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Threats to Democracy in the Americas: Developing a Research Agenda

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This conference report includes summaries of the FOCAL-UBC workshop "Threats to Democracy in the Americas" held in Vancouver in March 2000. The workshop analyzed a range of recent events and trends that have generated concerns over the quality and future of democratic governance in many Latin American countries. The content of the report is the sole responsibility of Flavie Major, who is a student to the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On March 3rd and 4th 2000, a workshop on Threats to Democracy in Latin America brought together academics, representatives of foundations and governmental officials on the St. John's campus of the University of British Columbia (UBC). It was sponsored by UBC's Institute of International Relations, the Department of Political Science and the Faculty of Arts. The workshop arose from the concern that, in spite of impressive progress towards democratization in Latin America in the last twenty years, a number of disturbing trends in the region point to an erosion of the quality and workability of democracy. Moreover, the present social science literature seems ill suited to help understand the nature of these trends and the danger that they present for the viability of democratic regimes.

The first day of the workshop was devoted to identifying and explaining threats to democracy in Latin America from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and to developing an agenda for further research. The observations and research priorities that were identified during the presentations and the subsequent discussions are included in this report. The second day of the workshop was devoted to providing constructive guidance to policy-makers attempting to respond to destabilizing trends in Latin America. In an effort to bridge theory to practice and policy-making, a variety of possible lines of policy were defined, and will be included in a second report, published by the Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

The workshop was divided into six different panels. Each of the panels began with presentations, followed by a discussion opened to all participants. Although this report cannot include all observations, and does not express views that were fully endorsed by all participants, I have sought to capture the general flavour of the workshop and to give

contrasting views adequate coverage as well. The report is divided on the same lines as the panels, albeit in a slightly different order. Recent political developments that exemplify the variety of “democratic” practices that coexist in the region are presented first, with an assessment of the dilemmas that such practices pose for democratization. Subsequent sections are then devoted to a presentation of the threats to democracy that arise from such practices and from structural factors. These threats are grouped in the categories of economic and social inequalities, culture, political structure and institutions, civil rights and education, and human security.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: THE CASES OF PERU, VENEZUELA, AND MEXICO

A range of undemocratic practices seems to co-exist with electoral democracy in Latin America, often with the backing of popular opinion. This has given rise to “hybrid” regimes, a complex amalgam of basic democratic elements and authoritarian practices. In countries where the population is highly disenchanted with the existing political arrangements, citizens are increasingly likely to support autocratic presidents who are popularly elected and promise a “real” and “authentic” democracy. The results are electoral democracies where the democratic principle of majority rule is present without much of the substance, the supportive political culture, the values and institutions normally associated with liberal democracies. Others have termed such regimes “illiberal democracies”. Fundamental human liberties are respected rhetorically, and opposition activity is not overtly restricted in these hybrid regimes. However, the increased concentration of political power in the executive, and a close alliance with the military, often lead to a type of populism that is impatient with the niceties of respecting opposition activity. Venezuela under President Chávez, Peru under President Fujimori, and the present situation in Mexico, illustrate in different ways the dilemmas of democratization in this new regional context.

In Venezuela, the political landscape has undergone profound changes since the election of President Hugo Chávez in December 1998 and his subsequent efforts to implement a Bolivarian revolution promising “authentic” democracy. At the heart of this revolution were important constitutional changes that were accepted in a national referendum. Poor economic performances under past democratic governments created enough disillusionment among citizens to favour the rise of a strong charismatic leader promising changes and effective governance, even at the expense of democratic procedures.

This “deeper democracy” gives primacy to a popularly-elected president who presumes to know what is “good for the people”, a presumption with potentially dangerous consequences for political pluralism. The Chávez regime may represent an alluring version of the tyranny of the majority. However, his majority is qualified. The new president has managed to reduce political opposition in Venezuela, yet there is a high level of electoral abstention and the traditional elites are disturbed by this new mass-populism.

Chávez’s radical economic measures illustrate heterodox and populist orientations as well

as his rejection of neo-liberalism. His policies are strikingly similar to older paradigms where governments promised economic miracles to save the nation, and especially the poor population (the "people"). But what is new and worrisome is the substantial presence of the military and the high politicization of the new leaders of the executive who manipulate symbols and past historical references to gain popular support. Building on the image and evoking the status of Bolívar, Chávez has managed to weaken opposition forces by casting himself as a new liberator. His new constitutional mandate has given him centralized powers and has eliminated significant checks and balances from the political system.

