

[Marett Lecture, given at Oxford on 28.April 1995]

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## **ILLTH AND WEALTH.**

Rector, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Robert Marrett wrote that '...to consider ourselves in the light of what we may reasonably hope to become is our first and last duty as self-directing beings. Strictly subordinate to this end is, therefore, the function of a Science of Man which provides a preliminary statement as to where we are at present and how we got there.' This lecture is precisely such a very preliminary statement. It will attempt to answer the question which Marrett posed, but refused to answer, 'Has there been progress?'

Marett realized that one of the difficulties of dealing properly with this vast question was the need to extend the argument well beyond particular competence: 'while every anthropologist firmly believes his science to apply to mankind in general, it is with the more uncivilized kind of man that he is at present free to deal with as he pleases'. Yet he felt that anthropology should be applied to 'civilizations' to overcome the ethnocentric bias. Hence the mission of anthropology was 'to decivilize history, as it were, in the sense of humanizing it more impartially and completely.'

I shall try to attempt to 'decivilize history' by using the very wide canvas of the whole of human history. I will include all four of the major types of social organization. I will look at hunter-gatherers, who dominated until about 9000 B.C., 'tribesmen', both horticultural and pastoralist, who did so from then to three thousand B.C., 'peasant' civilizations from that point until the nineteenth century, and our present capitalist/industrial society.

If we take these four types of civilization, does the record tend to support the view of the optimists, from the Enlightenment to the great Evolutionary founders of modern social science, that there has been continuous and incremental progress in 'civilization'. Or does it lend force to the tradition in Utopian thinking from Rousseau to Marx, namely that man lost Eden and will one day find it again, but meanwhile we have descended into the vale of tears.

In order to proceed further in considering these large questions we need to establish some measures of 'progress'. Marett reported a conversation with Lewis Carroll who 'said that the supreme problem of ethics was to measure happiness which could be done, he suggested, if the unit of value were taken as the satisfaction one got from eating a penny bun.' Not everyone has access to penny buns, even now, so I shall elaborate a rather more complex set of indices.

One of the first to lay out a schema for a somewhat more nuanced analysis was Adam Smith in 'The Wealth of Nations'. As a political economist, Smith meant by 'wealth' much more than mere monetary accumulation. He also included health, peace, equitable taxation, a fair distribution of profits and much more.

We can extend his ideas by looking at the opposite of Wealth, namely what Ruskin called Illth. In 1860, Ruskin wrote of the "mere accidental stays and impediments acting not as wealth, but (for we ought to have a correspondent term) as 'illth'. This was the opposite of well-being, in other words ill-being. Thus Lewis Mumford described how "In war ... the army is not merely a pure consumer but a negative producer: that is to say, it produces illth, to use Ruskin's excellent phrase, instead of wealth - misery, mutilation, physical destruction, terror, starvation and death characterize the process of war and form a principal part of the product."

Illth is thus negative wealth, it devours rather than produces, causes ill-being, encompassing but also extending beyond, purely physical suffering to mental, aesthetic and moral ill-being. Its constituents are many. Here I will limit them to ten indices. All of these are bound to be value-laden and contentious. Yet the cumulative Benthamite calculus of pleasure and pain will roughly be accepted by most. What I wish to do is to provide a very brief overview of the history of each of these ten forms of illth/wealth over the four great forms of human civilization known to anthropologists.

The following account will only apply to ninety-five percent of the population or more. The elite in 'peasant civilizations', through cunning and good fortune, often escaped the major tendencies which I shall outline. Furthermore vast variations between civilizations and times have had to be smoothed out in pursuing this larger picture. One danger of this is that you may feel that there is some implied denigration of previous civilizations as brutal, ignorant, 'savage'. This is completely contrary to my purpose.

I shall start by considering the first three major types of civilization, that is up to the high point of peasantry. I will take the story to the year 1650, an arbitrary date. By pausing there our judgment will not be clouded by what we know happened afterwards. What sort of 'progress' had there been by the year that Thomas Hobbes' prepared **Leviathan** for the press?

