

POPULAR, CATHOLIC CHURCH, AND THE ANTICOMMUNIST IDEOLOGY IN BRAZIL: ambivalences in the scope of Movimento de Educação de Base (1961-1966)

Educação popular, Igreja Católica e ideologia anticomunista no Brasil:
ambivalências no âmbito do Movimento de Educação de Base (1961-1966)

Educación popular, Iglesia Católica e ideologia anticomunista en el Brasil:
ambivalencias en el ámbito del Movimiento de Educación de Base-MEB (1961-1966)

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Abstract: We analyzed the relationships between the Basic Education Movement (MEB) and the hegemonic forces in Brazil between 1961 and 1966, with a particular focus on the Catholic Church. We begin with its initial trajectory as a popular education initiative and the foundations of its educational project, noting that its internal discussions reflected elements of the anticommunist struggle. We use institutional sources to understand the tensions that led to its assimilation by the regime after the coup. We turn to the press to analyze records that questioned its educational intentions, understanding how the "management of political passions" was fundamental for public opinion to justify discourses and practices of repression against alternatives assumed to be contesting the regime, with the unequivocal support of the Catholic hierarchy.

Keywords: military dictatorship and education; popular education and anti-communism; Catholic Church and hegemony; political education.

Resumo: Analisamos relações entre o Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB) e as forças hegemônicas no Brasil entre 1961 e 1966, em especial a Igreja Católica. Partimos do seu percurso inicial como iniciativa de educação popular e das bases do seu projeto educativo, observando que suas discussões internas ecoavam elementos da luta anticomunista. Utilizamos fontes institucionais para compreender as tensões que levaram à sua assimilação pelo regime após o golpe. Recorremos à imprensa para analisar registros que colocavam em questão suas intenções educacionais, compreendendo como a "gestão das paixões políticas" foi fundamental para que a opinião pública justificasse discursos e práticas de repressão diante de alternativas assumidas como contestatórias ao regime, com apoio inequívoco da hierarquia católica.

Palavras-chave: ditadura militar e educação; Educação Popular e anticomunismo; Igreja Católica e hegemonia; educação política.

Resumen: Analizamos las relaciones entre el Movimiento de Educación de Base (MEB) y las fuerzas hegemónicas en Brasil entre 1961 y 1966, en especial la Iglesia Católica. Partimos de su recorrido inicial como una iniciativa de educación popular y de las bases de su proyecto educativo, observando que sus discusiones internas resonaban con elementos de la lucha anticomunista. Utilizamos fuentes institucionales para comprender las tensiones que llevaron a su asimilación por el régimen tras el golpe. Recurrimos a la prensa para analizar registros que cuestionaban sus intenciones educativas, comprendiendo cómo la "gestión de las pasiones políticas" fue fundamental para que la opinión pública justificara discursos y prácticas de represión frente a alternativas asumidas como contestatarias al régimen, con el apoyo inequívoco de la jerarquía católica.

Palabras clave: dictadura militar y educación; educación popular y anticomunismo; Iglesia Católica y hegemonía; educación política.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, we have been watching in Brazil and worldwide a regression of several achievements we might consider modern, among them the reliance on the enlightenment and formation through different educational forms. This phenomenon emerges with the recrudescence of authoritarianism in different places of the world and has gained steam with discourses against the system, leading to the emergence of all types of populism, from left and right inclinations, besides the naturalization of authoritarian policies. In Brazil and in a large part of Latin America, this authoritarian wave is connected to the complete deregulation of the labor market, accentuated by the neoliberal ideology, the removal of acquired rights from a large part of the population, the criticism against institutions and the rightful State, and even their fragile democracies. From an educational viewpoint, we perceive an increase in criticisms against teachers and the school institution, creating forms to limit the right of popular manifestation, disqualifying the university, the intellectual and cultural works, as well as any critical perspective towards the capitalist-liberal organization. These initiatives are gathered around a well-known tripod, as it was also in the origin of the events that led to the 1964 military coup d'état and the long and cruel civil-military dictatorship that followed it: the criticism of costumes and the conservative agenda regarding them, the anticommunism, and, finally, the strengthening of all sorts of Christian fundamentalism. All these elements were targets of concern and “educational” action of the ideology that supported all authoritarianism in the country (Braghini & Oliveira, 2024, 2025), many of which are relived in the projects of civic-military schools, in movements such as *Escola sem Partido* [Partyless School], the persecution of teachers, the censorship or not of school books, and the disputes around school curriculum and teacher education.

We understand that many events observed nowadays have been slowly developing over the history of this country, although we are unable to accurately and adequately reflect on their impacts in the present time. An example is the relativization or even praising of the dictatorship by a part of the Brazilian population, including expressions in the mainstream media. Or yet, the false equivalence between the actions of different social groups to maintain acquired rights and the coup attempt on January 8th, 2023. We should not forget that memories are always an object of disputes and that those produced about the Brazilian dictatorship are far from being univocal or harmonious (Napolitano, 2015).

In this article, we present and discuss how the anticommunism discourse in the 1960s in Brazil was stimulated by the Catholic Church reverberating within a movement that would mark the practices of popular education in the country the *Movimento de Educação de Base* – MEB (Grassroots Education Movement). We argue that, in the Brazilian political culture, as delineated by Motta (2009, 2021), the Catholic Church, especially its hierarchy, played a fundamental role in disseminating

anticommunist ideology in the years leading up to the 1964 military coup, and even during its initial movements. If, later, an institutional turn within it would allow the emergence of the Liberation theology, through the work of progressist religious members deeply committed with the political causes of the explored population in Latin America, since the end of the 1950s the Church relied on the possibilities of transforming poor people's social reality with no criticism or denouncement against the structural bases of domination. As the documents used here show, in the limit of its reformist action, the Church warned about the risks of "subversive ideologies" contaminating poor people's minds. In this case, educating was not only contributing to overcoming the ignorance diagnosed by its agents. Beyond that, and most importantly, it would mean not allowing political tendencies considered radical and revolutionary to torment the minds of ordinary people (Sá Netto, 2024). Certainly, this type of "pedagogical" guidance hindered MEB work from its foundation to its seizure by the dictatorial ideal since 1966, creating within it a strong debate about its role in the political and ideological fight in the period.

