social reality, and on the belief that knowledge about the social can be mediated through theory alone. The trade-off for the lack of engagement with the hegemonic

¹⁶ Stahl, “Tehnici de cercetare și acțiune culturală ‘participativă’”.

¹⁷ For an analysis of how dogmatic historical and dialectical materialism managed to “skillfully take away political agency from the collective body they were meant to empower, remove human agency from all knowledge production, and establish positivist methodologies of socialist knowledge,” see Zhivka Venelinova Valiavicharska, “Spectral Socialisms: Marxism-Leninism and the Future of Marxist Thought in Post-Socialist Bulgaria,” PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2011.

¹⁸ Larionescu, “Cunoașterea acțiunii comunicațiilor de masă”, 41.

¹⁹ Cotoi, “Sociology and Ethnology in Romania”, 142.

ideology was the sociologists' self-alienation from their object of study, which precluded the articulation of criticism on the side or in the name of the people.

THE USES OF SYSTEMS THEORY

If theory was what distinguished the sociologist of mass culture from the "spontaneous sociology" of cultural activists, at the end of the 1960s, however, most studies on the topic offered merely surveys of the existing (Western) literature²⁰. One of the more sophisticated attempts to elaborate a theoretical and methodological approach to mass culture was that of Haralamb Culea. Culea tackled in several studies the issue of how mass culture relates to mass-media culture, folk culture, or high culture²¹, the ways in which mass-media culture constitutes itself as a separate cultural type²², and the role of mass communication in cultural activism²³. His main theoretical premise was that different cultural systems, types, and modes coexisted in contemporary societies, and that of these, (socialist) mass culture was a separate, relatively autonomous cultural type. Analyzed from a structuralist-functionalist perspective, mass culture consisted of a complex system of cultural institutions; ideas, values, symbols, and cultural models; and people's cultural interests, conduct, and lifestyle.²⁴ The institutional system of mass culture, in turn, was comprised of several subsystems: professional education, mass communications, and cultural houses. This was more than a theoretical model. For Culea, "systems theory" was a tool of governance in the field of mass culture: first, it structured social realities, which was a precondition for planning; second, by modeling the way a given system functioned, it simplified the process of assigning roles to its various components; third, it rendered the division of labor in the field of cultural work more efficient and economical²⁵.

Apart from being a language of management, structural-functionalism and systems theory also offered the sociologist a framework in which to voice criticism. At the end of the 1960s–beginning of the 1970s, this entailed discussing "dysfunctionalities," most notably the overlapping of attributions or bureaucratic duplication, which allowed Culea to propose measures for the partial decentralization of cultural governance. By the second half of the 1970s, however, the so-called "mini-cultural revolution" marked the move from managerial and delegative strategies of administration back to a normative strategy, predicated on

²⁰ See, for example, Herseni, "Coordonate ale culturii de masă".

²¹ Culea, "Mass-media și cultura de masă".

²² Culea, "Sociologia mass-mediei".

²³ Culea, "Comunicațiile de masă în activitatea cultural-educativă".

²⁴ Culea, "Rețeaua instituțiilor culturale de masă", 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

the re-ideologization of public life, reaffirming the party's guidance, and regaining control over the state apparatus through a new cycle of centralization. In this context, the bias of the systems theory approach to mass culture towards the description of functional systems and "objective structures" becomes apparent, in that it proved ill equipped for the analysis of what Culea euphemistically called "the subjective factor" – that is, direct political intervention. This is reflected in Culea's unpublished 1975 research paper contracted by the Philosophy Institute, a painstaking formulation of the "dysfunctionalities" of the system of mass culture in terms of "contradictions" more probable to be resolved through the "dialectical" intervention of the party than through sociology-informed management²⁶.

By way of comparison, in Pavel Câmpeanu's 1972 *Radio, Television, Public* – a full-fledged application of systems theory to the phenomenon of mass communications – the issue of command is wholly integrated into the analysis. Câmpeanu contended that the proper functioning of the system of communication depended on maintaining the identity, as much as possible, between the interests of the command and those of the receivers, which in theory would be best approximated in socialism²⁷. For a self-regulating system, this also required proper feed-back mechanisms between its elements. In this model, it becomes clear that the command is the least connected through feed-back loops with the rest of the system²⁸. Almost a decade later, Câmpeanu's critique of what he described as a neo-Stalinist social order based on coercion would rest on the negation of the systemic character altogether. For the 1970s, however, it is worth asking how the ideal model of a self-regulating system fared with the experience of the sociologists of mass culture. In terms of feed-back, Culea's theoretical model, managerial proposals, and empirical findings were clearly rendered obsolete by the shift in the regime's overall administrative strategies. After 1975, he abandoned the field of the sociology of mass culture altogether, as did Maria Larionescu. In the case of Pavel Câmpeanu, the Office for Studies and Polls of the Romanian Radiotelevision, which he directed, appears to have had a very limited impact on the workings of the institution for which it was designed to provide information²⁹. As for the identity of interests between the regime and the people, several empirical studies conducted at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s can offer a sense of how hegemony was pursued through mass culture.

