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Comments

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Guided by a Red Star: the Cuban literacy campaign and the challenge of history*.

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In the summer of 2000, I was invited, along with Ira Shor, to serve as an advisor for the doctoral degree program in critical pedagogy at the University of Saint Thomas (St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota). I also had the good fortune to teach a summer course that same year. In those days, many of us who had been engaged since the early 1980s in the difficult task of developing critical pedagogy into a legitimate program of study in graduate schools of education, dared to be optimistic about the future of the field. We were eagerly waiting to see our efforts reach fruition. Two of my former doctoral students (from Miami University of Ohio and the University of California, Los Angeles) became full-time faculty in the program at the University of St. Thomas. It was an exciting time.

I had hoped that critical pedagogy would catch fire at schools of education nationwide, and that this would lead to more doctoral programs with concentrations in critical pedagogy, and perhaps even doctoral degree programs. After all, UCLA had recruited me in 1992 to bring critical pedagogy to what is now called the Division of Urban Schooling. And colleagues of mine throughout the US were being asked to develop courses in critical pedagogy at their institutions. Perhaps critical pedagogy was coming into its own. Of course, at that time critical pedagogy (and to a certain extent today) was used as an umbrella term that covered the domains of literacy, educational philosophy and theory, ethnographic studies of schooling, language acquisition and reading, the social foundations of education, and multicultural education. So there was a lot from which to choose.

I had waited a long time for a doctoral degree in critical pedagogy to be established somewhere in the US, and when I heard about the program at the University of St. Thomas, a prestigious Catholic university, I was sure that more degree programs would be in the making. Those were heady days when public enthusiasm had been recalled from exile and was influencing the ranks of critical educators both in the public schools and the universities. Perhaps critical pedagogy could change the face of public schooling in the United States, and perhaps even build a new social order where equality and justice prevailed. Today, that enthusiasm has waned considerably, as both public universities and schools in general have been more completely taken over by corporate interests powered by neoliberal capital. The critical pedagogy program at St. Thomas

exists no more. And critical pedagogy barely seems to have survived the educational assaults of the Bush years.

Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship is a step-child of the Critical Pedagogy Program at St. Thomas, which ended after only four cohorts. It's author, Mark Abendroth, was a member of Cohort Two. As a scholar-activist, Abendroth has produced a courageous and prescient volume that will impact the field of critical pedagogy for years to come. Each page of this volume will repay the reader mightily in its creative retelling of the Cuban National Literacy Campaign—undeniably among the world's greatest educational accomplishments of the 20th century. Of course, this book is much more than a retelling, it is also a rethinking of the very meaning of literacy and critical citizenship today. And for this reason it merits the attention of educators everywhere.

As a young man, Abendroth's interest in Cuba was partially fueled by the prohibition that still exists for U.S. citizens to visit the island. My own interest in Cuba came from a very different place. As a Canadian, I recall billboard and magazine advertisements inviting Canadians to enjoy their winter holidays in the sunny island of Cuba, and for Canadians, every potential tropical site was viewed as a paradisiacal haven for those of us who were confined to eight long months of winter each year. In January, 1976, at the height of the Canadian winter (January 26 to be exact), the charismatic Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, stepped off an Armed Forces Boeing 707 at Jose Marti airport to meet Fidel Castro in Cuba. I was teaching at a senior public school in a village outside of Toronto at the time, and I remember well Trudeau's visit. Trudeau became the first leader of a NATO country to visit Cuba since the United States instituted its vicious 1960 embargo on the island, which the Cubans view (and rightly so) as more of a blockade. During a speech in Cienfuegos, Trudeau exuberantly exclaimed, "*Viva Cuba*" and "*Viva el Primer Ministro Fidel Castro!*" And Margaret, his wife, declared Fidel to be "the sexiest man alive." And while, as a burgeoning young leftist, I had my reservations about Trudeau's liberal politics, I remember cheering Trudeau's remarks in a tavern when they were televised throughout the country. At least for his three nights in Havana, Trudeau had resisted the attempts of the United States to dictate Canada's foreign policy (although I am sure some of the U.S. military strategists saw an advantage

to having a member of NATO that close to the devil himself).

