So Many Reports, So Many Questions
For instance: is there such a thing as postcolonial critical planning?
Gabu Heindl

"The young Alexander conquered India. / Was he alone? / Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not even have a cook with him?" This is a selection of questions Bertold Brecht poses in his 1935 poem "Questions from a worker who reads." After posing a number of productively naïve questions, he concludes the poem with: "So many reports. / So many questions."[1]

Brecht's "Questions from a worker who reads" are about colonization and hegemonic historical narratives. The questions repeatedly contemplate actors who have remained unnamed (like the cook), but by being ostentatiously singled out as individuals, they suddenly appear out of place. In today's research landscape, this Brechtian style critique is quite familiar. Nonetheless: at least in the field of architecture, people still snicker when (to use an example whose significance will soon be apparent), for instance, the notoriously naïve detective Columbo, in an episode (*Blueprint for Murder, 1972)* of the TV series of the same name, asks a cocky architect "Hey sir, did you build that?", gesturing at the presentation model of the building project. Columbo's friendly question "only" refers to the model, prompting the architect to reply: "No, one of my staff did." Had the architect believed Columbo had meant the building rather than the model, he certainly would have proudly answered "Yes."
What may appear a joke in a smaller fictional context is no joke in the greater scheme of reality. To this day, star and signature architecture à la Frank Gehry renders those who collaborate with architects invisible, making it seem as if they have no name or play no part in the discourses surrounding architecture or the production of cities and spaces. It is not uncommon to hear that the star architect not only "built" the Guggenheim Museum, but he also put the city of Bilbao itself (back) on the map. *Was he alone?*

"Who or what builds a city or a city district?" Like Brecht, the authors of the interdisciplinary research project *Model House* pose this question on the first page of their web cartography www.transculturalmodernism.org. The project and the question deal with urban planning and

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        Brecht, Bertolt. "Questions from a worker who reads" [*Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters*] (1935). In *Poems*. Translated by Michael Hamburger*, 1913-1956,* p. 252.

architecture during the time of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s in North Africa, Israel, India, and China. The answer is not "one architect," but a multitude of human and non-human actors, many of whom have been left out of classical architecture history: women, political constellations, non-human actors, materials, etc. The program here is the relativization and examination of hegemonic historical narratives as well as the subjectification and equal recognition of actors and resistance movements: "The result of this constellation is a polylogical and multiperspectival narration by a number of speakers."[2] It's not about creating a "grand" historical and linear narrative, but about bringing together different histories, found objects, intertextualities, empirical detail studies, and narratives on the same map, which raises many new questions; some I will address in the following. *So many reports, so many questions.*

Habitat Chart: Why not Charter? Why a Map and not a Master Plan?

Let´s start with form. Designing a master plan or postulating a new charter would go against the grain of the critical approach of a postcolonial endeavor. Using cartography as a form of notation, *Model House* maps the relations among the transformations of the afore mentioned (post)colonial spaces at a time when architectural discourse is largely concerned with questioning the dictates of modernity and countering universalizing claims by taking a closer look at regionalism, local contexts, culture or climate. Part of the project's comprehensive online database is the *Habitat Chart,* which consists of a cartography of discourses, projects and projections surrounding postcolonial urban planning and its habitat concepts—modern concepts that change according to local and political contexts.

At the time the *Athens Charter* was passed in 1933, it presented a universal set of guidelines for urban planning under the assumption of worldwide universal and equal conditions. With regard to new questions of the habitat and a growing critique on modern urbanism the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne, CIAM IX in 1953 and CIAM X in 1956 pursued the idea to draft another Charter: the *Charter of Habitat,* an undertaking which, however never came to fruition due to the strongly contrasting positions within the group, which also ultimately led CIAM to disband in 1959. The seminal act of creating another charter would have meant laying a foundation not everyone was willing to build upon. With historical distance, the *Model House* project's *Habitat Chart* does not attempt to make up for the charter that was never written but

