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Feature

'The Morning Quickie'

By [Alma Guillermoprieto](#)

1.

Four years into Mexico's newly minted electoral democracy, all is not as it should be with the body politic. One indication is that the host of the most influential news show in the capital is a clown. Another is that the clear front-runner in the unacknowledged race for the next presidential elections in 2006, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the mayor of Mexico City, is currently embroiled in a scandal that first saw light with a secretly filmed video released in March. It showed the mayor's all-purpose political operator, René Bejarano, who has served as his campaign chief and government minister for the city and was at the time the majority leader of the capital's Legislative Assembly, receiving enormous amounts of cash from a notorious *empresario*, or rich businessman, whose face was blacked out on the film. The video was first broadcast in March on the clown's television show.

Watching the video of René Bejarano on the take is a fascinating and nasty experience—as if Mexicans had not already enjoyed opportunity enough to exercise their voyeurism on a multiplying number of sex-talk programs, sex tour-o-ramas (E! Entertainment *en español*), and local franchises of *Big Brother* in which sexual congress supposedly takes place before our very eyes. Brozo the Clown, who has made a career out of mocking, and exploiting, the prurient interests of a society only recently still in the grip of extreme modesty and repressive sexual codes, seems in this light just the right presenter for the corruption tape, which was exhibited at 7:26 AM on the fateful morning of March 3 on Brozo's daily news program. The cameras in Brozo's studio closed in on a grainy black-and-white video with terrible audio quality, in which the glum, balding Bejarano, wearing a dark suit, opens a briefcase, lays it flat, and proceeds to stuff it with wads of US and Mexican currency. Weeks later, the bit that was still getting replayed was the sequence in which, having tried and failed to close the case, Bejarano hurriedly stuffs his pockets with more cash.

It's not as if Mexicans were new to corruption, which by long political inheritance is practically taken for granted. But it's not every day that the act itself is shown on screen. And then there is what Bejarano himself had to say about what he was doing in this and in another video which was released that evening on the major evening newscast. In that second tape Bejarano is not actually shown with money in hand, but he talks more. Bejarano's interlocutor, annoyed and threatening,

possibly a little drunk, sits off camera in an office that people who have done business with the man instantly recognized. He wants, he says, to get paid for the construction work he has done under contract with the city—contracts obtained in exchange for the kickback money he previously delivered to Bejarano— but Bejarano explains that there's no money in the city's coffers.

"You're fucking with me, I'll fuck you over," the *empresario* says.

Bejarano, conciliatory, tries to make clear his own risks: "I've done a lot of things for Andrés [i.e., the mayor] that not many people would do—a lot, you can't imagine. And if I'm ever caught ...I prefer not to tell him about a lot of things, although he supposes that I do those things, but he doesn't know, and he doesn't ask, how I managed to finance..." he leaves the sentence unfinished. "But of course, he knows perfectly well, because it's implicit, because I was his operator, that if they catch us one day, it was me, not him. He'll take a beating of course, but they'll hit me harder."

If this second, more damning video is less memorable than the first, it is mostly because of the way Brozo presented the first tape on his program. By a most unusual coincidence, René Bejarano himself was being interviewed that morning, in his role as Legislative Assembly leader, in the Televisa studio next to Brozo's. Bejarano was asked to step over to Brozo's set, and then in some perplexity sat down to watch what the clown warned him would be "a missile." The tape was then played all over again.

A small picture inset on the screen allowed us to peep in real time at Bejarano, poker-faced, realizing that he had been set up, first by the man who was being shown handing him money, and now by Brozo. We saw him watching himself stuffing money into his pockets, watching his career, his life, his reputation, go up in flames. "What is this, René, what is this?" Brozo roared at Bejarano, his wig wagging, a finger aloft. Live, Bejarano identified the man with the blacked-out face as the businessman Carlos Ahumada Kurtz—a darkly handsome Argentine-born businessman, we would find out later. He declared that the money was not a personal bribe but a campaign contribution offered by Ahumada. "Don't make an asshole out of me, René, please!" an angry Brozo interrupted. Bejarano mumbled a few other wobbly explanations, offered several times over to renounce his right to congressional immunity, and then we went to the station break.