Some analysts have made the case that Fidel's Jesuit education (grade five at the Colegio Dolores in Santiago de Cuba and finishing high school at the Colegio de Belén in Havana) and Trudeau's Jesuit schooling at the Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf in Montreal has something to do with their affinity for each other, but both their Jesuit educations occurred prior to an era marked by an openness to dialogue with others that was ushered in by the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II, opened under Pope John XXIII on 11 October, 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI on 8 December, 1965, and the 32nd General Congregation that followed it (although it is likely that Trudeau was at least at one time a student of liberation theology). (1) I remember appearing in 1980 on Margaret Trudeau's television show, and thinking fondly about the Trudeau's visit to Cuba, as I fielded questions about a bestselling book I had just published about my teaching experiences in a school located in Canada's largest public housing project in the city of North York. It was unthinkable that Fidel and Trudeau would become, in the words of former Canadian ambassador Mark Entwistle, "intellectual soulmates" at a time when all the political calculations of the era worked to prohibit such a relationship. Trudeau would not visit Fidel again until 1991, when the two men went snorkeling together, and he enjoyed three more visits with Fidel until the late 1990s. In fact, Jimmy Carter and Fidel both served as pallbearers at Trudeau's funeral in 2000. Later, it was learned that American mobster, Myer Lansky, who resented Fidel for confiscating his gambling enterprises in Havana, and who tried to have Fidel killed during Fidel's one and only formal visit to the United States, also considered assassinating Trudeau. Of course, the U.S. has repeatedly tried to assassinate Fidel, not only by recruiting mobsters John Roselli and Sam Giancana, but also through the pet project of attorney general Robert Kennedy, Operation Mongoose, which saw the recruitment of Cuban-American militants who helped to carry out counterrevolutionary operations against Cuba, which included the bombing of hospitals, the sabotage of industrial and agricultural sites (including the poisoning of Cuba's sugar crops), as well as assassinations (when president Gerald Ford issued executive order 11905, prohibiting assassination of an instrument of U.S. foreign policy, the Cuban American militants continued to terrorize the island and to this day are active, and the revelations about the Bush administration have made a mockery of

executive order 11905).

Today, as in the 1970s, there is a widespread habit of mind in the United States that is founded on the most pernicious of false generalizations and accordingly associates Cuba, socialism, Fidel, and Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez with the greatest of evils. It is an era of "negative nationalism" to use the words of George Orwell. Fueled by a vehement racism, right wing pundits and politicians and large sectors of the electorate are cheering for President Obama's policies to fail, even if it means the needs of the American people will not be served. Bolstered by a bottomless pit of corporate money, media support, and right-wing officials giddy with partisan hatred, a reactionary street-protest movement is afoot, drawing at times tens of thousands of people to decry the bank bailout, the auto bailout, health care reform, the deficit and America's descent into socialism or communism, led by the 44th President of the United States. Contrast this with the spirit and vitality of the Cuban people captured in *Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship* .

In *Ciudad Libertad*, an educational complex in the Playa district of Havana, there stands a small museum that commemorates Cuba's National Literacy Campaign (henceforth called the Campaign). This modest-looking white stucco structure is anything but a testament to negative nationalism; rather, it personifies what Abendroth calls "critical global citizenship"—a liberation movement designed to ensure the health and vitality of the revolution and independence from Cuba's colonial past. Few books have touched on this aspect of the Campaign, and it is to Abendroth's great credit that he makes this theme central to his work.

Before the successful completion of the Campaign, almost a million Cubans lacked basic schooling due to race, class, gender and geographic isolation (Elvy, 2007). But that was not to last long. Like the rapid brushstrokes of British narrative painter, Ian Francis, voluntary literacy workers took to the streets and the fields, assembling in what was to become a massive enactment of the ethical imperatives of the revolution. A total force of 308,000 volunteers worked with 707, 212 illiterate Cubans and helped them achieve a first grade level of reading and writing (to be followed in later years by the Battle for the Sixth Grade and Battle for the Ninth Grade). Cuba's overall illiteracy rate was reduced from over 20 percent, according to the last census taken before the

Revolution, to 3.9 percent. (Supko, 1998).