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Fahim Amir, Eva Egermann, Moira Hille, Johannes Köck, Jakob Krameritsch, Christian Kravagna, Christina Linortner, Marion von Osten, Peter Spillmann (2012): "Who or what builds a city or a city district?", <http://www.transculturalmodernism.org>

instead seeks to map out the circumstances and discourses that made the charter impossible and to offer a set of guidelines for understanding the relationships and backgrounds of existing structures, employing postcolonial and postfundamentalist critique in the process. Critique of the critique is inevitable in this context, seeing as some positions that sought to critique modernity did so on the basis of naturalizing and nostalgic notions of culture (culturalization) derived from colonial observations. The informal ways in which non-expert inhabitants utilized and defined their living spaces inspired the CIAM X architects: in these naturally evolving informal structures they saw a possibility for architecture to develop a new language; they hoped the vernacular architecture of colonized cultures would offer new input: "This work has allowed for a new architectural language to develop that had initially been created by the structures of inhabitation."[3] Maintaining a close proximity to power and to the market—these architectural perspectives have remained in place - from the era of colonialism and de-colonization until today. As the colonies began to crumble, the new sensibility for local contexts made sure Western architects continued to have access to the market. Their purported knowledge about specific ways of life was used to justify racialized boundaries as well as the construction of segregated neighborhoods and class-based gated communities.

To add a further critique to the critique, the (self-)criticality of postcolonial studies also comes into play here: within an academic context, postcolonial studies may be emancipating and sensitizing, e.g. in light of democratization processes, but they are not part of a radical, de-colonial liberation movement. While we may not share the decolonial impetus to separate the two, we are conscious of the fact that empirical and archive-based research perpetuates certain colonial structures: for example, the fact that European researchers use European research funds to do (self-)critical research on the history, spaces, and discourses of colonization and the potentials of decolonization, to conduct *field studies*, which, due to the practical research conditions, are often too short and constrained by language and translation difficulties. Often, this does not allow for what Anthony King defines as an important premise for Postcolonial Studies: "knowledge of the local pre-colonial society, knowledge of the colonizer's society at home, and that of the colonized society."[4]

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      Smithson, Alison (1968): Team 10 Primer. Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press. – zit.n.: <http://www.transculturalmodernism.org: : Dwellers>

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      Cohen, Jean-Louis. "Architectural History and the Colonial Question: Casablanca, Algiers and Beyond." Architectural history, no. 49, 2006: 349-68. 345. <http://www.transculturalmodernism.org>

When addressing the issue of planning such (self-)criticality can also be employed to conceive of a more substantial notion of democracy within planning, particularly since *Social Sustainability* now plays such a tricky key role within planning discourse. It is again particularly within the context of postcolonial architecture, that a certain type of discourse reveals itself so clearly. To bring an example: for nearly ten years now, the university project *SARCH (Social Sustainable Architecture)* has been building "necessary communal facilities in squatter settlements in developing countries," and the homepage informs us that "European students" and the "local population" are working together on the projects. Within one semester, architecture students learn about the needs of people in "developing countries" or the architectural manifestation of the "necessary" development. (The project defines itself as "Vienna's contribution to the development goals established in the UN Millennium Declaration: eradicating poverty, encouraging sustainability and establishing universal primary education."[5] "Knowledge" of the "users'" ways of life and needs is an attitude imminent within the discipline of architecture. Even in cases where planners are more familiar with the situation and the predominant language surrounding their project, there are still translation difficulties or misconceptions concerning users and inhabitants, who are often neither listened to nor understood, despite a shared language. These situations are based on an understanding of the planning process that divides it into planners with "knowledge" and users with "needs." By contrast, within the context of democratic participation in planning, democratization consists of "democracy education" that takes place in these schools in which tools are developed for "interfering" in elitist planning practices or of the opportunity to formulate demands and debate planning and construction budgets in public forums (such as the participatory budgeting in Rio Grande do Sul and Porto Alegre)[6]. All of these are themes currently, once again, being discussed within the field of critical architecture in the "West."[7]

Is Architecture Fundamentally Undemocratic?

