

Neoliberalism in the Academy: Dispatch from a Public University in Colorado

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Abstract

Neoliberalism's influence in higher education is broad and deep. We focus on three interrelated dynamics, all manifestations of neoliberalization in higher education: labor flexibilization, bureaucratization, and corporatization. Through these channels, neoliberalization is impacting the nature and quality of the education that our students receive, as well as the academic freedom, professional respect, and quality of life we enjoy as professors.

Giving flesh to this analysis, we pepper the discussion with personal insights based on our own experiences teaching together at a public higher education institution. We three authors perform different duties and roles in the same department. One of us demoted herself from the tenure-track two decades ago in order to focus on teaching, and finds herself just as distracted from her students today as she was then. Following many years of contingent appointments and sporadic unemployment, one of us just recently obtained a tenure-track position, a "promotion" that has actually undermined her teaching and her research in unexpected ways. Finally, one of us is a reluctant manager, a department chair who longs to support the creative innovations of department faculty, but who labors constantly under an increasingly heavy burden of administrative oversight and reporting.

Keywords: neoliberalism, higher education, academia, labor flexibility, bureaucracy, corporatization

Introduction

While many conversations about the neoliberalization of higher education focus on the important issue of contingent (adjunct) faculty, we argue here that neoliberalism's influence in higher education is broader and deeper than this. We focus on three interrelated dynamics, all manifestations of neoliberalization in higher education: labor flexibilization, bureaucratization, and corporatization. Through these channels neoliberalization is impacting the nature and quality of the education that our students receive, as well as the academic freedom, professional respect, and quality of life we enjoy as professors.

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tenure-track position, a “promotion” that has actually undermined her teaching and her research in unexpected ways. Finally, one of us is a reluctant manager, a department chair who longs to support the creative innovations of department faculty, but who labors constantly under an increasingly heavy burden of administrative oversight and reporting.

We do not intend here to criticize any individual person, nor to critique our particular institution, which each of us finds to be a supportive environment, even when faculty deliver critiques such as in this paper. Rather, the critique we present focuses on the ways in which neoliberal rationality is shaping structures, values, and relationships across the academy. Neoliberal logic is systemic and exerts disciplinary pressures such that any one of us, regardless of intention, may further its impact. In this sense, our 'dispatch' is a cautionary tale, a call to awareness to all to eschew neoliberalism's disciplinary power.

Labor Market Flexibilization

A central feature of the global neoliberal political-economic order since the 1970s is the drive among employers to cut costs to increase “efficiency.” A major channel through which this pressure has been brought to bear on workers is through the complex process of “labor market flexibilization.” The International Labor Organization (ILO) notes that labor market flexibilization “is constructed in opposition to labour ‘rigidities’ such as protective labour legislation, collective bargaining agreements and codified regular employment.” In many cases supported by complementary government legislation, labor flexibility is pursued by employers looking for ways to better adjust their labor forces according to organizational needs, as well as “lower their labour costs” and “increase labour productivity” (ILO, 2003, 1; see also, e.g., Stiglitz, 2003; Rodrik, 1997; Dicken, 2011; Blossfeld et. al., 2008). The concept of labor market flexibility goes a long way towards explaining the difficulties many academics in the U.S. face as workers.

Concretely, workers in a more flexible labor market may experience any number of consequences. Wages may be lower and more volatile, and non-wage compensation less generous. Workers may also have less employment security, and have to deal with unemployment and/or underemployment pressures. This may be because their employer lays off workers when market conditions change, or because the employer comes to prefer temporary or part-time workers. The workers who remain may experience a ratcheting up of employer productivity expectations (i.e. “work intensification”¹), and a related increase in employee productivity evaluations and assessments. They may also face resistance if they try to unionize. Workers in flexible labor markets may also enjoy fewer and/or less generous

¹ Either by increasing the number of tasks expected of employees or by shortening the time available to complete them.

policy protections (e.g. policies regarding minimum, overtime and severance pay; welfare protections; rights to unionize; employment benefits; and, workplace safety). Finally, flexible labor markets are highly competitive ones, with workers' jobs seemingly under constant threat (e.g. from the "reserve army" of unemployed and underemployed workers, or subcontractors at home or abroad).