Volunteers included adult popular educators (178,000 *alfabetizadores* who taught in urban areas), workers from factories (30,000 *brigadistas obreros* who received their regular salaries while doing their literacy training), and 100,000 students, between the ages of 10 and 19 who came to be known as the Conrado Benitez Brigadistas and who carried in their knapsacks a pair of boots, two pairs of socks, an olive-green beret, a Conrado Benitez shoulder patch, a blanket, a hammock, a lantern, and copies of *Alfabeticemos* (the Campaigns official teacher's manual) and *Venceremos* (a student primer). City schools were closed down in order that students between the ages of 10 and 19, with a minimum grade six education, could leave their homes in urban centers and live with *campesino* families in the countryside. As Joanne C. Elvy (2007) puts it: "Integrated into peasant households, they worked alongside their new families by day, and then taught them how to read and write by lantern at night." This profound revolutionary condition marked an important exchange between Cubans from urban centers and those who worked in the fields. Of particular significance was the social and cultural shift of the role of women in Cuba's civic society. Over 50 percent of the volunteer teachers in the Campaign were young women, marking the first time that many of them left home and were given the opportunity to take on the same tasks as their male counterparts (Elvy, 2007). Each act of shared labor and struggle with their *campesino* compatriots, each stroke of the pen made under the sturdy lanterns carried by the *brigadistas*, became gestures of solidarity, metonymical acts that reflected in their particular victories over illiteracy, the root metaphor of revolutionary praxis: making the revolution through revolutionary acts. Eventually, red flags were hung over doorways signaling *Territorios Libres de Analfabetismo* (Territories Free of Illiteracy).

Fernández Retamar (1989 pp. 44-45) has a wonderful quotation from Che Guevara, who, in accepting the position of professor, *honoris causa*, at the School of Pedagogy, University of Las Villas, in December, 1959, proposed to the university professors and students the kind of transformation that all of them would have to undergo in order to be considered truly useful to the construction of a socialist society. And in Martí's terms, this meant moving from the European University to the University of the Americas:

I would never think of demanding that the distinguished professors or the students presently associated with the University of Las Villas perform the miracle of admitting to the university the masses of workers and peasants. The road here is long; it is a process all of you have lived through, one entailing many years of preparatory study. What I do ask, based on my own limited experience as a revolutionary and rebel commandante, is that the present students of the University of Las Villas understand that study is the patrimony of no one and that the place of study where you carry out your work is the patrimony of no one – it belongs to all the people of Cuba, and it must be extended to the people or the people will seize it. And I hope - because I began the whole series of ups and downs in my career as a university student, as a member of the middle class, as a doctor with middle-class perspectives and the same youthful aspirations that you must have, and because I am convinced of the overwhelming necessity of the revolution and the infinite justice of the people's cause – I would hope for those reasons that you, today proprietors of the university, will extend it to the people. I do not say this as a threat, so as to avoid its being taken over by them tomorrow. I say it simply because it would be one more among so many beautiful examples in Cuba today: that the proprietors of the Central University of Las Villas, the students, offer it to the people through their revolutionary government. And to the distinguished professors, my colleagues, I have to say something similar: become black, mulatto, a worker, a peasant; go down among the people, respond to the people, that is, to all the necessities of all of Cuba. When this is accomplished, no one will be the loser, we all will have gained, and Cuba can then continue its march toward the future with a more vigorous step, and you will need to include in your cloister this doctor, commandante, bank president, and today professor of pedagogy who now takes leave of you.

Shortly after his speech at the University of Las Villas, Ché spoke to the problem of illiteracy in Cuba:

There are more illiterates in Cuba today than there were twenty-five years ago, because the whole government educational policy has consisted of embezzling and of building a few insignificant schools at the more central crossroads of the country. Our task is another, *compañeros*; we can rely on the people as a whole. We do not have to go beg for votes by building an insignificant school next to a highway. We are going to put that school where it is needed, where it fulfills its educational function for the people's benefit. (cited in Supko, 1998).