The Chávez revolution poses a number of challenges for democrats and students of democratization. Chávez sends a clear message to the international community that citizens of countries such as Venezuela want strong and effective governments. His actions could very well have important regional consequences if other countries struggling with the same difficult economic and social situations are tempted to imitate his example.

In Peru, where the same type of executive-centred political arrangement was created by Alberto Fujimori in 1992, the fragility of such regimes has become apparent in a series of problems arising from the country's elections in April 2000. President Fujimori was re-elected in 1995 after his first five-year term, but his popularity has since eroded. Although he has governed efficiently and without much opposition, thanks to the weakness of political parties and government control over the media and the military, the poor quality of the electoral process threatens the regime's stability and longevity. In strictly electoral democracies like Peru, opportunities are limited for the expression of opposition and dissidence. Manipulative approaches to governance leave little room for the creation of stable alternatives for the electorate, or for opposition leaders with long-term perspectives. As a result, the political process for leadership selection can easily degenerate into a race among *caudillos*.

While the quality of democracy depends on the balance between the executive, legislative and judicial spheres of power, Fujimori has concentrated all powers in the executive, reducing the legislature to a collection of ineffective opposition politicians, and transforming the judiciary into an oppressive instrument of the executive. These developments have been accompanied by a resurgence of the military and an increased politicization of the state.

In Mexico, a weak process of democratization seems to be well under way in some areas, but there are also threatening trends. On the one hand, it can be argued that positive steps have been taken to develop democratic institutional mechanisms. Since the 1980s, the political opposition has grown and is increasingly demanding accountability and transparency from the governments in place. This process reflects the growing plurality of Mexican society, and the opposition parties seem to be effective in expressing the electorate's priorities and influencing policy-making. But on the other hand, these developments towards greater democratization represent a fragile, new and fairly limited phenomenon. The political process remains concentrated in the hands of the executive,

as the opposition still lacks the necessary bureaucratic resources to challenge the government's "expertise" in policy-making. An important part of political life still occurs outside of the democratic institutions, with destabilizing consequences for the legitimacy of the system in place. Contestation of the narrowness of the political process was made apparent recently in the student's strike at the UNAM, the continuous guerilla warfare in some regions, and the problems in Chiapas. While there is faith in the good functioning of some democratic institutions, this faith remains fragile and limited to some sectors of the population. Greater challenges await the Mexican government in order to reach out to classes of the population, such as students and indigenous groups, which still remain alien to the political process.

Of course, these are but a few examples of Latin American countries with worrisome internal situations that need further attention. Other countries also show un-democratic trends that have recently emerged or have been latent for numerous years. For example, the situation in Ecuador has proven to be very unstable, with increased action from the guerillas, and in Colombia, where growing drug cartels are directly involved in an internal warfare that is affecting numerous individuals' security every day.

THE DESTABILIZING CONSEQUENCES OF INEQUALITY

The question of inequality was a central theme in the workshop. Latin America is the most unequal region of the world: one quarter of its total income goes to five percent of the population. Inequalities are easily measured with economic variables, but they can also be defined to encompass social and political factors.

Although the question of inequality is nothing new in Latin America, a qualitative shift is creating today very disturbing new patterns of inequalities. There has been a sharp deterioration of every economic indicator, such as growth rates and poverty levels, and the inequality level is so great that even in times of relatively good growth periods, the inequalities are perpetuated and the gap between the poor and the rich does not decline. The economy has known some dangerous periods of stagnation and the growth levels are very low. Even when these levels do go up in times of rapid capital flows, only a privileged class benefits from the surplus, and the poor remain completely excluded from profit redistributions.

Inequalities are not evenly distributed among and within the countries. Some, like Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Costa Rica, have greater economic and political successes than others, in that they have not evolved towards centralized political regimes nor do they appear to crawl under economic and social inequalities. Similarly, some portions or sectors of countries are better off than others, such as the North of Mexico, which is closer to the United States, in contrast to the South, which is relatively remote from the US. Increasingly, "Two Americas" are evolving with different patterns of development. Economic, social and political inequalities also seem to be concentrated in areas with indigenous communities or other minority and alienated sectors of the population.