## **War.**

Lightly settled hunter-gatherer societies have been largely free of war. War or feuding becomes endemic in some tribal societies, particularly among forest dwellers and some pastoral nomads. Yet it is in the so-called 'higher' civilizations that war reaches its full climax. The long chronicle of battles and wars of conquest from Alexander, through Caesar down to the seventeenth century does not need to be rehearsed here. McNeill noted that the casualties and ferocity of war seemed to be on the increase again in Europe from the fifteenth century onwards. The wholesale destruction of the Empires of South America and Mexico, the Manchu invasions of China, the religious wars of Europe, had led to a world which by 1650 appeared to be spiraling into more and more devastating

war.

This tendency is not difficult to explain. As technology progresses, the tools of destruction grow ever more powerful. As populations grow, larger numbers die of the side-effects of war - famine and epidemics. As increasing wealth is generated, the temptations to predation increase and the causes of potential conflict multiply. The Hobbesian vision of a war of all against all, had culminated in a world of marauding armies. There seems to be a natural tendency for war to expand to fill the resources available for it.

### **Famine.**

The old stereotype of the half-starved hunter-gatherer has been laid to rest, notably by Sahlins in his famous essay on the 'Original Affluent Society'. With very light populations and with a diversity of wild plants and animals, ancient hunter-gatherers seldom suffered from serious food shortages. Likewise, tribal societies usually lived well above subsistence levels, with ample reserves and complex webs of social investment to cushion them against animal sickness or unseasonable weather. Yet, as population builds up in the phase of peasant civilization, we begin to see the era of widespread deaths and famines. By the seventeenth century, the 'general crisis' in Europe was but one manifestation of the growing tendency for peasantries to endure periodic massive famines.

Again the reasons are not difficult to find. The Malthusian cycle of growing population, cultivation pushed into marginal land, larger demands made by non-agriculturalists in the towns, the growth of mono-cultures over large flat plains in central Europe, India, China and Russia, all these and other variants of the law of diminishing marginal returns led to a world described by Braudel as follows. "Famine recurred so insistently for centuries on end that it became incorporated into man's biological regime and built into his daily life. Dearth and penury were continual..." (Braudel, *Capitalism*, 38) The tendency was thus towards greater production and the feeding of more and more people, but with periodic swings in the other direction, leading thousands or hundreds of thousands to starve. By the middle of the seventeenth century the major agrarian civilizations were in a far more perilous situation than their hunter-gatherer or tribal ancestors. Quantity of mouths had been substituted for quality, proteins had been replaced by carbohydrates. The trend was undoubtedly downwards, even if the total world production of human foodstuffs had increased enormously over the previous three thousand years.

### **Disease.**

We can first consider the major epidemic diseases. All of these are density dependent. None of them were widespread in either the hunter-gatherer or tribal phases. It was only with the growth of cities and settled peasantries that the great scourges, bubonic and pneumonic plague, smallpox, measles, typhus, typhoid, cholera, cut swathes through the population. Many of these only became important causes of mortality from the sixteenth century onwards. They often accompanied the growing devastation of wars and the debility caused by famine. By the 1650s Europe and Asia had reached an apparent ceiling where the death rates were rising and viral and bacterial epidemics

occurred ever more frequently.

Endemic diseases are also density and nutrition dependent. In particular malaria and dysentery grew in seriousness as population grew. Neither is likely to have been a major problem in hunter-gatherer or tribal societies, but the **anopheles** mosquito spread as people practiced intensive agriculture and became weakened by hunger. Meanwhile the rising level of human and animal excrement poisoned the water supplies, leading to growing problems of enteric disease. Morbidity and mortality rose in what Turner has aptly called 'disease-logged' societies.

### **Work.**

It is difficult for a modern western audience to realize how much illth can be created by over-work. The crippling pain of straining the muscles and bones in long, arduous and tedious manual labour has to be personally observed to be appreciated. How then has this very important component of illth and wealth changed over the millennia?

The story has been well told by Ester Boserup. She showed that with each phase of economic 'progress', the mass of the population were subjected to heavier and heavier work loads. In hunter-gatherer societies it was easy to gather enough food and other necessities in a few hours a week. Pastoralism requires little human labour and slash and burn cultivation produces large surpluses with a short burst of effort.

It is with intensive farming to produce not only enough for the peasant but also the townsman and nobility, that the long drudgery really begins. Though wind, water and animal power may help, much has to be done by the human legs, arms and back. A sixty-hour working week, often involving tremendous efforts to push, pull, grind, beat and carry, is common in peasant societies.

