

Afraid to be free: Dependency as desideratum

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Abstract. Although collectivist ideas have everywhere fallen into disrepute, this essay argues that socialism nevertheless will survive and be extended in the new century. That gloomy prospect looms, not because socialism is more efficient or more just, but because ceding control over their actions to others allows individuals to escape, evade and even deny personal responsibilities. People are afraid to be free; the state stands in loco parentis. The breaching of plausibly acceptable fiscal limits in the first half of the new century will determine how the basic conflict between welfare dependency and liberal principles will be resolved.

1. Introduction

For this special issue, the editors asked me specifically to submit an essay under the general title, “Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century”. In this solicitation, they were encouraging me to think in grandiose terms – to offer a public choice–constitutional political economy perspective on the larger organizational-ideological alternatives that may emerge. We do not, of course, either collectively or privately, make choices as among the grand organizational alternatives. For the most part, and most of the time, we make choices on the various margins that present themselves, with the result that all societies are more or less capitalistic, more or less socialistic, more or less democratic. Nonetheless, these Schumpeterian terms may be helpful in organizing my general argument.

This argument can be succinctly summarized. If we loosely describe socialism in terms of the range and scope of collectivized controls over individual liberty of actions, then “socialism” will survive and be extended. This result will emerge not because collectivization is judged to be more efficient, in some meaningful economic sense, or even because collectivization more adequately meets agreed upon criteria for distributive justice, but rather because only under the aegis of collective control, under “the state”, can individuals escape, evade and even deny personal responsibilities. In short, persons are afraid to be free. As subsequent discussion will suggest, socialism, as a coherent ideology, has lost most of its appeal. But in a broader and more comprehensive historical perspective, during the course of two centuries, the state has replaced God as the father-mother of last resort, and persons will demand that this protectorate role be satisfied and amplified.

“Capitalism”, an unfortunate but widely used term again loosely described in terms of the range and scope for individual liberty of action outside collectivized direction and control, must remain vulnerable to continuing marginal encroachments, and this thrust of change will remain despite possible analytical and empirical evidence that such encroachments signal retrogression along widely recognized success indicators.

“Democracy”, defined broadly enough to include its many institutional variants, will reflect the preferences of the citizenry, who remain largely immune from the findings of science, and the increasing corruption that must necessarily accompany any expanding range of collective-political control will simply be tolerated and ignored. An overarching theme of the whole paper is that the thrust of development will be dictated by “bottoms up” demands rather than by “top down” dictates of an elite.

I shall flesh out this general argument in later sections. Only in the final section of the paper shall I offer a more hopeful alternative to the pessimistic scenario sketched out above. Such an alternative emerges, however, as much from a sense of moral obligation to believe that constructive reform is within the possible as it does from any realistic prognosis of elements which are discernible beneath the surface of that which may be now observed.

2. The Sources of Socialism

There are at least four sources or wellsprings of ideas that motivate extensions in the range and scope of collective controls over the freedom of persons to act as they might independently choose. In the political dialogue these sources are, of course, intermingled, but in philosophical discourse it seems useful to make distinctions. I shall label these four sources as (1) managerial, (2) paternalistic, (3) distributionist and (4) parental. I shall discuss the first three of these four categories in this section. I shall treat the fourth source, that of the parental motivation, separately in Section 3, because I suggest that this source has been relatively neglected by analysts and, more importantly, that it is likely to swamp the other three in influence during the early decades of this new century.

2.1. Managerial socialism

This is the form of socialism that is now dead and buried, both in ideas and in practice, having been “done in” during the last decades of the twentieth century. This is the socialism that is defined as the collective ownership and control of the means of production, and which involves efforts at centralized command and direction of a national economy as institutionalized through a central planning authority. It is now almost universally acknowledged that the motivating ideas here were based on scientific-intellectual errors of major proportions – errors summarized under Hayek’s (1988) rubric of “fatal

conceit". Even in its idealized form, the construction involved an ubiquity of perverse incentives and ignored the impossibility of ascertaining knowledge from widely dispersed and dynamic relationships. The scientific flaws now seem evident, but the cautionary lesson to be learned is that, for a whole century, among the best and the brightest economists and philosophers, indeed among the intelligentsia and academics generally, discussion was carried on in what now seems a setting of amazing ignorance.

