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PROJECT

ANALYSIS OF THE REGIMES OF REPRESENTATION OF NATURE AND THE DESIGN OF THE PLURIVERSE

ANÁLISIS DE LOS REGÍMENES DE REPRESENTACIÓN DE LA NATURALEZA Y EL DISEÑO DEL PLURIVERSO

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Abstract

The debate about the different discursive representations of nature has gained strength in recent years due, among other factors, to the deepening of environmental problems on a global scale, as well as the emergence of alternatives for development. The main objective of this work is to provide an analysis of Arturo Escobar's proposal for representations of nature, a proposal framed within the Latin American decolonial perspective, essentially his notion on Regimes of nature, as well as his theoretical proposal regarding Designs for the Pluriverse. Methodologically, we carry out an essentially theoretical approach, seeking to join the debate on discursive representations about nature, the discourse of development, and the voices that propose alternative visions.

Keywords: Development, Regimes of nature, Decoloniality, Discourse analysis, Sustainable Development

1   Introduction

Unlike decolonial authors such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Enrique Dussel, who situate themselves as heirs of a tradition of thought located in the terrains of the Marxist, Philosophy of Liberation, and Latin American critical thought, the position of Arturo Escobar is anchored in the post-structuralist perspective, which generates a divergent theoretical and methodological decolonial analysis in comparison with these authors.

Escobar's thought does not start from the analysis of a power world pattern that has dominated the world since the 15th and 16th centuries, like Aníbal Quijano (2014); neither does he seek to name modernity defined by a single will to dominate, as Enrique Dussel does (2020); nor does he speak of a series of secret codes configured from the West that governs all the production of knowledge in the world-system, like Walter Mignolo (2010). Escobar avoids speaking of totalities and focuses his analysis on historical phenomena delimited and explored in their singularity, as is the case of the development discourse.

In this sense, development is examined by Escobar not as an epiphenomenon of capitalism, but as a regime of representation directly linked to historically limited power devices, which belong to a modern order of knowledge with claims of universality. For this author, therefore, development does not appear as a modernity founding myth, but rather as a space of thought and action with a historically anchored starting point, which has served to configure a complex reality we witness today and which, according to the diagnosis made in its most recent works, has been showing clear signs of exhaustion (Escobar, 2018).

Thus, from Escobar's decolonial perspective, the rules that govern the development discourse were not invented in the 15th and 16th centuries; nor are they part of an all-encompassing system typical of modernity. They were formed from the second half of the 20th century, anchored in the Post-war period, a historical stage where, for him, the contemporary world was geopolitically reconfigured. Unlike other decolonial thinkers, Escobar is not guided by the search for secret modernity founding codes, but rather by the idea of showing the politics of truth behind the development discourse in the years after World War II, a discourse framed under globalization and neocolonialism logic (Escobar, 2007).

It is through the critical analysis of the development discourse that Escobar discusses precisely on how this discourse has become hegemonic, a hegemony that, for the purposes of this work, has allowed him to construct a notion about nature. It is a hegemonic discourse that claims universality that, like every discourse, coexists with others and competes with them. Like any other, it does not possess neutrality or objectivity; on the contrary, it follows hegemonic interests and, in that sense, creates imaginaries, notions, and particular configurations.

In this sense, Escobar asserts that this discursive game around what nature means symbolically and the definitions of both the environment and the natural system have generated what he calls Regimes of Representation of Nature. For this thinker, the discursive conformation has managed to design symbolic imaginaries around nature, as well as a series of discourses that have configured the

relationship that human beings in modernity have with it (Escobar, 1999). In addition to this, his most recent proposal on what he calls the techno-nature discourse is widely analyzed in his most recent work, Designs for the Pluriverse (Escobar, 2018).

We have proposed as the central objective of this work to analyze the notion of regimes of nature. To this end, we begin our reflection focusing on the analysis of the development discourse from post-structuralism, which will serve as a starting point for our reflection on the notion of nature regimes. Based on this, we will close our analysis by providing some reflections on the proposal of hybrid discourses present in his most recent work. We close our work by venturing some conclusions. This is an essentially theoretical work that seeks to provide and presente elements for the debate on the discursive representations that, in the field of the search for solutions and alternatives to the complex contemporary environmental problem from a decolonial perspective.