Consequences of Inequalities

Economic inequalities are dangerous for the practice of democracy in many ways. Democracies that are not able to reduce poverty and inequality levels are systematically less enduring than those that do show better economic performances. A first direct consequence is that unequal economic patterns perpetuate social inequalities, with reduced access to social services, health care institutions and education for a whole sector of the population. They are thus part of a vicious circle that creates citizens who have no access to the institutions where they might acquire the tools to become dynamic economic agents.

A second consequence is that economic inequalities create resentment of the democratic governments in place. Citizens in many Latin American countries are increasingly ready to accept autocratic leaders who can “deliver the goods” to groups living in poverty and inequality.

Intimately linked to this second consequence is the increased danger for human security and civil rights, as the population is more likely to accept the violation of those rights for a few citizens if it is done in the name of a better, national good. A third negative effect of economic inequalities is increased political corruption and subsequent representation of private interests in the elaboration of public policies.

Causes of Inequalities

The myth that past populist regimes are responsible for the economic problems endured by Latin America is no longer tenable. With the last wave of democratization in the past twenty years, a broad package of neo-liberal economic reforms were systematically applied, albeit with variations, in countries of the region. This package was part of the Washington consensus, whereby policy-makers stressed the need to boost exports, privatize capital, eliminate protectionism in order to encourage trade, and create a viable economy in the region. But the fundamental problem with this development model is that, contrary to the United States or European countries where the same measures were applied, no redistributive pattern was put in place, with the vicious consequence that economic openness promoted social exclusiveness. The social welfare state that was the flip side of neo-liberal measures in other countries was not developed in Latin America, with disastrous results for the majority of the population. The creation of a social safety net always been necessary for countries to develop, and there needs to be a fundamental change of paradigm in Latin America if there is to be sustainable and equal economic development, which goes hand in hand with stable democracies.

From these observations on the destabilizing effects of inequalities, a few prescriptions arise. First, there is no common remedy that can be applied to all countries. As described earlier, “two Latin Americas” are evolving with different rhythms, and we must not generalize or sensationalise the problems. In the countries where democracy seems to be working with more success, in terms of popular satisfaction and efficacy of economic

developments, the democratization process must be improved and reinforced. But for countries such as Venezuela, Peru, Mexico and Colombia, where we have observed dangerous trends, the patterns in place must be understood in order to help these “hybrid” regimes evolve towards greater democratization and not greater authoritarianism. Inequalities have destabilizing effects for democracy, and there needs to be fundamental change in the neo-liberal economic model, which has generated such inequalities.

Culture and Democracy

Some groups are systematically excluded from participation in political, social and economic life at a national level under the current electoral rules and institutional arrangements in some Latin American countries. Indigenous communities, particularly, are often alienated and kept outside of the electoral realm at a national level, even if they have developed leadership institutions on a local basis. These communities often have leadership styles that they consider their own and that they are not ready to abandon for liberal democratic structures, and there are few links between these forms of local leadership and the political leadership established at the national level.

Democracy works best when the rules of the game are known, understood and accepted by the population. But if a significant part of the population rejects these rules or is not familiar enough with them, then a dangerous phenomenon of disenfranchisement may arise. Important minorities are left out of the public and political organization of the society, with the consequences that the fundamental basis for democratic participation is threatened, and some social groups experience increased alienation and resentment towards the form of political governance in place.

Intimately linked with this first question is the issue of the politics of identity. When the electoral process functions well, with effective and representative intermediaries between the leader and the people, the capacity of the intermediaries to reach out to the electorate's sense of identity and belonging gives the people greater incentive to participate in the political life. This does not seem to happen in some countries of Latin America with a high percentage of indigenous people. Indigenous communities have a strong sense of belonging within their group, but the collective identity that holds them together on a local basis is not transferred to the broader, national level. The political process loses significance if the people cannot relate to the issues at stake or adhere to the symbols used for political mobilization by political parties. Moreover, when the political parties are considerably weakened, as is the case in Peru and Venezuela, or when the only intermediary between the citizens and the leaders is the military, there are increased chances that some classes of citizens will be alienated and possibly reject the electoral process itself.