And with tragic consequences. Efforts to implement the idealized and basically flawed construction, whether piecemeal or in total, ran up against the limits imposed by the necessity that ordinary mortals rather than idealized automatons must operate the system. The gross inefficiency that should have been minimally predicted emerged; corruption itself became the only lubricant for otherwise rigid structures of interaction; rewards disproportionately favored opportunistic behavior; personalized favoritism was matched by unalloyed cruelty in the absence of effective exit options.

The economy allegedly organized on the command-control principles of managerial socialism simply cannot, and demonstrably could not, deliver the goods in any manner even remotely comparable to those economies organized under the principles derivative from Adam Smith's system of natural liberty. This variant of socialism, which found much of its origin in the highly successful Marxist ideological thrust, will not soon resurface. The first half of this new century will not witness demands for collectivized planning for planning's sake.

2.2. *Paternalistic socialism*

The demise of managerial socialism has not, however, substantially lessened the demands for collectivization that stem from the alternative sources, including recognition by self-anointed elites that only by collectivization can the choices and actions of the masses be directed toward those patterns that "should be wanted if these masses only knew what was in their own best interest". This attitude, or set of attitudes, was importantly present in the imposition of managerial socialism, but, conceptually at least, it can be separately examined and analyzed. The ultimate motivation here need not stem from any argument to the effect that collective control is, in any sense, more "efficient", as defined in some neutral aggregative value dimension. The motivation is located in the value scalar itself; that which persons privately express is not that which the elite prefer. Preferences need to be shifted in more acceptable directions. The French term, *dirigisme*, is actually more descriptive of this mind-set than any comparable English term.

The persons who adopt this stance do not necessarily object to capitalism, or, rather, the market process, as the allocative means of implementing their objectives. Indeed, the market may be left to do the heavy lifting, so long as the

incentives are collectively adjusted so as to guarantee results dictated by the normative ideals of the elite. Much of the current political dialogue is imbued with this set of attitudes, notably much of the environmental emphasis, along with the impassioned crusades against tobacco and obesity.

This source of support for a widened collective control over liberty of choice will not fade away. It seems unlikely, however, that it will come to exert a major force toward further socialization. The limits of such efforts are exemplified, historically, by the failed experiment with prohibition of alcohol in the United States in the first third of the twentieth century and by Hillary Clinton's aborted effort in the early 1990s to remake the medical care industry. In this case, "democracy", howsoever its complex processes may actually work, becomes a conservative bastion against efforts by any elite to impose its own value structure through collectivized coercion.

2.3. *Distributionist socialism*

"Socialism is about equality" – this short statement moved quickly onto the center stage of discussion after the apparent demise of central planning and control. The advocates of centrally managed economies moved with surprising alacrity to align themselves with the welfare state – social democrats. The gross scientific errors that had produced the fatal conceit were swept aside as if they had never been promulgated with the argument that, all along, distributional equality is and had remained the primary value for socialists of all stripes. Nor is the distributionist thrust absent from the arguments of the paternalists, whose attention may be focused on in-kind transfers of defined goods and services to designated recipients, but always aimed in the direction of more equality in the final access to such goods.

In its unadulterated form, however, the distributionist argument is exclusively about equality, or rather inequality, in the distribution of goods and services, without concern for the makeup of the bundle. The allocative function may be left exclusively to the market (capitalism), as it responds to the preference patterns of persons as consumers and producers within the post-tax, post-transfer redistributive limits. The focus here is not upon what the market generates, or even on how it operates, but rather on the distributional outcomes that would emerge in the absence of the specifically directed and collectivized tax-transfer structure.

At the level of abstract political philosophy, and notably as brought into modern attention through the work of Rawls (1971), this source for collective action is the only one that is at all consistent with the precepts of classical liberalism. Even the hard-core libertarians find it difficult to defend the unconstrained distributional outcomes of the market process, of unrestricted capitalism, as embodying widely shared norms for fairness. Even when the perverse incentives that arise on both the tax and transfer sides of the fiscal account

are fully recognized, and even if the shortfalls between the stylized distributional adjustments that may be imagined and the actual adjustments that are possible through democratic politics are also taken into account, widespread support for some distributional correction may be evidenced. And, to the extent that the socialized sector of activity is measured so as to include the tax-transfer budget, “socialism” seems unlikely to disappear from observed political reality.

