

Reflection Article/Essay

# State and civil society in Gramsci: notes to discuss the institutionalization of social demands in capitalism and the social dimension of occupational therapy

*Estado e sociedade civil em Gramsci: notas para discutir a institucionalização das demandas sociais no capitalismo e a dimensão social da terapia ocupacional*

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this essay was to debate the Gramscian conception of the state and civil society, in an attempt to raise theoretical elements to discuss occupational therapy in the process of institutionalizing social demands in the context of a capitalist society. For that, we resorted to texts by authors who have been dedicating to the study of Gramsci's work, which allowed a critical analysis and the perception of the peculiarity of the conception of State by this author, through the incorporation of civil society and the general determinations of his theory. In this context, it was possible to make notes on the social dimension of occupational therapy, as a profession that emerges from and for the capitalist society, with the social function of responding to the social demands from people and groups that find limitations in participating in life in society, many of them arising from the contradictions inherent from this society. We reinforce the need for ethical and political commitment of occupational therapy professionals to the collective interests of the subordinate classes, which is the main demand of professional work.

**Keywords:** Civil Society, Capitalism, Occupational Therapy.

## **Resumo**

O objetivo deste ensaio foi trazer ao debate a concepção gramsciana de Estado e sociedade civil na tentativa de elencar elementos teóricos para discutir a terapia

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ocupacional no processo de institucionalização das demandas sociais no contexto de uma sociedade capitalista. Para tanto, recorreu-se a textos de autores que têm se dedicado ao estudo da obra de Gramsci, os quais possibilitaram uma análise crítica e a percepção da peculiaridade da concepção de Estado neste autor, pela incorporação da sociedade civil, e as determinações gerais da sua teoria. Nesse contexto, foi possível fazer apontamentos sobre a dimensão social da terapia ocupacional, como profissão que surge na e para a sociedade capitalista, com a função social de responder às demandas sociais de pessoas e grupos que encontram limitações para participar da vida em sociedade, muitas delas decorrentes das contradições próprias dessa sociedade. Reforça-se a necessidade do compromisso ético-político da profissão com os interesses coletivos das classes subalternas, principais demandantes do trabalho profissional.

**Palavras-chave:** Sociedade Civil, Capitalismo, Terapia Ocupacional.

## Introduction

Today, with a scenario of the political rise of the extreme right in Brazil, there are severe threats to the constitutional guarantees of 1988, which represented a historic milestone in the institutionalization of a wide range of social demands, from the political struggles that tensioned the Brazilian State in the context crisis of the dictatorial regime and enabling to re-democratize the country in the 1980s. Since then, civil society and its apparatus have gained greater freedom of action and claim before the State, especially in issues such as social control over public policies, third sector, non-governmental organizations, social movements, and their relationship with the State and public administration.

Therefore, recognizing the decisive role of the social and political organizations of civil society in the State apparatus, in different historical moments, for the institutionalization or not of the demands placed on the political scene by the subordinate classes and their transformation into social rights, there is the need to revisit theoretically the State and civil society categories for a better understanding of the topic under discussion and to propose reflections on the social dimension of occupational therapy. Due to the diversity of possible theoretical perspectives for the analysis of these categories, we address the one developed by the Italian intellectual and militant, Antonio Gramsci, considering the originality of his formulations and the influence that his thought has on Brazilian occupational therapy, especially from the 1980s.

At first, we will seek to briefly summarize the main elements that shape the concept of State and civil society within Gramscian theory, and then discuss the institutionalization of social demands in the context of capitalism and the social dimension of occupational therapy, as a profession whose action falls mainly in the State's field of action, via social policies, being inserted to work on the implementation, execution, and recognition of the population's needs (Bezerra & Trindade, 2013; Lopes, 2016; Malfitano, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2019).

We did not intend, nor would it be possible, to exhaust the topic under discussion with this text and to disregard the contribution of other occupational therapists who

sought to think the profession based on Gramsci's ideas. The proposal is to bring more elements to the theoretical debate within the profession.

