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Atavistic Core of Postmodern Totalitarianism. Depoliticization of Death and the Sovereignty of Capitalism

Abstract: Although the First World, in the light of decay of geopolitical unipolarity of the world, did not become the undisputed master, it has managed to install its own epistemological and ideological principles at the core of capitalist modernity and all social-political regimes that accepted it as universal modernity. These principles, however, don't originate from the process of transcending premodern epistemological logics, but from their extending into contemporaneity, which meant that politics was actually collapsed into being a mere extension of pre-modern epistemological normatives. As a result, death, as the plethora of recent imperial aggressions in the Middle East and North Africa testify to, did not become just a residue of hegemonization of global capitalism, it became a technology of social differentiation and a conceptual category/practice that obscenely reinvents politics as the instrument of imposition of death; as the extension of the ideology that depoliticizes death and as the instrument of providing ideological purpose to the capitalist system of power.

Keywords: death, necropolitics, capitalism, sovereignty, racism, atavism, capitalist modernity, colonialism

(De)Authorization of Death

Death as the instrument and the (obscene) form of politics, has already been observed by critical theory. Achille Mbembe's articulation of "necropolitics" has, therefore, defined it as "Contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror."¹ The important issue for this text, however, is the utilization of death in the capacity of a linchpin around which limiting and delimiting prerogatives of sovereignty are being organized. This means that death became a governing principle on the basis of which differentiation between authorized and non-authorized death has become one of the main principles of social differentiation. As long as non-authorized death

¹ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, 1 (2003): 39.

is concerned, anthropologist Talal Asad has, in the context of his articulation of the meaning of suicide bombing, argued that:

In the Abrahamic religions, suicide is intimately connected with sin because God denies the individual the right to terminate his own earthly identity. In the matter of his/her life, the individual creature has no sovereignty. Suicide is a sin because it is a unique act of freedom, a right that neither the religious authorities nor the nation-state allows. Today, the law requires that a prisoner condemned to death be prevented from committing suicide to escape execution; it is not death but authorized death that is called for.²

So, if authorized death is a kind of legitimate death, the one that is imposed by the system of power, that still does not mean that every suicide may qualify as non-authorized death, i.e., not every non-authorized death is a political act. For instance, non-authorized death caused by suicide bombing in the context of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli apartheid may be seen as an act of freedom of choice where one chooses to die on his/her own terms in the context of struggle and politicization that seeks to antagonize the wider authoritarian geometry that sustains the sociopolitical situation that led to such acts.

On the other hand, the utilization of suicide bombing or infliction of death by the so-called Islamic State is not exactly non-authorized by the First World that is addressed by these attacks. These deaths are implicitly authorized in that measure in which they are contextualized as attacks on modernist, civilizational value matrices of the West, which actually allows the First World to pose as if it is a paragon of civilizational values, that were in the first place utilized as an excuse and a grand rationale for imperial incursions that ultimately led to the creation of the IS. Since this (and similar) movements actually address civilizational and cultural matrices that are a part of the capitalist system of power, not the system of power in its totality, it actually means that is actually copying the First World style of utilization and the infliction of death, only that such movements do it without an elaborate, sophisticated ideological machinery that would connect said infliction of death with modernist, democratic and progressive dimensions.

So, an answer to the question who determines what is non-authorized and authorized death is the sovereign and/or sovereignty in a form of a capitalist system of power, i.e., global capitalism and the First World located at its epistemological, ideological and operational core. While the exercise of death always was a prerogative of the sovereign, the same exercise also always offered an insight into the epistemological and ideological interiority of the system power that inflicts death – especially in cases when that system poses as if it does not have any ideology. Since the ideology of the currently dominant system of power nominally resides on various anti-authoritarian,

² Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2007), 67.

