

Policy in propaganda image: Soviet posters (1918-1921) from the Sergo Gregorian poster's collection¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the visual practices in which the ideological narration for the construction of socialism is recruited, assigned and interpreted. The central reference points are four post-revolutionary Soviet posters (1918-1921) from the Sergo Gregorian poster's collection. The semiotic approach has been used to consider posters as signs. Each poster is a product of the ideology on a denotative and connotative level. For semiotics verbal messages, color, perspective, the value of the figures, postures, gestures and facial expressions are important. The methodology used is the «grammar» of visual design suggested by Kress and Van Leeuwen. The sample was analyzed in four categories: Visual approach, materiality visual signs, narrative patterns and influential meanings of various approaches. We attempt to show the ideological speech of Soviet posters in the early “existing socialism”, when the initiators were making a breakthrough in economic, political and social infrastructure. Our research and didactic concern refers to the concept of the citizen which seems bound up with that of the nation-state-society, so that if societies are no longer powerful entities, then it would seem that citizens require societies and states and the mutual antagonisms that they generate.

Keywords

Soviet poster, Soviet Union, Ideology, Semiotics, Citizenship education

¹ If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

Altini, T. & Vamvakidou, I. (2020). Policy in propaganda image: Soviet posters (1918-1921) from the Sergo Gregorian poster's collection. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 534 - 550). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

Introductory Note

Learn, man in the asylum!
Learn, man in the prison!
Learn, woman in the kitchen!
Learn sixty year olds!
You must take over the leadership.
Seek out the school, you who are homeless!
Acquire knowledge, you who shiver!
You who are hungry, reach for the book:
it is a weapon.
You must take over the leadership.

“In praise of learning” (B. Brecht 1930)

The poster as a means of political propaganda was used by every political organization in the passage of history. Until the end of the 19th century, its political presence is fragmentary and limited, and radical change comes with the October Socialist Revolution, which establishes the poster as a basic propaganda instrument (White, 1998). Born out of the historical need for massive popular upheaval and defense of the Bolshevik revolution, the propaganda poster came to defeat the call of the Revolution, to activate the people, inspire and guide the struggle for the Bolsheviks. The poster with the “strong images and the short and easy-to-understand slogans” shapes an unprecedented “sign language” that emotionally affects the overwhelming majority of the people because of illiteracy, this “tragic heritage” of the Tsar’s past. (Aulich, J., Hewitt, J., Hewitt, J.P. 2007).

Methodological Issues

The methodological framework for the analysis and interpretation of posters as visual texts includes differentiated approaches. We observe that posters as visual texts underline the process of (re)producing the hegemonic discourse. Simultaneously, posters as a work of mass culture seems to (re)produce the society’s “icon”, as they come from it, they reflect it while, at the same time, they generate, promote and develop social and political myths while maintaining the established ideology (Berkman, 2016).

Such kinds of social representations are part of what we could call a “popular” way of government mode. A sample of this kind is reflected in the Soviet posters

that are analyzed. These social and artistic representations “narrate” the relationship between creators and depicted people -a relationship that may be equivalent, whereas in the past it might have been hierarchical (Burke, 2003). In this context, visual structures are never just formal, but they are also ideological, because they involve semantic dimensions. Therefore, images do not only reproduce the structures of «reality», but they produce images of reality, inextricably linked to the interests of the social institutions in which they are produced (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010).

Thus, message makers seek to find decodable posters, repetitive motifs and stereotypical shapes that cannot be misinterpreted, directing the viewer straight to the intended message (Guiraud, 2004). Selected messages are never arbitrary, because their creators attempt to show signs of internal interconnection in a world that is in harmony with their environment (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010). Therefore, the “universal” dimension of the message is social construction -a product of theory and socio-cultural history and as such is influenced and shaped by the social and cultural conditions that (re)produce the visual language (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010).

The purpose of this research is to study the visual practices and to explore the ways in which past and present are engaged and interpreted in the formation of the ideological narrative for the creation of the new Homo Sovieticus, as it is recorded in post-revolutionary Soviet posters (1918-1921).