For anyone who has spent even a short time in academia over the past several decades, most if not all of the difficulties noted above will be familiar. They perhaps come into sharpest focus in the context of adjunct labor, and the related decline of tenure and tenure-track positions. Chomsky notes, "imposing 'flexibility of labor'... translates into such measures as undermining longer-term commitments to faculty and relying on cheap and easily exploitable temporary labor (adjuncts, graduate students)" (2016). The majority (70%) of faculty positions today are both part-time and off the tenure track (AAUP, 2016, 13). While they are difficult to pin down exactly, median wages for adjuncts in the US in 2013 are estimated at about \$2700 per class, with annual salaries amounting to roughly \$20,000-\$25,000 (McKenna, 2015). In parallel, colleges and universities in the US have been abandoning their long-term faculty commitments. Over the last forty years, the share of the academic labor force holding full-time positions with tenure has declined 26%, and there has been a 50% decrease in the share of those holding full-time positions on the tenure-track (AAUP, 2016, 13).

My dissertation advisor told me that she had "low grade depression" all throughout graduate school. Mine lasted longer. I got my Ph.D. in 2009. I had secured a visiting assistant professor (VAP) job that paid well and had good benefits the year before, right before the recession hit. I commuted almost two hours each way to get to that small liberal arts college and was laid off the year after I graduated. I took unemployment benefits for a while. I applied to lots of jobs. The next year I was offered and picked up classes at this same college two hours away where I had been a VAP, but this time as an adjunct making a few thousand dollars a class, with no benefits. They said they couldn't afford to keep me on full-time. I applied to lots more jobs. I picked up more adjunct work at another institution in 2011, and this turned into a contracted, "at will" one-year instructor position for the following two years. I finally obtained a tenure-track position in 2014, after spending five years getting rejected by the job market; I competed against hundreds of other applicants for the job.

But the adjunct labor crisis is only one manifestation of a broader movement toward more flexible academic labor markets, a trend that impacts academic workers in a variety of different ways. As another example, as universities have moved to expand enrollments and services while cutting positions and transitioning parts of their workforce to part-time, academic work has intensified. Burgess and Strachan note: "Work intensification is rife in universities under the umbrella of flexibility. Longer teaching hours, more students and

more research output are required without an increase in salaries" (1996, 30). Gill agrees: "Increasingly, academics are finding that they are unable to get the work done in a 'normal working week' and have to work evenings, weekends, and late into the night. Not surprisingly the most common response to the punishing intensification of work is to work harder and longer: getting up early, going to bed late" (2013, 21; see also Davies and Bansel 2005). Hiring and promotion criteria are rising; there are more and bigger classes to teach; demand for research output seems insatiable; and, there are always more committees that need staffing. Not to mention that all of this must be documented, reviewed and assessed with an increasingly onerous stream of paperwork (matters that my colleagues will address in some detail below).

Now in my third year on the tenure-track, I'm constantly calculating, constantly strategizing about passing performance reviews and getting tenure. I find these calculations stressful and exhausting, and they make me disappointed in myself. I feel that I'm betraying what my job should be about, that is, teaching students and critically engaging in public dialogue about important world events. Instead: Will this article count for tenure? Should I postpone submitting it until after the New Year so that it will count on next year's performance evaluation? Will writing this popular piece for a great magazine distract me too much from academic journal article writing? Have I already developed enough new courses for the tenure committee? I could really use that prep time for other stuff. Should I even try to co-teach with my colleague in another department? Will that help me get "excellence" in teaching? Should I hold one more office hour during the week for my students? Nah. I already have close to enough student letters for my file. And I have so much other work to do.

Researchers are starting to connect the insecurity, stress and pressure that results for academic workers from labor market flexibilization to mental health disorders like depression. A 2003 study of Australian academics revealed that the rate of mental illness among academic staff was three to four times higher than in the general population, and was highly correlated with "objective measures of university well-being" including "staff-student ratios" and "recent cuts in staffing levels" (Winefield et. al., 2003). Recent research in the UK indicates that "nearly half of academics show symptoms of psychological distress," attributing recent increases in mental health issues like depression and eating disorders to "greater job insecurity, constant demand for results and an increasingly marketised higher education system" (Shaw and Ward 2014). In the US, where rigorous studies of academic mental health are few and far between, a 2014 study found that while all faculty experience stress, stress (as well as anxiety and depression) among non-tenure track faculty is positively and significantly correlated with the insecurity associated with being "contingent" (Reevy and Deason 2014).

