

Postnationalism, Globalization and the “Post-Mexican Condition” in Roger Bartra

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Abstract

This article discusses the concepts of postnationalism and the “post Mexican condition” in Roger Bartra’s deconstruction of homogeneity in Mexican identity and nationalism. Bartra is a well known Mexican sociologist and anthropologist who bases his analyses of Mexican society on postmodern theory. His criticism of Mexican intellectuals and their invention of Mexican identity has made him an important figure in cultural studies. In his discussions of ethnicity, Bartra is critical of attempts to assimilate indigenous communities into a national culture, and is also skeptical of the segregation of indigenous communities based on an equivocal notion of multiculturalism following U.S. models. He cites the Zapatista uprising as an example of the decline of nationalist politics and identity.

This article also examines Bartra’s position regarding Mexico’s transition to democracy, in particular his notion of civil society’s role in political legitimation and his opposition to any populist or nationalist movements. His belief that Mexican society has entered a postnational condition, his postmodern disenchantment, and his distrust of nationalist and populist traditions in Mexico, have shaped his view of the ongoing crises of legitimation. This article compares Bartra’s views to two other prominent intellectuals in Mexico: Néstor García Canclini and Carlos Monsiváis. This paper concludes that Bartra’s postmodernist standpoint has limited his ability to recognize the negative impacts of globalization and the transnationalization of culture, as well as the rise of the neoliberal state, on Mexico’s democratic transition.

Introduction

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson stresses the importance of journeys, or colonial pilgrimages, in the transformation from the colonial state to the nation state (1991, 114-115). A similar process continues to this day with the transformation of what David Harvey calls the “neoliberal state” (2005). In the case of Mexico, one has to ask to what degree of relevance is the fact that 4 of the last 5 Mexican presidents did postgraduate studies in American universities known for their neoliberal credentials: Harvard, Yale, and MIT. The exception, Vicente Fox, was CEO of Coca-Cola in Mexico. This clearly suggests the possibility of class, institutional and ideological allegiances. I bring this up because it is one of the blind spots in Roger Bartra’s depiction of what he calls “the post-Mexican condition.” I also bring it up to contextualize and distinguish the experiences of this neoliberal political elite and that of the cultural intellectual I discuss in this paper.

Roger Bartra is a sociologist and anthropologist known for his deconstruction of Mexican identity and nationalism, and his postmodernist reading of the present conditions in Mexico. He did postdoctoral research in France during the 70s, and was a student of French poststructuralism. Furthermore, that Bartra chose France for study is significant in part because for Spanish American artists and intellectuals France has often been the alternative metropolis for those wishing to avoid Spain or the United States, especially for that generation that identified with the democratic upsurges and left wing movements of the Sixties. Bartra, however, associates his time in France with a certain disenchantment with respect to the metanarratives of the vanguard, modernity and the emancipation project of the enlightenment (1992b, vii-x, 223-234). Though he borrows the notion of postnationalism from Jürgen Habermas, Bartra distances himself from Habermas's hope in the universal spirit of the Enlightenment and modernity, leaning more toward Jean Francois Lyotard's conception of the postmodern condition. He believes that nationalism and modernity are "mortally wounded" and that we have no other recourse than to engage "the postmodernity of a fragmented western world to which we belong." For Bartra, the task implies the construction of a postnational identity based in the pluricultural and democratic forms of civic life (1993, 97). His position is one of enthusiastic resignation with respect to postmodernism, which in my view will later reinforce his resignation with respect to neoliberalism due in large part to his failure to take sufficiently into account the negative effects of the transnational forces that have changed Mexico in the last decades.