If every educational project embodies a bet on a profile of society and the individual, it can adapt itself to hegemonic forces, present itself as contrary to them, or even have ambiguous relations towards their principles. Despite the level of identification that the educational projects may have with the hegemony in the broader sense of the term education, in moments of social and political tensions and crises, they are placed under suspicion because it is believed that they can also be vectors of counter-hegemony.¹Not coincidentally, authoritarian regimes often have very evident educational agendas. In this sense, this text seeks to analyze the relationships established between MEB and the hegemonic forces in Brazil from 1961 to 1966, including the government, press, military, and, especially, the Catholic Church, as well as the "anticommunist" fight, which served as one of its guidelines. We start from the institutional sources and the period press to analyze the records that ended up questioning their educational intentions.²National newspapers or from specific regions in the country helped us to understand the ways through which the "management of the political passions" (Ansart, 2019) was fundamental to justify repression discourses and practices faced by alternatives considered to be confrontational towards the military regime consolidated in the country after April 1st, 1964. The documents that emerged from the MEC practices were analyzed because

¹ When reflecting on the relationships among hegemony, counter-hegemony, and education, we are grounded in the studies of Gramsci (2001a and 2001b) and Williams (1977 and 2003). We highlight that the hegemony concept was one of the most used during the 1980s in Brazil, not only in the History of Education but mainly in the whole educational debate in the period, which ended one of the many cycles of authoritarian violence of the Brazilian State.

² The archives consulted were: *Acervo digital Centro de Referência e Memória da Educação Popular e Educação de Jovens e Adultos do Rio de Janeiro – CREMEJA*, *Centro Memória Viva – Documentação e Referência em Educação de Jovens e Adultos (EJA)*, *Educação Popular e Movimentos Sociais da Universidade Federal de Goiás – Goiânia*, as well as the bibliography on the theme.

they mean the materialized expression of a historical experience (Thompson, 1987). As such, they record the ambivalence and the level of the surrounding intellectual debate, their hesitations, advancements, and setbacks, understanding the place of politics in popular education. The documents encompass correspondences, meeting and event minutes, materials to form militants, among others. Regarding the periodical press, it is understood as a repository of the practice and historical experience, which is not exempt from interests, mainly political ones. We focus on national press, such as *Jornal O Globo*, and regional newspapers where the *Movimento's* action was more developed and known. These newspapers often served as echo chambers to what was published in the main vehicles, reverberating a collection of ideas that sometimes praised and sometimes criticized MEB's initiatives. At several moments, their pages were used by representatives of the Catholic Church to reaffirm its commitment to popular education, though not succumbing to the charms of communist ideology. Considering the press as a public opinion maker, and MEB as a fundamentally middle-class movement, we can get clues of the broad debate that showed not only different ideological positions in dispute at the time, but also the disputes of meanings about the relationship between popular education and politics within the Church itself. In this sense, what was published during the period about the MEB's action did not specifically target certain power groups, but a large part of the population that accessed the newspapers directly or through the circulation of the polemic topics expressed on them by various mediators.

Faced with the organizational forms of civil society against the political *status quo*, mainly through the engagement of workers and students, even before the coup, many institutions aimed to politically educate the population. From the educational ideals and practices with a clear political objective, or through those that aimed to eliminate politics from the educational agenda, the goal, in the terms proposed by Ansart (2019), was to incentivize or contain the political power of the population, mobilizing a series of objective or subjective valences that helped define the national politics. An example faced by MEB regarded the political organization of rural workers. Many of them were represented by unions, and some among them were based on socialist principles. Hence, in that context, managing political passions was cleared guided towards an enemy, either real or imaginary: communism. The development of a comprehensive anticommunist liturgy aimed to instill in the population not only an aversion to communism as a possible political expression but also to demonize its fundamental principles in the criticism of Brazilian capitalism. The objective was to manage the political passions of those workers and the general population. For many, including the Church, this could be done through educational practices.

Based on this finding, we defend as a central argument that the anticommunist fight could be found in the justification to create educational projects in countries of the then-called Third World, with a strong support and presence of the Catholic Church, as is the case of MEB in Brazil, even before the 1964 military coup. It is also

true in the crisis that led to its decline in the first two years after the civil-military dictatorship was established, as the ideology that would support the dictatorial cycle had anticommunism as one of its pillars. The impasse between placing itself against the communist temptation or aligning with or assuming some of its principles – the class struggle, for example – sometimes reinforcing, while at other times moving away from the Church's official thought, produced studies, debates, and reflections that helped to measure some ambivalences of its conception and actions. If the *Movimento* did not immediately succumb to the events triggered by the April 1964 coup, as many other movements of education and popular culture in the period, it was not because it actually survived in all its plenitude. Setbacks, mutations, and structural transformations kept the name alive, but maybe not the educational project that would become a reference in popular education at the time.

POPULAR EDUCATION IN A WORLD IN CRISIS

MEB was officially created with the presidential signing of Decree 50.370 on March 21st, 1961. Nonetheless, its origins date back to the “experiences of education through the radio, promoted in the Northeast by the Brazilian Episcopate” (MEB – Movimento de Educação de Base, 1963, p. 1). It is important to mention that the use of radio for educational purposes predates the radiophonic schools nationally³and internationally.⁴However, the organization and the systematic form through which they were proposed transcend the simple aim of disseminating ideas and spreading information to the poor population. It is a complete process of formation and transformation of the mentalities of a well-defined public: the rural workers from “third world countries”. Sensibilities were in dispute.

³ According to Horta (1972), it is possible to find public and private initiatives that used the radio for educational ends in Brazil, since the 190s, starting with the Plan Roquette Pinto. Other initiatives were: *Rádio escola do Distrito Federal* (1934), *Confederação brasileira de Radiodifusão* (1933) through which were created the “*Comissão Rádio Educativa*”; *Serviço de Radiodifusão Educativa* (1937); *Universidade do Ar da Rádio Nacional do Rio de Janeiro* (1941); the *Plano da Rádio Educadora do Brasil* (1942); *Universidade do Ar de São Paulo* (1947); *Plano Benjamin do Lago* (1950); *Experiencia do professor Januzzi* (1950); *Plano Frei Gil Bomfim* (1955); *Plano de Ribas da Costa* (1956); *Sistema Radio Educativo Nacional – SIRENA* (1958).