Brozo the Clown, grease-stained, foul-mouthed, and leering, presides over the morning news show called *El Mañanero*, slang for "The Morning Quickie," which lasts from six to ten AM every weekday morning. Never mind that the length of the program contradicts its title; lacking attention to the finer details, it often feels spur-of-the-moment and displays a roaring devotion to all things having to do with reproductive organs and their exercise. In a green wig, rubber-ball nose, threadbare tail coat worn over sagging pants, with a menacing scowl and a whiskey voice, Brozo—the creation of a comedian called Victor Trujillo— has been a well-known television personality for some years. Wearing a sweatsuit, he used to co-host a late-night talk show with another Trujillo creation called La Beba Galván, who was a rather less respectable version of Dame Edna Everage, and proved to have a surprising talent for conducting interviews.

Because Trujillo's Brozo character took an active interest in politics long before becoming part of the political scene himself, he and his sponsors on an independent Mexico City television channel eventually figured out that having him read the news was not as stupid an idea as it sounds. Most citizens in greater Mexico City are poor, have less than ten years' formal schooling, and share, by and large, a bitter disrespect for the solemn fashion in which news and politics are treated by the characters in power.

In costume, Brozo is also part of a long tradition of cultural heroes in masks who are dear to the Mexican heart. There is, for example, El Santo, star of action movies for several decades, who was never to be seen— on-screen or off—without his silver wrestler's mask. And Marco Rascón, the leftist congressman who always attended presidential state of the union reports wearing a pig face. There is Subcomandante Marcos, the most famous masked hero of them all. For intellectuals, Brozo has the charm of the *popular*, a word that in Spanish is used to describe what is close to *el pueblo*.

On the initial *El Mañanero* show, Brozo talked in slang and presented current events in his own subversive manner. Somewhere between the wisecracks and the leering asides the news actually got read and put in some sort of context, and guests were interviewed. Three years later he was hired by Televisa, Mexico's once-staid media conglomerate, to bring the formula to their studios. They wanted his credibility.

Out of costume, Trujillo is thoughtful, self-effacing, mild-mannered; when I first interviewed him ten years ago I thought he could have passed for an academic, but it was his father who was an economist. In Brozo's restless youth, he spent some time in the theater, and gradually was drawn to comic satire because *la carpa*—a cheerful combination of vaudeville and circus which in Mexico has always had strong political overtones—struck him as "Mexico's only indigenous theatrical form." (The great comedian Cantinflas, too, came out of the *carpa* tradition.)

"My intention has never been to say dirty words," he said in an interview recently, in his office at Televisa. "My intention has been to talk the way people do. People come out on television looking pretty and acting refined, but that's not the way we are. How could we act blond if we're not blond, pretty if we're not pretty, solemn if that's not us?" He wondered aloud about his decision to screen the Bejarano tape. "I was very happy to have such strong material on the program," he said. "But on the other hand it was very sad to confirm that all the politicians were part of the same underworld." This kind of scandal, he said, "makes people, in their depression, turn dangerously away from the voting booth. But we couldn't just make believe that nothing was going on!"

For the 2001 presidential elections, Brozo announced the creation of a farcical "party," the PRAU—*Prau!* being a nonsense word he had invented to accompany the rude two-handed gesture that is common in Mexico. The Federal Electoral Institute did not make public the itemized results of the write-in votes, but people familiar with the final vote count, Trujillo says, told him that the PRAU did rather well.

Trujillo tries to sidestep the fact that he may well have become Mexican politics' most important arbiter; his own credibility is increasingly at risk the more successful he becomes. Perhaps not even he quite understood this before the López Obrador–Bejarano video episode, which has come to seem inseparable from its existence as part of the Brozo show. It was also the moment in which Trujillo stepped out of character. Appealingly, the clown had always managed to come across as sleazier than any of his guests, but that morning he was, in some sense, as trapped as Bejarano. If he was important enough to receive and air a video that could alter the results of the next presidential elections, how could he be a clown? And if he is a clown, what does that make us, his viewers? In accepting a tape that came from a ruling party congressman who is a known political enemy of the mayor's, Trujillo lost his bearings and turned into an inquisitor.

