

SPECIAL SECTION: PAULO FREIRE CENTENARY

The historical-social commitment of the universities: progressive incitement based on Paulo Freire's thinking¹

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the meaning of the historical-social commitment of the universities based on Paulo Freire's critical ideas and on his experience concerning adult education in the context of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Northeastern Brazil. To do so, we have used his own works, especially texts that analyze the meaning of education and its relationship with popular masses. The methodology focused on the bibliographical review of the author's texts and others that provide help to elucidate his thinking. It was noticed that the historical-social commitment for Freire is not a benevolence or donation of knowledge from the scientific academy, but a dialogical relationship that recognizes the importance of the cultures of popular groups. The experience in the Brazilian Northeast before the civil-military dictatorship, based on an extensive activity at the University of Recife/PE, brought into light significant elaborations of the involved subjects and criticism towards the world itself.

Keywords: Paulo Freire. Education. Dialogue. University.

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O compromisso histórico-social das universidades: provocações progressistas a partir do pensamento freiriano

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar o sentido do compromisso histórico-social da universidade a partir do ideário crítico de Paulo Freire e de sua experiência na educação de adultos no contexto dos finais dos anos de 1950 e início de 1960 no Nordeste brasileiro. Para tanto, recorreu-se a sua própria obra, sobretudo textos que analisam o significado da educação e sua relação com as massas populares. A metodologia centrou-se na revisão bibliográfica de textos do autor e de outros que ajudam a elucidar o pensamento de Paulo Freire. Percebeu-se que o compromisso histórico-social para Freire não é uma benevolência ou doação de saberes pela academia científica, mas uma relação dialógica que reconhece a importância das culturas dos grupos populares. A experiência no Nordeste brasileiro antes da ditadura civil-militar, com base numa atividade extensionista da Universidade do Recife/PE, apontou elaborações significativas dos(as) sujeitos envolvidos(as) e uma criticidade sobre o próprio mundo.

Palavras-chave: Paulo Freire. Educação. Diálogo. Universidade.

El compromiso histórico-social de las universidades: provocaciones progresistas a partir del pensamiento de Paulo Freire

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar el sentido del compromiso histórico-social de la universidad a partir de las ideas críticas de Paulo Freire y de su experiencia en la educación de adultos en el contexto de fines de la década de 1950 y principios de 1960 en el Nordeste de Brasil. Para ello, recurrimos a su propia obra, sobre todo a textos que analizan el significado de la educación y su relación con las masas populares. La metodología se centró en la revisión bibliográfica de textos del autor y de otros que ayudan a dilucidar su pensamiento. Se advirtió que, para Freire, el compromiso histórico-social no es una benevolencia ni una donación de saberes por parte de la academia científica, sino una relación dialógica que reconoce la importancia de las culturas de los grupos populares. La experiencia en el Nordeste brasileño antes de la dictadura cívico-militar, que se basó en una actividad de extensión en la Universidad de Recife/PE, señaló elaboraciones significativas de los(las) sujetos involucrados(as) y una criticidad sobre el propio mundo.

Palabras clave: Paulo Freire. Educación. Diálogo. Universidad.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to understand the social responsibility of the universities from Paulo Freire's theoretical framework, also considering his experience with the education of young people and adults in the context of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Brazilian Northeastern region.

We begin our reflection by alluding to the article "The Public University from a New Perspective", by the Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chaui. This text postulates that the social legitimacy of the university is directly linked to the ability to deal with new knowledge, discover and make use of new knowing and potentialities. It is a space of privilege in which, on the one hand, one can learn and socialize the knowledge and technologies already produced by human beings in history, and, on the other hand, one can produce new knowledge and know the methodology of its construction.

Moreover, Marilena Chaui still postulates that the university needs to have "society as its principle and its normative and value-based reference, which is perceived inserted in the political division [...] that allows it to respond to the contradictions imposed by this division" (CHAUI, 2003, p. 6).

In fact, the debates on the conceptual foundation, the historical-political specificities and the social role of the university require a previous reflection on the nature of the education itself, through which we can perceive with more richness the implications of professor Marilena Chaui's argument.