This development is not difficult to explain by reference to the processes of agricultural involution, decreasing marginal returns, deterioration of capital, the destruction of war and a growing ruling and urban elite. The result is again one of growing illth. By 1650, of the 500 million humans on earth, nineteen out of every twenty of those who lived in peasant societies were living a life of enormous physical toil.

### **Status inequality.**

It has often been noted that hunter-gatherer societies are usually egalitarian, with no inherited differences of rank, class or caste. With the phase of tribalism, some impermanent rank differentiation occurs, for instance with chiefs and commoners. Yet pastoral societies are also fiercely egalitarian and status is achieved not ascribed in 'Big Men' societies. There are no classes or castes.

It is only with the emergence of peasantries that real birth inequalities arise. The 'premise of inequality' becomes widespread. Some are believed to be born as better, superior, more fully human

than others. This takes many different forms.

In 'ancient' societies, it often took the shape of slavery. In Indo-European societies it usually took the form of a four-fold division into occupationally defined orders, ranked as superior and inferior. These were the lords, priests, townsmen and peasants. In western Europe the peasant were often semi-unfree, tied to the land, their work and marriages in the hands of the manorial lords.

The barriers between groups applied to all of life; eating, marrying, property rights. The differences took their most extreme form when given ritual sanction as in the Indian caste system which added a layer of 'untouchables' below the other orders. There were, of course, immense fluctuations, yet the powerful tendency towards hierarchical inequalities constantly re-asserted itself. Thus by the middle of the seventeenth century, throughout Asia and Europe, the vast bulk of the population were born as inferior - not just poorer or weaker, but less human. Most were not born equal and free, but unequal and unfree. The pressures of population, of the concentration of wealth and power in a few hands, the fear of predation by other nations or other lords, led to a vast increase in the status of the lords and the literati and a consequent weakening of the mass of the people.

### **Economic inequality.**

In hunter-gatherer societies the returns on a day's labour hardly varies from the 'richest' to the 'poorest', and any inequalities are quickly dispersed through sharing. There is no way to store wealth and no way to pass it on over the generations. There is little private property and no means to accumulate capital.

Although there is some differentiation in tribal societies, it is again relatively slight. The richest gain their prestige and power from distribution, gift-giving or conspicuous destruction, rather than from accumulation. The richest herdsman or swidden farmer is only perhaps twice as rich as the poorest. Human labour and human military strength tend to be the scarce factors in production and almost all own their own bodies and their potential.

As peasant societies develop, the gap widens. With the development of markets and money it became possible to store and accumulate wealth and transmit it over the generations. With the growth of population and the huge investment of labour in land improvements, land rather than labour became the scarce factor in production. Private property, exclusive rights in productive assets, grew rapidly.

Again there were fluctuations, but by the seventeenth century a Spanish hidalgo, a French nobleman, a Chinese mandarin, or an Indian rajah often had wealth that exceeded that of the average of the mass of the population by a ratio of much more than 100:1. He could have purchased whole villages of subsistence farmers and all their possessions with ease.

This can be quantified in terms of the proportion of surplus kept by the producer. The hunter-gatherer keeps or exchanges all of his or her production. The tribesman keeps nine tenths of

his produce. Peasants often have to surrender between a half and three-quarters of their produce to lords and clergy. All surplus value is drained from them in rents, taxes and debt re-payments.

### **Power inequality.**

Political power is practically absent in hunter-gatherers societies. It is well known that there are no chiefs or Big Men. Small groups constantly split up as each follows his or her own interests. There is no way in which one person can force another to do anything.

From this situation of consensus or ordered anarchy, the development of tribal societies created a minimal order. Chiefs with some power often emerged, but their control was limited in geographical range and depended on agreement. Without a police force, superior weapons, a standing army, the indirect pressures of money or writing, it was impossible for long-term dictatorships to emerge.

It is with the growth of the early Empires of peasants that Acton's dictum concerning the corruption of absolute power came into force. The power inequalities we witness in the classical civilizations, in China, or in the Empires of Incas and Aztecs are well known. The tendency was towards absolutism, the rule of divine kings or Emperors.