The uncharismatic Bejarano, who was known as an important fixer only to political insiders, is not, of course, the real star of the video. Nor is Carlos Ahumada Kurtz, the magnate who has major contracts with the city, and who, until the scandal broke, was the owner of two soccer teams and a one-year-old newspaper which employed some of the most respected reporters in the country. The *videoescándalo* would not have truly been a scandal if it had not implicated Andrés Manuel López Obrador directly, and set up a considerable obstacle to what only recently looked like the mayor's unbeatable ambition to run for the presidency in the 2006 elections. *Complot!*—a conspiracy—was the cry from his supporters from the moment the video came on the air. In Mexico, where conspiracy theory is a popular art form, the *complot* explanation for the tapes was guaranteed instant popularity.

Within hours, López Obrador himself endorsed it. The conspirators against him included, the mayor said in various interviews and press conferences, the government intelligence agency, a prominent right-wing senator, the President's wife, and also Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the former president who since his fall from dizzying popularity has become the country's all-purpose evil genius. Rather than call for an immediate investigation of the city's finances and of his closest associate's methods of fund-raising, López Obrador invited his supporters to rally in the Zócalo—the city's monumental

central square. On the appointed day the square was packed.

2.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador was born forty-nine years ago in the torrid southern state of Tabasco, to a family of tradesmen. Like many Mexicans who went to college during the Seventies and took an interest in politics, he graduated from the National University's school of political science. Back in Tabasco, he joined the PRI, the long-ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and built a career within the government. In 1987 a group of dissidents broke away from the PRI to support the candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the following year's elections, and López Obrador joined them. Those elections were won—or stolen, as many people believe—by the PRI leader, Carlos Salinas de Gortari.^[*] The dissidents went on to form the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), in alliance with the principal old left parties and a number of student activists and survivors of the 1968 student movement. Their platform has much in common with the program advanced by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's father, Lázaro, who as president in the Thirties nationalized the oil industry and created a large part of the social welfare system that is still in place today.

Once the new party was established, López Obrador rose fast, becoming, in 1994, one of the PRD's first politicians to be elected governor of a state. (He did not, however, become governor: the office was literally taken over from him, with the help of armed thugs, by the PRI candidate, who remained there for a full six-year term.) In the tense relationship between the former PRI party members and the former radical left-wing militants who form the main branches of the PRD, the ex-PRI-istas generally act the part of elder statesmen and campaign to be governors of states, while the former student leaders and activists stage demonstrations in favor of revolutionary causes and run for municipal office. López Obrador has chosen a different approach, leading thousands of Chontal Indian farmers who in 1996 took over hundreds of oil wells along the Gulf Coast. Two years later he marched at the head of thousands of residents of the state of Tabasco all the way to the Zócalo, dumping in the square truckloads of documents that allegedly contained proof of official corruption. The boxes may or may not have contained proof, but it seems that no one ever went through them.

As mayor, López Obrador has been controversial, and highly unpopular with the city's upper classes, but in the outlying *delegaciones*, or boroughs, where most of the city's inhabitants live, and where nearly everyone is poor, he has wide support. When, in 2002, he held a curious referendum against daylight savings time, the outer boroughs backed him. When he calls for a meeting in the Zócalo, people from these boroughs fill it. It is said that the city's bureaucrats are told to show up for the demonstrations, in the best old-PRI style; but the mayor also has sincere, and unswervingly loyal, supporters. From the first, his administration has moved to improve public services in the larger outer boroughs, and devoted large amounts of money to the welfare payments called *subsídios populares*. More than half of the available *subsidio* funds, or nearly \$300 million, are earmarked for monthly payments of around \$60 to any city resident over seventy years of age who is willing to fill out the appropriate form. Much else goes to handouts to the unemployed and the handicapped.

At \$7.3 billion, López Obrador's yearly budget is much bigger than that of every government ministry except the Education Ministry, but the city may be bankrupt. As Bejarano tells Ahumada in the video, the city government is having a hard time meeting its payroll; it has nearly doubled the debt accumulated by his two immediate predecessors as mayor—the PRD icon Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and the energetic Rosario Robles. She left office with a surprisingly favorable image among all parts of the city's population and was considered a strong contender for the presidency. It's unfortunate that Robles—a bitter enemy of López Obrador within the PRD—turned out to be having an affair with the very same Carlos Ahumada Kurtz who is seen in the videos handing over money.