## **The Conception of the State and Civil Society in Gramsci**

Initially, we need to understand the context in which Gramsci formulates his ideas and why he focuses on both the political and cultural spheres. Born in Sardinia, Italy, on January 22, 1891, Antonio Gramsci studied in Turin, where he joined the Italian Socialist Party in 1913 and participated in the founding of the Italian Communist Party (ICP) in 1921, which was an integral part of Communist International, the so-called III International. During the fascist regime in Italy, he was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in prison, where he produced, under very adverse conditions, his work of maturity, materialized in 33 school-style notebooks, which were rescued from the fascist prison by Palmiro Togliatti, CIP secretary, with the help of Tatiana Schucht, Gramsci's sister-in-law, and later published as *Cadernos do Cárcere*. After falling ill in prison, Gramsci died on April 27, 1937, of a cerebral hemorrhage (Sader, 2005).

In this scenario, Gramsci experienced a peculiar historical situation about the crisis of the liberal state and the hegemony of the capitalist system. He lived in a time when the state phenomenon became more complex due to the intensification of the processes of socialization and political participation, the formation of unions, the mass parties, and the conquest of universal suffrage. Therefore, in this context of complexification of the relationship between the State and society in his time, he elaborated his concept of Integral State, or, as it became known later, “Extended State”, after the publication of Christinne Buci-Glucksmann's seminal work called *Gramsci and the State*, originally published in French in 1975 and Portuguese in 1980 (Buci-Glucksmann, 1980).

In *Cadernos do Cárcere*, Gramsci highlighted that the relationship between the State and civil society has an organic character, that is, the State is integral because it maintains inseparable relationships with the apparatus and organizations of civil society, so that separation between the two can only be purely methodological. Therefore, the state and civil society are in a relationship of unity and distinction (Bianchi, 2008, p. 183). In this sense, both have apparatus that define and distinguish them; however, their relationships are organically the basis of state power. Gramsci took note of this fact when he stated in *Notebook 4* that:

[...] there is unconscious speculation [...] about the distinction between political society and civil society and it is stated that economic activity belongs to civil society and that political society should not intervene in its regulation. But in reality, this distinction is purely methodological, but not organic (Gramsci apud Liguori, 2007, p. 16).

In this sense, Correia (2005, p. 9) states that Gramsci's thought has the perspective of totality as an axis of analysis of the real, “[...] in which it subverts the principles of economic determinism, politicism, individualism, and ideologism [...]”, and establishes a dialectical connection between the structure and superstructure, conceiving reality like Marx, as a synthesis of multiple determinations.

For Semeraro (2011, p. 473), in Gramsci “[...] it is not possible to separate the State and civil society, nor to identify both [...]”, because, although they are different, both are closely linked in the same way that “[...] political society and civil society are constituent and inseparable components of the State”. Political society would be established by the arena of political institutions and constitutional legal control that includes the State's coercion and repression apparatus (army, police, public administration, courts), that is, it would be formed by the set of mechanisms in which the ruling class has a legal monopoly on repression and violence. On the other hand, civil society corresponds to a “private” or “non-state” sphere, constituted by the group of organizations responsible for the elaboration and/or dissemination of ideologies, comprising schools, churches, political parties, unions, professional organizations, the media, etc. Therefore, within the scope of civil society, consciences would be formed around the acceptance or not of the current order.

In this sense, the private apparatuses of hegemony are an important conceptual instrument for understanding the relationship between civil society and the State. Through these apparatuses, the classes disseminate their worldview and form a consensus around it (Liguori, 2007), a way to maintain the hegemony of groups that already dominate or to build a new hegemony.

In Gramsci, hegemony can be understood as the capacity for “intellectual and moral direction” that a social group exercises over others and society as a whole; in other words, it means when a group or social class manages to establish its will as the foundation of the organization of the several social sectors around its project of society (Cavalcante, 2008). Thus, hegemony is not a party action, but a class action, showing the interests of a social group as being for all, helping to maintain the status quo and, in a capitalist society, in the subjugation of workers before the owners of the means of production. In this direction, Gramsci proposes the need to build a counter-hegemony, in opposition to capitalism, which is based on the worldview and the needs of the subordinate classes.