⁴ The use of the radio with educational intentions dates to its origins. However, it is mainly in the first half of the 20th century that the radio starts to be broadly used as an education tool in “underdeveloped” countries, as documented by Grenfel Williams (1950). Regarding its use for educational purposes by the Catholic Church, the pioneer in Latin America was *Acción Cultural Popular – ACPO*. The initiative emerged in Colombia in 1947, created by the priest José Joaquín Salcedo Guarín. It was methodologically based on the combined use of mass communication media for basic education or *Christian fundamental education* of Colombian rural workers through the Radiophonic Schools. Hence, it is recognized as a pioneer in the use of radio for literacy and education of popular classes. A critical analysis of that experience can be found in Urrea Quintero (2022).

The agreement between CNBB[*Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*–Brazilian National Bishop Conference] and the Jânio Quadros government shared responsibilities and guaranteed a budget for MEB's works. The relationship and the partnership between the Catholic Church and the Brazilian State in the 1960s are fundamental to understand the consolidation of the project and MEB's internal dynamics before and after the 1964 civil-military coup, as well as the ideological dispute for the control of education in the country.

In the project of creation presented by the president the reality of illiteracy in Brazil was described and the dangers it raised to society in general and to those responsible for it:

The infra-human condition in which millions of Brazilians in the rural areas live – as well as urban areas – and the emergence of aspirations that do not come to fruition constitute a serious social problem for those who hold a part of the responsibility in their hands, but it is mainly a challenge to the democratic institutions in the country (...).It is urgent to open to our peasants, workers, and their families the richness of basic education, fundamental education that we would call 'popular culture'. [...] we are not talking about a traditional school [...] it would be impossible, nowadays in Brazil, to reach millions of illiterate people in this way. We shall use the radio for radiophonic schools (MEB, 1961a, p. 1- 2).

The project was ambitious, but we will not approach here how much its initial promoters were or not connected to the reality of Brazilian misery. In the emphases given in the documents, several questions are posed to explain why we believe that the Cold War environment and the anticommunist fight in Brazil and worldwide crossed the creation of MEB. They are also useful for understanding the specific proposal for a basic and fundamental education, as stimulated by international bodies. We will start with the latter.

Popular education on a transnational scale

At the beginning of the MEB's activities, *educação de base* (basic education) was defined as “mass literacy in the underdeveloped regions of the country; sanitary education; agricultural initiation; **democratic initiation**; healthy entertainment; Christian formation” (MEB, 1961b, p. 5, our highlight). The initial definition is identified with the transnational discourses after World War II by entities such as UNESCO. The proposal for fundamental education in this body intended to be “universal” but flexible in its ability to adapt to local characteristics. A perspective that goes beyond national frontiers was necessary when seeking to guarantee the advancement of peace in the relationship between countries, one of the pedagogical

leitmotiven after World War II. Nurtured, in turn, by the developmentalist logic valued at the period, the initial ideal was that the dialogue between nations and the transfer of educational conceptions would allow that countries in “superior developmental” levels to help or be a reference to others in their path to reach the same developmental level (Roldán Vera & Fuchs, 2021). At the end, in the developmentalist perspective “all” nations could develop following some paths. Here, we can find a strong ideological expression in an openly Eurocentric discourse, something that would help define and disseminate a hegemony.⁵

After two world wars, one of UNESCO’s concerns was education as part of the mechanisms to avoid new military confrontations, promoting the development of communities. The agency seemed to have forgotten that the monstrous experience of Nazism, to stick to one example, took place in one of the richest and most powerful nations at the time.

It is important to highlight the connection of fundamental education programs and attempts to mitigate hunger, disease, and “ignorance” in places from where, according to the developed countries, resistances against capitalism could emerge. There was little concern with the transformation of those realities outside the developmentalist milestones in vogue at the time.

If the immediate post-war II period stimulated the developmentalist and pacifist wave in Western hegemonic discourses, a new tension emerged in international relations: the Cold War. Defined as a fight for hegemony between the United States and the then Soviet Union, it invaded several life dimensions in the “third world”, those considered to be underdeveloped capitalists (Denning, 2005). These nations, the main recipients of that so-called fundamental education, became the privileged target of the increasing ideological dispute at the time. Latin America, in particular, would play a fundamental role in this scenario. However, as Motta (2021) shows, the anticommunist paranoia had emerged much earlier. The Cuban Revolution in the middle of the Americas would increase the persecutory fervor of the Western *status quo*. For this reason, programs focused on the education of popular groups and the development of communities became targets of investments from international agencies and countries, such as the United States, which presented themselves as guardians of the liberal and capitalist interests worldwide, especially in this continent. In this context, the danger of any social explosion had a name, color, and nationality: communism, “the red scare”, the soviets. In the specific case of MEB, we do not mean the direct economic support of the USA to its initiatives, but the ideas disseminated

⁵ In this text, we do not aim to discuss the concept of developmentalism and its multiple expressions, mainly in Brazil, as it is not our object and there are many materials available on the theme. However, the developmentalist ideology in its many strands is strongly grounded in the economic thought that transforms all life dimensions, e.g., education becomes a simple input in what was considered a developed country. Its dissemination took place from a number of assumptions established by liberal economists and ideologists, having as a goal a restricted group of capitalist countries considered to be “developed”.

by that country (among others), in the national and international contexts, when it emerged.

The defense of the magazine “*O Cruzeiro*” from Rio de Janeiro of the bishops’ actions when faced with the “communist threats” shows this ambivalence: “Dom Távora [...] obtained from the former president Jânio a decree creating the *Movimento de Educação de Base*. [...] He organized a Catholic Agrarian Youth. If not for this preaching barrier – if not for the bishops at the Northeast – the communist agitation would have been even greater” (A igreja e ressurreição nordestina, 1964, p. 127).

It is no coincidence that someone like Dom Helder Câmara, who became famous for his actions as a defender of those politically persecuted by the dictatorship, as well as a member of the Federal Education Council at the time, expressed the importance of MEB in the path for “human and Christian” development, moving away from the possibility that the people could raise against the established order. Quoted in the article: *Igreja e Desenvolvimento* [Church and Development], in the newspaper *A Ordem*, from Rio Grande do Norte, he affirmed that

The Church needs, furthermore, to prepare the people for development, so that it does not come from a summit. That is why the Church released the *Movimento de Educação de Base* (the slandered MEB) “to give the masses in subhuman conditions the base for their human and Christian fulfillment”. It does want to simply teach how to read and write, but to open their eyes, raise their awareness, **because, in one way or another, their eyes would open tomorrow and they would stand up with we (Sic!) and against us.**

[...]