In the case of Ecuador, however, a different relationship seems to have developed between the indigenous population and the military. The military junta in Ecuador is led by a new type of educated military intelligentsia, who work in collaboration with the

indigenous population. This new relationship, mobilized around new political symbols, led to an attempted coup in January 2000. While the coup poses an immediate threat to the practice of democracy, the process underway in Ecuador needs further attention, as it raises fundamental questions about the type of utopian democracy that is being created, encompassing indigenous populations but yet dangerously backed by the military.

These observations on the possible cultural threats to democracy point to the need for further research to understand the links that should exist between local and indigenous forms of governance, and the national forms of leadership institutions that are necessary for the good functioning of a liberal democracy. While we can stress that there is an inevitable tension between the principle of individualism in liberal democracies and the cooperative, identity-based mechanisms of governance in indigenous communities, it is possible for the two forms of leadership to coexist. A more flexible form of democracy could emerge from this, with clearly established rules of the political game that are endorsed by all. A fundamental question is thus what kind of new political institutions does this suppose, and how they can be created in the context of Latin America.

Culture is also relevant on a more global level. With the process of globalization, there is increasing interaction between international organizations or social movements and local groups of individuals in Latin America and other parts of the world. The role of these non-governmental organizations is generally assessed to be positive, in terms of issues such as the protection of human rights or the environment. However, further research is necessary to assess the costs and benefits of such international interventions, as the consequences do not seem to be clearly positive, in all cases, from a democratization perspective. In terms of the protection of the environment, for example, international social forces or local social groups that cooperate with international groups and use their scientific language and tools, can take advantage of the lack of education of indigenous and local populations. These organizations can encourage the implementation of policies, through international public awareness and pressure, which eventually disadvantage the local groups in their traditional way of living. Thus, the actions of international organizations must be reassessed in order to assure that policies that evolve from their intervention do not reinforce inequalities and create further resentment towards western ideologies and the forms of democratic governance that are associated with them.

Representative Institutions and Electoral Processes

How can political institutions such as the electoral and political party systems influence the emergence of executive-based politics, in Latin America? There have been fundamental changes in both party systems and electoral behaviour in the region in recent years. While politics of identity and massive social mobilization organized through political parties were important in the years of transition to democracy, nowadays political parties seem incapable of representing societal interests and they have therefore lost influence and power. There has been a professionalization of the political class, and political parties seem to have become a narrow political tool with which people can no

longer identify themselves. Political parties are no longer efficient intermediaries between the citizens and the state.

Adding to this, there is a higher level of electoral volatility in the region than in the United States or European countries. This phenomenon has increased in the 1990s, and it is mostly observable among the poor populations. Electoral volatility reflects significant underlying political problems and fundamental economic inequalities. In fact, the countries with the higher levels of electoral volatility, Venezuela, Ecuador and Peru, are precisely three countries where we observe the most worrisome trends in the region.

These observations lead to numerous fundamental questions for further research. As electoral volatility and lack of party identification seem to be affecting the lower classes to a greater extent than the elite classes, who have found other ways to gain access to power, more research needs to be done on the fundamental disjunctures that exist between these lower classes and the political parties. First, the class consciousness that existed previously and that allowed masses to organize and participate in the political life at a national level is no longer as present. There has been a proliferation of civic organizations, social groups and movements at a local level, but large-scale associations and national parties no longer give citizens the political space for identification and expression that they used to provide. This points to a second disjuncture, in that political parties and civil society are now increasingly operating at cross-purposes, especially with the rise of activity of indigenous communities and of the specific forms of social organization that they promote. A third disjuncture, intimately linked with the increasing globalization process, is that there is a constant narrowing of the policy space, a diminution of the capacity of national leaders to act independently of global economic forces. On a concrete basis, this entails elections where citizens do not really have a significant alternative to vote for.

All of these trends are observable not only in Latin America but in other parts of the world as well. However, they are especially critical for the quality and workability of democratic regimes in Latin America, because they point to the increasing level of inequalities that we do not encounter elsewhere. They need further attention if we want a full grasp of their possible consequences.

