

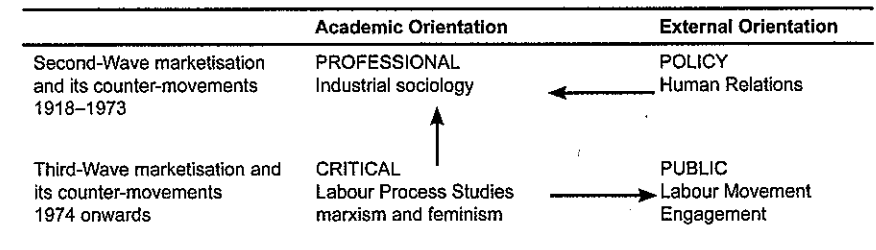
Organic Public Sociology and the Labour Movement: A Biographical Reflection

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... science must be pursued for itself, irrespective of the eventual results of research, but at the same time a scientist could only debase himself by giving up active participation in public life shutting himself up in his study. (Paul Lafargue, Die Neue Zeit, 1890, cited in Fromm 1966, 221).

Burawoy's article (this issue) presents a succinct overview of shifts in the intellectual focus and public orientation of industrial sociology and labour studies in the US over the past century. These changes are well summarised in the following figure:

Figure 1: Marketisation and Labour Studies



Burawoy's overview of the changes in the orientation of labour studies highlights several moments. The Hawthorne experiments in the 1930s gave birth to the human relations approach, which shaped the intellectual agenda of industrial sociology and organisational theory. Four decades later, Braverman's path-breaking work and the emergence of labour process studies created a critical sociology, which nevertheless remained grounded in professional sociology. The 1990s are marked by a transition, 'from the *study* of the labour process to an *engagement* with the labour movement' (my emphasis) at a time when the labour movement in the US

and indeed across much of the globe was in a period of marked decline. Burawoy asks a pertinent question: 'which can be paraphrased: why should sociologists devote themselves to a labour movement that was fast becoming extinct?'

The current situation is characterised by a crisis produced in part by the sustained corporate political attack on the very idea of unionism, which has sparked debate and, in certain instances, innovative responses from within the movement. Is there a role for sociology within this ferment, Burawoy asks? His response is essentially US-centered, capturing the debate in the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL/CIO), the new strategies of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the impact of the Justice for Janitors campaign and the progressive approach to the immigrant question. Taken together, these initiatives provide a glimmer of a movement response in the making. This awakening resistance has impacted on sociology, leading to a 'turn of focus from structure to agency, from process to movement, from a *critical-professional* sociology to a *critical-public* sociology of labour...'

Burawoy argues that the revitalisation of labour studies stems from a close connection between sociologists and the labour movement. The situation is characterised by a notable growth in labour studies literature and in the activities of the labour wing of the American Sociological Association. There is an intriguing conclusion to the paper where he contends that Polanyi's ideas of resistance are relevant to the emergence of a new labour movement. The appeal to Polanyi suggests a movement of alliances amongst communities facing the commodification of social existence, in contrast to the Marxist notion of the unification of an exploited working class. He contends that Polanyi-type struggles are especially important to countries in the global South, where wage-labourers constitute a shrinking elite. Whether or not 'the disparate struggles and communities that face commodification can find a common language to unify their protest' is an open question in his view. Quoting Bauman (1987), Burawoy concludes: 'certainly, the engaged sociologist has a role to play here...not as an omniscient legislator but as a sensitive interpreter'.

My comments, building on a brief biographical reflection concerning my early political and intellectual formation in South Africa, seek to engage with these questions. The intention is not to assert a singular model, but rather to stimulate debate on the nature of the relationship between sociologists and movements. The argument is grounded in Burawoy's notion of an organic public sociology, which he characterises as having 'close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter public' (2007, 28). Such an orientation, he argues, is often separate from the professional lives of sociologists. However, 'the project of public sociologies is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as part of sociological life'. My response highlights the potential inherent in such an organic engagement.