2   The development discourse as a source of colonial discourse

Various voices agree that the development discourse has as its starting point the call that former North American president Harry S. Truman made to the U.S. Congress in 1947, after the end of World War II. Geopolitics was entering one of the most ideologically and discursively complex processes, with unprecedented political polarization, with more than half of the world's population living in poverty and misery conditions, poorly fed, prone to diseases related to these living conditions, and with very limited possibilities of joining what would be called global economic development (Tovar, 2011).

Truman proposed to the Congress of his country, also calling on the world's hegemonic nations, to undertake a sum of efforts to, based on the technical knowledge they possessed, help increase the standard of living of the impoverished population of the so-called undeveloped countries. Truman argued that the backwardness of some nations would generate counterproductive effects in the then-emerging globalized economy, which is why technical action by hegemonic countries and supranational organizations was necessary.

Because of this, not only begin a stage characterized by a series of international economic policies commanded by specialized organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB) or the International Monetary Fund (IMF), among others, but also gave rise to the creation of notions that served as pillars of the emerging hegemonic discourse whose goal was unremitting progress and unquestionable development: "(…) producing more is the key to peace and prosperity", said the former North American president, who started the ideology commonly known as Truman Doctrine. Thus, the discourse on development creates notions to name realities, such as underdevelopment, third world, developing nations, emerging economies, etc., compared to other definitions such as developed countries, first world, industrialized countries, etc.

Beyond its ethnocentric and universalist pretension (Edwards, 2017), the discourse configured around the idea of development managed to be quickly introduced and imposed in many government plans of the time, as well as in all economic policies of both hegemonic nations and nations classified as underdeveloped. The development discourse focused, then, on the strategies that had to be generated so that, under the tutelage of multinational institutions such as the WB, the IMF, and the UN, this block of non-industrialized countries would overcome their socioeconomic conditions and reach basic standards of living, placing development as a global aspirational notion, as a "(…) certainty in the social imaginary" (Escobar, 1999, p. 35, our translation).

The reality, Escobar affirms, was colonized by the discourse of development, limiting all action to the margins that this same discourse allowed, turning it into an unquestionable reality with a universal character. In this sense, studies on the discourse of development began to emerge from different coordinates; from the analysis of Edward Said regarding the discourses elaborated on the East (Said, 1997) and those of the philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe about Africa (Mudimbe, 1988) to Latin American critical currents, the Philosophy of Liberation and Chandra Mohanty's work about the role of women in third world countries (Mohanty, 2003).

The structuring of these discourses under conditions of power inequality generated what was called the "colonialist move", a notion that seeks to explain how, through the imposition of a discourse, the colonial subject is constructed, in specific ways, as colonial/third world subject. This "colonialist move" creates a power device that, as Escobar affirms, ensured geopolitical control based on racialized, patriarchalized, scientific, economistic, etc. structures and imaginaries over the subalternized subject. It became a discourse that not only configured expressions such as first and third world but also those of Center/Periphery, Global North and South, among others (Escobar, 2007).

The analysis of the development discourse forced this notion to be problematized and, in doing so, generated a scenario of dispute, since "(…)   analyzing development as a discourse means suspending its apparent naturalness" (Escobar, 1999, p. 25, our translation). From this starting point, development and concepts that arrange the first, such as planning and management, are put up for discussion as they are paradigmatic notions of modernity and its rationality.

For Escobar, discourses are not mere objective descriptions of reality, but rather the reflection of the dispute to define what reality is; or rather, what is the meaning of reality (Escobar, 2012). That is, it is anchored in the recognition of the importance of the dynamics of discourse and power as a possibility of creating social reality. This position is heir to the Foucauldian premise, in which discourses are always linked to power (Foucault, 2007). Therefore, development discourse does not name an existing prelinguistic reality (the developed world and the underdeveloped world as things in themselves), but rather it linguistically creates those realities, shapes conceptions of reality, and, with this, also shapes the social action of those who inhabit that reality.