Citizenship is a second political institution that is problematic in the Latin American context. Although it is taken for granted in other parts of the world, the concept of citizenship can become incompatible with democratic political regimes if it is conceived as being exclusive confined to only a portion of the population. Fundamental problems can thus arise, since an exclusive conception of citizenship can lead to the appropriation of some resources by the self-defined portion of the population who are "citizens", while the other groups are left aside on the basis that they lack the same legal and moral status. This question is of particular relevance in Latin America, where various ethnic groups, through successive waves of immigration, have been historically arranged in a hierarchical way, between the "civilized" and the "non-civilized".

The concept of citizenship must be addressed by further research, especially since the new trends show the tendency to return to a closed and exclusive conception of citizenship, with significantly reduced access to the public sphere for some sectors of the population. Gender is one variable that has been left out of the conceptualization of citizenship, but it is nevertheless essential to the full understanding of the issue, given the increased participation of women in the political sphere. The search for a definition of citizenship that is inclusive and works hand in hand with a democratic system is desirable, but not easy to find when there are so fundamentally different identities at stake.

The Organization of Civil Society

Clear definitions are important when discussing civil society and civil rights, because such concepts are often used for different purposes and with different meanings. During the workshop, civil rights were referred to as secular rights, given collectively by human beings to other individuals, to establish legal and political equality for all. Civil rights generally include equality before the law, freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, right to fair and impartial trial, freedom of speech and association, freedom from various forms of discrimination, and equal political capacity. Although these rights were not linked to any original conception of democracy, they have come to be seen as essential to the good functioning of a democratic regime.

With increasing globalization, however, some questions arise. As the nation-state erodes and loses power to international, non-governmental institutions, we must identify and analyse how that institution can continue to provide and guarantee these rights, particularly in Latin America. Present trends are worrisome because they show increased centralization of power in the hands of a few individuals who eliminate plural representation in the political. Civil rights have a functional meaning and power if they come to represent tolerance for diversity under the rule of law. Without this tolerance for diversity and the moral and political options that it assures for all citizens, the rights lose any significance, as happened with the massive violations of civil and human rights by military regimes during the 1970s.

While the history of the 1970s is not likely to be repeated, there are still lessons that can be learned in order to avoid the development of a political culture that would allow such violations of rights. As mentioned in previous pages, increasing inequalities may lead the population to accept the violation of those rights in the name of a broader national good. When the political institutions and the culture or thinking in place allow for such ideas to surface and control the public discourse, civil rights and democracy are directly at stake.

There are other factors to examine in order to assess the level of activity and involvement of civil society in Latin America. One of these is religion. The increasing practice of Protestantism in Latin America seems to indicate a significant change in ideologies and beliefs in the region. While Weber's conception of the Protestant ethic was that it favoured liberal democracy and capitalism, could it be that the "new Protestant ethic" being created in Latin America is more conservative and supportive of autocratic regimes?

Research findings seem to indicate that this is not the case, as Protestants and Catholics are equally divided between progressive and conservative views, and there does not seem to be that much of a division, on the basis of religious beliefs, for the support of economic and political liberalism. However, the rise of Protestantism is still relevant, since religious diversity seems to enhance civil society just as a strong civil society also enhances religious diversity and practice. Moreover, religious beliefs can evolve into new forms of political identities, and thus influence considerably the results of democratic elections.

Education is a last factor that is very important when considering the strength and evolution of democratic civil societies. In recent years, the role of popular education in Latin America has become increasingly important for the mobilization and socialization of people on a local level. Pedagogy in Latin America is taking new forms and has evolved to encompass a very strong environmental paradigm. This kind of popular education is particularly central to indigenous populations that learn and organize new ways to participate in society, but often on a regional and community basis only. This could become problematic if there are no efforts made to accommodate local forms of education within a national framework of democratic development. Although local people and external observers use the same language of responsible education and increased participation in society, the mindsets are often radically different. External agents tend to situate this evolution within a broader framework of globalization, while local populations increasingly view society-building on a restricted, regional level.

In terms of a research agenda, education is intimately linked with the concept of citizenship that is being built in Latin America, as well as with the cultural factors linked to identity-politics previously mentioned. While the concept of "citizen" refers to the relationship between individuals and the state, its present definition might not encompass the local and indigenous populations that identify themselves as "people", and it cannot relate to the kind of political participation that is being exercised at a broader, national level. In terms of democratic participation, this poses serious problems that need to be addressed.