Public Sociology and the Labour Movement

Burawoy's question, 'Why do sociologists devote themselves to labour movements in crisis?' stimulates reflection on the social and psychological roots of organic intellectuals. His (2007, 24) piece provides an insight which may explain much – classical sociology was driven by a 'passion for justice' and aspired 'to change the world'. Despite subsequent shifts in focus, this 'originating moral impetus is rarely vanquished'. Indeed, in today's globalised society sociology is regaining its 'moral fiber' and 'herein lies the promise and the challenge of public sociology'. Probing sociologists' biographies may well reveal this moral impetus, passion for justice and its potential to revitalise the discipline, perhaps clarifying why sociologists devote themselves to labour movements, even when these movements are deemed to be in decline.

Racist South Africa during apartheid is a case in point. Two events of pure chance imposed an indelible mark on my inner being, creating a lifelong hostility to racism and injustice. As a child I spent a month of each year on a farm on the outskirts of Johannesburg and formed deep friendships with African children. Closeness to nature, early morning cattle-herding and then endless time to play – these were magical experiences. Such rural encounters were juxtaposed with life in an apartheid-structured city, including a neighborhood incident when I witnessed the thrashing of a young 'garden boy' for daring to ride a white child's bicycle. I believe upon later reflection, that this incident left a lasting psychological scar. These contrasting experiences were the psychological grounding of a lifetime of movement involvement. However, being a pure activist seemed not to fully resolve subconscious feelings and spiritual void. I hungered for knowledge – *why* were social relations in South Africa structured in this way? The extremes I witnessed seemed, at least in my uncompromising youthful awareness, the work of an insanely distorted collective consciousness. I needed to know how such a society had eventuated. Answers were a long time coming, for my father, a fitter and turner by trade, insisted that the pathway to worldly success was through studying economics. As a non-unionised worker, he acutely sensed his lowly status and hoped that his son would make good in a way that he could never achieve. These were years when economics was influenced by the marginalist revolution and therefore focused on an analysis of the problems of choice and allocation under conditions of scarcity, rather than the origins of the wealth of nations. Society was absent in this venture. On completion I all but destroyed my father's life when I eschewed business opportunities so carefully planned with his yachting contacts, moving instead into a Catholic worker movement paying 25 Rand a month. There I learnt organizing skills and found time to enroll in undergraduate sociology.

Later, through my organizing work, I had the good fortune to meet a small but remarkable group of public intellectuals – Rick Turner, Eddie Webster, Phil Bonner and Fatima Meer.¹ They deepened my passion for sociology, political science and history, for books and the world of ideas. Above all, they created a culture of hope and optimism. Social transformation was indeed possible, despite the state's repressive power, provided social forces were properly understood and new movement strategies were imagined (ideas) and fought for (organic engagement). In this 'Durban moment', as these tumultuous years were later characterised, the idea of sociology separate from social injustice was inconceivable. Such a moral impulse and direct engagement with movements drew many of us to sociology. In my consciousness, the university and the union office were connected. I have fond memories of rushing from union meetings (I was a union organiser at the time) to catch a Turner lecture on campus. The theatres were packed. Students sat down in the aisles and surrounded the podium. Only a third were registered. All were drawn as a magnet to this world of ideas and social engagement. When Rick returned from the Sorbonne, he introduced a Marxism freed from Soviet shackles, and we came to understand the potential of the union organizing work. His was a broad-based, sophisticated analysis, embracing classical sociology and western philosophy.

Such an experience of organic public sociology broadened my conception of my role as a social activist. Could intellectual activity combine creatively with a commitment to movement building? These public intellectuals argued that I should consider researching the labour movement in the 1950s. They contended that memories needed to be recorded so that an exceptionally rich history could be recovered and used to advance future movements. Turner commented, 'activists will die and a potentially rich texture of history will be diminished'. Thus began a decade-long oral history project, which uncovered new insights into the moral essence of the movement, which in the 1950s was grounded in Gandhi's ideas of non-violent direct action. The emerging movement embraced suffering for justice as a pathway to building a sensitive, compassionate society, recognizing that the end is preexistent in the means. Most interviewed had endured long terms of imprisonment and torture, which enlarged rather than destroyed their spirit and their humanity. In the 1970s, many students were drawn to a public engagement because of this moral vision and their encounters with the activists who had forged this culture.²

The major longer-term achievement of public intellectuals in South Africa is to keep the tradition of intellectual engagement on public issues alive in the Post-Apartheid period, at time when new orthodoxies prevail.