In colloquial use, education is repeatedly understood as a refined social behavior, that is, as a synonym of urbanity, politeness, and a certain affability, being often associated with the social and economic elite. However, what is at stake, when we reflect on the concept of education, is an irreducible question to a certain set of distinctly bourgeois behaviors and values. Education, therefore, far from such burlesque and caricature simplifications, is a complex historical, social, and cultural phenomenon.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning an important postulate of Professor Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, present in his popular text "What is education":

Education is, like others, a fraction of the way of life of social groups that create and recreate it, among many other inventions of their culture, in their society. Forms of education that produce and practice, so that they reproduce, among all who teach-and-learn, the knowledge that crosses the words of the tribe, the social codes of conduct, the rules of work, the secrets of art or religion, of craft or technology that any group of people needs to reinvent, every day, the life of the group and the life of each of its

subjects through endless exchanges with nature and among men (BRANDÃO, 2002, p. 5).

In this excerpt, Brandão (2002) affirms two fundamental aspects of education in a liberating perspective, namely: the social nature and its dynamic aspect. Education is characterized by him as part of the properly human way of life, in a dynamic and social movement of creation and recreation. As a complex socio-historical activity, education tells us of logical-systematic knowledge, of ethical-philosophical values, political postulates and also of the development of animic sensitivity, coming from cultural experiences organized and transformed continuously by the human being.

Moreover, as Freire warns us: "there is no education outside human societies, and there is no man in the void" (FREIRE, 1967, p. 43). Thus, the question for education then necessarily refers us to an investigation about the human being, his ontological status, his relationships, his historical actions, and potentialities. In the book "Education and the process of social change", Freire postulates that:

It is not possible to reflect on what education is, without reflecting on man himself. Therefore, it is necessary to make a philosophical-anthropological study. Let us start by thinking about ourselves and try to find, in the nature of man, something that can constitute the fundamental core in which the education process is sustained (FREIRE, 2014, p. 33).

Certainly, the concern for the human being is one of the most outstanding aspects of Freirian pedagogy. In this horizon, our author develops a theory of action, of effective commitment to the most unfortunate people, with women, men and children who are at the mercy of the deleterious effects of the logic of capital. This is what Freire declares in the work "Pedagogy of autonomy":

It is in this sense that I have never abandoned my first concern, which has always accompanied me since the beginnings of my educational experience. The concern for human nature, to which I owe my always proclaimed loyalty. Even before reading Marx, I made my own his words: I was already founding my radicality in the defense of legitimate human interests. No theory of the political and social transformation of the world moves me, by no means, if it doesn't come from an understanding of man and woman as beings that make history and are made by it, beings of decision, rupture, option (FREIRE, 2015b, p. 125-126).

Philosophical anthropology in Paulo Freire, in particular, is of enormous complexity. Thus, it would be pretentious to aim to exhaust it in this article. However, some of its aspects are important to understand the theoretical basis of educational (and therefore social)

commitment of the university with the historical struggle in favor of the condemned of the world, which we will see below.

THE EXERCISE OF UNIVERSITY'S DIALOGUE WITH POPULAR MASSES

In the Freirian perspective, the human being⁵ is a political being, historical and inconclusive, which is thus conscious of its own inconclusion. What are the implications of this postulate? From it, what is affirmed is the human dimension of transcendence, that is, the condition of possibility of overcoming the forms of oppression that are socially instituted. The affirmation of human historicity and inconclusion is, therefore, the denial of the naturalization of dehumanization.

In fact, the constitution of the capitalist social structure is not, therefore, the end of human history, as well as the denial of humanity of others, through neoliberal necrophilic politics, is not an irremediable historical fatality⁶. The struggle for humanization is thus always come-to-be, historical becoming, that is, a process that takes place in human history itself, and which inevitably:

[...] [a process that] goes through the rupture of the ties that are real, concrete, economic, political, social, ideological etc., which are condemning us to dehumanization. The dream is thus a requirement or a condition that has been made permanent in the history that we make and that makes and remakes us (FREIRE, 2016a, p. 137).

The formative processes of the subjects are thus understood, considering the historical specificities, the possibilities of creation and recreation of the cultural and political reality, in a continuous movement of come-to-be that denies the deterministic perceptions of history. Moreover, Freire tells us: "the world is not. The world is being" (FREIRE, 2015b, p. 75). It is therefore up to the university to develop formative actions that consider the social and political challenges of the present moment, as well as to be able to critically think about its time, in a posture of dialogical openness to the popular classes.