Postnational Identity and "The Post-Mexican Condition"

To understand the idea of the “post-Mexican condition,” one should begin with Bartra’s deconstruction of homogeneity in Mexican national identity. Since the appearance in 1987 of Bartra’s *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character*, and in later publications such as *Blood, Ink, and Culture: Miseries and Splendors of the Post-Mexican Condition*, he has argued that Mexican nationalism began to suffer a crisis of legitimacy in the late 1960s, and that since the 1980s Mexico is in transition to a postnational condition. Bartra coincides with a number of prominent Latin American intellectuals regarding the demise of what he calls “revolutionary nationalism,” the nationalist ideology that legitimized the government of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (or PRI) which dominated Mexican politics from the 1930s to the year 2000 when it lost those elections to the conservative National Action Party (the PAN). Nestor García Canclini, writing about Latin America in general, argues that the transnationalization of economy and culture has made the notion of national identity somewhat unrealistic as a mode of legitimation: “National identity has been eroded by the economic and communicational flows, the displacement of immigrants, exiles and tourists, as well as the multinational financial exchanges and the repertoires of images and information distributed to the entire planet by newspapers and magazines, television networks.” I compare Bartra to García Canclini, and later to Carlos Monsiváis, for what one finds in their analyses of globalization, in my view, fills the lacunas in Bartra’s analysis. García Canclini also affirms that nationalist impulses in culture have ceased to be convincing, and that “the current situation is characterized by a general crisis of the models of autonomous modernization, the general weakening of nation states and the even of the very idea of the nation, and by the exhaustion of vanguard and populist alternatives”(2002, 38-39). Bartra’s genealogical critique of Mexican nationalism and his notion

of the “post-Mexican condition” are, however, more insular and specific to Mexico than the analyses and vision that García Canclini elaborates.

In the beginning of Bartra’s *The Cage of Melancholy*, he traces a direct relationship between nationalism and the legitimation processes used by the modern state. And while Bartra traces many of the stereotypes of “Mexicanness” to traditional or classical western concepts dating back as far as the middle ages, he also outlines its decline and exhaustion in the twentieth century. I am interested in his concept of “the post-Mexican condition” in part because it coincides with transnational processes that have changed Mexican society, and yet for Bartra revolutionary nationalism’s failure is largely an internal affair.

In Bartra’s deconstruction of the stereotypes that Mexican nationalist discourse propagated and imposed on popular culture, he examines the ideas of intellectuals engaged in the search for Mexican identity. These intellectuals distorted popular culture as part of the legitimation process. In a dialectical inversion, the ideas and stereotypes they invented seeped back into and thus modified popular culture. He identifies at least three main stereotypes in the nationalist discourse: the stooping peasant, the violent revolutionary, and the *pelado*, or disenfranchised peasant turned proletarian. Bartra shows that the stereotype of the Mexican peasant is based on a myth that permeates western thought: the idea of a lost paradise. Bartra argues that peasants cast a long shadow of nostalgia and melancholy over modern society, and that modern culture constructs this image of a paradise lost in the peasant, as a reaction to its own contradictions: capitalist industrial society searches incessantly for a mythical level at which primitive innocence and the original order were supposedly lost. Moreover, when this myth develops in peripheral, underdeveloped societies, it often takes on peculiar forms.

For Bartra, Mexican nationality in the wake of the violence of the Mexican revolution is deeply informed by this myth: the intellectuals of the postrevolutionary era, from Samuel Ramos to Octavio Paz, believed Mexicans to be somewhat like avatars whose tragic relationship with the modern age obliges them to reproduce their primitivism permanently. The Mexican for these intellectuals is an “extremely sensitive, timorous, suspicious, susceptible being.” He is stuck in the past, but pushed toward a barbaric future of capitalist exploitation, for this past must be destroyed for progress. And it is in this sense that the image of the Mexican peasant parallels a western archetype: the melancholic other (Bartra 1992a, 17-21).¹

The construction of an ethnicity has, nevertheless, been an integral development in Mexican revolutionary nationalism: this is the idea of mixture, of *mestizaje*. Eric Hobsbawm wrote that ethnic difference has played a relatively small role in the genesis of modern nationalism, and he refers specifically to Latin American indigenes as having little role (Hobsbawm 1991, 66-7). Even with respect to the Zapatista uprising and the movement that lead to Evo Morales’s election in Bolivia, these articulate themselves around ethnic differences only partially; the movements respond to an international context that includes class conflict and the struggles of local communities against foreign multinational corporations. In his discussion of the role of ethnicity in Mexican nationalism, Bartra has argued that the image of the mestizo is largely a western construct. In the first half of the twentieth century Mexican intellectuals created a formidable myth in which Mexicans carry the Indian, the barbarian, the savage, or the child like homunculus within them. But according to Bartra this stereotypical homunculus is stunted like “a proletarian child without toys” immersed in the adult life of jobs and objectives inadequate for his rate of growth. This leads to the tragedy of the Indian peasant, who is obliged

¹ Bartra also has dedicated a number of books related to this topic of the melancholic other: *El salvaje en el espejo*, 1992; *The Artificial Savage : Modern Myths of the Wild Man*, 1997; *Cultura y melancolía : Las enfermedades del alma en la España del siglo de oro*, 2001.

to become a proletarian prematurely, and is “the source of the ‘inferiority’ in the primitive soul of the Mexicans” (Bartra 1992a, 77).