In this paper, the sample of the survey consisted of 4 posters, from Sergio Gregorian's “Soviet Posters” album (Lafon, 2007). We chose to analyze posters of the period 1918-1921, which cover the first years after the Revolution as an early example of aesthetics, content and contribution to the “new soviet art”.

Methodological Tools

The analysis applied to the needs of this work concerns in the visual design “grammar” by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2010). This way, the visual language is not transparent nor universally understood, but is culturally defined.

Categories of analysis

Category 1: Optical Approach
1.1. Scenario Construction
1.2. Caption
1.3. Poster shape
Category 2: Visual Point Material
2.1. Colors
2.2. Background
2.3 Modality
Category 3: Narrative Standards
3.1. Participants
3.1.1. <i>Number of participants</i>
3.1.2. <i>Body, face</i>
3.1.3. <i>Expression</i>
3.1.4. <i>Movement</i>
3.1.5. <i>Representation elements</i>
3.3. Synthetic structure
Category 4: Interactive Meanings
4.1. Style imaging
4.2. Symbolic metonyms
4.3. Image functionality

According to above, in the present paper, we investigate the individual elements that constitute the following categories:

Category 1: Optical Approach

1.1. Scenario Construction: The “implied” designer of the poster, “guides us silently, through the design of the whole” (Chatman, 1978), to draft outlined sentences through the visual editing and the help of the accompany-

ing text (caption), focusing on the potential meaning of narrative processes, operations and relationships, as evidenced by every virtual representation, we are studying (Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, 2010).

1.2. Caption: For the analysis of the caption, we rely on the description of Halliday's four basic verbal operations or "verbal functions". Each of the verbal operations is part of an inter-active dual, which has the "anticipated" and "selective" social response. Thus, verbal acts can: (a) "provide information"; (b) "provide goods and services"; (c) "request information", i.e., questions; and (d) goods and services -that is to say they constitute a sort of order (Halliday, 1985). Also, the choice of the font (uppercase, lowercase) as well as symbolic forms of color is categorized into constitutional and exemplary axes, converting language into visual, while encoding the sound value of words. The violation of standard alignment and typing options by switching between different sizes and font types enhances readability and visualizes the information provided in a pretty easy way even for the novice viewer (Chalevelaki, 2010). At the same time, the fonts and their layout, depending on their design, convey the weight, size, color and generally the way they are used, additional meanings in the transmission of messages (Bierut et al (1994). In many cases, in addition to the intense colors, contours and shades are used in the characters, combined with hard angled frames, or the illusion of perspective for «embellishment» of the typographic message is created (Kalman & Jacobs, 1990).

In any case, the visual dialect, irrespective of its structure, content and style, communicates effectively, providing information not only on the obvious but also on secondary elements that subconsciously operate at different levels in the mind, depending on aesthetics, the needs and the social requirements of the viewer. Therefore, the morphological characteristics the letter's form and the word's design structure are used as a mean of effective persuasion, as they function effectively in the subconscious.

1.3. Poster shape: The direction of the image (poster) shape as well as the direction of the pixel is recorded, while the information value of each horizontal and vertical axis of the visual representation is studied. Regarding the informative value of the vertical axis, we note that there is less continuous movement between the two parts of a composition than the horizontally oriented. If in a visual composition, some of the synthetic elements are placed at the top, and other, otherwise at the bottom, then what is placed in the upper part is presented as the ideal and the one placed at the bottom is shown as real. That something is ideal means it is presented as the idealization or the generalized essence of information. The real is in contrast to it as it presents more specific information or more practical information (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010).

In the informative value of the horizontal axis, where there appears to be a sense of complementarity or continuous movement from left to right, a vector is formed that drives the viewer's gaze towards the message. Usually, on the right side, there is the basic information, which the reader, the “message” side, must pay particular attention to (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010).

Category 2: Visual Point Material

2.1. Colors: Colors have a symbolic function that is heavily linked to the cultural data of the era and region created. They are symbolically charged at a constitutional level and their sympathy only creates meaning (Scarpelos, 2000). Color as a mean of transmitting information or stimulating emotions is a basic communication tool, it is an element of understanding as an integral part of the aesthetic code of points that reflects a system of values common to designers and recipients of a poster (Thwaites, Lloyd & Warwick, 1994).