For a class to become dominant, it must first become a leader, that is, Gramsci observes that the State is not based only on force, the legitimate monopoly of violence, but its authority is based on a “dynamic balance” between force and consensus (Bianchi & Aliaga, 2011). In this way, all state domination also carries with it the element of consensus, of political direction. Thus, in the normal exercise of parliamentary democracy, we can affirm that the State is based on an “armored hegemony of coercion” (Gramsci, 2000a, p. 244). The author recognizes that the State acts as an essential instrument to expand the power of the ruling class, both through the dissemination of this class's values and worldview and through the repressive force that aims to keep subordinate groups weak and disorganized.

In Gramsci's theory, the understanding of the State as an apparatus of repression and domination of one class over the other corresponds to only one moment in the composition of the State, the political society. Thus, the State in Gramsci is not restricted to repressive apparatus, but also extends to hegemony apparatus since the complexification of Western social formations placed the need for the hegemonic class to seek other means of maintaining its hegemony that was not only by the use of force. The State also consists of “[...] the whole complex of practical and theoretical activities in which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its domination but manages to obtain the active consensus of the governed people [...]” (Gramsci, 2000a, p. 331).

Different from the conceptions of Hegel and Marx, Gramsci puts civil society as a moment of the superstructure and not of the structure<sup>1</sup>, although he still recognizes the centrality of the material base when he understands that the private apparatus of the hegemony of civil society is also linked to the world of the economy, contrary to the deterministic interpretations made by some authors<sup>2</sup> about Gramscian thinking.

Having a non-economist reading of Marx to combat the economic determinism attributed to him, Gramsci develops his thinking about the relationship between structure and superstructure, uniting them in a social totality that he called “historical block”. For him, the superstructures become more complex and, ultimately, are determined by the economic structure, but not in a mechanical and automatic relationship, since there is a desynchrony resulting from historical singularities among them (Correia, 2017). The connection between these two spheres can be seen in Gramsci's discussion of Americanism and Fordism and, quite clearly, when he states “that there can be no complete and perfect political equality without economic equality” (Gramsci, 2000a, p. 224).

Also, in the fight against economism, which inhibits criticism and class action, Gramsci reaffirms the importance of political activity in determining reform programs, without, however, falling into politicism. Thus, he breaks with the deterministic economic thinking that he attributes only to the productive forces, in the narrow sense of technology, the role of the engine of history.

In his thinking, the dispute for hegemony occurs within and through civil society, where classes seek to gain allies for their positions through political direction and consensus. Semeraro (2011, p. 474) states that, in Gramsci, civil society would not only be “[...] the scope of individual freedoms and economic activities [...]”, but it is also “[...] the place of the several voluntary organizations, the elaboration of ideologies and cultures, the formation of subjectivities, political clashes, and popular mobilizations”.

In this sense, civil society is not constituted as a homogeneous whole, but as space where there are conflicting interests and disputes over hegemony. Therefore, civil society also constitutes the State that is permeated by the interests and conflicts of the classes that constitute the economic structure.

Civil society is not homogeneous, but a space for struggles of contradictory interests. The struggles are not from civil society against the State, but sectors that represent the interests of capital and labor in civil [...] society and the State in search of hegemony. [...] as a member of the social totality, it has a transformative potential since it also involves the organization of social movements that represent the interests of the subordinate classes in the search for the 'political-ideological direction' (Correia, 2005, p. 14).

For this understanding, Montaño (2007) states that it would not be correct to refer to the struggles of civil society, but the struggles in civil society. According to the author, understanding civil society as a harmonious and homogeneous whole, in which there

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<sup>1</sup>In the historical and dialectical materialist method, in general, the structure is the set of production relationship in a society, to the sphere of economics. On this economic structure, a superstructure would arise, which is the forms of social consciousness, such as politics, culture, sciences, religions, arts, worldviews and other ideological components of a class.

<sup>2</sup>It is the distortion made by Bobbio (1997) when mistakenly identifying a split between structural and superstructural elements in Gramsci's thought.

would only be common interests, leads to the uniformization of an essentially heterogeneous and contradictory sphere since, in civil society, both workers' and capital organizations are present; thinking of it as uniform results in an error of historical interpretation. Questioning this misconception, even more, the author adds that “[...] thinking about the 'struggles of civil society' is also and fundamentally, to thinking about this social sphere not as a space for struggles, but as a *subject* of them [...]” (Montaño, 2007, p. 275).