This was the myth at about mid-century, an image that has been severely undermined, but that can still be detected in popular culture and film. In Mexico, moreover, *mestizaje* is presented not only as the union of races and cultures, of Indians and Europeans, but also as the blending of the rural world and the industrial world, of development and underdevelopment. Bartra also points out that however much he criticizes it, “*mestizaje* as a social ideal is vastly more democratic than the model that governs ethnic and racial differences in the United States. In a multicultural society like the United States, the absence of any notion of mixture is a consequence of the widespread racism and exaggerated Anglo-centrism characteristic of the hegemonic culture.” Furthermore, Bartra is critical of attempts to assimilate indigenous communities into a national culture, and is skeptical of the segregation of indigenous communities based on an equivocal notion of multiculturalism following U.S. models. In *La sangre y la tinta* he considers the Zapatista uprising to be an indigenous uprising that shook the foundations of national identity, and that shattered the culture of *mestizaje* as the mediating solution for conflict. According to Bartra, this culture of duality in Mexico has come to an end: the theater of the institutional revolutionary or the semi-oriental mestizo has gone bankrupt (Bartra 1999, 20-21).

Democracy, Civil Society, and the Neoliberal State in Mexico

In Bartra’s scheme, Mexican political culture is passing through the traumatic but unavoidable entrance into the world of Western democracy. In a certain way the conquest, the war for independence, and the revolution had already integrated the country into Western

culture. For Bartra this integration into western culture produced a revolutionary nationalism that attempted to exalt Mexican culture but instead led it into an implicit acceptance of its semi-Western condition, stained by artificial mixtures, doublings, and twists. With the indigenous uprising of 1994, however, “The Indians have shown up to give the cocky technocrats who were piloting the ship of Mexican authoritarianism a lesson in modernity (and even in postmodernity). They have placed national identity and the legitimacy of the political system in doubt” (Bartra 2003, 21-22).

Bartra further explains that the indigenous/Zapatista uprising demonstrated to civil society that the myth of Mexicanness that helped to legitimate the postrevolutionary government was set up in a way hardly consistent with the Western capitalist development characteristic of the century’s end. The myth had been effective at legitimating the PRI’s power but “ineffective at legitimating the rationality of factories and NAFTA.” In other words, for Bartra the problem with Mexican nationalism is that it creates a political culture that no longer corresponds to the needs for expansion with the system of exploitation, which is capitalism (Bartra 2003, 21-22). In his review essay on the Spanish edition of *Blood, Ink, and Culture* [*La sangre y la tinta*], Francisco Javier López Castro points out a number of lacunas in Bartra’s analysis of the conflicts in Chiapas; namely the role of the church, of Central American guerilla movements, the reform of Article 27 of the constitution and NAFTA. Indeed the review author goes to great pains to tie together the “loose ends” and fill in information that Bartra leaves out of his analysis, mostly having to do with the international context of the conflict between modernity and postmodernity. He attributes this lack to “intellectual fatigue,” and the assumption that the lacunas are given that Bartra assumes the reader knows, as opposed to any ignorance on Bartra’s part (López Castro, 2000). For me, such lacunas are symptomatic of a larger problem: namely Bartra’s

postmodern resignation to neoliberal globalization, which he at times confuses with democratization.