Just as this moral vision inspired an organic public sociology engaged with the newly emerging labour movement a similar potential exists in relation to free

market globalisation. Global restructuring, environmental degradation and the war machine foreground ethical choice. What kind of movement will have the capacity to challenge market rule and what is meant by an organic public sociology?

What Kind of Movement?

The 1970s were a time of intellectual ferment in South Africa. Drawing on historical research on factors shaping the expansion and decline of non-racial unionism, public intellectuals contributed to a vital debate on the style of unionism required to challenge the power inequality. The debate centered on how unions could be built as a participatory movement in contrast to the traditional model of bureaucratic organisations.³ In this the relationship between internal democracy and power was explored. Similarly, in the current struggles a public sociology is needed to create a movement with power to challenge the global market model. Theorizing the nature of such a movement and its sources of power should be a priority in labour studies.

The final section of Burawoy's (2007a, 9-11) paper introduces a debate on this question. He envisages two strategies deriving from two theorists. The Marxist theory of exploitation analysed the early onslaught of industrial capital, when the trade union movement arose to unify exploited workers. Polanyi's ideas now capture the situation of the new labour movement, which focuses on commodification and workers' inability to secure social reproduction rather than just on exploitation in the workplace. Organizing strategies focus on these broader issues as well as traditional workplace concerns. A careful reading reveals a subtlety to Burawoy's analysis, for he recognises that these spheres cannot be neatly separated. Nevertheless, his position requires further reflection, particularly with regard to the relationship between exploitation and commodification in the early and late Marx (Fromm 1966: 93, 95; Marx 1976: 165), which complements and potentially deepens Polanyi's notion of commodification.

In highlighting the relationship between production and reproduction, Burawoy identifies a vital task, namely, envisaging a new kind of movement with the capacity to unite these two spheres in complementary struggle. Polanyi's notion of a counter-movement is a fertile concept to stimulate further work in this area. Analysis of the Marx/Polanyi relationship is the way to advance a theoretical conception of the character of the counter-movement. This would need to be grounded in work on what has already been accomplished, most notably in Clawson's (2003) analysis of labour and the new social movements in the United States. Can these spheres of action (production and reproduction) be organically linked in a social movement unionism in an enduring form? Or are these moments of linkage beyond production into civil society merely episodic, whereby unions connect with civil society when they need society's support then retreat into their

old institutional pattern once the issues are resolved? Seidman (1994: 274) notes in the conclusion of her analysis of the rise of social movement unionism in South Africa and Brazil that this orientation may only be a 'transitory phase'. Integration in the state industrial relations system creates an institutional dynamic and resource choices which focus solely on workplace issues of wages and conditions separate from broader political and civil society questions. Seidman (1994, 199) observes that redefining the union role and linking spheres of struggle 'is hardly a straightforward process'.

Globalisation introduces a further layer of complexity, which is mentioned but not developed in Burawoy's analysis. Sociologists acknowledge that unions will also have to become global if they are to successfully counter the power of global corporations. Whilst the notion of 'global unionism' is now part of the discourse, like 'social movement unionism' itself the precise character of this type of unionism remains obscure. In considering movements in relation to global corporate power, C. Wright Mills' conception of the sociological imagination needs to be recast from one of understanding private troubles as social issues to conceiving that which does not yet exist. That is to say, Mills' vital insight on the relationship between the private orbits of citizens and the public sphere needs to be extended to imagining alternative social, economic and political arrangements. Our analysis (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout 2008) of the nature of corporate restructuring and its impact on society imagines an alternative to market rule and envisages a counter-movement that can become a force transforming market-driven politics. In this phase of experimentation, reflecting an intense search for new sources of power, sociologist can choose to become 'sensitive interpreters' (Burawoy, this issue). However, the choice of an organic engagement expands the role of the sociologist into the furnace of action itself and the grounding of ideas *within* the movement itself. Too often the exchanges between sociologists in the form of publications and conferences do not connect with the internal life of movements. An organic public sociology suggests a role redefinition in order to bridge the divide.