The above-mentioned points of critique prompt us to contemplate who commissions architecture. Which political structure makes which design possible? Why does Nehru commission Le Corbusier to plan a top-down master plan for Chandigarh, as the symbol of a new democratic

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[5]   http://sarch.twoday.net/

[6]   Leubolt, Bernhard (2006): Staat als Gemeinwesen. Das Partizipative Budget in Rio Grande do Sul und Porto Alegre. Wien: Lit Verlag.

[7]   Heindl, Gabu. „Solidarity. How do democratic spaces come into existence?" Lecture series curated for the Österreichische Gesellschaft für Architektur. (2011/2012) www.oegfa.at

India, in 1947? Because (only) Nehru wants it that way? Who invited him? Who pays for it (both figuratively and literally)? What is ordered? Who builds the walls? *Model House* doesn't answer all these questions—we do however learn, among other things, about the architect Minnette de Silva, who has thus far not been considered part of architectural history of Chandigarh,[8] about the transcultural influences or, about different actors and debates in South Asian modernity.

Back to the "face" of the *tabula rasa* planning of Chandigarh: Le Corbusier. The notion that one architect is given credit for the planning of an entire city is not only diametrically opposed to a radical understanding of democracy; it is also a far cry from any sensitivity for "collective planning." Also within postcolonial critique, the image of the "evil" planner emerges—architects who exert their power over the design in an authoritarian way. Though such cases exist, ultimately, architects never have absolute power within architecture or in urban planning. (Even "the Chandigarh Masterplan had many masters.")[9] And yet it would also be too simplistic to claim architects are "merely" part of the system, or henchmen of those who commissioned the architect in the first place. What's more: often times the commissioners are not so easily identifiable. In the reception of architecture in which power relations are obscured and the decision-making processes untransparent, planners come in handy in terms of giving a "face" to the design that is seen as exerting and representing domination. Making architects the only ones accountable for the built form affirms a concept of absolute, hierarchical authorship (as if the form-building "masters" were the only ones responsible for built environments) that also fails to address power structures, capital relations, decision processes.

The anti-colonial resistance of the *bidonvilles* dwellers, the protests against the construction of Chandigarh as well as against urban planning based on segregation form the basis for yet another chart of *Model House*: "Dwellers", which maps different forms of resistance practiced by t*he* dwellers, such as for instance self-building, rebuilding, repurposing, self-organizing. It also includes reports of mosquitoes and malaria, of cows eating the plants of Chandigarh's landscaping, of donkeys disrupting construction. It talks about how the dwellers of the North African *bidonvilles* were used by Candilis Josic Woods as living "research objects" with which to study everyday urban life, and later by CIAM X architects who observed local routines and appropriations for their

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     Hille, Moira (2012): "Minnette De Silva. A modern regionalist architect.",
<http://www.transculturalmodernism.org>

[9]

     Amir, Fahim (2012): "Dwellers and Strayers. Multispecies Criminality in Postcolonial Worlds",
<http://www.transculturalmodernism.org>

modernist plans of Casablanca (*Carrières Centrales, Cité Verticale/Horizontale, 1952*). These reports also lead to more questions: how problematic is a strategy of appeasement that continues to obscure the West's / modernity's unbroken dominance? How generalizable or resistant are local contexts? To what extent is modernity renewable and adaptable? How capable of appropriation are city districts that were planned to include appropriation processes?[10] How dominant is architecture?

Is Architecture not Fundamentally Colonizing?

Architecture is an art form that cannot be eluded,[11] as Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, a modern architect who plays an important role in the *Model House* project research on China, repeatedly pointed out.[12] In this respect architecture is dominant. Generally speaking, the architectural history of economic-political spaces is a history of power and committed social politics—especially regarding mass housing projects.[13] In a Gramscian sense, in non-dictatorial forms of government, successful architecture politics are almost automatically *hegemonic*, because they are based on a consensus that creates and affirms dominance. While architects help to appease and "pacify." However, the moment an environment is (re-)designed or "simply" re-modeled, something else is always destroyed, the space is occupied in another way, becomes "colonized."