Therefore, in Gramsci's view, there is no space to understand the State and civil society as homogeneous spheres, as spheres that represent interests of the same class, as civil society has often been placed, ideologically, by some theorists, and how it appears in a common-sense today. In the Gramscian perspective, the State and civil society cannot be taken as monolithic blocks, but as spaces permeated by the class struggle in which the subordinate classes must dispute their hegemony.

Therefore,

Gramsci defends the possibility that consensual and contractual mechanisms resulting from conscious and critical social actions can increasingly be created, consolidated, and developed, particularly in the politics area. The author insists on the idea that the constitution of the hegemony of the subordinate classes [...] requires an intense 'ideological preparation of the masses', a 'work of criticism, of cultural penetration, of penetration of ideas', of building a new conception of the world (Duriguetto, 2007, p. 62).

Therefore, the role of the organic intellectual in the author's theory is highlighted, while the one who exercises the function of organizing, directing, and educating, whether in the field of production, culture, politics, or administration. According to Duriguetto (2007, p. 64), his main role “[...] consists in establishing the connections in the diffuse and dispersed characters of the 'common sense' of the subordinate classes for a higher elaboration of their worldview, for active construction of their own story”.

Gramsci's intellectual understanding is not limited to the intrinsic activities of a particular form of work (mastery of theories, of a scientific language, knowledge of research methodologies, etc.), but rather to the role that the individual assumes in the set of social relationships. This is because, according to the author, “the worker [...] is not specifically characterized by manual or instrumental work, but by this work in certain social relationships [...]” (Gramsci, 2014, p. 18). Thus, he expands the notion of intellectual, breaking with the dichotomy between cultured and uneducated individuals, so that any individual can assume the role of the organic intellectual.

In the Gramscian conception, every intellectual is committed to some worldview, that is, no intellectual is not linked to an ideological political project, whether he is aware of it or not. Either he exercises his ideological activity in favor of legitimizing the power of dominant groups or he performs it for the social transformation in favor of subordinate groups and the construction of a new societal project. Santos (2017) states that the intellectual can be conservative insofar as he adheres to the politics of the ruling class, but he can also be assumed as revolutionary/organic when he is linked to the political horizon of the working class.

## **Gramsci's Contributions to the Understanding of the Institutionalization of Social Demands and the Social Dimension of Occupational Therapy**

In the context of capitalist society, we understand that social demands come from the social needs that are produced by the immanent contradictions of that society. In this order, they cannot be fully met since their objective is to meet the economic needs of the system, to the detriment of the workers' human-social needs. However, there is a political field of struggle and depending on the correlation of forces, the State may be more or less favorable to the institutionalization of social demands and the interests and needs of the subordinate classes.

Thus, in the current context of the capitalist crisis, there are several changes undertaken by capital to overcome it, mostly, with negative repercussions for the working class, restricting the conquest or maintenance of social rights. In addition to new economic standards, new values and rules of behavior arrive on the scene to meet the needs of capitalist production and reproduction; however, maintaining the marks of dependence, social exclusion, unemployment rates, and precarious work (Santos, 2013).

As part of these changes, fragmented and superficial conceptions about the most diverse aspects of social life are disseminated in the ideological area, in which critical propositions (like Marxism) become the target of attacks, in a clear attempt to devalue these ideas as if the immanent contradictions and antagonisms of that society had been overcome. We can observe the recent presidential election in Brazil and the victory at the polls of candidate Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, which won support from a large part of society with a campaign with conservative content, criminalizing social movements, attacking social rights, defending the restriction of civil and political rights of vulnerable groups; and the increase in the power of action and veto of fundamentalist religious sectors is emblematic of this process (Quinalha, 2016; Gallego, 2018).

There are constant attempts to fragment, demobilize, and demoralize the social movements from the lower classes to maintain the hegemony of the dominant classes. In this sense, in particular, the Gramscian theory about the State and civil society are necessary for the discussion on the institutionalization of social demands in capitalist society since this institutionalization occurs from the correlation of power and forces between classes that seek to exercise their hegemony in different historical moments.