Academic labor has been more deeply commodified and cheapened by the process of labor market flexibilization. Academic workers are an increasingly overworked, underpaid,

stressed out and dejected bunch, with large costs for the students we teach and the communities we more broadly serve.

Bureaucratization

Each February as I fill out my annual evaluation report, I muse on the course of my career. Twenty years ago I decided to “demote” myself from a tenure-track position to an instructorship so that I could focus on teaching. The final straw occurred when a student appeared asking for assistance and I replied that I couldn’t because I was doing the paperwork for a teaching-excellence award—an essential step in the promotion process. The irony was too acute to ignore. Advancement in the profession required that I spend time satisfying bureaucratic norms; the fact that teaching could or should be a vocation involving an ethical commitment seemed ignored. But with the neoliberalization of the academy, the irony has reemerged: to continue in my vocation, I must now expend energy on the same bureaucratic processes I had intentionally eschewed. Education has become about efficiency, regulation, and monitoring, with images of recalcitrant students and faculty justifying administrative micro-management.

As critics generally argue (Brown, 2015; Etienne Balibar, 2014; Peck, 2010), neoliberalism is mode of organizing economic activity as well as a “governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as homo oeconomicus” (Brown, 2015, 176). According to the logic of marketization and commodification, education is an instrumental good to facilitate the growth of human capital, wealth accumulation, and technological innovation rather than a means to advance the common good and democracy. The justification offered by the 1946 President’s Commission Higher Education for federal support of the academy now seems radically arcane. “It is an investment in social welfare, better living standards, better health, and less crime. It is an investment in a bulwark against garbled information, half-truths and untruths, against ignorance and intolerance. It is an investment in human talent, better human relationships, democracy and peace” (Quoted in Brown, 2015, 187). Today, we live in a “post-truth” society in which the grounds of truth-claims reflect one’s preferred beliefs; education is merely a tool for individual advancement and economic growth. That it might also be an intrinsic good encouraging the cultivation of the intellectual, creative, and deliberative capacities appears an irrelevant ideal. We also live in a society undergoing increasing bureaucratization, which according to the standard definition entails an impersonal hierarchy that manages through rules imposed from the top and reliance on expertise and specialization. From a Foucauldian perspective, this mode of governance enables the dissemination of market rationality through disciplinary power that rewards modes of acting and relating which conform to the exigencies of efficiency and control (Foucault, 2000).

The bureaucratization of higher education manifests this rationality. If self-interest is the motivator of *homo oeconomicus*, then we cannot merely assume that students will study and faculty teach without being motivated by external incentives and administrative monitoring. Both parties must live within the tension between a pedagogy of consumption (classes should offer consumer satisfaction, including high grades) and charges of grade inflation (students must be hierarchically ranked) – a tension that quantification is reputed to resolve. Syllabi should specify the points earned in every phase of the learning process; and students should be able to access at any moment their standing in the class. The syllabi in turn are the subject of bureaucratic scrutiny and ranking. Courses should conform to formal rubrics that govern teaching style and modes of evaluation in order to ensure homogeneity and control. Whether the development of critical thinking, analytical depth, and ethical reflection can actually be quantitatively measured remains an unaddressed question, as does the possibility that each teacher may have unique ways of creating a class environment in which learning can creatively take place. Within a neoliberal frame, contingent faculty receive particularly acute inspection because they are the primary instructors yet have the least institutional standing and support. While all come under neoliberal disciplinary power, those denied employment security are the most vulnerable to its exigencies on the grounds that their status testifies to qualification deficiencies. Rarely considered is the real possibility that they have chosen their status based on moral and professional considerations.

I had an interesting exchange with a dean who, while genuinely committed to higher education, argued that contingent faculty should have a more rigorous probationary status than their tenure-tracked peers because the former had primary responsibility for instruction. When I noted the irony that they also had less status, power in governance, and salary, while being more significant to the educational process, he had the graciousness to concede the point, though without altering the policy.