Conceptualising the role of an *organic* public sociology will be critical to the success of the counter-movement venture. Such a role definition foregrounds the relationship between intellectuals and activists. Far from reproducing an intellectual/activist divide, an organic public sociology contributes to the evolution of a new movement culture, open to ideas, contestation and debate and hence a relationship of equals where activists are intellectuals and intellectuals activists. Such a culture generates an open, fluid, participatory movement orientation, which contrasts with that of closed, bureaucratic unionism.

Organic Public Sociology

Burawoy's (2007: 28) definition of organic public sociology emphasises a close connection with movements, in contrast to traditional public sociology where the sociologist instigates debates with or between publics without necessarily participating in the social. In the latter case, the notion of public is mainstream and outside of movement engagement. This raises the fundamental question: for whom and for what do we pursue sociology (Burawoy 2007: 34)?

An organic public sociology arises out of the choice to identify with the needs of those social classes adversely affected by market rule. Its purpose is to advance the needs of society against the logic of the market (corporations), and movements are viewed as the means to resolve this contradiction. Whilst there might be general agreement that *connection*, or *engagement*, with movements is a defining feature of an organic approach, the nature of such an engagement — its purpose, potential, contradictions and constraints — has not been adequately reflected upon. In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci (1971: 12) states: It should be possible to measure the 'organic quality' (*organicita*) of intellectuals by 'their *degree* of connection with a fundamental social group'. I propose to respond to this question of organic quality through my own involvement in the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), a movement of the global south, which I helped to found in the early 1990s.

SIGTUR was formed in May 1991 as an initiative of the left sectoral unions within Australia, who were strongly supported by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in South Africa. The spur was the impact of free market trade and investment on local conditions and the aim was to draw democratic unions from the global south into a networked social movement. SIGTUR now comprises democratic unions from some twenty countries in the global south and has been instrumental in developing and applying new forms of solidarity action to local situations.

The Co-ordinator's role is to organise annual Regional Co-ordinating Committee meetings, which bring together leaders from the major participating unions to review and plan strategy. Every two years, SIGTUR organises a Congress. Eight have been organised to date and the Co-ordinator's role is to work with the leadership in realising this. Finally, the Co-ordinator is responsible for regular communications and responses to issues. For example, SIGTUR is currently in the midst of a regional campaign against the imprisonment of Korean labor leaders.

For the past twenty years, I have played a difficult dual role: university-based academic and Co-ordinator of this global movement, which has increased in scale over the years, now uniting democratic labour movements from twenty countries

in the Global South (Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australasia). Initially, I was invited to assist the Australian unions in their endeavours to link with southern democratic unions, following Australia's radical embrace of market rule. Given my South African background, I relished the opportunity to redefine this intellectual/activist divide. Thus began a new journey filled with opportunity, demands, difficulties and crises.

Opportunities arise from being on the inside of the everyday struggle to build a movement. In the case of SIGTUR, one is working with an array of remarkable movements from the Global South: the Korean Council of Trade Unions (KCTU) in Korea, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in India, COSATU in South Africa, the Trade Union Centre (CUT) in Brazil, together with the nascent democratic unions across Southeast Asia. All are hostile to market rule and each is searching for new forms of power to challenge global corporations. Consequently, one develops insights into the character of this struggle from the vantage point of political and organisational engagement where ideas are continuously contested by experienced, battle-hardened unionists. One becomes acutely aware of strengths and organisational weaknesses in the struggle to construct a global unionism.

Given this organic connection, what then of my university-based academic role? Whilst the contradictions and tensions are profound at times, I have nevertheless found this organic connection productive and creative in both spheres of activity. SIGTUR has set my research agenda, the demands of which could only be met through the development of a community of scholarship locally and globally. Locally, we have built a small creative team of labour scholars. Our research has focused on corporate restructuring (sectoral studies), the new labour movements in Asia and the new labour internationalism. Globally, I renewed my partnership with Webster and Sociology of Work Project (SWOP), which has resulted in our book, *Grounding Globalization*, originally inspired by the SIGTUR experience. Another facet of the global is the vitality of the labour studies network within the International Sociological Association (ISA), where many scholars have deep movement connections. This vitality is evidenced in the extraordinary response we have received when the Labour Movements Research Committee of the ISA called for papers for the mid-term conference in Barcelona in September 2008. A common culture of scholarship has emerged within this Committee, one defined by social commitment and a public engagement with movements.⁴