“post-racial” and democratic pillars, which are coupled with actual employment of racist totalitarianism, the connection between these two dimensions has to be addressed, not as dichotomy, but in a mutually cohabitating role. Asad has argued that:

[...] the cult of sacrifice, blood, and death that secular liberals find so repellent in pre-liberal Christianity is a part of the genealogy of modern liberalism itself, in which violence and tenderness go together. [...] Today, this contradiction is a part of a modern liberalism that has inherited and rephrased some of its basic values from medieval Christian tradition: on the one hand, there is the imperative to use any means necessary (including homicide and suicide) to defend the nation-state that constitutes one’s worldly identity and defends one’s health and security and, on the other, the obligation to revere all human life, to offer life in place of death to universal humanity; the first presupposes a capacity for ruthlessness, the second for kindness.³

Since there is no universal humanity, and since modernity was universalized by the First World in order to conceal the subjective and the geopolitical nature of modernity, humanity itself was at the same time differentiated in a racial key. Prominent decolonial theoretician Anibal Quijano has argued that:

The intersubjective universe produced by the entire Eurocentered capitalist colonial power was elaborated and formalized by the Europeans and established in the world as an exclusively European product and as a universal paradigm of knowledge and of the relation between humanity and the rest of the world.⁴

Humanity, therefore, is not a universal category, its universalization is only an aegis that hides the fact that human traits were assigned to those privileged and taken away from those made and defined as less worthy, which is the logic that practically constitutes the humanocentric epistemology of capitalist modernity and the power structures that sustain it. Hence, those that were, directly or indirectly, killed amidst the attempts at democratizing and modernizing the Occidental periphery, did not, as the dominant narrative states, die because of their inabilities to implement democracy and modernity, but because they were defined as incompatible or less compatible with either, which is actually a colonial logic that operates within the wider framework of multiculturalism. In relation to the Middle East, decolonial theoretician Nelson Maldonado-Torres has argued:

³ Ibid, 88.

⁴ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, 2 (2007): 171–72.

Islam is acceptable when it rather looks like the kind of Christianity that US Americans practice. Islam is recognized as a 'religion of peace'. Multiculturalism hides in this way a deeper multiracism that only recognizes the right for difference when peoples are well domesticated by capitalism, the market economy and liberal ideals of freedom and equality. Policy (both foreign and national) follows the contours of a division between blessedness and evil, the site of God on the earth (Western civilization that has found its reach in American soil) and the sites of evil.⁵

Torres's insight showed, not only that attempts at spreading capitalism were proclaimed worthy of death (of others), but also that the death of others was translated from the, previously mentioned, register of ruthlessness into the register of kindness. In those terms, the actual death of refugees⁶ can surely be seen as "authorized death",⁷ and even as a spectacle, that is, in the form of macabre primetime porn, utilized as the token of existence of both humanitarian sensibility *and* the superiority of the First World.

The infliction of authorized death in this context functions as the token of purpose of sovereignty in which the others *have* to die in order to endow the ephemeral consumerist existence and depoliticized capitalist state with an aureole of purpose that transcends the logic of maximization of profit. Authorized death is therefore depoliticized death, and it serves as the instrument of removal of the structural link between the macabre effect of spread of capital and the democratic, humanocentric normative that substantiates it. Hence, necropolitics and/or necrocapitalism does not just inflict death, it delays the death of the system of death, it spectacularizes the death of those deemed as unworthy, as well as it delays the death of those deemed as worthy.⁸ It is noticeable in various Hollywood movies that thematize apocalyptic events that mass deaths are implied, but they cannot be seen because everything that gets destroyed are only physical structures (cities) and physical nature. All of this implies that the system of power auto-interprets itself, and its society, as nothing else but a hollow immediacy, mere physical structure, but this also shows that the system has a problem with such structural traits. For instance, popular TV shows that on the one side thematize undead walkers, zombies etc. and that are, on the same hand (as seen in the sci-fi genre), unable to conceive fictitious orders as nothing else but politically and ideologically unarticulated décor, testifies to this hollowness. Hence, the death of potential for political and ideological articulation of the real and fictitious regimes

⁵ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge Modernity, Empire, Coloniality," *City* 8, 1 (2004): 49.

⁶ From Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria.

⁷ This refers to directly inflicted death (by military means), to deaths that occur as a broad consequence of imperial aggressions as well as to deaths caused by treacherous migration and the racist immigration policies of the First World.