Faculty and students also live within the contradictory pressures of student retention and the dictates of efficiency. Increased reliance on technology means replacing face-to-face meetings with online advising. Transfer credits and degree audits supposedly simplify and routinize, but often leave students confused and anxious. Lacking adequate funding and staff, writing centers tend to focus on assisting those already possessing basic argumentative skills rather than on those who, requiring more substantive help, appear to be less productive investments in human capital. Because faculty lack both the time and expertise to step into the ensuing pedagogical gap, first-generation students and those with learning disabilities may leave the academy not realizing that the failures are systemic, not personal. Studies show that retention entails creating substantive relationships, with faculty whose doors and minds are open, who are willing and able to engage with students inside and outside of class. But standards of efficiency and assessment promote closed doors and minds as tenure-track faculty attempt to satisfy publishing requirements and contingent faculty

have too many courses and students to provide individualized support. Neoliberalism may meet the demands of wealth accumulation, but its rationality distorts the mission of the university: the development of individuals' talents, the fostering of analytical skills and ethical reflection, and the promotion of (greater) societal equality to sustain the actualization of human rights. As the statement by the 1946 President's Commission on Higher Education indicates, that distortion, in turn, impairs the functioning of the larger society. Democracy entails citizens who can critically reflect upon and deliberate respectfully together about the common good, who accept plurality and diversity, and who, recognizing their mutual interdependency, can work for equality and justice. By reducing all social goods to commodities, neoliberalism strips them and life itself of intrinsic meaning and value, thus rendering those who do not produce 'sufficient' human capital devoid of worth—disposable lives.

Corporatization

Following a multi-year effort to unite faculty in our College around defining and assessing achievement of college-wide learning objectives, several faculty in my department were recently asked to submit syllabi to a college curriculum review committee. This committee reviewed syllabi to determine whether: college policies were enunciated, assignments and due dates were clear, learning objectives were adequately advertised, assignments matched learning objectives, assessment strategies were appropriate, the course was adequately rigorous, and there was a clear presentation of content and methodology of the discipline. Syllabi were scored by this committee as either "passing," "vague/needing revision," or "suspended" – meaning the course could no longer be offered as part of the college core. Only one of the four syllabi submitted by our faculty passed this review, though each faculty member had more than twenty years of teaching experience. Syllabi were returned to the department chair (myself), with a note from the vice-chancellor, urging chairs to work with faculty to revise syllabi, in order "to maintain the high quality of our general-education curriculum, ensure that all Core courses in this area adhere to the Knowledge Area Standards for approval, and make sure that there is reasonable consistency across the diverse courses that fulfil the same Core Area."

"Corporatization" has been a powerful force reshaping higher education (Raaper and Olssen, 2016; Schultz, 2015; Donoghue, 2008; Champagne, 2007; Davies, 2005). This trend undermines the university as a community of professional faculty, trusted with broad freedoms to foster habits of critical thinking, humanistic understanding, and reflective praxis among students, and instead promotes the university as a training ground for measurable and job-relevant skills, taught by a faculty in need of surveillance systems and assessment practices to insure their best behavior. Amid the neoliberal celebration of business values (entrepreneurialism, efficiency, assessment, accountability), and in line with influential "new public management" theory (Tolofari, 2005), the university is increasingly

seen as offering marketable products that will surely be improved if they are better defined, measured, and advertised to student-consumers, following the required use of a battery of performance indicators, assessment rubrics and accountability tools by faculty (Raaper, 2016; Raaper and Olssen, 2016; Bennett and Brady, 2014; MacDonald, et. al., 2014; Jankowski and Provezis, 2012; Donoghue, 2008; Davies, Gottsche and Bansel, 2006).

Political demand for assessment, as reflected in Bush-era Congressional Hearings on “Assuring Quality and Accountability in Postsecondary Education” and the White House Spellings Report of 2005, have increased pressure for assessment practices in higher education (Bennett and Brady, 2014). So too have a host of institutional projects such as the American College and Universities’ VALUE-Plus project (Champagne 2011). It can all be described as an “Assessment Industrial Complex” (Bennet and Brady, 2014, 152), complete with a growing coterie of professional assessment consultants and seemingly irresistible pressures to constantly conduct strategic planning, develop performance indicators, define learning objectives, and utilize assessment practices (Raaper, 2016).