In the wild hours that followed the episode of the video-on-the-clown-show, astonished viewers suddenly heard much gossip about the Robles–Ahumada affair: how her own passion explained her transformation from a businesslike, if slightly frumpy, Mexican woman wearing glasses to a svel-ter

self in chic suits, contact lenses, eye makeup, and an expensive haircut. She had moved to a house in the beautiful neighborhood of Coyoacán, rented to her by Ahumada's wife. (Where, one wondered in the midst of all this gossip-magazine rapture, did his money come from?) She was besotted, rumor goes. So, she appears to have believed, was he. According to another member of the city government who was also filmed with Ahumada, she pushed her colleagues in city government to do business with him.

By the time the video scandal broke, however, Ahumada was hiding in Cuba and Robles's reputation was in ruins. According to flight records retrieved by the newsweekly *Proceso*, Robles flew to Cuba twice in Ahumada's private jet during that scandalous week. She was taking him a supply of his favorite Tabasco sauce, among other items. It seems he intended to lie low for some time in Cuba, but on April 5, Cuban authorities held him for questioning. Two weeks later, they deported him to Mexico, without waiting for Mexico to complete extradition proceedings. The consequences of that decision are still reverberating throughout the Mexican political scene. Mexico recalled its ambassador, and the Cuban foreign minister called a press conference to denounce Mexico's treatment of the scandal and of Cuba in general (notably, President Fox's decision to vote against Fidel Castro's regime in the yearly UN Security Council Resolution on Human Rights).

3.

Democracy, or, at least, free and fair elections, arrived in Mexico nearly a century after a devastating revolution was fought for that goal. ("Effective suffrage, no reelection" was the slogan that brought down dictator Porfirio Diaz in 1911.) The victor in the 2001 elections was Vicente Fox, but it says something about his failure to establish a strong political presence that among those the mayor accused of conspiring against him, he initially mentioned the President's wife, Marta Sahagún de Fox, and not Fox himself. The President looks not so much tired as beaten, his deep voice hollow, much like his speeches, which carry no conviction.

An informal poll of four leading columnists of contrasting political leanings left them all searching for significant accomplishments in Fox's first four years. One praised him for having fired the imagination of a good many Mexicans back in 1994, "enough to believe that the PRI could be overthrown in the voting booth." Two agreed that the anti-poverty program Fox inherited from Presidents Zedillo and Salinas de Gortari seems to be efficiently run and is producing results. Another pointed to a new freedom of information law. He observed that since Fox has no majority in Congress and most of the state governors also belong to rival political parties, the President has little scope for action. "But [despite this] he's never tried to subvert the legal order, which is important," he concluded. It could be added that, given the near-zero growth of the economy, salaries for those lucky enough to have employment (about 60 percent of the work force) have remained more or less constant.

But this is not what was expected of Vicente Fox, the big, impetuous former Coca-Cola executive in cowboy boots. Having promised an urgently needed immigration accord with the United States, he was expected to deliver it and instead obtained nothing more than Bush's half-baked proposal for temporary residence. With respect to human rights, it was hoped that the country's first truly democratically elected president would, at a minimum, voice his concerns regarding the scandalous and ongoing case of the assassinations of women in the border town of Juarez, so that at least due process might be followed in investigating the crimes. He was expected to turn his party, the Partido Acción Nacional, or PAN—a small, mild-mannered, and deeply conservative party—into an effective force in the legislature. He was also supposed to know how to make a fractious Congress accept major changes in the economy. In short, he was supposed to govern.

Mexico's long progress from a dreadful civil war, through seven decades of authoritarian rule, to genuine elections is often compared to Spain's history: the civil war, Franco, democracy. But Fox seems to think that he was elected to play the benevolent overseer role of King Juan Carlos rather

than undertake the deal-making, lobbying, governing activities of President Adolfo Suárez, the shrewd Spanish conservative. "*Yo ya cumplí*," Fox has said. I did my part.