These views voiced by Che illustrate the attitude that animated the Campaign and made it so successful. The Campaign was able to develop appropriate strategies and

tactics that were part of both methodological and doctrinal fronts. Paulo Freire (1985, p. 17) makes a distinction between strategy and tactics:

Strategy is, as I understand it, the space in which I have my dream, my political dream, the objective of my life. It does not mean that my dream stays eternally, permanently, like it was at the beginning. Tactics, on the other hand are different. They concretize the dream. We have to be very consistent between tactics and strategy. It means that I cannot have tactics of a rightist man in order to concretize the dreams of a leftist...I remember Guevara said 'no contradictions between the means and the objectives'.

Not only did the Campaign have a strategy—building socialism—it created pedagogical tactics that were consistent with that strategy. The Campaign also benefitted from Anibal Ponce's stress on creating both a methodological front—emphasizing collective work instead of the usual bourgeois call for increasing individual freedoms—and a doctrinal front—creating a curriculum that serves the interests of workers and *campesinos*. The methodological front was also evident in the emphasis placed on collaboration among all Cuban citizens—white, black, male, female. And the doctrinal front was further revealed in the creation of a curriculum that explored colonial oppression and understanding the transformative projects of the revolution. Of course, the Campaign also benefitted from the insights of Sandino, Mello, Mao, Mariategui, Marti and others.

At this present historical conjuncture, when we are living in the bowels of a crisis of capitalism, the likes of which we have not seen since the Great Depression, when increasing numbers of people are being thrown out of their homes and denied medical assistance because of a lack of health insurance, it is not as surprising as it is disconcerting that some educationalists, such as William F. Pinar (2009), are attacking proponents of critical pedagogy for not acknowledging the lineaments of subjectivity or for paying insufficient attention to theorizing the “I” in their work, or for focusing too much on social structure and the role that education plays in the reproduction of inequality and injustice. Discussions of the importance of Che or Freire are ridiculed by Pinar as attempts by critical educators to sell commodified “metasubjects” in a “symbiotic rhetoric” to students, creating a “doomed defiance” and an “impossible

praxis.” Having ignored the search for a self-critical subjectivity (apparently Pinar’s own mission), in its eternal repetition of the same, he argues that critical scholarship (that is critical scholarship *sans* Pinar) has produced “no new insight, no accumulated knowledge or intellectual advancement” since 1968, despite the offspring of the *soixante-huitards* in Paris, Berlin, Grosvenor Square, or Prague to carry on the struggle. Pinar’s aqueous clarion call to move ‘beyond’ the antediluvian categories of reproduction and resistance and to embrace Pinar’s sanctified “I”, just at a time when the work of critical educators, especially Marxist educators, is increasing in relevance because of the explanatory potential of historical materialist critique to explain the *entrañas* or *tripas* of the current crisis of capitalism, to reveal the limitations of poststructuralism in its criticisms of Marxism as “deterministic” and to put class analysis back on the educational agenda (2), can only be viewed by educators serious about educational transformation in capitalist societies as *jejeune*. Capital, it appears, has its way of making strange bedfellows.

Inspired by the examples of Fidel, Che, and others, the hundreds of thousands of volunteers in the Cuban National Literacy Campaign were able to create a praxis, a possible praxis, without the benefit of Delphic utterances on the importance of self-critical subjectivity made by Pinar as he squats in Foucault’s metaphysical brainpan (3). Nor does Venezuela’s ongoing Bolivarian revolution seem hindered by a lack of poststructuralist insight *qua* Pinar (4).

Rebel Literacy: Cuba’s National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship is a shining example of the type of work that needs to be undertaken today. Abendroth links the revolutionary trajectory of this work to the foundations of critical global citizenship that today is reflected and deepened in critical race theory, in exploring the historical connections between indigenous struggles for sovereignty and the emancipation of the African Diaspora, in international feminist activity and scholarship, and in Marxist critiques of transnational capitalism. It can also be seen in transnational struggles for socialism, in efforts of those developing a de-colonizing pedagogy as well as in anti-imperialist struggles worldwide.