As we have already pointed out, unlike some decolonial thinkers faithful to dependency theory or Marxist theory, where language names an existing reality, Escobar does not presuppose such an affirmation, since, from his post-structuralist position, the recognition of the importance of discursive rules within the development discourse, as well as the power in the creation of the social reality that it possesses (Escobar, 2007, p. 14).

At the same time, this starting point that denotes Escobar's interest in exoticizing development, in demonstrating its historical peculiarity, in rebelling against the discursive rules it obeys, places him in the field of the decolonial turn, since it denaturalizes modernity and makes visible its desire for universality, emphasizing its historical, classist, local, patriarchal, etc. To this end, Escobar returns to the aforementioned theories of Edward Said on the Middle East and V. Y. Murimbe on the European invention of Africa, although he also names the works of decolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabba and Gayatri Spivak.

That is, Escobar invites us to stop seeing development as an objective and universalist reality and now see it as an invention, as a singular experience that is the product of specific power relations formed from a discourse of power, a discourse emanating from predominant political and economic forces in the modern Western world (Escobar, 2007). To do this, it is necessary to map the discursive route of development, trying to identify its techniques of power, the institutions that support it, and the forms of knowledge that it mobilizes.

Hence the emphasis on the sphere of discourse that Escobar proposes, which occurs not in its subjective vertex, but rather in the investigation of the linguistic and meaning reasons that become a constitutive part of reality. The fundamental premise is that, through language, particularly discourse, reality acquires meaning for the individual. The philosopher Félix Guattari (2022), in this sense, made it clear that this linguistic perspective does not deny the existence of a pre-discursive reality but rather emphasizes that it is only through language that we appropriate it, but this only happens through power mediation.

Therefore, a constant discursive struggle is established for the control of meaning, so that the discourse immanently acquires a political dimension. For the same reason, the modification of the preponderance of a discourse, as Escobar states, is a matter of politics, it is part of the theory of politics (Escobar, 2012). Accordingly, a change in the discourse structure and in the order of discourse does not simply imply the introduction of new ideas, but, more profoundly, means the transformation of practice, since these two changes are structured on certain linguistic conventions, a certain way of relating, paraphrasing Foucault, words to things (Foucault, 1998). The order of discourse is linked to certain rules that govern the meaning of practice. Therefore, changing the order of discourse is not a fact that only occurs at the level of thought, but must also happen at the level of historical practices. If these must be modified, one must first intervene in the rules that support them to transform them or open new possibilities of action.

Following Foucault's thought, Escobar then understands development as a specific type of governmentality, as the creation of a field of government intervention that operates under certain logics, rules, and discourses. For the author, these rules cannot be derived from any colonial pattern or matrix of power.

> Development was and remains largely a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, treating people and cultures as abstract concepts, as statistical figures that could be moved back and forth on graphs of progress. Development was never

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conceived as cultural development, but rather as a system of technical interventions universally applicable with the objective of bringing some essential goods to a target population. (Escobar, 2007, p. 94, our translation).

It is, in Foucauldian terms, a biopolitical device that seeks to regulate the population's life, beyond sovereign power. Such interventions are configured under the technocratic operation in certain regions then called third world, following indicators such as literacy and industrialization as fundamental premises of development, conditions that would be guaranteed through the intervention of capital in key areas of the economy, as well as in education, combating poverty, and habitat preservation, among others (Escobar, 2007). Thus, the ideal scenario is created for systematic interventions, under the discourse that populations had to be modernized, that is, integrated into global economic dynamics, incorporated into the global train through technical intervention mechanisms orchestrated by the international organizations and with the support of local government networks that will guarantee their compliance and perpetuation, legitimizing them. In that sense, Escobar says, life itself begins to be seen as a technical problem, in charge of a group of experts and development professionals (Escobar, 2014).

This complex discursive apparatus tied to institutionalized control mechanisms has, however, lost cohesion, giving rise to a framework where other discourses confront it (Escobar, 2018). The emanation of these new discourses does not fit with the aforementioned control mechanisms; that is to say, for Escobar, they do not appear only as development alternative discourses, but as diametrically different discursive forces, which in reality seek alternatives to development. Thus, they place themselves on a different terrain, which he calls post-development.