There is little support among faculty for these growing administrative demands. Studies from Davies, Gottsche and Bansel (2006), Bennett and Brady (2014), Macdonald, et. al. (2014), Hussey and Smith (2008), and Champagne (2011) have all found that faculty overwhelmingly find typical assessment practices to be alienating, irrelevant to learning, unproductively time-consuming, and unable to measure the value of quality teaching. Champagne (2011, 15) concludes that faculty mostly see these assessment practices as a “dog and pony show,” generating easy-to-digest, rubric-scored reports, but irrelevant to improvement of teaching. Efforts to define and measure learning outcomes seem especially dysfunctional in the humanities, where faculty focus on such elusive to measure concepts as the notion of truth, the philosophy of art, the gendering of knowledge, the depth of one’s ignorance, or the value of “learning not to be at home in one’s home” (p. 10).

All faculty in my department are critical of rubric-driven assessment as counter-productively time-consuming, without adding value to the teaching enhancement strategies that faculty already rely upon – namely, their professional training and experience, together with pedagogical discussion and brainstorming sessions with their colleagues. In presenting each year’s new strategic planning initiative, or teaching enhancement task force, or outcomes assessment tools, to our faculty, therefore, my role as Chair is mostly manager of discontent and strategizer of how to best meet administrative demands for assessment reports without making disruptive time-demands on the professional teaching efforts already happening within our department.

And what time demands they can be! Just the most recent learning objectives/assessment initiative that emerged at our college required several half-day workshops to discuss the initiative, hours of

committee time to develop the assessment policy, hours of college and departmental effort to develop, implement, and assess learning objectives, training sessions with specialists on how to implement assessment, submission of annual assessment reports, review of reports by college administration, and “closing the loop” through departmental response to administrative feedback. And of course that initiative overlapped with a demanding host of other college-required strategic prioritization efforts, annual departmental assessment reports, annual Chair’s self-assessment reports, a year-long departmental self-study, and annual reports on implementation of self-study recommendations. Confronted with all these required self-studies, prioritizations, and assessment efforts, I am asked as Chair to somehow secure compliance by requiring already time-burdened faculty (many of whom are contingent and underpaid) to master and implement new assessment strategies, ultimately requiring them “to engage in further uncompensated or poorly compensated labor for dubious purposes” (Bennett and Brady, 2014, 151).

In addition to demanding endless paperwork and assuming unlimited faculty time, the “assessment industrial complex” inevitably conveys a lack of respect for the professionalism of faculty when corporate strategies of micro-management are imposed from above. Constant pressures to surveil, audit, and micro-manage faculty syllabi and teaching practices to “align” them with university-approved learning objectives reflect a climate of distrust in which ever-increasing accountability is needed to guarantee teaching quality. In this situation, “trust in professional values and practices [is] no longer the basis of the relationship” (Davies, Gottsche and Bansel, 2006; see also Davies, 2003). The notion that faculty are trained professionals, with intrinsic motivation to perform well, and possessed of unique and individual expertise regarding what works in their own classroom, is inevitably degraded with assumptions that faculty will inevitably avoid hard work or engage in sloppy teaching if not constantly monitored and assessed. In this way university neoliberalization is an “ongoing system of deprofessionalization” in which administrators do not trust existing training and intrinsic skills and motivation of faculty to result in quality teaching. Rather trust is put in a host of “quasi-market criteria like audits, appraisals, performance and incentive targets” (Raaper and Olsen, 2016, 22). In this way, a “regime of rationality” (Foucault, 1980) unfolds that requires adherence to standardized learning objectives enunciated in university-approved boilerplate, submission of long-existing syllabi to committees for possible suspension, and use of rubric-driven performance reports that most faculty believe are irrelevant to their real work.

Foucault has described the process by which academics (and others) can be shaped into manageable and “docile subjects” (Foucault 1975, 136) through such rationality regimes. Through everyday participation in the discourse of codification, surveillance and assessment, faculty become defined by a practice “that transforms the fundamental purposes of university and academic work” (Raaper, 2016, 187). In such a rationality regime,

the idea of the university as a space for creative disruption, an alternative to the market, or a locus for exotic imagination and radical possibilities, is undermined as it cannot be defined or measured through the assessment community's search for "stable, uniform entities that can be continuously compared to each other and evaluated" (p. 183).