Last month Fox publicly scolded his energy minister for attending a PAN political rally in support of the minister's presidential ambitions. But he never reprimanded his wife, Marta Sahagún, for talking openly about her own possible future candidacy. The energy minister, who was an active militant long before Fox even joined the PAN, quit his post in fury, and Fox was left to ignore a wave of rebellion within his own party. "We don't take instructions from anyone," a PAN congressional leader said. One month later, the President's spokesman resigned, after distributing copies of a twenty-page letter in which he decried, particularly, "the incursion of the First Lady into the list of possible presidential candidates."

In Mexico City the first lady is often portrayed as both predatory and simpering, a terrifying combination. But in the *provincia*, which she tirelessly visits, Sahagún may be the most effective politician in Mexico today. She was Fox's spokesperson during the campaign, and she learned a great deal then about gaining power for herself and her candidate even without party backing. Her charity fund, Vamos Mexico ("Let's Go, Mexico"), now has a nationwide organization (even if recent articles in the *Financial Times* exposed its extreme inefficiency, and, at best, murky fund-raising methods). She is sometimes irritatingly moved to tears by her own words (as when she compares herself to Mother Teresa). But she appears to be fearless, as her husband also seemed, but was not.

Nevertheless, as her own party's unhappiness with her ambitions escalated, and the threat of nepotism in the succession generated a national scandal, Marta Sahagún's husband called a halt. The future of the presidential couple was not in politics, he declared on July 6. It took a week for her to agree with him in public. In a press conference held on July 12 at Los Pinos, the presidential residence, she professed her loyalty to the President and renounced all presidential ambitions for the 2006 elections. She would not, however, give up her commitment to the unprotected, she said, and she would "continue her struggle in favor of women." One had the feeling that the curtain had not come down; she could, at the least, and more sensibly, decide later on to run for office in Mexico City or in the state of Guanajuato, the Foxes' official residence.

As for the PRI, during its seventy-plus years in power it set up and dominated the modern Mexican political system. The PRI has a machine, experienced workers, political know-how, and the support of many former and current bureaucrats. Widespread disillusionment with the recent performance of electoral democracy might lead to a PRI comeback in 2006, if candidates can be found who are not engaged in slitting each other's throats. Also, with the loss of omnipotence, the PRI's tradition of arbitrary rule is coming into view, like the murky bottom of a lake going dry. José Murat, governor of the state of Oaxaca, was accused in June by the attorney general's office of staging an attempt to assassinate himself in March—either to glorify himself or to cover up a squabble among his bodyguards that left one policeman dead. In Chihuahua, a ten-year-old string of murders of young women and girls, committed with what can only be the connivance of law enforcement officials, has long been a scandal; but this month it was temporarily overshadowed when two members of the feared *Policía Judicial* were found to have three kidnap victims in a station wagon they had left parked in *Judicial* headquarters in the state capital. The *judiciales*, who have been released, having been charged merely with extortion, were part of PRI governor Patricio Martínez's security detail.

By comparison with the PRI, the corruption scandals within the PRD seem positively benign, which helps to explain why, his current troubles notwithstanding, Andrés Manuel López Obrador remains the country's most popular politician. But he has been chopping down many branches of his fractious party, without, perhaps, realizing the damage he is doing to himself. Witness his reaction to what was very probably the largest protest march in Mexico's history. As in the historic marches of the 1968 university student movement, the hundreds of thousands of orderly protesters who walked down the Reforma to the Zócalo on June 27 were largely self-organized, if at all, and predominantly middle class. The marchers wanted the local and federal governments to do something—anything—about the frightening rate of violent crime (Mexico now holds second place after Colombia in the

number of kidnappings, for example). The march was first proposed and coordinated by López Obrador's right-wing Catholic enemies (and eagerly promoted by the principal newspapers and television stations). But it's also unquestionable that the capital city is at the moment a frequently scary place to live for everyone and that, after a brief lull, the crime rate seems to be climbing sharply again.

The day after the march the mayor repeated his earlier conviction that the protest had been the result of a conspiracy and cited as evidence, "one, the manipulation by the right; two, the federal government's opportunism... and also, the yellow journalism in some of the media." The day after that, the leading newspaper, *Reforma*, ran an oversized headline calling for his resignation. Clearly, there was a political struggle behind the march, but López Obrador, characteristically willing to decide that all the marchers were his enemies too, staged a confrontation and in the process alienated many leaders in the PRD, who in some embarrassment publicly suggested that he rethink his position.