This tendency can be seen very clearly in Western Europe after the collapse of Rome. It has been charted, for instance, by Perry Anderson in his **Lineages of the Absolutist State**. As the feudal kingdoms settled down, royal power grew. The period of the relative autonomy of city states in Italy or of local lords in France or Spain gave way to the era of powerful absolute rulers, typified by the Russian Tsars or Louis XIV. The tendency was everywhere towards absolutism. Parts of the pattern have also been outlined by Wittfogel in his characterization of Oriental despotism.

Against the massive force of a superior military technology, for which they had to pay, the average peasant was powerless. He or she had no say in government at the national level. The monolithic machinery of the increasingly powerful nation states was outside his control. He was left with only the 'Weapons of the Weak', periodic largely fruitless rebellions, informal resistance through foot-dragging, petty sabotage and theft.

Again, if we try to give a rough quantified estimate, the peasant's power was less than a thousandth of that of his local lord, whose power again diminished over time in relation to the absolute rulers. By 1650 Europe, like Asia, seemed to be moving inexorably towards ever-greater concentrations of political power in fewer and fewer hands.

### **Cognitive and spiritual inequality.**

In hunter-gatherer societies there are few cognitive or spiritual differentials. Each adult can know most of what others know. There is secret knowledge, often held by an individual, family or a particular gender, but most knowledge, whether about this world or the next, is shared.

The growth of tribal societies fragments knowledge somewhat. Shamans, diviners, bards begin to monopolize esoteric knowledge, particularly about the past and the supernatural. Yet with the absence of powerful tools of knowledge, particularly the manipulation of symbols through writing, the vast majority of the population are largely equal in the face of life's uncertainties.

With the development of writing and other tools of thought such as mathematics, complex philosophical systems, world religions, as well as material technologies which influence thought such as glass and clocks, the gap between a small literate group and the mass of an illiterate peasantry widens. Knowledge is power and such knowledge was monopolized by Mandarins, Brahmins, Clergy and Notaries. The difference between what anthropologists have called the 'Great' and 'Little' traditions, that is the complex and powerful cosmologies and knowledge of less than five per cent of the population, and the local truths known by the other 95 per cent grows apace.

Thus by the seventeenth century there were in India, China, Russia and western Europe tiny oases of esoteric knowledge in a vast expanse of oral culture. In quantitative terms a Chinese mandarin or west European lawyer would have access to a thousand times as much information as a Chinese or French peasant. As knowledge grew, it became concentrated into a few hands.

Those who tried to challenge this monopoly found themselves faced by the thought-police of the various forms of inquisitorial process. The mounting power of the Catholic Inquisition, particularly after the Counter-Reformation in Europe from the sixteenth century, is just one example. That world of closed thought which Voltaire satirized in **Candide** had been growing for several centuries. The tendency in thought and religion, as in politics, was towards absolutism, towards Popper's 'Closed Society'.

### **Gender inequality.**

Many of the preceding tendencies come together and are magnified in the relations between the genders. Although there are inequalities, on the whole men and women are more or less equal in hunter-gatherer societies. This equality is largely preserved in many tribal societies. In particular, horticultural societies which have been the locus for matrilineal and, to a certain extent, matriarchal, institutions. Women provide an equal or greater amount of labour in hoe cultivation and they influence production as well as reproduction. Though pastoral societies tend to be male-dominated, the differential is not yet heavily emphasized.

It is with the growth of peasantries that the real oppression of women multiplies. Whether this is mainly the result of their diminishing role in economic production with plough cultivation, or of the effects of world religions which characteristically give them a secondary position, or of increasing stratification, which turns them into pawns in marriage alliance strategies, or of rising mortality rates which exacerbates their role as machines for producing children, is still much debated. Probably it was a combination of all these and other factors. Certainly the effects are writ large in each agrarian civilization, though the forms of deprivation vary.

In China one manifestation was in the growing custom of foot-binding, the crushing and breaking of the feet bones of half the population, thus confining them for many centuries to a life of pain and marginality. In Islamic civilizations women were in every sense inferior and often kept in exclusion through purdah. When Islam mixed with tribalism, there grew up the practice of female circumcision. In Hindu society, women were first the slaves of their fathers, then their husbands and finally their sons. They had no rights and their life was to be extinguished if possible with that of their husband. In southern Europe the opposition whereby men were the guardians of honour, and women the gateway to shame again placed women in an increasingly inferior position.