This rationality regime shapes faculty subjectivity in ways that fit nicely with the demands of neo-liberal governance, partly by consuming so much of a faculty member's limited time, "filling in grids and gathering statistics" (Davies, Gottsche and Bansel, 2006, 315). "You are spending 90% of your effort at regulating the system and only 10% of it actually doing anything," claims one social scientist (p. 315). This kind of time-consumption has consequences. As Davies, Gottsche and Bansel (2006, 316) argue, "the talk that informs critique and the development of a counter-discourse takes time—time that no one any longer has...The imperatives of the practices through which academic subjects are governed have turned away from the intellectual work of critique and innovation towards managing workloads and meeting the terms of workplace agreements."

I am chair of a department with a wonderful diversity of teaching strategies and intellectual commitments. One scholar travels with students to global sites of indigenous struggle, ranging from sovereignty movements in Nicaragua to the Dakota Access Pipeline—and mentors students through their transformed personal and civic identities that accompany such travel. Another professor partners with grass-roots groups to perform organic theater, telling the story of marginalized communities through spoken word, requiring students to express political understandings through art, and creatively unnerving students by putting them in unusual circumstances. I personally engage students in walking tours of homeless communities, culminating in discussion sessions over shared meals with our homeless neighbors, discussions that rarely stick to assigned readings.

None of us believe that the most important learning that happens in these scenarios can possibly be captured by the rubrics of the learning assessment regime. In such a situation, it is frustrating that so much of our faculty time is increasingly absorbed by tasks meant to manage and report on learning objectives. Like Champagne (2011, 5) I have found that "during my tenure as chair of a [Political Science] program...I was somehow supposed to transform my discipline from a site of struggle, disagreement and contestation to a coherent, agreed upon and measurable set of learning outcomes." Such a troubling task fits perfectly with the increasing corporatization of university life, but does not reflect the highest calling of university teaching that many of us were called to. We may be able to rationally define and measure some elements of teaching and learning, but in our obsession to prioritize such measurement, we are confronted with the venerable insights of Max Weber regarding what kind of personality such a process may unfortunately engender: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" (Weber, 2010 [1905], 182).

Conclusions

Neoliberalism's impact in higher education has been broad and deep. Academic labor market flexibilization has eroded quality of life for academic workers by making life more precarious, stressful, demoralizing and financially insecure. Bureaucratization has brutally intensified faculty and staff workloads, redirecting time away from teaching and towards the litany of mundane processes, procedures and paperwork required under increasingly rigid systems for management and control. Corporatization has rendered higher education a consumer product, subjecting the academy to the banal demands and cold quantifications required by the marketplace.

Our intertwined narratives show that many of the measures justified in higher education for their contributions to "efficiency" are in reality quite wasteful. Beautiful minds are abused and wasted by neoliberalism's assault on the academic labor market. Time that could be spent with students or on important research is wasted on endless paperwork and meetings. Money that could be spent on better wages and conditions for adjuncts and improving instruction is diverted into new administrative positions, strategic planning initiatives and third party consultants. Our spirits are wasted by stress, anxiety, depression and the creeping feeling that we are no longer providing the meaningful and vital public service that we should be providing.

Further, neoliberalization has been a powerful force for social discipline. Intellectual freedom and political voice are curtailed when faculty have little time to think and write. Public intellectualism is eroded when the public communication it depends upon does not count for tenure. The corporate model of higher education further conditions "student-consumers" to see their education not as a platform for political empowerment and civic participation, but as preparation for working life. Their scientifically managed college experience is training for the similar "rationality regimes" of codification and assessment they will confront later as professionals.

As such, neoliberalization in higher education is undermining American democracy. The stupefying work that occupies more and more of our time prevents us from the infinitely more important task of safeguarding democracy, truth and respect for all people. The academy is the place where questions of intrinsic meaning and existential value should be critically explored. Those of us who are privileged to teach may have an ethical obligation to resist neoliberal rationality for the sake of serving our vocation and our students with integrity, and creating alternative modes of sociality (Giroux 2002; Mettler 2014, and Butler 2015). And we may find hope in the possibility that the life of the mind, substantive reason,

ethical relationships, and democracy actually enrich human lives and so are intrinsic goods that persons will seek to preserve.

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