The key point of these relationships is that they have had a notable impact on the evolution of SIGTUR. For a period in the mid-1990s, there was a degree of uncertainty as to the movement's future direction. Unlike the leaderships of many unions in the global north, who have embraced restructuring in varying degrees, the southern leadership is uncompromising in its opposition to global restructuring. Whilst the political position was firm, union leaders within SIGTUR, representing

the perspectives of their national federations, were far from clear as to the alternative to the market model. The research program developed with SWOP deepened our understanding of the implications of this position and led to rigorous debate on empowerment strategies. We researched the SIGTUR experience through surveys and leadership interviews, contextualizing this southern movement within the history of labour internationalism, thereby exploring the characteristics of a new labour internationalism. The research deepened our understanding of the potential power of cyberspace networking, especially when connected to movements (Lambert and Webster 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Lambert 2006). *Grounding Globalization* developed a systematic critique of markets through exploring Polanyi's analysis of the relationship between markets and society. In particular, the book analysed new sources of power critical to the SIGTUR venture (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout 2008). The discovery of new thinking in labour geography (Harvey 2000; Herod 2001, 2003; Herod and Wright 2002) introduced the problem of spatial structuring of power and led to analysis of new forms of movement power through working space (Lambert and Gillan 2007). The form and character of global unionism became a key focus (Lambert 2009 forthcoming). During the course of this intellectual journey, SIGTUR provided the opportunity to test these ideas through policy debates with organic intellectuals inside SIGTUR; hence ideas were constantly tested in the heat of real world conflict and struggle. Ideas were refined, or abandoned. An evolving area of work is the monitoring of global corporations, utilizing powerful software programs that are now available. Here research focuses on areas of vulnerability produced by capital markets, trade dependency and just-in-time production systems.

Burawoy observes:

... professional sociology depends for its vitality on the continual challenge of public issues through the vehicle of public sociology. It was the civil rights movement that transformed sociologists' understanding of politics; it was the feminist movement that gave new direction to so many spheres of sociology. In both cases it was sociologists, engaged with and participating in the movements, who infused new ideas into sociology. (Burawoy 2007: 41)

Similarly, the intellectual journey sketched above is the product of an organic public sociology. Provided that a community of scholarship in labour studies can be sustained, these ideas on the emergence of a new labor internationalism (NLI) and new forms of action might suggest new directions in labour studies. Historically the discipline has advanced through the theoretical insights and creative empirical work of individuals. An organic public sociology might achieve intellectual and political breakthroughs through the collective effort of the community of scholars which has emerged with such vitality in recent years.

Far from movement engagement detracting from intellectual endeavor, direct involvement stimulates fresh directions relevant to the overriding issue of our times: can market rule be challenged? New ideas produced by this intellectual labour have been grounded and enriched by movement debates (formal and informal).

Organic public sociology also provides a meaningful perspective on university life and citizenship. As the university chooses a relatively uncritical embrace of the corporation, a review of reasons for remaining in the institution is pertinent. Are we Lucky Jim in the Kinsley Amis novel, the academic who does what has to be done, without purpose or meaning? Do we feel trapped by a 'Chaplinesque assembly line model of scholarly productivity' (Zussman and Misra 2007, 9)? In these circumstances, Gramsci's *organicita* gives meaning to university life.

Within this environment, an organic public sociology gives a sense of purpose far deeper than publications listed on a CV. Such an involvement keeps the original passion for social justice alive, ensuring that the normalizing pressures of careers are kept in check. For the organic public sociologist, society sets the agenda. The crisis shapes our commitment to research and publishing and this is more profound and fulfilling than a personal career and promotions. In this context, key personal questions take on new meaning. Why do we remain university-based academics? What personal goals do we set ourselves? What are our ambitions and deeper aspirations? These are at once questions of personal identity and social status - our deeply felt need for recognition. How do we answer these questions within the new corporate culture of the university? Here the institutional transformation is exceedingly simple in its design. In a previous era, universities entered into a relationship with corporations, and now these powerful economic forces have become integrated into the internal structure of the institution. Within Australia, for example, University Chancellors are drawn from corporate ranks. Performance targets are set. Vice Chancellors receive million dollar salaries with performance bonuses, provided they meet these targets. Corporations make up part of the shortfall in public funding, provided they 'have a voice' at faculty level. Market rule within the university is seldom questioned. This is a wintry environment for a labour studies that chooses to be organic in orientation.