In the Freirian conception, the exercise of dialogue of the university with the oppressed masses should be guided by a "cultural action" and, "for this very reason, action with them"

⁵ It should be noted here that the Freirian philosophical anthropology considers so: "the concrete man, who exists only in reality also concrete, which conditions him. This is the reason why, necessarily, this discussion, taking man as its center, will continue to reality, because, without it, the man is not possible and, without him, reality is not possible" (FREIRE, 2020, p. 14).

⁶ "[...] if we bring to the last consequences the understanding of history as 'liberating fatalism', we will be dispensing the struggle, the commitment to the creation of democratic socialism, as a historical endeavor. Thus, the ethics of the fight and the beauty of the struggle will disappear" (FREIRE, 2016a, p. 71).

(FREIRE, 2016b, p. 97). Thus, the critical thinking of reality, the unveiling of estrangement and debasement is necessarily effective in the loving dialogicity that takes place in the human encounter:

Dialogue is the loving encounter of men who, mediated by the world, "pronounce" it, that is, transform it, and by transforming it, humanize it for the humanization of all. This loving encounter cannot therefore be an encounter of irreconcilable beings (FREIRE, 2020, p. 51).

However, it is important to point out that, as Moacir Gadotti warns us, the university's actions in Brazilian society have been characterized by two distinct aspects of thought, "one more welfarist and the other non-welfarist [...]" (GADOTTI, 2017, p. 2). The first one understands university action as a propagation of knowledge, which does not know popular knowledge and despises it: "it is a kind of one-way street: it only goes from the University to society. The reverse way is not considered" (GADOTTI, 2017, p. 2). In this sense, popular culture, its ways of doing, do not reach academics as legitimate knowledge in the university environment.

That's the reason why Freire problematizes certain actions called extensionists:

The term extension is in a significant relationship with transmission, delivery, donation, messianism, mechanism, cultural invasion, manipulation, etc. And all these terms involve actions that, by transforming man into almost anything else, deny him as a being that causes transformation in the world (FREIRE, 2020, p. 20).

The university's social practices, which comprise its own historical commitment to the ragamuffin people of the world, should not develop in the dirigisme, in the propagandist manipulation of cultural invasion of the universe of the oppressed person⁷. Manipulation is an instrument for the conservation of the state of estrangement, an artifice employed in bourgeois logic: "manipulation is made throughout the series of myths to which we refer. Among them, there is the following one: the model that the bourgeoisie makes itself to the masses with the possibility of their ascension" (FREIRE, 2016b, p. 227). Furthermore:

⁷ On the pedagogical actions of the university that do not deal with critically and dialogically problematizing reality, Freire (2020) warns us that: "even when – and this always occurs – a community of thinking predominantly magical is overcome by the cultural elements that invade it, it reveals its resistance to the transformation that these elements operate. The natural defense of its typical way of being-in-process is materialized in syncretic expressions. By perceiving the strange cultural elements, they modify them, subjecting them to a kind of 'purifying bath', resulting that those strange cultural elements keep something of their originality, especially in the formal aspect, and gain a new color, a new meaning that the invaded cultural landmark imposes on them" (FREIRE, 2020, p. 35).

[...] manipulation and conquest, expressions of cultural invasion and, at the same time, instruments to maintain it, are not paths of liberation. They are paths of "domestication". True humanism cannot accept them in the name of anything, as it is at the service of the concrete man. Hence, for this humanism, there is no other way than dialogicity. To be authentic it can only be dialogical. And being dialogical, for true humanism, is not to affirm itself as uncompromisedly dialogical; it is to experience dialogue. Being dialogical is not to invade, it is not to manipulate, it is not to sloganize. Being dialogical is to commit to the constant transformation of reality (FREIRE, 2020, p. 51).