⁸ As an example from pop culture, almost every band that ever lived is, sort of, still alive – Gang of Four are touring, Sex Pistols were touring, even Michael Jackson is sometimes on tour...

also testifies that the (infliction of) death, delay of death and glorification of death as the form of life, has become the only substance and an aim of such a system of power. This is a mark of hegemony, but this also means that the system of power is without any other agenda, but the cannibalistic one. Cultural critic Suely Rolnik has argued that:

[...] what the Western idea of a promised paradise amounts to is a refusal of life in its immanent nature as an impulse to continuous processes of creation and differentiation. In its terrestrial version, capital has replaced God in his function as keeper of the promise, and the virtue that makes us worthy of it now becomes consumption: this is what constitutes the fundamental myth of advanced capitalism.⁹

Since this consumption has to have a higher, ideological and teleological sense that could pose as if it supersedes the ephemeral substance of the process of maximization of profit, death, more precisely depoliticized death, comes in not only as a residue, as an effect of commodification, but as the form of subjectivisation of the system of power.

Sovereignty of Capitalism

From the 1960's onward, the capitalist system of power was – in the name of wider free-market, economic-centric utopias about abandoning political control of society – depoliticizing both society *and* politics. Of course, the system of power had to do this because it needed to conceal the geopolitical and racial hierarchies entailed in various technologically, democratically and economically prefixed social realities. In these terms, universalized modernity, surely, was a potent instrument. In relation to this, Maldonado-Torres has argued that:

What the concept of modernity does is to ingeniously hide the significance of spatiality for the production of this discourse. That is why most often than not those who adopt the discourse of modernity tend to adopt a universalistic perspective that does away with the significance of geopolitical location.¹⁰

Hence, while in such a setting the system of power was becoming hegemonic and omnipresent, and while it modernized its racial hierarchies of exploitation into

⁹ Suely Rolnik, "The Geopolitics of Pimping," *Transversal* 11 (2006), <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/rolnik/en>, accessed April 3, 2017.

¹⁰ Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge Modernity, Empire, Coloniality," 37.

post-Fordist environment(s), it seems that the system of power itself started to believe that its modernity was really transcending its political origins. It could be said in this sense that modernity was itself spatialized and turned into a boundary. Deterritorialization of capital processed through post-Fordism in the time span from the 1960 to 2000s, had an impact on how the system of power saw itself. Although capital was spatialized throughout territorial and cognitive dimensions of the existence of society, capitalism as the system of power actually found itself unable to articulate any kind of political ideological agenda. In this specific case it started to lose, more precisely, neglected to optimize the sovereign traits of its hegemony. Rolnik has noticed that in these times:

[...] the ‘cultural’ or ‘cognitive’ capitalism that was conceived as a solution to the crisis provoked by the movements of the 1960s–70s absorbed the modes of existence that those movements invented and appropriated their subjective forces, especially that of the creative potential, which at the time was breaking free in social life. The creative potential was in effect put into power, as was called for by those movements.¹¹

While it is clear that cultural and cognitive prefixes of capitalism describe only specific modes of application and maybe some topographical features of its hegemony, the absorption of subjective and creative forces of society was also a token of justification of capitalism. In the context of Rolnik’s argument that: “[...] this rise of the imagination to power is a micropolitical operation that consists in making its potential into the major fuel of an insatiable hypermachine for the production and accumulation of capital [...]”¹², it could be noted that such a machine, in the era of the rise of neoliberalism, threatened to ‘devour’ even those political and ideological dimensions of the capitalist state that sought to provide an ideological aureole to the process of maximization of profit. Although the capitalist system of power never became an economy-centric regime, but a regime in which the economy always was an extension of power, capitalism found itself in a situation in which it had to combine profit maximization logic with the ideological normative that allegedly surpasses this ephemeral logic. As the rise of reactionary populism – that seeks to structure ideological normative ‘above’ the ‘soulless’ profit maximization matrices – testifies to, what was happening in the era of neoliberalism, and what continues to reach its pinnacle in the era of combining neoliberalism and a reactionary neoconservative system is actually a completion of the process of depoliticization of ideology. This process underlined the whole modernization of capitalism, and it – by shattering the link between the system of power and political dimensions of ideology – reduced the distance between the power and the society to such a shape in which society ceased to exist. What emerged as the result was the suppression of class-based conflict and

¹¹ Rolnik, “The Geopolitics of Pimping.”