It is up to us to fight for development, with eyes open to save from the Marxist fascination mainly the workers and university students, to remind the People of abundance of the ethic development lessons (Câmara, 1965, p. 1, our highlights)

How did MEB moved from being highly recognized in the country for its role in education and literacy of the “underdeveloped” masses to being “slandered”, as Dom Helder suggested? We should take some steps back to the consolidation process of the *Movimento* during the period between 1961 and 1963. In those years, the identification of MEB as a movement of culture and popular education was created, within the Catholic Church gained steam the discussions about the renovation of its positions faced by the issues of the time (and not only spiritual ones) and the engagement of lay people in the peasant and workers movements. These questions projected to the eyes of the anticommunist discourse the sector of the Church, considered progressive and some of its organizations, such as MEB. This scenario triggered within the Church the need to produce arguments seeking to demonstrate that the *Movimento* was not

communist and, consequently, that its educational project was not “communizing”, revolutionary, or subversive. In some cases, the *Movimento* questioned if they should take a political position, besides educating.

However, if the principles of MEB matched UNESCO’s frames, its processes of growth, penetration in rural areas, and its reading of the social and political reality of the country, mainly by lay people and university students, produced a series of transformations in the conception and the ways of acting, characterizing moments of intense debate and internal crisis.

MEB UNVEILS BRAZILIAN REALITY

In December 1962, in Olinda, the *I Encontro Nacional de Coordenadores do Movimento* [I National Meeting of Coordinators in the *Movimento*] took place. It is a consensus among researchers that MEB considers this meeting the beginning of a new phase in the *Movimento*, with a more engaged view on the interests of the so-called popular classes. Between the impulse of this Meeting and the possibility of having enough resources – according to Fávero (1982), the first and only time it would happen – the year 1963 would be a fruitful one for the *Movimento*, which had an important quantitative growth, a process of better ideological definition, and its recognition in the national level as a movement of Education and Popular Culture. Such recognition took place in the frame of the *I Encontro Nacional de Alfabetização e Cultura Popular* [I National Literacy and Popular Culture Meeting], in September 1963. During this meeting, different movements gathered in Recife to share work experiences in education and popular culture. The event was key to understanding the environment in which the transformation of MEB itself took place.

As Soares (2009) affirms, between the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s, several movements of popular education and culture emerged in Brazil. Fávero (2006, p. 51) defines this emergence as a transformation of literacy campaigns from previous decades. The new proposals were qualitatively different by assuming a commitment “in favor of urban and rural popular classes, as well as the fact of guiding their educational action towards a political action” (Fávero, 2006, p. 51). Those fighting for popular education seemed to acquire the consciousness that education was not enough to, in fact, free poor people from their condition.

When observed during a period of time, the emergence of these movements shows a rich period of alternative productions and exploration of different paths for the education and participation of popular groups when building other life conditions in capitalist countries. However, amidst a time of fierce ideological dispute, these alternative forms were perceived as subversive and dangerous, before and especially after the 1964 military coup. In fact, as is the case with MEB, this perspective took

place even when keeping the frames of the Catholic Church when seeking to define educational proposals and actions. According to Beisiegel (1982, p. 199 as cited in Fávero 2006, p. 196) the educational projects of these movements were, in turn, expressions of greater political projects committed to the "pacific transformation of society", through which they rejected only "certain expressions of the capitalist society functioning and not the capitalist form of production as a whole". As MEB, many of these movements were connected to the Catholic Church, either through the bishops or through Catholic militant groups. The militant lay people circulated, connecting ideas, practices, and discourses. Terms such as popular culture, consciousness/awareness (raising awareness), and popular education were part of the common vocabulary.

We can clearly perceive through the review of the newspapers analyzed between 1960 and 1966 that MEB was recognized as an organization for peasant education with the approval from the Catholic Church, through CNBB, and the State, through the economic support and official recognition, even though this affiliation does not frequently appear, nor is it present in mainstream newspapers. However, since 1963, we can find some articles and opinion columns questioning the "Christian" work of MEB, understanding the *Movimento* as aligned with communism. Many of the criticisms disseminated by the press came from the Church itself.

In Maranhão, Dom José Delgado, archbishop of São Luís and connected to MEB, frequently wrote at *Jornal do Maranhão*, showing a concern of "extremes" in which the young people from MEB could fall prey to:

When the MEB started, in São Luís, I advised its leaders on the convenience of approaching specialized organizations of *Ação Católica Juvenil*[Catholic Youth Action], including JAC, in the rural area, my intention was to protect Maranhão youth from any danger of political alienation, mainly, in the beautiful life phase in which one either finds noble causes or embrace the most ignoble ones, as long as they have good appearances (Delgado, 1963, p. 7).

The Bishop's warning was issued from the finding that some "young apostles from *Ação Católica*, in JEC, JOC, and JUC in their community activity had contact with strange movements with political functions, including groups and entities with a Marxist inclination" (Delgado, 1963, p. 7).

Despite the Bishop's concerns, the same newspaper presented serious criticisms against MEB and its members' actions, which announced the reactionary waves:

[...] this strange basic education that has been implemented by MEB can be summarized in the deal, clear and subtle, of all values already confirmed by the Brazilian society and shouting at the

peasant's ear that he is poor, miserable, pauper, and destitute, [...] the peasant is not an established power, often is not even a voter, impregnate it (sic!) with this mistaken idea will be to invite him to the immediate action, using the force, toward the social friction in a struggle against the classes that border them. More than an invitation, the incitation – this is already a pedagogy of class struggle (Muezim, 1963, p. 8)

Also in the *Diário de Pernambuco*, an editor (identified as M.A.A.) dedicated to MEB, on a couple of occasions, his column “*Informativo Econômico*” [Economic Information]:

I have no personal prejudices against the *Movimento de Cultura Popular* or the *Movimento de Educação de Base* (MEB), which are, in Pernambuco today, the advanced fronts of Brazilian left movement together with the masses – urban and rural – and the inexperienced and frustrated youth. MEB is one of these naïve movements, composed by a group of young boys and girls who believe, due to one of those common inspirations of the youth years, to be possible to save humanity against the “decaying bourgeoisie”, even if at the expense of an alliance with communism.
[...] The greatest contradiction is not among the lay people that compose the Church, mas among priests themselves, who do their work as priests and let themselves be involved by the tricks and wiles of the communist party in the Northeast (M.M.A., 1963, p. 4).