The Freirian project consists of an education forged from the oppressed people's context, languages, values, and cultures. In this case, fundamentally it is required trust in the people, faith in the other person, no matter if such person is peasant, industry worker, unemployed, marginalized. Openness to the other and to the exercise of dialogue is effective as an indispensable condition for social transformation itself, thus constituting a theoretical presupposition for social actions that are made in solidarity with the cause of the oppressed class.⁸

It is therefore up to the oppressed people to free themselves from the bonds of reification, dehumanization, and estrangement. It is a historical task of the people of oppressed class to free both themselves and the oppressors. However, the idea of the liberation of oppressors does not concern the humble and naïve acceptance of the state of exploitation. In Freire, overcoming the objective conditions of exploitation implies the proper humanization of the oppressors themselves. And that is undoubtedly a historical necessity of the oppressed class.

However, how in a situation of penury and debasement can the oppressed people set themselves and the oppressors free? Two terms are fundamental to understand the issue: communion and awareness. Explicitly, Freire states that: "[...] men set themselves free in communion" (FREIRE, 2016b, p. 95). As we have already pointed out, the dialogical relationship is a fundamental imperative of the whole pedagogy of the oppressed. Freire conceives it as an indispensable requirement for the intelligibility of the cognoscent beings.

From the dialogical relationship, from praxis into communion of women and men, always mediated by the world, awareness emerges. Freire still tells us: "[...] liberation does not take place within the consciousness of men, isolated from the world, but in the praxis of men within history that, implying the consciousness-world relationship, involves the critical awareness of this relationship" (FREIRE, 2015a, p. 116)

⁸ "[...] The dialogue with the popular classes is a radical requirement of every authentic revolution. That's why it is a revolution" (FREIRE, 2016b, p. 200).

The imposition of fragmented contents and unrelated of the social and existential reality of the oppressed people is an obstacle to the creation of the conditions required to the awareness of the experienced oppression. Hence the necessity to think liberating actions from a pedagogical matrix that conceives the student as an active subject of the process, and not just a mere spectator, that is, someone whose cognitive capacity is reduced to the mechanical memorization of some pulverized aspect of reality. Thus, what is advocated are genuinely problematizing practices, because “the more students are problematized, as beings in the world and with the world, the more they will feel challenged. The more challenged, the more obliged to respond to the challenge” (FREIRE, 2016b, p. 122).

Freire leads us, therefore, in a reflection that emerges in the thesis of a problematizing, emancipatory, dialogical, and contextual education as a *sine qua non* factor for overcoming the state of estrangement and dehumanization. Therefore, the revolutionary social struggle, according to the Freirian criticism, has an eminently pedagogical character, which fundamentals are based on popular awareness, critical insertion in reality, that is, in the liberating praxis itself.

THE EXPERIENCE OF POPULAR CULTURE MOVEMENTS IN BRAZILIAN NORTHEASTERN REGION - DIALOGUES WITH THE UNIVERSITY

The experience of democratization of culture and education in some localities of Brazilian Northeastern Region, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, before the civil-military dictatorship, was a milestone in which there was both a break with a purely mechanical literacy of adult people and actions that expanded the university's dialogue with the popular masses. The Circle of Culture and the Culture Center, in which instead of the figure of the teacher there was the coordinator of debates, problematized the expositive classes model and a tradition of learning in which the passivity of the students was prevailed.

These experiences were based on people who lived in the rural area and were considered illiterate. The program of the debates was designed through previous interviews with people who both suggested themes and problems and considered the ideas postulated by the coordinators. The use of images was fundamental for a group that had difficulties in reading words. As Freire pointed out:

In fact, only with great patience is it possible to tolerate, after the hardness of a work day or a day without “work,” lessons that speak of WINGS — “Peter saw the Wing” — “The Wings is from the Bird.” Lessons that speak of Eva and grapes to men who perhaps know few Eva and have never ate

grapes. "Eva saw the grape."⁹ We thought of literacy that was in itself an act of creation, capable of triggering other creative acts. In a literacy in which man could develop impatience, vivacity, characteristic of states of search, invention and claim, just because he was neither patient nor object of this education (FREIRE, 1967, p. 104).

The students were encouraged to choose, within their own universe, the themes that most concerned them. The subjects of the debates could not be an imposition of the coordinator. This experience was derived from the collaboration of the team of the Cultural Extension Service of the University of Recife/PE, at the time directed by Freire himself and collaborators (FREIRE, 1967). It was necessary to develop in and with the students a more critical awareness. It was important, therefore, to integrate it into reality without naivety and without fanaticism to change the action in the world.