2.2. Background: We try to distinguish the image background as a visual perception skill in order to identify visual information, record it as separate, and differentiate it from the environment in which we see it. In other words, focusing on the important element and filtering the insignificant, to identify similarities/differences (visual distinction) and to understand the position of objects in space (perception of spatial relationships).

2.3. Modality: The term refers to the reliability of statements and/or information for the viewer. As color indexes (color, black and white), color variation (colorful, monochrome), frame (with background, without background), representation (abstract, detailed), depth (flat, perspective) and lighting (existence, absence of shadows) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010).

Category 3: Narrative Standards

3.1. Participants: Participants are called «tumors» or «masses» and each has a «weight» or “gravitational pull” in the composition. Forms are perceived as distinct entities that are protruding to a different extent due to their different size, shape, color. The prominent forms are not only perceptually more distinct, but also play the most important roles in the gram-

matical structure that makes up the meaning of the image. The relationship that is visualized between the forms is perceived and transmitted by the vector relations between the tumors (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010).

Category 4: Interactive meanings

Symbolic meanings: Named terms are the words and/or verbal shapes that allow the production of meaning, with the help of connotation: containing instead of content. According to G. Peninou (1965), “we return with the name to one of the great families of the prehistoric representation, which is grammatically constructed in the syntactic narrative regime and psychologically to that of associative transfer”. A prerequisite for the use of metonyms is the knowledge of a given constitution and certain cultural codes by the viewer, which will add to the existing piece of constitution the remaining part. As Eco points out, “given a prefabricated constitution, established morals allow the substitution of one of its components for another. It characterizes, in fact, the term supernatural” (Eco, 1989).

Analysis



Caption	<i>Cossack, who are you with? With us or with them?</i>
Artist	<i>Dmitry Moor</i>
Date	1918
Dimensions	78X58 cm
Publisher	<i>Department of literary editions of the RVSR's Political Management</i>
Release	<i>Unknown</i>
Place of publication	<i>Moscow</i>
Style / Type / Method	<i>New (Symbolic - allegory poster)</i>
Technique	<i>Lithography monochrome</i>
Period	1917-1921
Contents	<i>Patriotic poster, Need for recruitment, Civil war</i>
Propaganda Technique	<i>Personalized question (sense of responsibility)</i>

Historical context

The above 1918 poster is about recruiting the Cossacks on the Red Army side during their participation in the Russian Civil War. The Czarist rule in the 17th and 18th centuries constantly exerted pressure on the Cossacks, seeking in every way to limit their self-determination. A fact that naturally caused their reaction. Despite these difficult relationships, their Czarist power was actively used to expand the territory of the state. After the Bolshevik revolution during the Russian civil war, the Cossacks fought mainly for the White Army (i.e., after the Red Army's victory was under persecution).

Category 1: Optical approach

1.1. Scenario Construction

The image shows the waiting of both sides (i.e., Red Army, White Army) for the beginning of the battle. There is a strong element of war and controversy (they are ready-made, they hold arms), as the Cossack's response is expected. A Cossack, positioned in the center of the poster, facing the viewer, is in a dilemma about what side to choose (White-Bolsheviks) to be recruited, but essentially the question is addressed to viewers / receivers.

This way, the criticalness of the decision on the part of the viewer / receiver is emphasized, as well as the necessity to receive it directly as it affects the outcome of the war. It causes the viewer / receiver to think critically, with a high sense of responsibility for taking a dynamic and serious decision, proportionate to the criticality of the situation in the country.

1.2. Caption: Cossack, who are you with? With us or with them?

This is a questionable sentence, which includes an incitement. The question mark proposes two alternatives (disunity). The choice of straightforward speech using a Single person indicates intimacy or even individuality. In essence, it urges viewers / receivers to make an immediate decision on the side they will choose to stand for, as it is expected, to be recruited by the Red Army. In this context, the use of capital letters, which vary in size and color according to the meaning, as well as the choice of a single font with an accented line without decorative elements in order to give a classic or even traditional style to the writing (Moriarty, 2002) while enhancing the gravity of those who write the message. According to Eco, the choices of letters are involved in the production of meaning, as print contracts acquire a different content depending on their environment.