In his introduction to *Anatomía del mexicano*, Bartra sees the defeat of authoritarianism in Mexico as a product of a long and complex process of democratic transition. He distinguishes two cycles: The short cycle begins with the political crisis of 1988, which extends to 1994 and culminates with the elections of 2000. The long cycle begins in 1968 and is the ongoing and slow growth of a new political culture. The long cycle implies a cultural crisis in the nationalist mediations of legitimacy; in its place new forms of legitimacy are developing that he associates with the postnational, postmodern condition. Faced with the crisis of nationalism the PRI government chose to push forward NAFTA and globalization, and later faced with a lack of credibility, the PRI implemented political reforms that installed an autonomous and trustworthy electoral system (Bartra 2002, 16). My problem with this argument is that the PRI had already taken a neoliberal turn with the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid in 1982, and was faced with an ever deepening economic crisis in the early eighties. No doubt the populist government of José López-Portillo had contributed to the crisis, but this cannot be understood without considering the context of the international debt crisis.² Bartra does not take into account the articulation of democratic transition with the rise of the neoliberal state, which is a fundamental part of Mexico's current political and economic woes. The repressive and authoritarian government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, widely believed to have come to power through fraudulent elections, reaffirmed the neoliberal reforms that were already underway in the 1980s, and this has led to ongoing cycles of economic instability and deepening poverty.

² For a concise analysis of process and consequences the neoliberal reforms in Mexico during the eighties and nineties, and the collaboration of the De la Madrid and Salinas governments with international trade institutions, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 98-104; Alan Knight, "Empire, Hegemony and Globalization in the Americas," 8-12; Guillermo Correa, "La miseria en el campo, peor que en el porfiriato," 11-13.

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The waves of democratization in Latin America during the last three decades have coincided with the rise of neoliberal states in the form of, in some cases, strong authoritarian states in transition, such as the Pinochet regime and the democratic government that followed, Central American governments with residual authoritarianism mixed with formal democracy, but also more unstable democratic governments as in Columbia and Venezuela before the election of Hugo Chavez. Within a global context, there is not a unified model for the neoliberal state. Harvey points to two contradictions and difficulties in defining the neoliberal state: the reality that such states have “systematic divergences from the template of neoliberal theory,” and that the evolutionary dynamics of neoliberalization have been such as to force adaptations that vary greatly from place to place as well as over time. Nevertheless, the neoliberal state, in all its variation, tends to restore class power to capitalist elites. Such states will intervene in economy to create ‘good business or investment climates,’ and will usually privilege the idea “a good business climate” as opposed to either the collective rights (and quality of life) of labor and the capacity of the environment to regenerate itself. Furthermore, the neoliberal state will generally sacrifice the well being of the population or the environment during crises and conflicts in the name of preserving the integrity of financial institutions. Implied in this is the idea of a strong, potentially authoritarian state. Harvey also discusses the well known strategies of intervention by both states and financial institutions: privatization, austerity measures, unbalanced trade, the linking of debt relief to neoliberal reforms, but also state intervention that liberates class power from reliance on the state, at the same time that it reorients state power along neoliberal lines (Harvey 2005, 70-78).

In Bartra’s discussion of democratization, he rarely addresses the influence of neoliberal policies in relation to the changes he perceives in the mediations of legitimization. For Bartra,

the relegitimization of the Mexican nation-state requires the creation of a new culture of civil democracy. He argues that state power does not become legitimate solely through executive efficiency, a representative parliament and a vigilant justice system, but rather legitimacy comes primarily from cultural, educational, moral and communicational processes that form networks of communication that do not respect traditional borders, nor the three powers of government. Such networks of citizen empowerment in civil society are described as heterogeneous transnational, global and postnational cultural networks: mass media, internet, schools and universities, publishing houses, ethnic, religious and gender groups, nongovernmental organizations, etc. (Bartra 2002, 17; 1993, 135).

García Canclini, however, is more careful to point out the disadvantages of European and North American dominance in publishing and media, and the problem of the suffocation of national media, markets and industry. He also affirms the role of the state for the public well-being, which is also an important source of political legitimacy. Like Bartra, García Canclini also points to transnationalization of culture as a potentially positive development, but is much more skeptical and rigorous in his recognition of the very powerful and negative impacts of transnational economic and financial institutions and the neoliberal policies that have been imposed on developing countries (2002, 51-68).