Both records present important points that were constantly discussed about the MEB work before and after the 1964 military coup. The “awareness” work was a central educational point for MEB. It was considered as something that would increase the “affliction of the humble ones” (“Clero reage”, 1964, p. 4). MEB work would not only lead to anguish when faced by the reality of “field workers” but would also incite their violent reaction. A logic through which it would make no sense for people to feel, understand, and seek the transformation of reality because on their “insignificance” there was little they could do. And this ‘little’ could be harmful for them and to the national order. Statements like this came from within the Church. That is, regardless of the socialist or communist guidance, what was never the case, the simple political and educational practice that proposed questioning the life conditions of common people was immediately characterized as subversive, communist. We can notice that, in the previous quotation, the author raised criticisms that, some years later, would target the religious members that followed the Liberation Theology. This aspect helps to understand how it is an ideological and hegemonic dispute through the (re)definition of political sensibilities.

In 1963, MEB prepared the publication of a series of didactic materials that sought to answer the perceived need, by part of educators and coordinators, for materials of “appropriate reading for its educational action” (MEB, 1963a, p. 52). According to the 1963 report, a commission was established to defend and define was to implement the desired reading book. The following report was presented:

The reading book should raise a message that the peasants can identify with; the reading book will focus on a region, the Northeast, where its action is broader and, later, adaptations or other books, to other regions will be provided. The aims of the reading book will be: literacy and awareness, seeking a transcendental view of men and awakening them for the concrete engagement in professional organizations, organizations of class and groups that seek the development of communities; the formative and informative aspects will be based on the value of humans (MEB, 1963a, p. 52)

We can see that there is no reference to the principles that define communism. On the contrary, all the fundamentals expressed follow the principles long disseminated and defended by the Catholic Church. The book would be used as a reading text and a grammar manual for the rural workers who had already learned to read and write through other manuals and booklets that were not adequate to their realities and language. At the end of the booklet entitled “*Viver é lutar*” [Living is Fighting], the authors explained the choices made, in grammatical terms and regarding the use of popular expressions, when seeking to establish a “real communication with the people”. However, this would not exempt the text from accusations about “shameful Portuguese mistakes” (Chagas Freitas, 1964, as cited in MEB, n.d., n.p.). We do not intend to analyze the form and content of the booklet, which has been done by authors, such as Alves and Tonetti (2021). We understand that this text became a justification to question MEB's work and define it as “subversive” on the brink of the military coup. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind the objective that defined MEB in its educational intention: peasants' “awareness”.

On February 20th, 1964, 3,000 copies of the reading book *VIVER É LUTAR* were apprehended, at Companhia Editora Americana, by the orders of the Guanabara governor [Carlos Lacerda], who received complaints that it was printing ‘communist booklets, by order of the Ministry of Education’. MEB ignored that *Empresa Gráfica Brasil Ltda.* had hired the services of *Gráfica Americana*, due to the urgent need of finishing the works.

The 3,000 copies of the book corresponded to the last part of the last shipment of the first 50,000 copies, out of which 45,000 had already been dispatched for the MEB's systems (MEB, n.d., p. 3).

According to Geir Campos's Opinion column at *Jornal Última Hora*, from Rio de Janeiro, the publishing company where the booklets were been printed at the apprehension moment was the same that printed thousands of copies of the book "*Carreirista da Traição*" [The Careerist of Betrayal], by the journalist Eptácio Caó. On this book, the author "takes stock of the ideolofical, theoretical, and mainly practical contradictions of said governor" (Campos, 1964, p. 8). Copies of this book were also apprehended. The same publishing company produced the newspaper *PANFLETO*⁶ [Pamphlet], idealized by the representative Leonel Brizola. MEB's argument, presented by its president, Dom José Vicente Távora, and the general secretary, Marina Bandeira, was that it was a mistake. The later declared for the *Tribuna da Imprensa*, of Rio de Janeiro, in February 22-23, 1964, that "MEB believes that the police investigation aimed to apprehend other publications indeed subversive believing that, finally, the publication of '*Viver é lutar*' will be approved" ("MEC não sabe dos livros", 1964, p. 3). The criticisms of Carlos Lacerda, in both printed materials, was explicit. However, the governor affirmed that the complaint was about the booklets and never took back his words that considered the qualified content as "subversive".

The apprehension incident and the consecutive demands for the MEB's leaders to give testimonies were followed by the national press. Notes of complaint against the "subversive booklets" and, also, the rejection against the actions of the governor and the DOPS, enable us to glimpse how the press noticed and broadened the debate about the "communist danger", paving the way for April 1st.

In the dossier "*Repercussões da Imprensa/Conjunto didático Viver é lutar*" [Repercussion of the Press/Didactic collection *Viver é lutar*] created by MEB (n.d.) with the repercussions of the incident in Guanabara's newspapers, we can find the following headlines on the first day after the apprehension:⁷

"Violada Liberdade de Pensamento" (Correio da Manhã);
 "Apreendidos três mil impressos subversivos" (O Globo); "Cartilha

⁶ We should mention that the newspaper PANFLETO from the *Frente de Mobilização Popular* (under the leadership of Leonel Brizola) published the full booklet, with comments about the apprehension incident and questioning Carlos Lacerda's accusations to the content.