1.3. Poster shape

Image area:

Rectangular shape (standard poster) in a vertical direction. According to the dimensions of the visual space, concerning the informative value of the vertical axis (up and down), we note that there is less continuous movement between the two poster parts relative to the horizontally orientated posters. In a visual composition (poster), the components placed in the upper part are presented as ideals while those placed in the lower part are considered as real. A synthetic element is characterized as ideal when presented as the idealization or generalized essence of information (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010). Thus, in this particular poster, the ideal and the real are the Bolshevik forms, which cover the entire right side of the poster, where according to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2010) is the side of the basic information.

Text area:

A rectangular shape with a horizontal direction, which creates a contrast between the horizontal and the vertical axis. The visual text fully harmonizes with the western visual communication, as indicated by the direction

of writing, giving specific values and meanings to the dimensions of the visual space.

1.3. Modality

Reality is in the eye of the viewer / receiver of this era, as what is considered real depends on how reality is defined by the specific socio-cultural group (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010). In this context, the poster we are studying has a high modality in the right-side (ideal), as an intense red (Bolshevik) is selected at the focal point, a gray tone at center for the dilemmatic condition (Cossack) and white (White) in the right side, where the tendency is deliberately lowered. Also, the represented participants are depressed, virtually depicted in a vacuum, resulting in a «representative sample» without being associated with a certain place and time -a condition that would have reduced the modality, but color choices balance the situation. Although the modality is made by a complex interaction of visual indications, in the case we are studying, the high positivity of the poster results from the intensity of the red color and the value of the caption, which we regard as a social need and belief or a value for the power structures from which they have been produced and the social group to which they are addressed.

Discussion

This research deals with the way in which the ideological visual discourse is represented in post-revolutionary Soviet posters. The creators focus on the ideological field as a generic reference frame for the design of visual material, drawing their argumentation from the historical, political and social context, in order to manipulate the viewer / receiver in an attempt to shape patterns of behavior as a necessity for its creation new Soviet identity. This results in the creation of the new Homo Sovieticus and the awareness of the normative patterns of behavior shape moral and political or social behaviors necessary both for acceptance and support and for the stabilization of the hegemonic group.

By looking at an outline of the basic parameters of the visual material we are looking for, we seek recruitment of geographic, social or cultural information, as the poster is used as an alternative form to the written discourse. It is a language with "special" vocabulary and syntax, and the resulting visual meaning creates a variable chain of signifiers, which remain open to a variety of meanings. Each visual material is understood by the particular society referred to and relates to the public sphere and its context of use and evaluation. In our research, the Bolshevik era (1917-1921) is a struggle for life and death for the Bolsheviks and their ideology.

The Soviet propaganda poster is dominant in an effort by the Reds to win the civil war against the White women and to claim control of the Ukraine by the Poles as well as parts of modern Belarus. The early Soviet poster is characterized by revolutionary warmth and intelligent design as well as by symbolic, rather than diachronic, representations: red star, hammer and sickle.

The posters of this period fall into the category of ideological propaganda. In the toughest moments of the Civil War, the revolutionary government, in its attempt to strengthen the Red Army, prefers the recruitment of men (Cossack, who are you with us or with them [1918]). During the next years the political situation has not stabilized (We have to work with the rifle next to us, 1920). When Bolsheviks were stabilized in power (Never again will be like this, 1919) they demanded to proceed with the implementation of the plan and the spread of socialism. However, in a country with a high illiteracy rate, its main concern is to eradicate it (The illiterate man is like the blind - BOOKS, 1920).

It is worth mentioning that in most posters, at the bottom, there was a warning: "Anyone who rips or covers the poster is committing a counter-revolutionary act." The poster was a powerful "weapon" for the fight, and like any weapon, it had to be carefully guarded.

In the text of the caption or in the picture of every poster, the direction of the writing is horizontal from left to right. This means that it follows Western visual communication, is deeply influenced by the convention of Western civilization, giving similar values and meanings to the dimensions of the visual space.