¹² Ibid.

its relocation into the field of race, religion and culture and the spatialization and/or statification of capitalism itself.

In relation to the classical Marxist theory of the state, where the base-infrastructure consisted of the economy, i.e., the relations of production, and where the superstructure consisted of legal, political and cultural domains, now, it is *vice versa*. The infrastructure now consists of the state, i.e., force and ideology and even society to a certain measure, while the economy, culture and the relations of production were relocated into the domain of the superstructure. All of this means that global capitalism, as the state-like system of power, does not operate on an inter-subjective matrix, it operates on an intra-subjective level where all interactions between the system of power and its subjectivised surrounding (including society) is an internal interaction.

The 'civil war' between reactionary and liberal discourses is not just fake, it is dramatized as an ideological conflict not just because the system of power needs to conceal the lack of ideological differences within the capitalist state, but also because it needs to structure a rigidity able to cope with the ephemeral, overly hybridized post-Fordist neoliberal production modes. The actual rise of reactionary populism does not mark the end of neoliberalism, but a rigid reorganization of both neoliberal and non-liberal principles in synchronous relationship within capitalism. Reactionary populism – in those terms in which it is providing capitalism with an aureole of a deplorable, yes, but still ideological agenda – is only a continuation of neoliberalism by other means. This relates to both the Western and non-Western types of reactionary populisms, as the cases of Russia and Turkey demonstrate, although the essential principles of the mainstreaming of reactionary populism stem from the First World's colonial epistemology. What is important to emphasize here is that capitalism as sovereignty has a need for spatialization, which is in direct connection with the prime ideological categories it handles, such as race. Maldonado-Torres has argued:

[...] the merging of race and space is behind imperial and military conceptions of spatiality that tend to give new meaning to Augustine's classical account of the earthly and heavenly cities: the difference between the City of God and the Earthly City of Men is translated into the divide between the imperial cities of the human gods and the cities of the damned.¹³

If race, i.e., the centrality of race in capitalism's matrices of social differentiation, is seen as a residue of the death of discourse, it could be said that space became an extension of race. Hence, race is a technology only in that capacity in which it is being used to deprive space of political and ideological dimensions, but, racism is primarily a principle of differentiation that essentially constitutes the matrix on the basis of which the processes of limitation and delimitation are being configured and

¹³ Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge Modernity, Empire, Coloniality," 51.

organized. The ultimate result is the geometry of boundaries that confirm that capitalism is a form of sovereignty. The 'post-truth' world is not therefore a world devoid of structural/systemic features, its ephemeral appearance only conceals the hegemonic nature of capitalism's statehood and omnipresence. These boundaries are at the same time total, when exercised against those designated to die, and minimal in the sense of being politically and ideologically articulated. So, this system is not yielding a politically and ideologically articulated boundary, it is yielding a boundary in the form of a miserable compensation for the lack of other politically-ideological discourses.

Marina Gržinić's argument that necropolitics is the "politicization of biopolitics"¹⁴ is extremely important because it shows that such a politicization is obscene, that it politicizes the already depoliticized field of social differentiation, social conflict and the matrices of social differentiation. Hence, depoliticized death is not just death that is being deprived of any meaning because of "postmodern conditions", it is a final result of deprivation and a method that is being exercised by the system of power as the only system's sovereign agenda it can organize. The opposite of depoliticized death is not politicized death, it is only non-authorized death that might, or might not, lead to its politicization. In the same sense, the epistemological content of necrocapitalism is not just death, it is an ideological imperative that seeks to prevent politicization of death and authorize the delay of life of that which had already died.

So, sovereignty reduced to geometry of boundaries and death reduced to depoliticized, delayed death mount up to not only the delimitation of geopolitical, ideological and epistemological oppressive apparatuses of the capitalist state, but also temporal ones and in that sense global capitalism actually destroys political possibilities of history and/or destroys the capacity of history to impose death on obsolete regimes. Depoliticization of death is therefore a process of depoliticization of history and a process of converting it, from being a sequence of the political deaths of systems of power, into a mere continuation of capitalism in a form of an immediate social-political order whose shape might look modern, but whose core is still authentically primitive, feudal and atavistic.