In this perspective, the State and civil society are understood as contradictory spaces of the class struggle, in which the subordinate classes politically organized can dispute the hegemony for a new societal project or, even in this society, claim the institutionalization of their demands and expand social rights. Therefore, under the Gramscian propositions that life in society is a product of human action, considering the objective conditions of each historical moment, there is the possibility of these individuals to impress their conscience and will in the transformation of reality.

An extremely important aspect in the Gramscian theory of State and civil society for the discussion of social demands - involving the expansion or retraction of social rights - is the understanding of these spheres as heterogeneous spaces and full of contradictions as they open the possibility of subordinate classes to build their corporate project and dispute the hegemony within these spheres, expanding the possibilities of meeting their needs.

Another aspect is the centrality of the discussion about the role of the intellectual in contemporary society. Organic intellectuals are those who, in addition to specialists in their profession, are linked to the mode of production, under an ethical-political conception that enables them to exercise cultural, educational, and organizational functions, ensuring social hegemony. Aware of their class bonds, they manifest their intellectual activity, acting in the processes of formation of critical conscience, based on an organic relationship with the class they feel identified. Thus, for Gramsci, the organicity of the new intellectuals is mainly related to their deep connection with the culture, history, and politics of the subordinate classes that organize to build a new civilization (Semeraro, 2006).

In this way, the organic intellectual distances from the one who intends to validate the current bourgeois social order, seeking, through his action, to unveil the historical conditions that, absorbed uncritically, due to the action of State and civil society institutions and organizations, limit the fighting power of the subordinate classes.

In order not to remove the ontological primacy from the material basis, we emphasize that, in Gramsci's thought, intellectual and moral reform must be linked to economic reform, in which "[...] the advance of political democratization is, at the same time, condition and result of a transformation process also in the economic and social spheres [...]" (Gramsci, 2000b, p. 19). Thus, the class struggle and the possibility of overcoming this society remain present.

With these considerations, it is up to us to make some notes on the place of the occupational therapist in this complex and contradictory process, which is the institutionalization of social demands in capitalist society. We are based on the principle that due to its form of insertion in the social division of capitalist labor, the occupational therapy participates in the process of social reproduction of bourgeois sociability, acting mainly through policies and state social services, on the expressions of the so-called social issue (Bezerra & Trindade, 2013).

Adopting a concept of occupational therapy that starts from the understanding that the social function of the occupational therapist in this society is to act in a different area, to promote and/or expand the social insertion and participation of certain people, collectives and groups, it is essential to place this practice in a concrete social context. This conception of the profession, which can be linked to the discussion about the role of the organic intellectual proposed by Gramsci, implies the recognition that, in addition to the application of specific techniques, the work of the occupational therapist must be articulated and focused on the social dimension people's lives, a work that involves the inseparability of the technical, ethical and political dimensions (Malfitano, 2016).

The discussion about the inseparability of these dimensions of professional work and the social function of occupational therapy has been present in the category for some decades. When discussing the economic, political and social determinations of the constitution of occupational therapy in the Brazilian State from 1950 to 1980, Soares (1991) revealed that the profession, immersed in class relationships and the result of the social division of capitalist labor, participates in the meeting the needs of the working class at the same time that this action is re-functionalized to the interests of the dominant classes. The author states that, in Brazil, the ideological role reserved for occupational therapy in that period reinforced two fundamental and inseparable aspects



of the Brazilian State: assistance, aiming to give a humanitarian and democratic face to social relationships of domination; and control, using scientific practices to cross the real social issues (Soares, 1991). In the same direction, Lopes (1999) analyzed the historical process of occupational therapy and used the expression “consensus employees”, referring to Gramsci's thinking, to explain the political and ideological functions that professional work performed at certain moments and historical contexts.

In this way, thinking about daily life, the social insertion and participation of the people with whom we work requires the occupational therapist to consider that we live in a capitalist society, structured on unequal relationships and whose problems are not only continuously replenished, but they also directly impact people's lives, limiting the possibilities of living with dignity. We also need to consider that the institutional responses to the social demands presented by the target groups of professional actions occur, mainly, through state social policies, which are the main mediation of insertion and performance of the occupational therapist in the job market.