Major accomplishments, such as the new “Organic Education Law” (see Suggett, 2009) which Venezuela’s National Assembly passed unanimously shortly after midnight on August 14th following an extended legislative session, could not have been possible

without the triumph of Cuba's National Literacy Campaign. Those fierce opponents of Chavez who claim the education law is unconstitutional, anti-democratic, politicizes the classroom, threatens the family and religion, and will allow the state to take children away from their parents for the purposes of political indoctrination, are reminiscent of the Cuban counterrevolutionaries who were against the Campaign. Of course, these condemnations by the *Venezolano* right-wing are part of a well-orchestrated campaign, which, like in the case of Cuba's Campaign, is funded by Washington. But the Organic Education Act is important in that the state has the responsibility to ensure that all citizens have a high quality education, free of charge, from childhood through the undergraduate university level (Suggett, 2009). The concept of the "Educator State" (*Estado Docente*) is introduced in Article 5, which asserts that the state must guarantee education "as a universal human right and a fundamental, inalienable, non-renounceable social duty, and a public service... governed by the principles of integrality, cooperation, solidarity, attentiveness, and co-responsibility" (Suggett, 2009). The law also requires "progressive annual growth" in education spending as a percentage of GDP. Article 6 lists nearly fifty aspects of the education system of which the state is in charge, including educational infrastructure, curriculum, and other administrative tasks, as well as specific duties that exemplify the principles of the education system established in Article 3. One of the key principles, in my view, advocates "equality among all citizens without discrimination of any kind." In fact, this new law mandates "equality of conditions and opportunities," as well as "gender equity," "access to the educational system for people with disabilities or educational needs," and the extension of educational facilities to rural and poor areas. Spanish is listed as the official language of the education system, "except in the instances of intercultural bilingual indigenous education, in which the official and equal use of their [native] language and Spanish shall be guaranteed." In addition to promoting "the exchange of social and artistic knowledge, theories, practices, and experiences," the law sanctions "popular and ancestral knowledge, which strengthen the identity of our Latin American, Caribbean, indigenous, and afro-descendent peoples." Finally, Article 10 specifically prohibits speech and propaganda that promote hate and violence in classrooms or in the context of educational settings, including the news media. Article 3 also stresses a recurrent theme: that of "participatory democracy." This

is clearly important, and you can hear this echo throughout the new education act. Article 15 is perhaps the most controversial in the eyes of Chavez's opponents because it stipulates that one of the basic purposes of education is "to develop a new political culture based on protagonist participation and the strengthening of popular power, the democratization of knowledge, and the promotion of the school as a space for the formation of citizenship and community participation, for the reconstruction of the public spirit." Yet there are plenty of references to the importance of "learning to peacefully coexist," learning to learn and teach simultaneously, "valuing the common good," the necessity for education to be "integral" as opposed to highly specialized. The act emphasizes a "respect for diversity," and the importance of life-long learning. The legal definition of the educational community has been significantly broadened to include families, community organizations, and wage laborers in addition to the formal educational workers. Article 20 states, "The educational community will be composed of all the fathers, mothers, representatives, students, teachers, administrative workers, and laborers of the educational institution... spokespersons of the different community organizations linked to the educational centers and institutions will also be able to form part of the educational community." This new educational community is described in the article as "a democratic space of social-communitarian, organized, participatory, cooperative, protagonist, and solidarity-oriented character." The Organic Education Act also deals with questions of labor rights, job security and benefits, and training in "liberatory work." Article 15 asserts that the educational system must "develop the creative potential of each human being for the full realization of his or her personality and citizenship, based on the ethical value of liberatory work and active participation" (Suggett, 2009). There is also a stress on human rights and free speech. Additionally, the law maintains that education should encourage an end to nuclear weapons in the world, that it should fight racism and develop with students an ecological consciousness to preserve biodiversity and social diversity. The Organic Education Act is a profound historical achievement, and resistance to this act is sure to animate Venezuelan politics for years to come. The historical struggles that have, and continue to take place in Cuba, and now Venezuela, are indeed heartening, and give us reason for optimism.

Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship demythologizes the Cuba that US capitalists have constructed for public consumption through the hegemonizing powers of the corporate media; not only does it show the vibrant and courageous history of Cuba's march towards socialism and participatory democracy, it makes a profound case for high-quality education as a international human right. *Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship* needs to be read by teachers, teacher educators, students, administrators, and educational policy makers. In highlighting various dimensions of community and egalitarianism as revolutionary values that still intrinsically animate youth culture in Cuba, Abendroth not only advances a powerful critique of US educational imperatives that link educational performance with possessive individualism, earning capacity and the ability to consume, but also makes a powerful case for critical pedagogy and popular education as a transnational social movement—in fact, a way to make people's power a reality, a way of life, a possible praxis.

***Acknowledgement**

This article is the Preface to Mark Abendroth *Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship*. Duluth, MN, USA: Litwin Books.

Notes

(1) Although today it appears as though the Vatican is softening its stance against Marx, as Gregorian University professor Georg Sans in a recent edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, praised Marx, but not without qualification, distinguishing between Marx and Marxism, calling the latter a misappropriation of Marx's theories. The publication of Sans's piece in *L'Osservatore Romano* gives it the *de facto imprimatur* of Pope Benedict XVI, *The Times of London* reported. See Trudy Ring. (2009). Vatican: Marx, Wilde Not So Bad. *Advocate*. As retrieved from: http://www.advocate.com/News/Daily_News/2009/10/22/Vatican_Marx_Wilde_Not_S_o_Bad/#

(2) Those educationalists (including poststructuralists) who accuse Marx of being a "determinist" confuse *determination* with *determinism*. Marx's *Capital* does not present a fatalistic theory that all peoples must or will endure. It presents an image of the trajectory of the logic of capital (Peter Hudis, personal communication).

(3) Thanks to Joel Spring for alerting me to the Pinar critique.

(4) This is not to say that the struggle for self-critical subjectivity is unimportant. What is problematic is the attempt by educationalists such as Pinar to denigrate the accomplishments of Marxist critique (due in large part to their superficial characterization of Marxism) in their attempt to reinsert "culture" and "subjectivity" at the center of critical educational work. See Dave Hill, Peter McLaren, Mike Cole and Glenn Rikowski, eds., *Marxism Against Postmodernism in Educational Theory*, Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2003.

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Writer's Details

Peter McLaren is internationally recognized as one of the leading architects of critical pedagogy and known for his scholarly writings on critical literacy, the sociology of education, cultural studies, critical ethnography, and Marxist theory. He has developed a reputation for his uncompromising political analysis influenced by a Marxist humanist philosophy and a unique and poetic literary style of expression. His scholarship and political activism have taken him throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

His numerous works have been translated into twelve languages. McLaren is the author, co-author, editor and co-editor of approximately forty books and monographs. Several hundred of his articles, chapters, interviews, reviews, commentaries and columns have appeared in dozens of scholarly journals and professional magazines worldwide.

His most recent books include: *Pedagogy and Praxis* (with Nathalia Jaramillo, Sense Publishers, 2007), *Rage+Hope* (Peter Lang, 2006); *Capitalists and Conquerors* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); *Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism* (with Ramin Farahmandpur, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); *Red Seminars: Radical Excursions into Educational Theory, Cultural Politics, and Pedagogy* (Hampton Press, 2005); *Marxism Against Postmodernism in Educational Theory* (with Dave Hill, Mike Cole, and Glenn Rikowski); *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). He is also author of *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education* (Allyn & Bacon) which is now in its fifth edition (2007). *Life in Schools* has been named one of the twelve most significant writings worldwide in the field of educational theory, policy and practice by an international panel of experts assembled by the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. McLaren is Professor of Education, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, United States

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