In almost all of these cases their virginity and procreative power was their chief merit. They were inferior at birth, were married off early, worked enormously hard, bore many children and many died relatively young. Their inferiority was reflected in sex-selective infanticide and their exclusion from politics, priesthood, education and the public sphere.

Thus within that 95 per cent or more of the population already many times poorer, weaker and less knowledgeable, there was an enormous internal gulf between the lowest of the low, that half of the population born female and the rest. The long-term tendency seems to have been downwards, with indignity and deprivation piled on inequality and injustice.

### **Relative deprivation and contentment.**

Sahlins pointed out that happiness or contentment largely lies in the relationship between ends and means. Hunter-gatherers characteristically live in a world where needs, wants, desires are few and are easily attained. The good things of life, adequate food, leisure, sex, companionship, excitement, are within everyone's reach. This is the Garden of Eden.

It is a world which is continued to a considerable extent in many tribal societies. Particularly among horticulturalists, anthropological accounts often describe the surplus of good things, pigs, yams, taro, beautiful objects, which are exchanged. Prestige alone is in limited supply, but even some of that can be enjoyed by all but a few 'rubbish men'. These are worlds of affluence.

As peasantries emerge we change into a world of scarcity, at least for the 19 out of 20 who live by manual labour. There is always a shortage, whether of labour, health, children, money for taxes, food, time, reputation. This is a world which many anthropologists have described. It is Foster's world of 'limited good' and envy, Black-Michaud's world of 'moral scarcity', Bailey's world of peasant fears of the 'bad life'.

Life has become a constant battle. It is a struggle against predatory lords and priests, against townsmen and money-lenders and literati, a mutually divisive struggle against other peasants. It is that atomistic world of 'amoral familism' which Banfield analysed and Marx bewailed. In this world there are two particularly grinding forms of relative deprivation.

On the one hand it is apparent that there are people in the towns or manor houses who enjoy a



standard of living infinitely better than one's own and who look down on one as ignorant, brutish, almost sub-human. Yet the means to emulate them are totally absent. On the other hand, there are literal shortages of everything. The philosophy of many rulers was brutally stated by the founders of the Tokugawa regime in Japan: "The proper way to govern is to ensure that peasants don't accumulate wealth yet don't starve either" - that is by "making certain they can neither live nor die". The peasants live, as Tawney put it in his famous metaphor, with their noses just above the water. One disaster and they drown.

Thus all of life is an effort to bring ends and means closer together, to economize on time, effort, to scheme and scrimp. The harder one works, the more the ends, whether leisure, comfort or security, seem to elude one. Of course not all is gloom. Feasts and festivals, the cohesion of the famous **gemeinschaft** give their solace. Yet the general characteristic is a world of moral, spiritual, economic and material scarcity. This is a world which has been captured movingly by Bruegel, Goya and van Gogh, Balzac, Tolstoy and Carlo Levi.

### **The downward tendency to 1650.**

Thus if a dispassionate observer, living in about 1650 but with the knowledge we now have of the growth of European and Asian civilizations, had summarized the state of the nations, s/he would not have been optimistic. On every level, there was a steady worsening of the condition of the vast majority of those who lived in the great agrarian civilizations which now dominated the globe. While gross economic wealth had increased and the earth sustained more and more people, while the technologies of thought and power gave mankind hitherto undreamt of control over the environment, the polarization between the lucky few and the misery of the mass grew apace. It was almost as if there was a necessary built-in contradiction. As the total wealth increased, most individuals suffered more and more illth. Up to this point, Mandeville's famous maxim had not applied; 'private vice, public misery' would have been nearer the mark.

### **The reversal of the trends.**

Yet when we look back, only 350 years later, from the end of the twentieth century, a mere speck of time in the history of man on earth, these tendencies have almost all been reversed. Since this is familiar to us, I shall only very briefly summarize the unexpected transformation.

War has continued with us, but has increasingly become the exception rather than the rule. As a cause of human death, it has declined in importance. The trend seems to have started in the West in the early C18 and in Asia from the nineteenth, though there have been some notable reversals.

Large-scale famine disappeared in western Europe in the eighteenth century, with the tragic exception of Ireland. It disappeared in Asia after the 1960s. Africa alone is now famine-prone.