Atavistic Core of Capitalist Modernity

The ideology of values that saturates the epistemological and ideological normativity of the First World, as well as other major geopolitical actors, shows that the majority of political and epistemological matrices that format the relation to the world are based on axiomatic logics. The concept of 'value' is not being treated as a procedural category, as one that is derived out of politically articulated needs and actions, but it is treated as the result of deriving already defined and determined definitions out of the pre-political dimension of the metapolitical register. According to decolonial theoretician Freya Schiwy:

¹⁴ Marina Gržinić, "Subjectivisation, Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Where do we Stand?," *Reartikulacija* 6 (2009): 23.

The colonial imaginary has employed gender as a metaphor and means of subalternization, a metaphor that resulted not only in the representation of territories as female virgin lands that the conquerors penetrated with the sword in hand. The gendering of colonial imaginaries has operated as a means of rendering European masculinity through Othering.¹⁵

On the basis of Schiwy's insight it could be said that gendering and consequent 'Othering' – as parts of wider subjectivisation matrices that operate in the context of human rights and previously mentioned humanocentric logics – actually point out that the whole matrix of social differentiation in contemporary capitalism has grounds in pre-political logics and/or in such conceptualizations of the function of politics that define it as the extension of allegedly already determined truths. The glorification of gender equality in apolitical fashion on the one side and the nominal negation of the role of race that is coupled with actual employment of oppression in a racial key, actually manufactures pre-political categories into a pillar of the whole terrain in which the interaction between power and society happens. So, the persistence of the system of power on sustaining these categories as central in the matrices of subjectivisation shows that the system is not just unwilling, but also unable to produce other, *new* fictitious categories that would frame subjectivisation and social differentiation. This inability actually renders (post)modern capitalism as the structural canvas wrapped around and based on principally atavistic logics that originate from pre-industrial capitalism and even the *ancien* regime. Capitalism's imperialism in this sense is not just a geopolitical operation, but an epistemological operation that seeks to impose pre-political definition of politics as the basis of constructing ideological discourses, which is in connection with the previously mentioned depoliticization of ideology. Austrian political economist Joseph A. Schumpeter has, in his analysis of modern imperialism noted that:

It does not *coincide* with nationalism and militarism, though it *fuses* with them by supporting them as it is supported by them. It too is – not only historically, but also sociologically – a heritage of the autocratic state, of its structural elements, organizational forms, interest alignments, and human attitudes, the outcome of precapitalist forces which the autocratic state has reorganized, in part by the methods of early capitalism.¹⁶

The translation of colonial, racist rules in organizing social differentiation and the translation of natural-centric, pre-political epistemic logics into modernity, surely testifies to this, especially in relation to the contemporary dialectics between the neo-liberal bourgeoisie and their reactionary counterparts. As Schumpeter argued:

¹⁵ Freya Schiwy, "Decolonization and the Question of Subjectivity – Gender, Race and Binary Thinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, 2 (2007): 275.

¹⁶ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes. Two Essays by Joseph Schumpeter* (Cleveland, New York: Meriden Books, The World Publishing Company, 1966), 97.

The bourgeois outside his office and the professional man of capitalism outside his profession cut a very sorry figure. Their spiritual leader is the rootless 'intellectual', a slender reed open to every impulse and a prey to unrestrained emotionalism. The 'feudal' elements, on the other hand, have both feet on the ground, even psychologically speaking. Their ideology is as stable as their mode of life. They believe certain things to be really true, others to be really false.¹⁷

If this insight is translated into a contemporary context, it could be noted that neoliberals exist as mere extensions of the system of power, while reactionary elements address only those dimensions of the same system they saw as not 'real' or 'authentic' enough, implying, and actually believing that social-political order is, or should be, an extension of already determined, pre-political 'truths'. The necropolitical system's social-political order, necrocapitalism, is therefore only a bad kind of (very real) fiction that is substantiated with the belief that it is inherently real, untouchable by political means. In relation to the form of ruling class and/or nobility in an 'upgraded' autocratic state, Schumpeter has argued:

The nobility entered the modern world in the form into which it had been shaped by the autocratic state – the same state that had also molded the bourgeoisie. It was the sovereign who disciplined the nobility, instilled loyalty into it, 'statized' it, and, as we have shown, imperialized it.¹⁸

The modern capitalist state is, therefore, a classical autocratic state, whose sovereignty 'statifies' modern nobility and 'imperializes' it through global capitalism as the contemporary form of statehood of capitalism. Yet, when Schumpeter argued that: "[...] it is a basic fallacy to describe imperialism as a necessary phase of capitalism, or even to speak of the development of capitalism into imperialism"¹⁹ he actually projected a disagreement with Lenin's definition of imperialism "as the highest stage of capitalism" (Lenin). However, these two interpretations do not necessarily have to be in conflict. Lenin was right in those terms in which capitalism has modernized its networks of subjugation, but the epistemic and ideological principles on the basis of which new totalitarianism is being applied, are based on atavistic logics. Capitalism's technics had been advanced, but its core remained atavistic, to which a plethora of colonial epistemologies employed in the imposition and sustainment of contemporary hierarchies of exploitation testify to.²⁰ Hence, when obscene politicization of death produces the discourse of

¹⁷ Ibid, 92–92.

¹⁸ Ibid, 93.

¹⁹ Ibid, 89.

²⁰ In relation to the examples from pop-culture brought up in the first section, it is noticeable that one of the rare, also extremely popular, TV shows that is able to articulate some social-political order is *Game of Thrones* (HBO), which features a reimagining of a feudal order.

power and when depoliticization of death both conceals the hegemonic system of power and delays its own demise, that substance – which stands in the middle of such a binary and becomes a dominant experience of the whole modernity and its edges – is suffering. Of course, this suffering is not universal, it is differentially employed, which means that capitalist modernity is actually a cemetery where everything different dies definitely and where everything macabre continues to live on indefinitely.

So, after the French revolution collapsed in white, Eurocentric, masculine order; after the institutional legacy of the October revolution surrendered to the capitalist version of modernity, and after the victory of the explicit reactionary, racist populism in the center of capitalist modernity, it could be concluded that we all still live in an *ancien* regime. Racism, colonialism, necropolitics, patriarchy, atavism, *statification* of capitalism and the humanocentric normativity based on these conceptual categories now clearly testify to a totalitarian, hegemonic *and* statified form of capitalism.

Conclusion

If there are any positive notes contained in all of this, then they can be found in the rigidification of capitalism in those terms in which the structural connection of all these elements is becoming almost explicitly visible. As a means of resistance, it still stands that deuniversalization of modernity, i.e., the expulsion of the First World and its colonial epistemologies from the register of progress and that metapolitical register that determines the ‘irrational’ scope of politics, is a precondition of the reinvention of politics and restarting history. Additionally, in relation to an epistemological diversity that is often advocated by decolonial theory, it could be said that epistemological diversity cannot stand on its own, i.e., in parallel with epistemic homogeneity, it needs its own space, it needs to be spatialized, it should seek to dismantle the base of global capitalism, its spatial infrastructure – global capitalism as the state – and to establish a new state, i.e., new matrices of producing differentiation and limitation/delimitation.

This means that the de-universalization and politicization of the world should not be a rejection of death and/or any utopian celebration of life, it should be an attempt at universalizing death. Since the left is pretty much dead,²¹ it means that the politics of progressive resistance should not seek any kind of integration, emancipation and/or equality in life, but equality in death. Since depoliticization of death is actually an act by which capitalism hijacks/detaches death from history, the proper politicization of death should not be an ideological discourse that seeks to save the world or humanity from capitalism and its main protagonists by redistribution of global wealth, but that seeks to politicize death as the prerogative of history. Hence, the death of the current system of power and the death of humanity itself – as the prerogative, as the biological confine and as the extension of colonial humanocentrism – should be conceptualized as the precondition of restarting and (re)politicizing history.

²¹ In terms of refusing to die in order to reinvent itself on anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-humanocentric ideological grounds.

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