What does colonizing mean in this context? Building settlements, creating policies to populate certain areas, land grabbing are all concepts that are still familiar parameters of action for (colonizing) city planning, even if they are not defined as such: from the violent exploitation of economically "underdeveloped" regions to global capitalism profiting from gentrification projects —"here" as well as "there." Just as forms of colonialism persist in postcolonialism, planning practices remain colonial after colonialism—though under new political circumstances. Their discourse remained Eurocentric both within and following the CIAM X architects' attempts to

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For more on the appropriation of the "appropriated" housing settlement, e.g. the *Cité Verticale*, cf Von Osten, Marion. "Architecture without architects—another anarchist approach", e- flux #6, May 2009, <http://www.e-*flux*.com>

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From a conversation with Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky

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Linortner, Christina (2012): "Bamboo and the Courtyard House. Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in China.", <http://www.transculturalmodernism.org>

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Teyssot, Georges. *Die Krankheit des Domizils. Wohnen und Wohnbau 1800-1930*. Braunschweig, 1989.

create a new sensibility—in how Michel Écochard dealt with the informal structures of *bidonvilles* as director of Casablanca's city planning office, or how, in the early twenty-first century, Rem Koolhaas and his students at Harvard, much in the vein of the CIAM X "learning from" approach. researched precarious market economies in Lagos and described them as "working" economies[14] In the film *Koolhaas HouseLife* about Rem Koolhaas famous House Bordeaux, the filmmakers describe how the camera follows the housekeeper Guadalue Acedo "and other people who look after the building". And further: "This experiment presents a new way of looking at architecture and broadens the field of its representation."[15] Here, only one of many actors who have a part in (re)producing the space is given a name and a voice—only because she is beneficial in terms of a new representation of the architecture.

Actors involved in building, rebuilding, using, and cleaning the space remain excluded from the network of representative architecture discourse. At the same time, also architects are struggling to be recognized for their efforts; while descriptions of new buildings in architecture magazines often cite the name of the photographer and the commissioner of the project, there is rarely any mention of any other names of people involved in the project. Recently, one of the largest commissioners in Austria responded to the question of why in their publications architects are not named by saying, "if we did, we would have to mention everyone's name involved in a project, even the person who lays the tiles." (This was meant as a self-explanatory argument, as in: "Nobody could possibly want that!"—so much for acknowledging multiple actors within the building sector.)

Back to the period the research in *Model House* focuses on: after decolonization, "development" discourse took the place of the notion of "occupation." Both are modernist concepts: the logical step after "occupying" a space imagined to be empty was the modernist idea of "forwards"— progressing towards modernity (paternalistically supported by modernity experts from the West). Developing, developers, development: these are all terms that are quite familiar within the architecture sector. In the architecture world, the expertocratic project development of a building far outweighs concerns of the inhabitants' use. Recently, that due to the financial crises less projects are being contracted, architects gladly take on the role of developers themselves, initiating projects themselves that are geared toward the free market. Part of such initiatives is acquiring government funding for creative or economic projects where they can engage in urban or

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      Koolhaas, Rem, Cleijne, Edgar: Lagos: How it Works. Lars Müller Publishers, 2008.

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      www.koolhaashouselife.com

architectural developments (modernization) in "developing countries." North-South or "West and the rest" relations demonstrate architecture's inherent paternalism persists to this very day. Why have such projects remained so attractive for Western architects (aside from reasons of wanderlust and exoticism)?

In What Way is Architecture's Dominance Particularly Obvious in (Post)Colonies?