The concept of modality is essential to visual communication because it is social, depending on what is considered real / true to the social group that the representation aims to. In the Soviet posters we study, the verbal and fictional texts work together to tell a certain story in an attempt to highlight / accept the true value or credibility of the viewer's / receiver's statements. The posters are multifaceted, resulting from the multimodality of the visual text as a modern means of communication. The visual modality lies in culturally and historically defined criteria, so culture gives the framework of visual perception for a fuller understanding of representation. The modality of these images produces a social affinity, aligning the viewer / receiver with specific representations. The boundaries between reality and construction are confused, but new values and new ways of perceiving can be established, as the Soviet people as a society draws on "We".

The human symbolism (the repetition of the human figure in the frontal posture, offer and sideways stance) is defined in the "grammar of the image" as a requirement for recognition by the viewer / receiver. In the composition of the posters, we observe the correlation of representational and interreligious meanings be-

tween the interconnected systems. The placement of visual representation elements gives the in the elements specific information values associated with the various "zones" of the image (Altini, 2017).

In the informative value of the horizontal axis, the left side illustrates the basic information, which the viewer / receiver should pay particular attention to. Whether it is an invitation to identify the viewer / receiver with a role model (which is highly appreciated in the Soviet culture) or an intimate and agreed starting point for the message, it is the side of the message. On the right side of the poster, what is shown is not the data. Though the viewer/receiver does not agree with it, he/she has to pay special attention to it. The meaning of "New" is "problematic", "questionable" or constitutes information to be discussed. Regarding the informative value of the vertical axis, the top performs the promise to viewers / receivers.

Usually, there is less movement between the two parts of the composition than the horizontally oriented compositions, where the bottom illustrates the "message" as such, providing fewer or more information. The composition as a fundamental function of the integration codes is textual. It serves the production of the text and the placement of the information throughout in order to achieve coherence and order among them. The compositions / posters we are studying are described in multifaceted representations and the forms in the majority are ground-based, and dynamic. Human symbolism, the repetition of the human figure in another attitude, is defined in the "grammar of the image" as a requirement for recognition or even offering, if it is in a frontal or lateral position, respectively.

However, the composition of a poster also contains different degrees of display of its elements. Regardless of where they are placed, viewing can create a hierarchy of importance among the elements, selecting some of them as most important and worthy of attention (poster 1 [Red Army, Cossack, Bourgeoisie]). When the composition is the way of incorporation, the view is judged based on the visual indications. Viewers / receivers are able to judge the "weight" of the various elements of a composition and the larger the weight of an element, the greater the visibility of it. This view is a complex interplay between many factors, such as size, focus, tonal contrast and perspective.

Thus, the visual material produces a hierarchy of importance between the elements of the poster as an ideological composition. Overall, we can see that the exaggerated vitality and detail distracts from the analytical purpose. However, the essential characteristics of the possessive properties of the participants, the representation of depth, the detailed representation of light and the fine tonic distinctions are conventionally used to distinguish the socio-economic groups. This means that it enables the viewer / receiver of the message to identify the player directly and to examine in detail his possessive properties.

As for the symbols, the predominant ones are the worker-hero, the soldier of the Red Army and the red star. Also, in Soviet propaganda posters, the Soviet enemy is depicted with the black color representing the bourgeois. The metonym as an extension of constitutional relations summarizes the description of the object or symbol in shape. What permits such a linguistic "disorder" is the close relationship between the linguistic and the visual object, which is based on the experiential experience of man.

Each poster is subject to multiple readings, since some reading paths are not strictly coded, while others have specific hierarchies of potential viewer / reader movement. Our posters give us the choice to see them from a distance without any effect on the meaning. This "recording" means is representative. However, as a pictorial, they encode reading paths to varying degrees. Some lead the viewer / receiver by the hand. Others offer the viewer / receiver some suggestions and suggestions, and then leave it to his / her own mechanisms while in others we do not see any reading path. However, the very pattern of the reading path expresses a specific cultural message.

In conclusion, it's clear that both the Bolsheviks' vision and their commitment to freedom, security, political stability and the improvement of living standards produce an important area for strengthening the ideological mechanism and creating the new Homo Sovieticus. Soviet propaganda relied on socially acceptable ways of expression, appropriated "familiar" symbols and created a code of conduct for the masses as a new invented tradition. In this context, the symbols provide a core of dialogue, which concerns an "interactive» lists focusing on the concept of "national interest".