López Obrador is the kind of man who collects enemies: he seems to fear Salinas and Marta Sahagún, but within his own party he is hated by several factions, including the one led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the PRD's *líder moral*, who resigned last March from the party's governing council in protest against López Obrador's failure to deal with the video scandal. Is there in fact, in view of these hatreds, a *videocomplot* against the mayor? In the fragment of the declarations made in Cuba by Ahumada that the Cuban foreign minister presented on May 5 to foreign correspondents, a seemingly relaxed Ahumada tells an unknown interlocutor that he gave "them" the videos because it was his way of "proving what they were asking me about." He didn't at first intend to have the tapes shown on television, he said, but "then later they told me that it was important to have them publicized on television."

But who are "they"? Behind this answer lies the mystery of the *complot*. Ahumada is clearly both untrustworthy and inventive: "they" could be whoever he feels might be useful to name at any given moment, including López Obrador and Bejarano, or López Obrador's many enemies within or outside the PRD. It strains belief to imagine that the unlikely Gang of Four named by the mayor as the *complot* authors were collaborating on anything, but it is equally difficult to believe that René Bejarano just happened to be sitting for an interview in the studio program next door to Brozo's the day the tape was aired.

In fact, two days earlier, another tape had been released on the eve-ning news, showing the city's highest finance official gambling for huge sums in Las Vegas. In June, when the *videoescándalo* seemed to be getting nowhere, the Mexican attorney general presented López Obrador with a summons for criminal violations involving the city government's expropriation and use of a valuable piece of land (expropriated, in fact, during the term of his predecessor, Rosario Robles). López Obrador risks being caught in a trap. If he resigns six months before his term of office ends in December 2006, he loses his mayoral immunity and can be prosecuted, disqualifying him as a candidate. If, on the other hand, López Obrador serves out his full term of office, he cannot run for president. There does indeed seem to be a clear effort to get the front-runner out of the race before it has even begun. In response, the Mexico City government has begun distribution of two million copies of a comic book titled "The Dark Forces against Andrés Manuel López Obrador," which shows a salivating shark threatening a nice middle-class family on the cover, and goes on to explain the blows, or coups, against the mayor. "If we let him, this Tabasqueño will win the presidency," a business-suited Dark Force explains to his hand puppet.

Hand Puppet: Can't we buy him, like the other one?

Dark Force: He's not interested in money, and he has principles.

Hand Puppet: That evil one! He must be stopped at any cost.

With leading politicians thus disporting themselves, what is undeniable is that the people at

W Televisa are making sure that the Mexican viewing public gets maximum entertainment value out of its elected officials (including a congressman who was a cast member, and a finalist, on the latest *Big Brother* retread). Spicy infotainment sells, Televisa discovered some years ago, and the rest of the media have been happy to bring politics into the same sphere: *Bang!* goes the tape, and Bejarano bites the dust. *Sob!* weeps the heartbroken girlfriend/party chairman/former mayor. "They accuse me, and accuse me, and I don't understand why." *Wham!* goes the Clown Inquisitor, and morality gets reestablished.

Meanwhile, Brozo announced in June that he would be taking a leave of absence from Televisa following the death of Carolina Padilla, his wife and inseparable partner. One had only to watch the final broadcasts of *El Mañanero* to realize how great is the influence he wields. Manuel Bartlett, the senator from Puebla who in 1988 oversaw the manipulation of the presidential election vote count, called in to send his best wishes. So did President Fox and the attorney general. So did Salinas de Gortari, the old devil himself, sending *saludos* during a live radio interview.

Even López Obrador, during his daily pre-dawn press conference, congratulated Brozo as "a very intelligent social communicator." Then, unable to resist a populist opportunity, he expressed his hope that the program's workers would not be fired but "be given a vacation of a week, fifteen days, before being allowed to return on a full salary." At the studio, cameras showed Brozo's team mockingly cheering the mayor. Brozo was temporarily off the screen, but he will most certainly be back. As for López Obrador, for all the efforts to get rid of him, he may well be around for a very long time.

—July 14, 2004

Notes

[*] For a thrilling account of the tumultuous 1988 elections, see Julia Preston and Sam Dillon, *Opening Mexico: The Making of a Democracy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

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