²⁶ See Culea, "Omogenizare și diferențiere în procesul culturalizării de masă."

²⁷ Câmpeanu, *Radio, televiziune, public*, 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁹ For a discussion of the workings of the Office for Studies and Polls, see Cioroianu, "Televiziunea – mijloc de informare și instrument politic"; and Matei, "Oficiul de studii și sondaje", in *O tribună captivantă*, 179–185.

ARGUING WITH DATA

The issue of the relationship between people's cultural interests and the activities of mass culture pursued through state institutions stood at the core of an empirical research coordinated by Haralamb Culea in 1969–1970 in two medium-size cities, one of which was an industrial city built entirely under state socialism. Data gathered pointed to people's marked preference for mass-media as a source of mass culture, to the detriment of other institutions (such as the houses of culture) and to more "traditional" forms of cultural activism and propaganda (in particular the conferences, symposia, etc.). This was further correlated with a preference for entertainment over instruction in choosing the media content, and most interestingly for how the sociology of mass culture reflected upon the dynamics of hegemony under socialism, with people's attitudes towards work. The majority of those asked to describe their work as either interesting, uninteresting, or boring chose one of the latter two options, or added the option of tiring/difficult. Moreover, the interest in entertainment was prevalent among the workers who either considered their work a burden (unqualified workers), or thought of it merely as a paying job (poorly qualified workers), the deficiencies of which could be "compensated" through culture. "Deprived to a certain extent in their attempts to affirm their personalities," commented Culea on the latter type in a typical account of alienation, "some of the subjects studied showed the will to express, at least through culture, their individuality, wishes, aspirations, to feel important and useful."³⁰ These people "abandoned themselves to mass media," expressing their own social aspirations by emulating the cultural practices of those with a higher social status (qualified workers, civil servants, intellectuals, etc.). In this sense, mass culture was shown to produce cultural hegemony not necessarily through its content, or because it naturalized an acceptable form of command (through cultural policy), but especially by way of allowing social grievances (potentially anti-hegemonic collective sentiments) to be compensated through individual acts of participation at mass culture.

One of the main conclusions drawn by Culea from the empirical data on the two cities studied was that cultural interests grew increasingly homogenous, regardless of the existing cultural traditions, and that this was largely an unplanned, spontaneous byproduct of the processes of mass culture. The development, hypothesized Culea, might be explained by the homogenization of lifestyles under the impact of industrialization and urbanization; the standardization of cultural activities through their centralized planning; the standardization of the mass cultural products offered; and the similarity of the institutional networks distributing them. The homogenization of cultural interests and conducts was not, in itself, at odds with the collectivist ethos of the party-state, but, as Culea

³⁰ Culea, "Preliminarii metodologice", in *Structura*, 55.

commented, it did also imply a large degree passivity (rather than artistic, social, or political activism). Consequently, he projected that one of the major aims of cultural policy would be to encourage the differentiation of cultural attitudes.³¹ Culea's engagement with the issues of homogenization, differentiation, and passivity illustrates how sociologists were not only offering technical expertise, but could also perform as producers of ideology. In this particular case, the attempted reconfiguration of the three elements pointed towards cultural hegemony, achieved through people's active participation at mass culture, as an alternative to the mere imposition of a cultural model upon a passive population. Passivity, however, was to become the target of the so-called July Theses of 1971, a rallying call against the relative autonomy from party control of the state managerial elites. By mobilizing the people as an administrative strategy, the goal was to realign their interests with those of the party, which on the long run translated into such mass cultural movements as *Cântarea României*, a hugely successful annual festival which played into the consolidation of national communism as the regime's legitimizing ideology.