Support for extending this tax-transfer budget, as motivated by strictly redistributionist objectives, may, however, be much less than implied by the oft-encountered class warfare demagoguery of electoral politics. The poor, the distributionally disadvantaged, are not observed to be using the majoritarian processes of democracy to exploit the rich, at least beyond relatively narrow limits. And, indeed, much of the class warfare rhetoric seems to reflect the ranting of the elitists who call on the distributionist motivation to advance their basic *dirigisme*.

3. Parental Socialism

To my knowledge, the term “parental” has never been explicitly discussed as being descriptive of the motivation behind the collectivization-socialization of human activity. I introduce this term here for want of a better one to describe a source that is difficult to encapsulate even if easy to treat in more extended discussion. In one sense, the attitude is paternalism flipped over, so to speak. With paternalism, we refer to the attitudes of elitists who seek to impose their own preferred values on others. With *parentalism*, in contrast, we refer to the attitudes of persons who seek *to have values imposed upon them* by other persons, by the state or by transcendental forces. This source of support for expanded collectivization has been relatively neglected by both socialist and liberal philosophers, perhaps because the philosophers, in both camps, remain methodological individualists.

As the title for this paper indicates, and as I have noted earlier, this ultimate motivation for maintenance and extension of control over the activities of persons through collective institutions will, in my assessment, be more important in shaping the patterns of development during the first half of the new century than any of the other, and more familiar, sources discussed in the previous section. Almost subconsciously, those scientists-scholars-academics who have tried to look at the “big picture” have assumed that, other things being equal, persons want to be at liberty to make their own choices, to be free from coercion by others, including indirect coercion through means of persuasion. They have failed to emphasize sufficiently, and to examine the implications of, the fact that liberty carries with it *responsibility*. And it seems evident that many persons do not want to shoulder the final responsibility for their own actions. Many persons are, indeed, afraid to be free.

The term “parental” becomes quite descriptive in its inference that the attitude here is akin to that of the child who seeks the cocoon-like protection of its parents, and who may enjoy its liberty, but only within the limits defined by the range of such protection. The mother or father will catch the child if it falls, will bandage its cuts, will excuse its behavioral excesses along all dimensions. Knowledge that these things will be done provides the child with a sense of order in its universe, with elements of predictability in uncertain aspects of the environment.

This cozy setting is dramatically disturbed when the child becomes an adult, when responsibility must be shouldered independently from the family bounds. Relatively few persons are sufficiently strong, as individuals, to take on the full range of liberties and their accompanying responsibilities without seeking some substitute or replacement of the parental shelter. Religion, or God as the transcendent force that exemplifies fatherhood or motherhood, has and does serve this purpose (more on this below). Organized community is a less satisfactory but nonetheless partial parental replacement for some persons. More importantly, and specifically for purposes of the discussion here, the collectivity – the state – steps in and relieves the individual of his responsibility as an independently choosing and acting adult. In exchange, of course, the state reduces the liberty of the individual to act as he might choose. But the order that the state, as parent, provides may be, for many persons, well worth the sacrifice in liberty.

Note that, as mentioned earlier, the source for extension in collective or state control here is “bottom up” rather than “top down”, as with paternalism. Persons who are afraid to take on independent responsibility that necessarily goes with liberty demand that the state fill the parental role in their lives. They *want* to be told what to do and when to do it; they seek order rather than uncertainty, and order comes at an opportunity cost they seem willing to bear.

The thirst or desire for freedom, and responsibility, is perhaps not nearly so universal as so many post-Enlightenment philosophers have assumed. What share of persons in varying degrees of bondage, from slavery to ordinary wage-salary contracts, really want to be free, with the accompanying responsibility for their own choices? The disastrous failure of “forty acres and a mule” was followed by the lapse into renewed dependency status for emancipated former slaves in the American south. And the surprising strength of Communist parties in the politics of post-Cold War central and eastern Europe attests to the thirst on the part of many persons “to be controlled”.