Understanding that social policies result from the institutionalization of certain social demands by the tensions and conflicts generated in the context of relationships between civil society and the State, in which the performance of social movements occupies a prominent place, the work of the occupational therapist imposes the need for the professional to participate directly in the public arena for the discussion of projects and collective needs, broadening social rights that provide greater access to goods and services and, consequently, greater insertion and participation in life in society (Malfitano, 2016). Therefore,

[...] the occupational therapist cannot 'just' provide individualized attention, restricted to the application of specific techniques or approaches, aimed at individuals or groups, as this is not enough to achieve the purpose of their action: insertion and social participation. To achieve this objective, the association between the micro and macro-social dimensions is essential, between a technical and political analysis of the place, the population group, and the individuals with whom it works. The work requires that individual, collective and institutional needs be reconciled and connected (Malfitano, 2016, p. 121).

In this sense, Gramsci's propositions about the State and civil society and the role of the organic intellectual in social struggles for the transformation of reality and the occupation of spaces in the political arena, re-functionalizing them in the interests of the subordinate classes, proves to be useful for discussing the social dimension of occupational therapy and its commitment to collective interests.

When proposing to work with the development of people's autonomy and emancipation, recognizing them as individuals of social rights, we define the need for political and social awareness for professional interventions, so that occupational therapy assumes an ethical-political commitment with individual interests, but more collective, tuning its theory and practice with societal projects aimed at building a new hegemony in the relationship between social classes, assuming a technical responsibility to exercise a political role from the practice, consciously, deciding between consensus and dissent, participating, technically and politically, in the social transformation movement (Lopes, 1996).

Considering the ideopolitical dimension of professional work, the Gramscian reference can support a practice in which the occupational therapist recognizes as one who can promote the intellectual and moral elevation of the beneficiaries of his services to awaken a critical awareness of the contradictions of reality and mediate processes of construction of the collective will of the subordinate classes but recognizing that both (professional and patient) need to take an active stance as historical individuals. This implies breaking with theoretical perspectives and contributions that suppose a neutral conception of the profession and placing the class perspective at the center of the discussion, assuming and demonstrating the professional commitment to the working class.

In this conception of “professional project”, the occupational therapist should not be oblivious to the movements and struggles that take place in society, but, instead, be involved in the condition of individual-professional inserted in the dynamics of capitalist relationships, which place limits not only to their professional action but also to the ways of life of the individuals and collectives. Engage in social struggles concerned not only with expanding rights and access for individuals and collectives but also with the construction of new social relationships and a democratic and transformative political project that promotes human emancipation.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the above, Gramsci's theoretical construct is considered a set of extremely valid ideas not only to propose the transition to a new society but also to analyze and understand the development of modern capitalist societies. The author develops a conception of the State and civil society that contributes to the understanding of the political and social processes involved in the institutionalization of social demands in a capitalist society, also placing for the working class a new possibility of overcoming exploitation towards human emancipation, showing its commitment to the struggles of the subordinate classes.

In this context, his ideas enable us to take notes on the social dimension of occupational therapy, as a profession that appears in and for capitalist society, with the social function of responding to the social demands of people and groups that find limitations to participate in life in society, many of them stemming from the contradictions inherent in that society. Based on Gramsci's conception of organic intellectual, the need for the profession's ethical-political commitment to the collective interests of the subordinate classes, the main demanders of professional work is reinforced.

The entire theoretical and practical construction of occupational therapy in Brazil has been modified - and continues to change - over time and history and is facing the demands presented by society, which are also changing. For us, the analytical validity of Gramscian thinking for the struggles that arise in contemporary times is unquestionable, and for reflections on the technical-professional role and the social function of the occupational therapist, especially at a time when capital, in as a result of its structural crisis, it raises its contradictions and inequalities. Thus, the question that remains is: how has occupational therapy been (or is) going to face these current social problems?

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### **Author's Contributions**

The reflections in this text stem come from the final work of Waldez Cavalcante Bezerra in the discipline “Social control over public policies and Social Work”, from the doctorate in Social Work of the Postgraduate Program in Social Work at the Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL). He was responsible for the conception and writing of the text. In theoretical construction at Núcleo Metaúia UFPB/Uncisal, Beatriz Prado Pereira and Iara Falleiros Braga worked on the process of building, writing, and reviewing the text. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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