⁷ We reviewed different newspapers cited by the dossier to confirm the headlines. They all match. We could not access the paper "*A Notícia*". Translation note: headlines in order "Freedom of thought violated", "Three thousand subversive materials apprehended", "The booklet DOPS apprehended as subversive was ordered by MEC", "Lacerda orders the invasion of *Gráfica* and apprehends Bishops' booklets", "The booklets' target was to conduce peasants towards fight", "Lacerda's policy invades *Gráfica* and apprehend booklets from the Belém Bishop", "Edition *Viver é Lutar* apprehended by DOPS", "Police chief explains the diligence in the *Gráfica*: subversive booklets apprehended belong to the Pink Bishops"

que DOPS apreendeu por subversivas são encomenda do MEC” (O Jornal); “Lacerda manda invadir Gráfica e apreender as cartilhas dos Bispos” (Jornal do Brasil); “Alvo da Cartilha era conduzir os lavradores à luta” (Diário de Notícias); “Polícia de Lacerda invade Gráfica e apreende Cartilhas do Bispo de Belém” (Última Hora); “Edição Viver é Lutar apreendida pela DOPS” (Diário Carioca); “Chefe de Polícia explica a diligência na Gráfica: Cartilhas subversivas apreendidas pertencem a Bispos Cor de Rosa” (A Notícia). (MEB, s.d., p. 2)

Reading the headlines as a whole is emblematic of the ways through which the press shaped public opinion. The same incident could be analyzed in different forms, which is not only a question of researchers’ subjective analysis. In this specific case, less than a month after the military coup that established the hateful dictatorship, the way through which the incident was reported shows the environment of political tension, ideological dispute, and the hegemonic and explicit definition of each newspaper’s political project.

Several papers showed the rejection to the way Carlos Lacerda, the main actor in the increased anticommunist authoritarianism, coerced the freedom of expression. For instance, this is how the *Correio da Manhã* referred to the incident in the editorial from February 21st, 1964:

The last police violent action from the governor of Guanabara is one more clear demonstration of intolerance and its complete incompatibility with the democratic regime. It affirms, once more, its obscure objective to destroy individual and collective freedoms as if the country was not willing to defend them.

In general, the greatest repulsion was towards Lacerda’s action. Nonetheless, there was also an important support towards the booklet *Viver é Lutar* and questions to the adjective “subversive”. Still, it is important to highlight that Dom José Távora, MEB president, could publish a broad defense to the *Movimento*’s educational work. As MEB had been denounced as “subversive” and aligned with communism, the Bishop’s defense, its creator, sought to justify its actions within the Church’s doctrine framework, disconnected from any aspect of the communist doctrine. We can stress some examples of how the Bishop’s declarations and testimonies were received.

Saying that the *Movimento de Educação de Base* “seeks to promote people and never massify it”, Dom Távora declared yesterday that “MEB’s work has a Christian guideline and is implemented by people aware that a materialist solution for Brazil would be a

disastrous measure” (“Dom Távora: MEB eleva o povo sem massificá-lo”, 1964 p. 6).

‘MEB’s booklets – declared Dom José Távora, archbishop of Aracaju – are of purê orthodoxy. If a cautious spirit hangs to an isolated phrase, within a context, there might be an exploitation. But if taken as a whole, the end it targets, cannot make any unfair judgement’ (Távora, 1964, p. 25).

On Friday, March 27th, 1964, the newspaper *Última Hora* published fragments of Dom José Távora’s testimony at DOPS.

I should tell Your Excellency that the discomfort to which I refer, closely refer to an educational work of broad social reach from Archbishops and Bishops, over which an ideological doubt is posed even with a supposed service to communism. More than anyone, we, the Bishops, who represent the Church know how to distinguish between communism and Catholicism (Távora, 1964, p. 7).

As expected, when considering the hegemonic fight, his position was immediately praised as an antidote against the supposed communist wave:

After declaring himself categorically anticommunist, d. José Távora stressed that his strong position, as the guardian and preacher of the gospel does not give him the right to seem omissive when faced with social injustices, ‘as well as not admitting hate between men and classes’ (“Cartilhas não são comunistas”, 1964, p. 3).

In the texts that intended to defend MEB, the content of the *Cartilha* and the work of the *Movimento* was less clear than among those attacking it. The option to emphasize *not being communist* gives the impression that a good opportunity to have an open discussion about the educational objective and the importance of the theme approached at *Viver é Lutar* was left behind. We can imagine it was a defensive position considering the advancement of authoritarianism. It is possible that the context was not favorable to propose a deeper discussion about Brazilian misery, mainly given the conditions at stake after April 1st, 1964. Thus, the emergence of getting rid of any possible connection with a counter hegemonic thought. In its reformist path approximations with communist were certainly not proposed. Therefore, in this movement of getting closer or moving away from a political ideal based on the suppression of the private property and the class struggle, and that mobilized part of workers, students, and even the urban middle class at the period, MEB showed an

ambivalence regarding an absolute acceptance or the flexibilization, in some cases, of the Catholic Church's guidelines concerning its repulsion towards the communist doctrine.

Besides having to defend itself from accusations in the public opinion disseminated by the press, MEB did not receive enough support from MEC or even from the Catholic hierarchy. In the case of MEC, its position was typically of a bureaucracy that nurture a repressive furor:

The Ministry of Education and Culture distributed a note yesterday declaring not fully knowing the content of the booklet "Viver é lutar" which was ordered to be printed by the *Movimento de Educação de Base*, a body from the *Conferência dos Bispos do Nordeste* (SIC!) ("MEC não sabe dos livros", 1964, p. 3).

On the Catholic hierarchy side, Dom Jaime Câmara, who had recently left the presidency of CNBB, by strategy or cowardice, only hindered the *Movimento's* work, which sought to defend the principles of its actions, but witnessed the discredit towards its operation, making it more difficult to combat its detractors:

The Cardinal-Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro. Dom Jaime de Barros Câmara vehemently reacted yesterday to the press news about the invasion of the printing house Americana and the apprehension of booklets from *Movimento de Educação de Base*. He explained that he is unrelated to the books the police consider to be subversive. The cardinal declared himself willing to appear on television to affirm to the public that he is not responsible nor has knowledge of everything that takes place on the ground floor of São Joaquim Palace, which nowadays is exclusively dedicated to a sector of the *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos* that had ordered these booklets ("Cardeal diz que nada tem com cartilhas apreendidas e ignora a ação de bispos", 1964, p. 5).

It is important to consider the context in which MEC had to affirm its ignorance of the booklet. The argument is feasible, as MEB did not need direct authorization due to its autonomous work. However, amidst the pre-coup atmosphere, some explored the fact that the money from *Ministério da Educação e Cultura* in João Goulart's presidency was producing a "communizing material". The newspaper *Diário da Noite*, for example, affirmed that "[...] the *Movimento de Educação de Base*, a body that though belonging to the *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil* is, due to an agreement with *Ministério de Educação* to receive governmental resources, contaminated by propaganda makers from the red belief." ("Penúria sujeita o SERB à orientação comunista", 1964, p. 2).