The themes thought and proposed in the interviews conducted by the University team were about citizenship so often denied to the student people involved: "Nationalism", "Remittance of profits abroad", "Political evolution of Brazil", "Development", "Illiteracy", "Illiterate Vote", "Democracy", among others enunciated in that context (FREIRE, 1967). And a fundamental meaning, as we point out, is founded on dialogue. In this regard, Freire is very emphatic:

And what is dialogue? It is a horizontal relationship of A with B. It is born from a critical matrix and generates criticality (Jaspers). It nourishes itself with love, humility, hope, faith, trust. Therefore, only dialogue communicates. And when the two poles of dialogue connect this way, with love, with hope, with faith in each other, they become critical in the search for something. A relationship of sympathy between the two is then established. Just this way there is communication (FREIRE, 1967, p. 107).

The author even proposes a pedagogy of communication to overcome anti-dialogue, that is, vertical and subaltern relations. And, to do so, it would be necessary to overcome the idea that a systematized knowledge is superior to that linked to the life of the people in question, to their work and to the value of their culture, since culture is linked to human experience and its nuances. From this perspective, it is from the universe of culture that words come to life, because they express their own identity and are tied to the existential dimension of the human being.

⁹ "Eva saw the grape". In Portuguese, "Eva viu a uva". This sentence intends to present the letter "V" and its sound. In Freire's language, these three words (Eva, viu, uva) have the letter "v" in their spelling. Freire was also concerned with using words that were as close as possible to the context of his students.

Freire (1967) distrusted the education manuals, which, he said, "intended the assembly of graphic signs as a donation and reduced the illiterate more to the condition of object than that of subject of his literacy" (p. 111). He proposed the challenge of thinking the generating words, fundamental to awaken in the student his literacy process and his awareness. To this end, the Cultural Extension Service of the University of Recife/PE, without the teaching materials formed in the isolation of a cabinet, researched in rural and urban areas generating words and thematic from people's daily lives. The vocabulary was selected according to the following criteria:

- a — that of phonemic wealth;
- b — that of phonetic difficulties (the chosen words must respond to the phonetic difficulties of the language, placed in a sequence that gradually goes from the smallest to the greatest difficulties);
- c — that of pragmatic content of the word, which implies a greater plurality of engagement of the word in a specific social, cultural, political etc. reality. (FREIRE, 1967, p. 113).

This set of criteria associated with the vocabulary universe and of interest to the population in the process of literacy proposed students that were protagonists of their own processes. In this scenario, the generating words should deal with "problem situations" involving the students. Then, they were systematized in forms that helped new scripts and the decomposition of phonemic families to form new words. Therefore, the training of educational coordinators was fundamental to not reproduce the banking education denounced by Freire; many of them were from the University itself and from the team coordinated by the researcher.

By working in a perspective of acceptance and privileging the universe of the students, Freire neither annulated the role of their interaction in the world nor the contribution of the educator. Speaking of the peasants in the rural settlements, he asserts:

We do not want, however, to say that the peasants must remain in the state they are in relation to their confrontation with the natural world and their position in the face of the political life of the country. We want to affirm that they should not be considered as empty "canisters" in which the knowledge of specialists is being deposited, but, on the contrary, subjects of the process of their training (FREIRE, 2015a, p. 46).

It was fundamental to understand the longings, desires, and knowledge that those people carried with them. An education focused on a technical service of production of the capitalist system removes the protagonist role of others and their commitment to their own formation. The cultural richness of peasants, even though they are considered formally illiterate, imposed new challenges to the coordinators of the University. Freire (2015a)

points out that “the practice has shown us [...] the importance and richness of the discourse of the students [...] either of form, or of content, which involves linguistic analysis, which, in turn, extends into ideological and political one” (p. 39). The university was invited to get off its high horse of possessor of what is considered as the most important or legitimate knowledge, in order to learn from the popular and rural masses through the coordination of a dialogical process.