Tabula rasa—the realization of the pure form of a new urban master plan—is contingent on the circumstances surrounding property for it to be a possibility at all. Modernist urban planning is contingent on receiving access to vast stretches of land. New Towns, Carpet Settlements, "Habitat for the Greatest Number"—all large-scale, mass residential construction projects are difficult to realize without an incredible amount of land available, even today.

It was not only the land conditions that made colonies "testing grounds" for Fordist mass residential construction projects or for ways to structure massive urbanization. A cheap workforce enabled these to be carried out based on Taylorist organizational structures—at least as long as access to construction workers and *dwellers* was ensured.[16] With regard to his critique that such urban planning projects are however all too quickly labeled "testing grounds", new ideas or "laboratories" for experimenting with development (in the modern linear sense), Jean-Louis Cohen notes that "evaluations" of such projects are rare.

The charge that the metaphor "laboratory" is brought into play too hastily[17] applies to architecture in general, seeing as it is one of the few disciplines that does not have its own evaluation process methods, although in reality, prototypes are the only things being built. Building large-scale habitats without previous testing and thus performing trials of residential concepts on a one-to-one scale does not require too much justification or explanation if it is "Not in My Backyard" (NIMBY). The physical distance between the Western planning centers and the colonies not only plays to the NIMBY mentality, it also maximizes the application of a "bird's eye perspective" for top-down planning or "North-South recommendations" – the outcome of which can be seen well looking down from an airplane on the way to a vacation. By paying attention to daily routines and taking

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      Farocki, Harun: *Zum Vergleich* (2009), GER/A, Film, 61 min.

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      Cohen (2006)

them as a foundation for new architecture, e.g. floor plans assigned to specific users, à la "European-style habitat" or Housing for the Arab population, it is once again clear how "identifying a target group" naturalizes and racializes an entire population—which is also reflected in discussions around social housing for migrants in the West.

Perhaps the most salient point in terms of dominant forms of urban planning is that (post)colonial planning does not encounter any obstacles through democratic circumstances. "Zones for experimentation […] were only possible because local power structures hardly left any room for democratic debate."[18] This could also be viewed as an "ideal condition" for realizing any (modernist) building project. The inevitable fact that, within a democracy, there is always the possibility that demands may be raised to participate in the project; along with the concern that some would veto the project or that opposition, objection, resistance could prevent or delay the construction often results in planning being done in secrecy, in untransparent contracting procedures and in information being provided to the public for the shortest time legally possible. By speaking of an intervention as being "technically necessary," criticism is staved off and the fact that any intervention, any planning is political, and thus contestable, is concealed.[19]

Why Continue Developing Housing for the Middle Class While There are Still Sans-Papiers?

During the financial crisis of the 1920s, architects bundled their creative energies to build minimal existence housing (*Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*), thereby proving to the market and to the modern residents that it was indeed possible to build housing on most minimal space (shown, for example, at CIAM's 1929 exhibition in Frankfurt). While this rendered the "minimal existence home" acceptable, according to architect Giancarlo de Carlo (also part of CIAM X), it did so without questioning the social circumstances that caused this "minimum."[20] Despite their sensibility towards context, climate, and lifestyle habits, also CIAM X architects working on mass housing projects "for the greatest number" within postcolonial contexts continued to plan in a

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      Cohen (2006), 356

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      Ironically, planning policy in a city with a paternalistic policy style like Vienna currently includes demands for democratic participation, at a time when the financial and budget crises don't allow for much planning let alone building.