This is not the space to discuss the notion of post-development, but we are interested in mentioning that Escobar, with this notion, aims to demonstrate how the discursive crisis of development has made possible the opening of spaces that give room to other discourses, to other thoughts, to see other things from different narratives, from subalternity, which generates the writing and understanding of history from other languages (Escobar, 2007). It is important to clarify that Escobar does not suggest a possible stage after development with the post-development concept, as his notion has sometimes been read, but rather he defines it as a discourse that opens new paths where alternative visions have made their way; it is, therefore, a concept that allows us to understand development from a different perspective.

Like Walter Mignolo, Escobar proposes an epistemological change as a necessary condition for a radically different world and, in that sense, anchored in an alternative discourse. This epistemic change is only possible through the emergence of discourses and subalternized knowledge of subjugated knowledge, organized through social movements and their discursive political practices. It is, in this logic, that the notion of regimes of representation of nature arises.

3   Regimes of representation of nature

Nature, Escobar affirms, has not escaped the efforts of systematization of modern science, its narrative, and its desire for universality. In this sense, its characterization responds to the scientific discourse, its methods of knowledge, and the desire for submission typical of the modern civilizational project. It is in this impulse of systematization that nature is reduced to a mere stage where life happens, not where life takes shape. As a result of this process, it is worthy mentioning the definitions *of natural system or environment*, notions that allow us to glimpse the role that, for the modern individual, nature occupies.

From a decolonial analysis, the binary thinking that characterizes modern science has generated an explanation under scientific standards of the diversity of planetary natural phenomena, and it has sought to explain and understand the laws that allow the reproduction of the fabric of life as well as the biodiversity that characterizes it, reducing, however, highly complex relationships to indissoluble pairs: body/mind, society/nature, animal kingdom/plant kingdom, environment/human environment, among others. In this way, the discourse of modernity has given meaning to what nature represents for the discourse of development in its universality eagerness.

That is why, for Escobar, what we call nature is not a neutral and independent notion, nor alien to hegemonic discourses and, therefore, to human symbolization. In that sense, he states, what we understand by nature is an invention that does not obey objective laws, but

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is a response to certain regimes of representation, a fact that then places us in an epistemic and cultural relativism, from where nature acquires a particular representation according to each cultural sphere (Escobar, 2010).

Therefore, the meaning of nature, from a discursive point of view, does not appear as given, but is the product of a discursive struggle to shape it, a struggle that occurs in the political field, thus maintaining a close relationship with power. From this point of view and from a decolonial perspective, Escobar affirms that there are three regimes of representation of nature that are not only simultaneous but, as discursive realities, compete: organic, capitalist, and techno nature. They are, in Foucauldian terms, three epistemes, whose logic of operation is different in each case, but which, for Escobar, are not incommensurable, but quite the opposite: as discourses, they compete, intertwine, and coexist with each other (Escobar, 1999). We will give some conceptual details of each of them.

The organic regime is situated in that terrain that is defined by shapes that are not strictly modern; that is, this regime is made up of representations where there is a "…relative inseparability of the biophysical, human and spiritual worlds", where "…vernacular economic relations, (the) non-modern circuits of knowledge, and (the) forms of use prevail, and meaning of nature that does not imply its systematic destruction" (Escobar, 1999, p. 229, our translation). This regime is represented by those discourses whose central goal is not to generate alternative developments, but alternatives to development. Thus, from the good lives of the Indo-American communities, where development is tied to the forms of local production and the consolidation of the biocultural heritage of the communities (Rist, 2002), proposals such as *sumak kawsay*, *suma qamaña, mandar obedeciendo*, and *commonwealth*. They are proposals with ancestral visions whose philosophical principles are anchored in a profound rescue of communal lifestyles, both of indigenous and Afro peoples, where nature acquires a level of sacredness that prevents dissociating the biophysical from the spiritual, guided by principles such as parity, linkage, that of the included third party, community service, hand/return, etc. (Mignolo, 2002). It is the notion of nature that the People of the earth possess (Leff, 1994), the people-territory (Escobar, 2014).