For a critical formation, the political action has an essential role: “by this way it's possible easily to observe how violent the city's politics are, as a State, which prohibits, or limits, or minimizes the right of the people, restricting their citizenship, by denying education to all” (FREIRE, 2001, p. 13). The denial of politics as a space altruistic and intervention in the social reality is a mark of an unequal education and a divided country.

Freitas and Biccás (2009) point out that Freire approached the Ministry of Education and Culture during the President João Goulart's government, as well as student entities, trade unions, and the Catholic Church, which worked in popular education at that time. The Basic Education Movement (MEB) predicted, from 1963, the elaboration of materials for adults with the motto “Knowing for living and living is fighting” (FREITAS; BICCÁS, 2009, p. 243). In the following year, with the establishment of the dictatorship, the movements of education and popular culture began to be persecuted and dismantled. Paulo Freire was arrested and later went into exile.

The National Literacy Plan that was previously in the Freirian perspective was extinguished and the MEB gave way to the Brazilian Literacy Movement (Mobral). According to Freitas and Biccás (2009):

Mobral's ideological commitments can be perceived both in methodological guidelines and in the didactic materials that were produced, distorting and emptying the density of procedures that admittedly underpinned educational experiences prepared to young people and adults in the 1960s. It is evident the absence of any possibility of problematizing and questioning reality. Education was designed as a simple adaptation and preparation of subjects based on the promise to insert everyone in the demands of the national project that was in progress, a development project without the obstacles of social tensions (p. 259-260).

It was a conforming education that was projected at that time and that did not allow to question social inequalities. The Mobral program did not provide to the monitors a specific training that had a relationship with the university, and it previously brought generating words too, but without considering the demands of the students. During the civil-military dictatorship, movements considered clandestine tried to continue the path of popular

education, even though they were persecuted. Then Freire, who was exiled, continued to write and disseminate the works developed in Brazil before the authoritarian period, through which a huge number of people had become literate. Mobral was unsuccessful, but lasted until 1985, after the long and tortuous period of civil-military dictatorship (FREITAS; BICCAS, 2009).

The university, during this period, suffered attacks intended to silence it. Even today, in some cases, it is reproduced a critical abyss in training, and as professor Roberto Romano explains, the main collective target as a university is “the success of our students in the world of work. This makes us forget that we are supported by the tax of the common citizen” (ROMANO, 2009, p. 4).

The university has a historical-social commitment and needs to emphasize the political-dialogical dimension of education:

Educating and educating one another, in the practice of freedom is the task of those who know that they know just a little bit – that's why they know that they know something and can thus learn more - in dialogue with those who almost always think that they know nothing, for them, transforming their thinking that they know nothing in knowing that they know little, they can also know more (FREIRE, 2020, p. 25).

Freire, therefore, calls on the university to recognize that the valorization of the community and those involved in it is a basic premise in the exchange and learning of knowledge in a reciprocal way, thus recognizing that there is no absolute knowledge, nor even absolute ignorance.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We highlight that the political character of education, to which we directly or indirectly allude here, is one of the most important postulates to the liberating education. In fact, the political dimension, intrinsic to education, is a direct reflection of the citizenship project developed by the State itself.

Brazilian universities aim at the professional training of students and integration with the reality of society, with the proposition of new paths to social transformation. Especially public universities need to be able to repay the investments that society applies in them, returning to the community research, studies, extension projects that significantly reflect the reality and needs of the population.

In this sense, the university is responsible for making its historical commitment to the construction of knowledge in a horizontal perspective and intense dialogue with the popular masses, especially with those who, for historical-political reasons, were prevented from having access to the scientific academy, but who also constitute beings of praxis and, therefore, culture makers and knowledge producers. It is necessary, therefore, that the academy overcomes the temptation of pride to consider itself superior to the so-called unlearned, the temptation of closing in on itself, in a kind of "ivory tower", admiring itself narcissistically, boasting of the beauty of its own image of wisdom.

Paulo Freire, based on the experiences of adult literacy, highlights the role of the university as a partner of the popular masses. He problematizes the meaning of extension as social or charitable "benevolence" and presents a pioneering project that led many, before being silenced, to understand, criticize and express the world itself through reading and writing. Finally, we highlight the necessary overcoming of the capitalist perception of knowledge as personal capital for social valorization, able to distinguish certain human groups as superior to others.

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