4. God Is Dead; Long Live the State

Prior to the eighteenth century, to the Enlightenment, and particularly in the West, God, as institutionally embodied in the church (and churches), fulfilled what seemed to be a natural role as the overarching “parent” who assumed

ultimate responsibility for the individual in a last-resort sense, as biological linkages were necessarily lost in the aging profile. Manifestations abound. “We Are All God’s Children”, “God Will Take Care of You” – these familiar hymnal assertions are merely illustrative of the near-universal attitude. Psychologically, persons went about their ordinary lives secure in the feeling that God would clear up any mess they might make, analogous to parents’ behavior toward children. Of course, transgressions might be followed by punishment, in this or another life, but predictability characterized both the rules themselves and the prospect for both reward and punishment. God, as institutionally embodied, provided order in the lives of all.

But what if Nietzsche is right? What if God is dead? What happens to the person who is forced to recognize that the ordering presence of God is no longer real? What if God cannot be depended on to clean up the mess, even in some last resort sense? Who and/or what can fulfill the surrogate parent role? Who and what is there beyond the individual that can meet the yearning for family-like protectiveness? Who and what will pick us up when and if we fall? Who and what can provide the predictability that God and his agency structures seemed to offer?

In the more extensive idealizations, as imagined by some medieval scholastics, secular politics, or the state, is an unnecessary appendage to God’s embodiment in the church. Nascent efforts in post-medieval centuries to establish secular authority independent of church control were opposed throughout the European realm. But the monopoly of the Catholic church was broken, by Luther and his followers, well before the onset of the Enlightenment. God was no longer monolithic in the image of one institution. Competing interpretations emerged, and the conflicts among churches came to be intermingled with conflicts among states as representatives of those churches. In the process, secular authority came to be divorced from ecclesiastical authority and to assume independent stature.

By the time of the Enlightenment, the secular nation-state had almost reached its maturity, and nationalism, the sense of nationhood, was a more or less natural repository for the sentiments of those persons for whom God had died. For many, the state, as the collectivity, moved into the gap left by the demise of the church’s parental role. The individual who sought family-like protection, but who no longer sensed the presence of such protection in the church, or in God so embodied, found a substitute in the collectivity. The individual could feel that he or she “belonged” to the larger community and was necessarily dependent on that community. The death of God and the birth of the national state, and especially in its latter-day welfare state form, are the two sides of the coin of history in this respect.

The transposition through which the state replaced God in the parental role, for many persons, was aided and abetted by two historically parallel developments. First, the Enlightenment, in itself, did not contain justification

for the burgeoning of the state, as such. From the Enlightenment, classical liberalism rather than collectivism emerged. But, as the next section will indicate, classical liberalism singularly failed to offer persons any psychological security coincident with the loss of religious faith. Almost immediately following the Enlightenment, however, arguments for socialism, as treated above, were advanced. And all arguments for socialist organization depend critically on the expansion of the collectivized or politicized sector of activities.

Implementation of the socialist proposals for change, in whole or in part, was accomplished through the combination of Marxist ideology, paternalism of the intelligentsia, distributionist argument and the residually desperate search for a parental replacement for God. Socialist collectivism promised the order that seemed absent in post-Enlightenment liberalism. Persons more or less readily accepted the dependency status that socialism carried with it because, by becoming dependents of the collectivity, they were able, at the same time, to share in the communal project that collectivism seemed to represent.

The state did, indeed, become God. This transposition was, of course, most evident in the Soviet Union and other Communist regimes. But essentially the same psychological shift in public attitudes took place in Western democratic societies. Persons accepted the dependence on the state as normal; even those who at the same time railed against the increasing collective-governmental intrusiveness. It came to be increasingly rare to find persons and groups who supported releasing the shackles of dependency. The collapse of the Communist regimes in the last decades of the century did little or nothing toward slowing down the growth of the welfare state; this, in itself, demonstrates that the parental motivation for collectivization remains perhaps the strongest of those identified above.

5. The Lacuna of Classical Liberalism

The central organizing idea of classical liberalism emerged from the Enlightenment, notably from its Scottish variants. This idea, best enunciated by Adam Smith, is that extensive collective direction and control over activity is not required at all; that, with minimally invasive institutions that guarantee person, property and contract, persons can be left at liberty to make their own choices and, in so doing, generate maximal value. The spontaneous order of the market, emergent as persons are allowed to make their own choices in a “simple system of natural liberty”, implies that there is only a limited role for the sovereign state.