In this predicament, Burawoy (2007: 57) argues that we have to surmount these impediments through 'commitment and sacrifice....that is why [we] became sociologists - not to make money but a better world'. We are committed to an intense research program and quality (hopefully widely read) publications because of our desire for a socially just, humane society. Hence, good labour scholars are also highly productive and pass the corporate-driven - endless - measures of 'productivity' that universities are now applying, but they achieve this, not because of a commitment to the 'almighty CV', nor through an aspiration to climb the internal status hierarchy, but rather through the quality of an organic connection

with movements. This is the realm wherein a new identity is formed and a sense of status achieved. Here is an identity forged through serving society, where we judge our own value and worth in terms of this engagement, rather than in terms of the title on our office door. Here status is non-hierarchical, a counter to measures of personal worth *over* others of a 'lower status'. Within genuine movements, every person is deemed to embody an immense value and personal worth, *equal* in standing to every other person. There are no highly esteemed leaders and functional others. This is why a democratic labour movement such as the Korean Council of Trade Unions (KCTU) places such emphasis on what they call 'body talk', whereby persons within the movement discover the power of their own bodies, their spirit, their emotions and their mind. When organic public sociologists enter this movement environment, they have to swiftly learn that formal institutional status means nothing: commitment and service is everything. Recognition of the inherent status equality of all in the movement means delving deeper into the inner world of status anxiety. Here it is found in Gramsci's *organicita*, the quality of our connection.

What then of sociologists who are committed to the movement project and the transformation of market rule, but who choose not to become actively and directly engaged in movements? There is a role for all in Burawoy's conception of public sociology. In the case of organic public sociology, there is practical answer to this question. Meeting the research demands of movements requires a team approach, where teams may link those who are organically linked with those who have chosen a pure research role. Thus we witness a flowering of local and global networks of scholars in labour studies, focused in the main on key questions surrounding the current transformation of the labour movement. In this there is a new-found vigor, which is evident within the labour division of the American Sociological Association and within the labour movements research committee of the International Sociological Association.

Conclusion

Market rule will continue to ravage society and the natural world in its quest for stock-market gain unless challenged by an active, globally linked civil society. Such reaction requires the construction of a new kind of movement, which Polanyi foreshadowed in his conception of a counter movement. Sociology has a critical role to play in this process. My story suggests that this will be best achieved through a community of scholarship, where organic linkages with movements are created by some, but not necessarily all sociologists in the team. The intention of this biographical reflection is the stimulation of debate, surely the hallmark of active citizenship in these troubling times that daily darken our horizons. Burawoy has

engendered hope by initiating this crucial discussion on public sociology.

Notes

1. Here I mention only those who had a direct influence on my formative years. There are many other organic public sociologists of note: Ari Sitas and his inventive cultural work with the new labour unions; Jacklyn Cock and her work on gender, the war machine and ecology; Johann Maree and his diligent analysis of the early labour movement.
2. The line in a Dylan song, 'Don't follow leaders, watch the parking meters', was popular at this time. In contrast to this sense of political alienation, the humanity of these movement leaders inspired purpose and commitment. Politics was a value choice, an engagement with the social, a vision of a realisable alternative. The contrast between this movement culture and the sometimes corrupt, self seeking politics that now characterises aspects of post-apartheid South Africa is an irony of history.
3. The debate on the new form of unionism made a sharp contrast between a democratic, participatory, movement style of unionism centered on worker control (mandates and accountability) and the difficulties in controlling leadership in a bureaucratic hierarchy. However, movement and bureaucracy can be seen as complementary, the one driving collective action and the other providing stability in moments of retreat (see Tarrow 1998).
4. Research Committee 44 on Labour Movements produces a regular newsletter, which covers both intellectual and movement developments (see <<http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/globalabour/rc44/index.cfm>>).

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