Concerning the Church authorities that washed their hands during this incident, we will see later how the more conservative wing of the Church determined the alignment process with the dictatorial regime established since April 1st, 1964. Even Church members such as Dom José Távora and Dom Hélder Câmara, to cite two important characters in the educational causes, expressed their anticommunism whenever they could.

Despite the – not uncommon – criticism of Carlos Lacerda's censorship, vague and confusing news about the incident and opinion columns about the "communizing" work of MEB seemed to reverberate more than those of support and explanation. For years MEB needed to defend itself for the initiative of producing the booklet *Viver é lutar* and justify its work outside politics. If, before this event, they already had to defend themselves locally in the states they worked, after the apprehension of the booklet the defense attempt was held nationwide. An example can be seen in a long column published by none other than Eugênio Gudin at *O Globo*, one of the largest national newspapers, which had always supported the coup and dictatorial violence. We can perceive in some parts of his argument an unabashed example of anticommunism.⁸

The title VIVER É LUTAR is significant in a booklet supposedly organized for literacy. Even more significant are the photos that illustrate all the pages of the booklet: images of misery, sub nutrition, hard work, etc.

[Booklet excerpts]

If this is not a booklet designed to instigate the people for a Revolution and make propaganda of Communism as Our Lord, I don't what it is.

Not disrespecting the sincere priests, I should say that the procedure of this communist wing of Catholicism, to which Dom Távora is a member, results from a SPECIALIZED AND UNACCEPTABLE IGNORANCE from those who want to teach others to read.

The most general formula of this ignorance is that every human being HAS THE RIGHT to a dignified life standard: nutrition, clothing, housing, rest, etc. This is an asinine proposition, as it is

⁸ Eugênio Gudin is considered one of the fathers of Brazilian liberal economy. An engineer, who became an economist, he can be characterized as one of the creators of neoliberalism in Brazil (Bielschowsky, 2001). Openly conservative, defender of a modernizing-conservative economy with a liberal-internationalist bias, he was an incisive critic of João Goulart and supported his deposition and the consequent dictatorship. His anticommunist fervor should not seem peculiar, mainly in a moment of great hegemonic dispute worldwide. It is mainly shown in his attacks against the progressive area of the Catholic Church that, as we have seen, did not agree with the communist ideals. His text at *O Globo* is a perfect example of the ideological fight, the dispute for hegemony and the defense of the *status quo*. About Gudin's trajectory and work see the biography written by Scalercio and Almeida (2012) [Scalercio, M., & Almeida, R. de. (2012). *Eugênio Gudin: Inventário de flores e espinhos*. Insight].

absurd. In any country worldwide, the total of material goods to be shared cannot exceed the National Income, that is, the value (except for some details) of the production of goods and services in the whole country.

It is impossible to distribute more than is produced. [...] Productivity decides between wealth and poverty or misery. [...]

There are rich countries, such as the United States, in which the cake provides a slice equivalent to 2,500 dollars “per capita” a year; while others, such as Brazil, in which the slice does not reach 300 dollars and others, like India, that it does not go over 100 dollars.

Who says that the people in Brazil HAVE THE RIGHT to a standard of 1,000 dollars a year, corresponding to a 'dignified' life and not BEING EXPLORED, does an STUPIDY AND EVIL deed, as well as lying.

Nobody denies that there is inequality in the distribution of the 300 dollars “per capita” in Brazil. What countries do not have inequalities? In Russia, I have been constantly saying, the available work income varies from 1 to 40, against 1 to 17 in the United States. Everyone knows that the income taxes in Brazil is badly collected, as it is in Italy, Spain, and France; but those who pay it, pay it hard; even more than in the United States [...]. (Gudin, 1964, p. 2).

Gudin's columnenables us to perceive some recurrent aspects in the collection of articles about the hegemonic dispute; the complete “ignorance” or bad faith of people who defend communist principles, the subtleness of the communist penetration in social reality and the instigation towards the revolution with utopic ends. His text is rich in ironies but unveils a large part of the poverty and misery problems in Brazil, though, conveniently, with no allusion to their structural causes. It would simply be a question of assuming that some would work more than the majority and, consequently, would be richer than others.

In general, in most analyzed sources the attacks are shallow and do not allow us to know exactly what is fought beyond the “atheism materialism”. As Moura de Oliveira (2021) analyzes when defining “anticommunism” in the dictionary of “antis”, the real existence of communism is not necessary, not even understanding what it would be, to allow the historical existence of “anticommunism” and all evils it had caused.

The great noise caused by MEB's booklets increased after the civil-military coup. Persecutions, end of activities in several states, and a tense environment in the field activities. To analyze the booklet incident beyond the dossier prepared by MEB, Bilhão and Alves (2024) use the educators' correspondence, which reveals that the doubts about them being catholic or not, communist or not, have mined peasants' trust and hindered the field work.

It is known that the first years of the military regime attacked the most progressive wings of the Catholic Church beyond MEB; thus, the booklets and some

radio programs continued to be used as examples of “communization” within the institution.

The “*Exposição de Material Subversivo*” [Exhibition of Subversive Material] inaugurated in this capital by order of ID-4 is raising protests in the Catholic circles from Minas Gerais due to its inclusion, as auxiliar bodies of the Communist Party, of religious organizations from *Ação Católica* – JUC, JIC, JOC, JEC – the *Ação Popular* and the *Centro Popular de Cultura*, besides the *Movimento de Educação de Base*, which is directly connected to the *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*.

The booklet edited by the *Movimento de Educação de Base* [...] appears as one of the highly subversive documents, side by side with pannels about the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Revolution, banners, manifests, pamphlets, and books considered “communizing” and even the private correspondence of student leaders and a hand-held machine gun and several muskets (“*Exposição da ID4 irrita católicos*”, 1964, p. 14).