Bartra downplays the negative impact of neoliberal economic policies and the potential negative consequences of globalization; the greatest threats for him are not globalized markets and the transnational circulation of commodities. He is more concerned about the dangers of local reactions to globalization: the strengthening of local powers that recuperate traditional, provincial cultures that are conservative in nature - the mixture of retrograde Catholicism, allied

with wealth, and the culture of the drug trade. He points out that such customs can lead to local legislation that is discriminatory and authoritarian (Bartra 2002, 17).

Moreover, his rejection of “globalphobe” attitudes in left wing Mexican criticism of neoliberalism derives from his skepticism regarding anti-imperialism in earlier writings: “Faced with these changes, the old left still has conservative reactions and adopts ‘globalphobic’ attitudes, instead of analyzing critically the process in order to discover those facets whose impulse can bring about a general improvement in the conditions and quality of life.” He also criticizes the left for placing too much emphasis on warning against privatization and dependence on “global networks,” and for not recognizing the importance of encouraging democratic regional autonomy and combating bureaucratic, corporate and drug trafficking forms of corruption (Bartra 2002, 18; 1993, 135-36). While this may seem like a class neutral analysis, in an “age of pillage,” to borrow Carlos Monsiváis’s recent characterization of general conditions in Mexico, such statements from Bartra are clearly designed to undermine the criticism of globalization in favor of the more positive light with which he portrays it. Bartra’s position with respect to capitalism and democracy is somewhat ambiguous and contradictory. While in *La sangre y la tinta* he states that the capitalist market tends to annihilate the plurality that is indispensable for change and creativity,³ his emphasis on cultural matters leads him to diminish the importance of the crisis of poverty. For Carlos Monsiváis, “Inequality, which is the most significant and defining characteristic of life in Mexico, is no longer tolerable to those who suffer under its consequences. Hopelessness and desperation are a part of daily life in Oaxaca. Violence in towns and villages is relentless and the criminal insolence of businessmen, the PRI government and the Fox Administration is beyond any measure and more than justifies the rage

³ Roger Bartra, *La sangre y la tinta* 1999, 47. The English edition *Blood, Ink and Culture*, does not include all of the essays published in *La sangre y la tinta*, but it does include earlier selections from *Oficio mexicano* and *La democracia ausente: el pasado de una ilusión*, (Mexico City: Océano, 1986).

it has engendered. What we see on the ground is an unarmed and bold popular insurgency that is expressing its generalized rejection of the current situation and of the neoliberal policies that have brought it to a head” (Monsiváis 2007, 6-11). In his defense of democracy, Bartra differs from Monsiváis in the following way: he opposes any position from the left that smacks of populism, nationalism or anti-imperialism, regardless of the current historical context. His rejection of revolutionary nationalism and populism is so strong and so calcified that it taints his analysis of current populist mobilizations against neoliberal globalization and its effects.

Bartra definitely belongs to that generation of postmodernists who view “new movements,” that is non-traditional, non-worker oriented political movements in civil society, as the only legitimate source of oppositional politics. Clearly grassroots and non-governmental organizations have proliferated under neoliberalism, contributing to the general opening of democratization. However, according to Harvey, “the effect of such movements has been to shift the terrain of political organizations away from traditional political parties and labor organizing into a less focused political dynamic of social action across the whole spectrum of civil society.” But what these movements gain in terms of direct relevance to particular issues, they lose in terms of focus and organization on a mass scale. Harvey concludes that such movements “often find it hard to extract themselves from the local and the particular to understand the macro-politics of what neoliberal accumulation by dispossession and its relation to the restoration of class power was and is all about” (2005, 200). Bartra’s utopian desire for a political culture and a civil society that preclude any nationalist, populist or worker based impulse ultimately leads him to defend the same political forces that prohibit the resurgence of popular social democracy in Mexico.

Conclusion: Populism, Nationalism and the Elections of 2006

In response to the presidential elections of 2006, Bartra has harshly attacked the campaign of the left candidate in Mexico, who contested the results of a very close election. Through a critique of Andrés Manuel López-Obrador, the candidate of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (or PRD), an offshoot of the PRI, Bartra concludes that the left in Mexico is suffering a process of demodernization, that it has regressed to a form of populist conservatism that attempts to recover the PRI's revolutionary nationalism. (This echoes the critiques of the left he made during the 1980s, his position has not changed.) He was particularly incensed that López-Obrador has threatened the legitimacy of the democratic transition by questioning the transparency of the elections (Bartra 2006).