For its part, capitalized nature is based on the separation of the human and natural world, where it is mediated by capitalist and patriarchal social relations and appears as produced by the mediation of work (Escobar, 1999). It is this discourse, says Escobar, that characterized the aggressive process of global industrialization that began at the end of the 19th century with an expansive and highly exfoliating nature of natural resources. It is a stage of exploitation of nature that was based on the idea of progress as every society's final stage, having as an ally the increasingly efficient techno-scientific apparatus, a fact that generated a discourse around the idea of nature as a system, the natural system, whose purpose was to provide capitalism and the market with sufficient natural resources, as well as provide environmental services (Escobar, 2014).

Finally, the discourse of techno nature was based on the idea of a kind of nature produced by technoscience new forms, "…particularly those based on molecular technologies" (Escobar, 1999, p. 229, our translation). We will focus our analysis on this point, since, following theorists such as Félix Guattari and Donna Haraway, Escobar affirms that we have entered an era that is beyond organic nature and that it is impossible to return to it.

Escobar's proposal expressed in Designs for the Pluriverse (2018) affirms that the limits between the organic and the artificial have faded, or at least have shifted depending on the techno-scientific currents with the greatest influence worldwide. It is impossible to think that what we call nature remains alien to the interventions of human beings; In fact, those who place themselves in this field, Escobar says, create what he calls "nature ideology".

This statement underpins an unprecedented logical, ontological, and epistemological transformation that, he assures, we are just beginning to understand. For this author, it is now impossible to think about that great return to a non-capitalized nature, as organic discourses advocate, seeking again to concatenate the biophysical and the spiritual. Rather, it is about promoting an alliance between organic nature and techno nature, about understanding its pluriverse. For this author, we witness the decline of those essentialist discourses that support the idea of a pristine nature, outside of history and the human context, as a pure and independent entity. It is a discourse that, Escobar assures, has been exhausted and that is giving way to a new one where nature is seen as artificially produced by humans.

In that sense, he continues with what he had already started years before, where:

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(…) the discourses of biodiversity and biotechnology can be in the scheme of what Donna Haraway calls the postmodern reinvention of nature, a reinvention promoted by sciences such as molecular biology, genetics, and immunology, or by currents of research such as human genome projects, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology. We could be moving from a regime of organic and capitalized nature towards a regime of techno nature carried out by new forms of science and technology (Escobar, 1999, p. 387, our translation).

When Escobar states that the limits between the natural and the artificial have faded based on the role of biotechnologies, it is impossible for humanity to remain oblivious to the multiple ways in which the techno-scientific apparatus intervenes in nature, contributing to the discursive construction. Nature has already been a technical product, he assures. It has become an entity that generates "artifactual" products, with bioartifacts of a hybrid nature, what Donna Haraway calls the notion of the cyborg[1]. Escobar affirms that techno-natural discourse implies knowledge of a reality where humans, animals, and machines find themselves intertwined and articulated. It is no longer possible to oppose the organic to the technological, nor to think of a romantic return to a reality where the organic discourse manages to impose its hegemony over the techno-natural.

The bet would be to assume an imbrication to configure new ways of managing nature and human communities' relationships. We are therefore faced with the challenge of a political reinvention of nature, of the pluriverse, that separates it from the discourses of development, especially those that support the possibility of sustainable development, discourses typical of the episteme of capitalized nature. From this perspective, the role of social movements is fundamental, since they create alternative discourses where environmental problems such as energy production, resource exploitation, and even those that are indirectly related such as gender and poverty issues, are not reduced "…to another problem of development, to another chapter in the history of economic culture" (Escobar, 1999, p. 396, our translation).

Opposite to other analytical perspectives, and even thinkers within the same decolonial perspective, Escobar does not romanticize the idea of subalternity in his analytical proposal, nor does he support an organic discourse as it would contribute to the solution of the complex environmental contemporary problems. According to him, social movements, as political actors, activists, and, to a certain extent, academia, must (should) move in a regime of hybrid natures, halfway between the organic and the cybernetic, with anti-essentialist approaches.