Disease mortality started to drop in parts of Europe from the eighteenth century, then in the later nineteenth century the causes of most epidemic diseases were discovered. Although there is now

some resurgence of malaria and other diseases, and of new diseases such as AIDS, most epidemic and endemic diseases were under control in Europe by the later nineteenth century and in Asia by the 1960s.

The industrial revolution has freed many from long hours of physical work. In the West this happened from the later nineteenth century and it is now starting to happen in many parts of Asia. Indeed the major problem for many now is too little work, not too much. Machines driven by fossil fuels have increasingly taken the strain off the human back, arms and legs.

In terms of birth status, the famous declaration of the rights of man which proclaimed the certain truth that man is born equal and free was only one landmark in the reversal in the promise of inequality, whose latest expression is the death of apartheid. By the 1830s, Tocqueville could believe in the inevitable progress of the tendency to equality. Slavery was formally abolished, then serfdom. Caste has been more obdurate and class has replaced the old system of estates. Yet whatever the continued inequalities, there is a widespread belief in the universal equality of humans at birth.

In terms of economic differentials, there has been a massive levelling. The very rich are still with us, but there is no longer a vast gap between the one to five per cent who have a thousand times the income of the average of the rest. There is a more gradual gradient of wealth, with the majority of the population, at least in the West and increasingly in Asia, living at a level of affluence undreamt of even two centuries ago.

In terms of political power, the gradual death of absolutist regimes has gathered pace and democracy spread. First in parts of north-western Europe and America, then in India and southern Europe, and now dramatically in Eastern Europe and perhaps soon in China, absolutism is on the retreat. Its famous representatives, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Mao and Pol Pot, have been only weakly replaced by the now 'amoral supermen', the communications moguls. The ideal, if not the practice, of democracy is widely espoused and has become the norm, rather than the exception.

There has also been an opening and levelling of knowledge. The closed worlds of priesthood and literati have withered before mass education, the rapid spread of printing and other communications technology, the growth of scepticism and tolerance. The inquisition has been abolished and the thought police pensioned off in many parts of the world. The ordinary educated citizen may not have specialist knowledge in many fields, but the division of knowledge is no longer between the one who has keys to all that is known, and the nineteen who are excluded.

The emancipation of women in many parts of the world has been partially achieved, though inequalities of course remain. Foot-binding and **sutee** have been abolished and though bride-burning and female circumcision and purdah still continue, there is little doubt that an impressive shift in power has occurred.

Finally, in terms of means and ends, though we still live in a world of relative scarcity, and this is

indeed what drives capitalism, the situation has changed. With the lessening of the vast differences in rank, wealth, status, the relative deprivation is not so stark. Many people in affluent societies suffer not from a shortage but a surplus of material goods. There is, of course, still a scarcity of the 'invisibles' - love, prestige, security, meaning. Yet at the material level, at least, the crushing scarcities which the vast mass faced in the recent past is fading.

When we look back from our vantage point at the end of the twentieth century, all of this transformation looks inevitable, perhaps the working out of some 'Spirit of History', as Hegel, and more recently Fukuyama, have argued. It is only when we look at the total trajectory of human history and stop at about 1650 that we see how extraordinary, unexpected and enormous the 'Great Transformation' has been.

It consisted of a series of changes which are such a complete reversal of previous tendencies, that we give them the term 'Revolution'. These are the constituents of the modern world. We all know what they are called and something about their nature: the industrial revolution, the scientific revolution, the demographic revolution, the capitalist revolution, the democratic revolution, the egalitarian revolution, the individualistic revolution, the rationalist revolution. All of these different revolutions, when combined, created the 'modern' world. Yet we still do not really understand how or why they occurred. How was part of western Europe able to achieve something which had eluded all other great agrarian civilization?

### **Envoi.**

It is customary in a lecture to ask a question and then try to answer it. I have tried to do that. The question was, 'have human societies progressed?' In terms of my indices, there was little 'progress' for most before the seventeenth century. But there has been a dramatic improvement since then. Yet like all answers, this only raises a further question. What caused the partial escape from at least certain aspects of illth? In posing this question in a somewhat different form, and perhaps dispelling a little of the gloom under which most of us seem increasingly to suffer, I have tried to follow in the footsteps of the inquisitive and genial Robert Marett. Thank you.