For Bartra, in the postnational condition the erosion of nationalism is not an invitation for the resurgence of a new nationalism, but rather is the sign of a new era in which “the foundations of governance will not be found in the exaltation of national values” (2002, 18). His reaction to the elections of 2006, and the at times nationalist and populist rhetoric of the left, in my view, has been extreme, though many of his criticisms of the PRD candidate are valid and have even been echoed in the left wing press. Nevertheless, no one should be surprised by a resurgence of nationalist sentiment in response to the continued devastation and pillage resulting from neoliberal policies, in my view an important factor in the ongoing legitimization crisis in Mexico.

The populist opposition to the class warfare waged against Mexico's poor is a natural response, and in this regard Bartra's analysis is imbalanced. “Populism” in Mexico has a vastly negative association with the previous authoritarianism and clientalism, or the buying votes practiced by the PRI. I believe that Bartra too easily equates the current populist rhetoric on the left with the revolutionary nationalism he had deconstructed. In “Fango sobre la democracia”

[The Mud on Democracy], Bartra paints the image of López-Obrador, the mayor of Mexico City, as an urban, populist *cacique*, or Boss, who “wove together his political force within a preexisting structure of mediation that had been the traditional base of the PRI. This is a dense clientalist network of more or less informal organizations linked to neighborhoods, political gangs linked to marginal sectors, groups of shopkeepers, taxi drivers, bus drivers and street vendors. A fabric that includes the investment agencies that distribute aid to the elderly and handicapped, the legalization of the take over of land, construction and supply companies, unions and small pressure groups” (2006, 17). That a political campaign or movement has a functional and preexisting social network at the community level is nothing new. Moreover, the attempt by Bartra to paint the network as corrupt, though it may be so, is laden with what appears to be a class bias; none of the examples mentioned reflect upper middle class, professional or highly educated sectors. It is curious, however, that Bartra never discusses the populism on the right, nor does he question the PAN’s use of political tactics that the PRI had used to remain in power: Bartra was critical of the PRI’s use of fear to ensure its legitimacy, the PRI presented itself as the only party that could contain the Revolution (1993, 137), but he has been curiously silent with respect to the intense media campaign to paint López-Obrador as a fascist, or populist of the likes of Hugo Chavez. Indeed, the same magazine that published his article against López-Obrador, *Letras Libres*, a year earlier published an article by Sergio Sarmiento that depicted López-Obrador as a moderate social democrat (2005, 42).⁴

Alan Knight, who considers populism to be more of a political style than an ideology, and therefore advocates a looser model that views populist movements and leaders in dynamic terms, pointed out that although under the neoliberal government of Salinas de Gortari, populism

⁴ See also Jorge Volpi, “Carta abierta a AMLO,” and Carlos Monsiváis’s criticism of Mexican intellectuals’ role in the 2006 elections in “We are living in a Time of Pillage,” 10-11.

became a dirty word, Salinas, like other neoliberals, “had his populist side,” which was arbitrary and personalist in nature. Knight also points out that Vicente Fox of the PAN during his presidential candidacy in 2000 also adopted populist positions (1998, 244-248). Following Ernesto Laclau’s discussion of the term, populism is a symptom of social division and puts into question an institutional order; it articulates the position of an underdog, and an agent that is an *other* to that order (2004, 113-14). Bartra’s error is to conflate the current populism with a previous official nationalism, for the current left populism is a reaction to the neoliberal order. In the context of Mexican politics over the last decade, the PAN is the true heir to the later PRI, which was ruled by a neoliberal technocratic elite.

In conclusion, I suspect that Bartra is caught up in a postmodern theoretical straightjacket, a calcified discourse that limits his ability to consider the negative impact of globalization on Mexico’s democratic transition. His view of the transition is overly simplistic, at time utopian; the political and economic crises of the last two decades are not simply the result of a failed nationalism, as he often suggests. Rather, these crises are indicators of the transnational forces that have modified the regulatory and governing functions of the Mexican nation-state, and have radically reconfigured the relationship between the state and civil society in such a way that the dichotomies of nationalist populism vrs. democracy, state vrs. civil society are insufficient to describe the conjuncture of democratization and the formation of the neoliberal state.

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