Thus, they form the field of forging a collective identity and, in combination with the political and cultural parameters. They also form the mechanisms of production of the imaginary community of each nation. These mechanisms sometimes act as internal regulatory authorities and sometimes give the impression that they are compiling "homogenization" codes.

In this context we propose posters' analysis in order to visualize the citizenship as a political/social responsibility to university's students as had already been used in primary education: *Potentially it is the most controversial. In the minds of some, it is an opportunity for teachers to preach on behalf of themselves or the Government. But it is arguably the most important, informing both "political literacy" and "community activity", the other two strands* (Vamvakidou, 2009). We had also implemented such didactic proposals in our post program lessons using the multimodal representations, the symbols and the cinema in order to teach citizenship in the 21th century (Aypay, A., Goncalves, S., Keramyda, M., Kyridis, A., Spinthourakis, J., Troullou, M. Vamvakidou, I., Zagos, C. , 2009, Goncalves, S., Keramyda, M., Kyridis, A., Spinthourakis, J., Troulou, M., Vamvakidou, I., 2010).

We also propose to the students in Fine Arts Faculty to produce their “propaganda poster” including the pillars of citizenship such as agility, social participation, justice, responsibility, and equality. We have to put all the knowledge we know about the pillars of citizenship and propaganda in order to make the best propaganda poster. Our researching and didactic concern refers to the concept of the citizen *which seems bound up with that of the nation-state-society, so that if societies are no longer powerful entities then it would seem that citizens require societies and states and the mutual antagonisms that they generate. Without them in quite the same form it may be that we are witnessing the slow death of the national citizen, just as the claim for citizenship seems to have become so extraordinarily widespread* (Urry, 1998). This paper supports Alistair Ross thesis about “concepts of multiple and nested identities and how these relate to citizenship and rights, and the implications of identities and rights for active citizenship education” (Ross, 2007).

The Posters as Researching and Didactic Material



Caption: Cossack, who are you with?
With us or with them?
Artist: Dmitry Moor
Date: 1918
Dimensions: 78X58 cm
Publisher: Department of literary editions of the RVSР's Political Management
Release: Unknown
Place of publication: Moscow
Style / Type / Method: New
(Symbolic - allegory poster)
Technique: Lithography monochrome
Period: 1917-1921
Contents: Patriotic poster, Need for recruit-ment, Civil war
Propaganda Technique: Personalized question ,sense of responsibility



Caption: Everything is past
Artist: Viktor Nikolaevich Denisov
Date: 1920
Dimensions: 31X46 cm
Publisher: Gashizdad, Government Edition
Release: 2000
Place of publication: Petrograd (Leningrad)
Style / Type / Method: Lubok
Technique: Lithography ,multicolor
Period: 1917-1921
Key words: Patriotic Poster ,Revolution ,Civil War ,Capitalist
Propaganda technique: Absolute crisis (creating a sense of trust)
Optical narration as a praise to Bolshevism
Historical narration with bottom-up participation



Caption: The illiterate man is like the blind - BOOKS
Artist: Aleksei Radakov
Date: 1920
Dimensions: 69X49 cm
Publisher: Gashizdad, Petrograd
Release: Unknown
Place of publication: Petrograd (Leningrad)
Style/Type / Method: Lubok
Technique: Lithography tricolor
Period: 1917-1921
Key words: Revolutionary feeling ,Patriotic poster ,Disdain of the past,
Fight against illiteracy
Propaganda technique: Artistic dipiction of the revolution,
conscious effort to approach people, order for immediate decision



Caption: We have to work with the rifle next to us
Artist: Vladimir Lebedev
Date: 1920
Dimensions: 56 x77cm
Publisher: Rosta
Release: Unknown
Place of publication: Gashizdad, Government Edition, Petrograd(Leningrad)
Style/Type/Method: Avant - garde
Technique: Lithography, multicolor
Period: 1917-1921
Key words: Patriotic poster, Work, Fighting the past
Propaganda technique: Visual depiction of the revolution
direct incitement for work, order to support the revolution

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