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      De Carlo, Giancarlo [Original 1970]. "Architecture´s public." In *Architecture & Participation*. Edited by Peter Blundel Jones, Doina Petrescu, Jeremy Till. London: Taylor & Francis, 2005.

fundamentally colonizing and paternalistic manner. The fact that the minimal existence home and the housing settlements in Carrières Centrales ultimately remained unaffordable for those in need[21] and for whom they had initially been built—at least according to the planners—is not only a farce, but inherent to the system. Then and now, "social housing" means building for a middle class with civil rights. In "Fortress Europe," social housing is available for those with citizenship rights who can afford "social" housing. While it is uncertain how many, a great number of *sans papiers* are "here [in Europe], because we were there" (and still are), and yet, (star) architects are still planning and building for authoritarian regimes or private clientele on the neoliberal capitalist market. Rhetorically savvy and along deconstructivist critique, Rem Koolhaas justifies his involvement in projects in China by claiming that the CCTV headquarters in Peking (Koolhaas iconic building for Chinese state television) could serve to foster greater democratization. This interest in democracy seems contradictory when critics rave about the building, emphasizing how it successfully "dominates" the city's skyline. Speaking of dominance and urbanism: Nezar AlSayyad writes that dominance is "not exclusive to colonial cities, but [that] the use and manifestation of dominance in the colonial context is particularly blunt."[22]

Another contemporary example of the "bluntness" of White dominance up to outright cynicism, is the planning discourse surrounding New Orleans. Entire "colonial" tracts of urban land were flooded and destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, especially black neighborhoods located in stretches that were cheap to build on due to the high risk of flooding. The flood of projects initiated by architects from around the world to develop architectural solutions / answers for rebuilding the city ranged from architecture spectacles, to Brad Pitt's housing initiative *Make it Right*, to cynical "white-washing" projects. The flood areas that had previously been home to a mostly African-American population were "white-washed" by the construction of ecological parks (backed up by the argument that it was time to finally build "with nature"). What then emerged, instead of rebuilding the black neighborhoods, was a rhetoric of ecologically motivated "technically necessary" measures, which, in effect, made it impossible for many who had lost their homes to return to their neighborhoods.[23] In a critical study on the range of ideologies of the different projects, art citic Yates McKee differentiates a view critical projects as dissent-friendly, such as

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     Von Osten, Marion (2009)

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     AlSayyad, Nezar. "Urbanism and the Dominance Equation: Reflections on Colonialism and National Identity." In *Forms of Dominance. On the Architecture of Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise.* Edited by AlSayyad, Nezar *Alder*shot: Avebury. 1992.

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     McKee, Yates. *Haunted Housing: Eco-Vanguardism, Eviction, and the Biopolitics of Sustainability in New Orleans.* Grey Room 30 (Winter 2008)

Mobilizing Shame, an activist project by the Yes Men, or Laura Kurgan's *JusticeMapping*. Kurgan and her students at Columbia University had already begun mapping New Orleans before Katrina. Their "Million Dollar Maps" survey and illustrate how much (or little) budget is spent on public infrastructure per city block and set this in relation to the total amount spent on the incarceration of residents living on a given block. In the maps, by overlaying physical parameters (topography, city planning traits, volumetry, figure-ground ratios, public functions and infrastructure, etc.) with otherwise invisible data, it becomes clear that an interrelation exists between the neighborhoods' location and design and the parameters mentioned above, and that there is a direct correlation between a lack in infrastructure and an increase in incarceration—providing a starting point for thinking about "justice reinvestment." Here, cartography is the tool that enables a critical assessment. This is one current example of social engagement through architecture which, from a postcolonial (self)critical approach, demands that a just distribution of means be a fundamental part of postcolonial planning, in the sense of deconstructing existing conditions—before and after the disaster, before and after colonialism. To return to the *Model House web-based* data-map: Where parameter "North Africa" crosses parameter "Theory", we find Jean-Louis Cohen's text "Architectural History and the Colonial Question: Casablanca, Algiers and Beyond". His credo reads: "The first condition of any fruitful work in this domain [analysis of colonial territories] is mistrust vis-à-vis any political narrative, consisting of idealizations still bearing an imprint of colonialist relics, whether of the superiority of imposed models or of a natural suspicion of anti-colonialist discourse against all forms of cultural imposition."[24] Acknowledging suspicion in this way is a fruitful point of departure for numerous other (self)critical inquires; for this paper, it is a (provisional) conclusion.

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[24] Cohen (2006), 356.