Some religious members sought to react against that type of denouncement, as seen with Dom José Távora, always appealing to the Church’s Social Doctrine and trying to keep a distance regarding any connection with the communist ideals. However, it is evident that this progressive and minoritarian wing of the Church, despite counting with important bishops, was overshadowed by the most conservative and majoritarian wing. Not by change, in the first CNBB’s official statement after the coup, published in almost all the mainstream newspapers of the country and in the Catholic printed material consulted, CNBB started its message praising the “victorious Revolution movement” (*Semana Religiosa*, 7 de junho de 1964, p. 1). The Conference stated that: “Answering the general and distressing expectation of the Brazilian people, who witnessed the fast march of communism to gain power, the Armed Forces arrived in time to prevent the implementation of a Bolshevik regime in our land” (Ibidem). The Church’s support for the coup was explicit. The same document highlighted the importance of seeking the “restoration of the order” brought by the “Revolution”, and thanked “God by the bloodless success of a weaponized revolution”, condemned the violent attacks to Catholic organizations, priests, and lay people. Far from establishing itself as a counter hegemonic possibility, it recognized that there were “favors and abuses by one element or another that bypassed our vigilance, or its own idealism, the lack of malice, or the inadequate appreciation of facts” (Ibidem).

In another document citing the MEB case, CNBB (17 de junho de 1966) talks about the “mistakes or natural flaws in human institutions” (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 22 de junho de 1966, p. 3). It is not clear which would have been the mistakes and flaws in the MEB’s work, clouding its pedagogical and political project, because with these statements only an education institution that followed the frameworks of a

“simple” literacy and evangelization could stand. Even if it was not an initiative that criticized the structural bases of Brazilian society since its beginning, the *Movimento* wanted more. Having warned about the possible abuses within the organization, that exempted the hierarchy and ease the spirits of the military supporting the coup and their supporters, the bishops and archbishops stated that:

we do not accept, nor can we ever accept, the insulting accusation, generalized or gratuitous, veiled or explicit, that the bishops, priests, and followers of organization, such as, for example, *Ação Católica* or *Movimento de Educação de Base* (MEB), are communists or communizing. This is sometimes due to the communist tactic itself; other times, certain elements dissatisfied with the open and brave attitude of true apostles of the Church, the clergy, or the lay people, who preach the healthy doctrine, be it against communist, be it against scandalous social injustices and focus of corruption or de denial of moral values (“A voz autorizada dos Revmos. Snrs. Arcebispos”, 1964, p. 1).

The Church’s process of hand cleaning, which is shown in the excerpt above, was explicit in the criticism against the communist danger, but never used any expression that directly alluded to capitalism and its ills, what was cleared with time. At first, several bishops and archbishops, mainly those directly connected to MEB or with the educational agenda, such as Dom José Távora, Dom Helder Câmara, and Dom José Delgado, defended the *Movimento*. However, as the press published articles, reports, and opinion columns that sought to attenuate the responsibility of the Catholic institution, they ended up condemning the *Movimento*, alleging that the lay people were the ones abusing the priests’ trust and ingenuity, which would imply the existence of problems to be solved: “the book’s publishers already assumed the responsibility for its publication, thus, exempting the *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos* from participating in the endeavor” (“Dom Távora não será ouvido no inquérito da cartilha comunista”, 1964, p. 2). We can notice that the record directly contradicts Dom Távora’s words, who assumed that the initiative was eminently educational and knew about it. Hence, the Church used the strategy of blaming lay people when seeking to show a unit that, in fact, did not exist, but also not to compromise its relationships with the coupist “elites” that would govern the country for the following 25 years. From MEB’s perspective, that strategy might have represented a path of possibilities to continue the *Movimento*, even if it underwent profound restructuring.

Under the new dictatorial wave, the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* from June 4th, 1964, presented the backstage of the first bishops’ meeting after the coup, which would have led to the following declarations:

“A high ecclesiastic source told us, before publishing the document that it ‘could be disappointing for many Catholic intellectual and

militants', but that the Church, mainly in a difficult time for Brazil, should present itself as united, 'so that there are no mistakes nor exploitations' (Alves, 1964, p. 6).

This unit, interpreting the words from the source, sought to be established through "mutual concessions", in the typical accommodation play that Brazilian political culture has also enacted (Motta, 2009, 2021). On the one hand, the Church kept itself close to the *status quo* and aligned with the new political, coupist, antidemocratic, and dictatorial hegemony; on the other, it defended its priests and lay people, certainly, not denying the need for a "purge" if necessary. Obviously, this arrangement was positive on the hegemonic perspective, because the Catholic Church continued to walk side by side with the winners and the powerful ones. But that unit took its toll due to its artificiality, because it implied silencing part of the clergy and Catholic organizations that was effectively concerned with the interests of ordinary people, especially the poor and working population, rural or urban.

MEB new guidelines were announced by CNBB and implemented already in 1964. However, the situation became unbearable for the more engaged lay militants that carried on in the organization even after the closure of several systems in the country in 1964, mainly those more politicized. Many of them would only leave the *Movimento* in 1966 when there was another restructuring process, but first they made explicit their rejection against the new guidelines and the submission to MEC's official ideals. In a letter addressed to the Secretary General of the *Movimento de Educação de Base* (MEB, 1966), with no signatures, militants demonstrated their disagreement regarding the dependence on MEC. According to them, the governmental pressures compromised the *Movimento's* autonomy and authenticity, going against the "commitment also assumed as members of the Church with the Brazilian people" (MEB, 1966, p. 4). That is, MEB lost one of the most important parts of its support base as a movement that was intended to be popular.

FINAL REMARKS

Our work did not intend to analyze in-depth MEB and its political and pedagogical project, but to understand the dilemmas of the *Movimento* when faced with the hegemonic fight at the period, especially regarding anticommunism and its main relationships with the Church. Though it was still trying to find the best way to act alongside ordinary people, something normal for a movement under construction, only the authoritarian paranoia could frame its actions within the framework of communist ideology. The reading of the documents shows no consistent explanation of what would be "communizing" in its action. On the contrary, records such as those from Eugênio Gudín clearly show that it was a dispute for power, control, and

privileges of some over the majority. Thus, conservatives and reactionaries accused any initiative with a popular direction of being communist, because certain fragments of the population always appear as in need of control. In this sense, it is a fight for the hearts and minds of the weakest, a fight of ideology, of hegemonic dispute.

In the MEB and the Catholic Church perspectives, pedagogy, and "awareness" would be enough for someone to make the right choices and transform their reality. However, the historical experience shows that we are beings driven by emotions, feeling, collective groups, in other words, by much more than conscious thought. This seems to have escaped MEB's attention because, loyal to its religious connection, it ended up attributing to the individuals and communities a power they did not have to transform the cruel reality to which they were submitted. Not even its omission regarding the structural conditions of domination had stopped the Movimento, strongly guided by the Catholic ideals, from being considered subversive by the authoritarian fury.

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