Human Insecurity: The Culture of Violence

Another fundamental threat to democracy in Latin America is the negative consequences of increased criminality and human insecurity. The major causes of citizens' insecurity are state crimes, police abuses and decreased respect for civil rights. Such observations are troublesome because they suggest the increasing alienation of citizens from the state, and their increasing distrust of the "democratic" institutions that allow such developments. In numerous countries, the usual response from policy makers to this increase in criminality has been to increase the police authority, which is problematic in that a major source of insecurity comes from corrupted police forces.

This situation creates many undesired consequences. The first is the generation of fear and psychological insecurity, which has lasting effects on how societies work and evolve. The social distrust that such levels of insecurity promote influences the relationships between

citizens of different groups and identities, and can generate further social divisiveness. A second consequence is that social participation is directly affected by violence, as increased fear tends to restrict people in their level of public activity, and the quality and workability of democracy are thereby affected. A third set of consequences is the changing of private habits such as the increasing ownership of guns, and the purchase of private security services where public security forces are no longer reliable. Violence reinforces inequalities and further concentrates the negative outcomes of such insecurity among the poor population, since the elite class that can afford private security services no longer pressures governments for the improvement of public security services.

Of course, this issue has benefited from increased attention, thereby increasing the possibilities for change and policy reforms in which citizens are more consulted. Furthermore, international organizations have a particularly important role to play in this case, as they can raise awareness and use international tools to denounce police abuse and increasing violence. Nevertheless, the issue needs continued attention.

Different analytical perspectives provide different insights and solutions to the problem of violence. In the Latin American context, literature is an essential analytical framework. It is very interesting to see how literature and culture have historically helped to shape the political context and the use of violence in the region. The analysis of the links between literature and politics can lead to the understanding of how literature can further engage in a democratization process. The analysis of narrative texts of countries where violence has occurred shows well how politics can be linked to cultural symbolism, and how cultural fields have been fully engaged in the production of ideologies and in the writing of violence. The new centralist leaders such as Chavez, for example, use powerful symbols and images in order to perpetrate the myth of the strong leader able to save a nation, and able to personify this nation.

In terms of a research agenda, this perspective can include an interesting analysis of newspapers and other sources, where new perceptions on the legitimacy of democratic systems, as well as new national myths and symbols, can be shaped.

CONCLUSION

For most countries in Latin America, the last twenty years represent the longest period of uninterrupted democratic rule in the region's history. There has been undeniable progress towards democratization. Although the future of democracy is still uncertain in some cases, drastic solutions are not necessarily required. The threats to democracy identified during the workshop point not to the danger of a dramatic reversal of democracy, but rather to the erosion of its quality.

In what way, and to what extent can new undemocratic practices, as put in place in "illiberal democracies", co-exist with the principle of electoral democracy? Are we witnessing the creation of a new form of democracy, one that does not correspond to the usual conception of liberal democracy in the Western industrialized nations? What can be done with the new hybrid regimes, seeking "true and deeper" democratic principles to

orient them towards greater democratization before they slide unwittingly to authoritarian rule?

There are striking correlations between most, if not all, current undemocratic trends. The increased level of inequality has fostered the creation of a *demos* more prone to tolerate strong and executive-centred leadership where there is no substantial opposition or accountability, with dramatic consequences for numerous groups of the population now excluded from this political process. Civil society is directly affected by these changes, as the tolerance of pluralism and support for the protection of fundamental liberties and human security is becoming increasingly weaker. Considerable changes in basic political institutions such as the electoral process, the party system and representative institutions, can be seen as both a consequence of such developments, and as a cause of further tensions.

The consolidation of democratic practices cannot be taken for granted, especially as the economic and social situations pose so many problems. Undeniably, inequalities are now at the centre of the discussion on the current situation in Latin America, and it is not exaggerated to see this situation as evolving from deep structural problems that have developed and reinforced one another over the years. Fundamental changes are thus needed, as the numerous interrelations between observable undemocratic practices clearly indicate that threats to democracy, far from being a surface phenomenon, could lead to further damage if they are not taken seriously.

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