In this sense, it is close to what Félix Guattari's notion of ecosophy (1996), by proposing alternative uses of new technologies; we delve into discourses that do not aim to join the market (such as the liberal position) or the State (such as the Marxist position), but rather social movements that are committed to the defense of their territories, their biocultural heritage (Toledo et al., 2019), in what Escobar calls a political ecology of virtuality, which challenges the techno-capitalist valorization of nature. They are, in this sense, movements whose discourses are anchored both the defense of identity in the name of essentialist visions, and the articulation of the three areas of experiences indicated by Guattari: environmental ecology, social ecology, and mental ecology, experiences that, for this author, far from being separated, are closely articulated in Latin American societies.

The articulation of these three areas indicated by Guattari appears in Escobar's work as insurmountable experiences for the configuration of a discourse that manages to bring together the demands of the discursive representations that sustain the social movements anchored to the territory, movements in which this author deposits the last hopes in the search for alternatives to the complex contemporary environmental problems.

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[1] With the notion of cyborg, Haraway (2020) brings into play one of the essential characteristics of his work: the juxtaposition of notions, practices, and knowledge that are, apparently, incompatible. From biology, psychoanalysis, robotics, and zoology, Haraway proposes the notion of cyborg: a metaphorical concept that defines a hybrid between a machine and a living organism, it is a creature that tramples, on the one hand, social reality and, on the other, that of fiction, trying to exemplify the way in which it is currently impossible to think (think ourselves) apart from the role that technology has in the life of contemporary human beings, whether we are modern or not. This is not the space to analyze Haraway's provocative proposal, but it seems pertinent to point out the reflection he makes on the patriarchy operating in the organization of the American Museum of Natural History, which reveals a discourse behind the way of presenting nature. In *The Teddy Bear Patriarchy. Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden*, Haraway (2019) debates the way of articulating the masculinist, racist, economic stories, etc., after the layout and the route in said Museum, an articulation that, in discourse, is presented as objective, without being so, states the author.

4   Conclusions

While it is true that Arturo Escobar's position can be read as part of the decolonial analytical perspective, both his initial conceptual apparatuses (Foucauldian post-structuralism) and the most recent ones reflected in his proposal in Designs for the Pluriverse (design theories, the theories of complexity and good living), his analysis has not failed to incorporate other perspectives that have nourished both his conceptual apparatus and his analytical perspective.

In that sense, it seems essential to highlight the way in which this author asserts that modern technology has generated a certain way of being in the world, an ontology in which the human being has lost his premodern links with nature, which some call eco-connection. This modern uprooting has made him lose his compass in the world of entities and objects. It is a technology that has designed a certain world, a certain way of understanding our life projects, our relationship with other living beings, and, in that sense, our future on the planet. A dualistic vision persists that contrasts the natural with the human, the social with the natural, the mental with the physical, the subject with the object, etc.

The organic vision of the world, the one that linked the human lifestyle with planetary physicochemical cycles, has disappeared. With the emergence of techno-natural discourse, an irreversible process of despiritualization of nature began, guided largely by the techno-scientific apparatus. The discourse on nature changed from one that named it the mother earth, as the giver of life, and with a spirituality that united man with other living beings to another that saw it as a system that provided resources to beings human, as a large analyzable organism, with measurable, conceptualizable, codifiable, and measurable life cycles, with practical purposes and whose environmental services provide the resources to sustain rationalizable human lifestyles.

From this perspective, the present and the future are technically designed, based on abstract axioms that no longer depend on ancestral abstract knowledge but on modern scientific knowledge. The consequence of this, Escobar would say, is that knowledge has been unanchored from life, becoming an ally of capitalism and a tool to manipulate the world. In this sense, the value of the social movements that defend their territory increases, since, Escobar believes, the emerging global politics is anchored in them since they face what he calls conditions of ontological occupation, a notion with which this author provides a light of hope in the face of the complex reality of modern environmental problems. The discourse of grassroots social movements, those anchored to their territories, represents a complex rationality that can be contrasted with techno-natural discourse. Like Walter Mignolo, Escobar closes his analysis by asserting that these movements are like "islets" spread throughout the planet surrounded by the technical and predatory rationality that surrounds the techno-natural discourse of the West. Each of these islets is the bearer of a peculiar form of design, Escobar asserts, which, although located in an ontological exteriority in the face of modern/Western thought, also interacts autopoietically with the techno-naturalized discourse.

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