At the end of the 1970s, with the illusions of the scientific management of culture having mostly faded, and the ideological flexibility of the second half of the 1960s giving way to national communism, Pavel Câmpeanu formulated profound skepticism towards the possibility of the rational expression of consent through the medium of mass culture, based on data collected by the Office for Studies and Polls. Comparative surveys of the public's and the experts' evaluation of the best movies watched on television in 1975, for instance, showed that there was no agreement between the two. Similarly, a 1977 survey on the importance of recent events revealed the public consistently underestimating external politics and overestimating internal non-political events, as compared to the specialists' views³². Both culturalization and information, these results suggested, failed in their capacity of propaganda, in as much as they did not manage to ensure the public's adherence to a particular system of values: "The system of mass communications managed to a greater degree to cultivate the need for current information, than to also transmit along with it the system of values according to which it selects, presents, and interprets the information."³³ Several further studies conducted in 1978 that assessed which were the most watched shows on television and which were the shows that the public most appreciated revealed the overwhelming preference for the consumption of foreign TV series such as *Poor Man*, *Rich Man*, or *The Onedin Line*. To explain what he called the public's "non-esthetic appreciation" of these cultural products, Câmpeanu drew a parallel between false consciousness, which naturalized the producer's self-alienation, and the satisfaction produced by spectacle, which "reconciles the producer with the

³¹ Culea, "Preliminarii metodologice", in *Structura*, 26–8.

³² Câmpeanu, *Oamenii și televiziunea*, 84–5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 170.

mystified representation of his/her real condition, and therefore the condition itself³⁴. While this comes close to Culea's own understanding of what the role of mass culture, and television in particular, could become in the extreme, Câmpeanu's interpretation is much more radical in its breadth. Câmpeanu defined television as an "excessive spectacle", and following Marcuse described how it produced its spectators in their capacity of "non-participants in the spectacle's action": "Through the excessive spectacle, the transformative social energies are deviated from real action to the real contemplation of imaginary actions. The excessive spectacle thus accomplishes its function as a buffer of social conflict."³⁵ The distance between Culea and Câmpeanu is that between the first calling to diagnose the dysfunctionalities of the system of mass culture and the second calling into question the very cultural basis of consent. Câmpeanu's final word concerning the future of television in Socialist Romania took his argument one step further, suggesting that in order to break the cycle of the reproduction of self-alienation, the spectator should be educated to transition from excessive to moderate "participation" at mass culture first. Ironically, this was to be achieved several years later, when television programs were drastically cut to around two hours per day during the week, which, of course, rather further deteriorated the condition of the consumers of culture. The systems of mass communication, the economy, and the political regime were clearly not interacting in the way modelled by Câmpeanu, who ultimately conceded that the social order which his empirical studies revealed functioned less as a system kept together through consenting to the existing hegemony, and more as nonsystemic conglomerate the fragile hegemony of which had to be regularly kept in check through coercion.

Coming full circle and to the conclusion of this article, I would like to briefly reflect back upon how "The Syncretic Society," such a trenchant negation of the possibilities for consent under state socialism, reads in the context of the late 1960s and 1970s sociology of mass culture in Socialist Romania. First, it is the product of a progressive disillusionment with the sociologists' role under state socialism. For a while in the context of the regime's broader move towards managerial and delegative administrative strategies, it seemed possible that the sociologists of mass culture would model their professional identity on the promise of scientific, technical expertise for the management of both mass culture and the processes of "culturalization". This was premised on the sociologists' representation of their object of study as opaque, accessible through theory alone, and ultimately rendered them powerless in the face of the regime's shift to mobilizational and normative administrative strategies, with its call for intellectuals to become producers of ideology. Secondly, systems theory was a very heterogeneous language of both Parsonian and cybernetic inspiration, which could alternatively model the social

³⁴ Ibid., 197.

³⁵ Ibid., 63.

order as a system spontaneously able to smooth over its dysfunctions, or describe it as the naturalization of an asymmetrical distribution of power. There was potential for criticism in both variants, but, given the general currency of systems theory among sociologists, by far the most radical formulation was to negate the systemic character of the communist social order altogether. Third, the empirical sociological studies of mass culture were quite successful at capturing workers' precarious condition and (self-)alienation, and not so much at locating consent. The homogenization of cultural interests was associated more with the passive acceptance of mass culture than with active participation or rational consent. Similarly, the consumer of mass media culture, particularly television, was shown to not share in the system of values which it propagated, but rather reproduce one's self-alienation by contemplating representations of reality rather than acting to transform it. Consequently, in the 1980s, in the context of the producers' increased exploitation, which threatened the fragile hegemony of state socialism, the regime would fall back on coercion as the main instrument of control.

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