Modern socialism, at least in the first three variants noted above, was born as a reaction against classical liberalism, and especially against the limited successes of classical political economy during the first half of the

nineteenth century. As indicated, managerial or command-control socialism was based on intellectual error, on a failure to understand the basic principles of market order. Paternalistic socialism rejects the democratic features of market outcomes, and, by inference, also rejects small-d democracy in governance. Distributional socialism can, as noted, be accommodated within classical liberalism by appropriate adjustments imposed on market outcomes.

The lacuna in classical liberalism lies in its failure to offer a satisfactory alternative to the socialist-collectivist thrust that reflects the pervasive desire for the parental role of the state. For persons who seek, even if unconsciously, dependence on the collectivity, the classical liberal argument for independence amounts to negation. Classical liberals have not involved themselves in the psychological elements of public support for or against the market order.

“The spontaneous order of the market” – this is an intellectual idea that is not naturally understood by those who have not been exposed to the teachings of economists. And economists themselves in their sometimes zeal for working out the intricacies of complex models have neglected their primary didactic purpose. They have assumed that, like the ideas in the natural sciences, once an idea is accepted by the scientific community, it will become a part of the conventional wisdom of the public, as implemented in institutional reforms. Economists, as the putative repositories of the principles of classical liberalism, have not sensed the categorical differences in public reception of their scientific findings and those of their fellow natural scientists. In a very real sense, every person is his or her own economist, who pays little or no respect for the truths of economic science.

For far too many members of the body politic, the market order requires that persons subject themselves to “the blind forces of the market”, as if the independence so offered carries no offsetting gains. There is a widespread failure to understand that the independence offered by the entry and exit options of the market offsets the *dependence* on others when markets are closed or displaced. And such dependence, importantly, includes dependence on the state, and on its bureaucratic agents. The individual can readily walk away from a market relationship. He cannot walk away from the taxing authority.

The entry and exit options provided by the market serve as the omnipresent frontier open to all participants. And economists could well have done more to exploit the familiar frontier experience by instancing the analogue here. Their failure to do so illustrates the point made above, that adherents of classical liberalism, and especially economists, have not been sufficiently concerned with preaching the gospel of independence. Classical liberalism, properly understood, demonstrates that persons can stand alone, that they need neither God nor the state to serve as surrogate parents. But this lesson has not been learned.

6. Capitalism and Its Contradictions

Capitalism (“free enterprise” would be a much better term here) is the institutionalized embodiment of classical liberalism. As idealized, it is best described as a system in which values are set; resources are allocated; goods and services are produced and distributed through a network of voluntary exchanges among freely choosing-acting persons and groups – a network that functions within a collectively imposed legal structure that protects persons and property and enforces contracts while at the same time financing those goods and services that are most efficiently shared among many users. Such an idealized capitalistic system would, at most, command collectively up to 15% of national value product.

During the half-century since World War II, we have observed that, even in Western countries outside the nominally socialized Communist bloc, the collectivized sector has extended its allocative-distributive reach to estimates ranging from 40% to 60% of total value generated. What are such systems to be called? Half capitalist and half socialist?

Contradictions become apparent once we recognize that the principles upon which the whole organizational structure allegedly rests are those derived from classical liberalism rather than from socialism in any form. It is as if these principles carry the politicized or socialist half of value on their backs, as it were, as a deadweight burden. Such principles include the rule of law, which requires that all persons, regardless of dependency status, be subjected to the same law, including, importantly, those who become agents for the collectivity. In addition, democracy, as a political form, requires open and universal franchise, with eligibility for agency roles being open to all. Within the appropriately defined jurisdiction, all persons are guaranteed freedom of entry and exit to and from occupational and geographical opportunities, subject only to the respect dictated by the legal protections noted above. All persons in the organized polity are insured that personal rights are protected – rights to speak, to practice religion, to associate with whom they may choose.

The listing might be extended, but the point made should be clear. There is no discrimination among persons in the implementation of the basic principles of classical liberalism. The implication also is clear. To the extent that the burgeoning tax-transfer element in the budgets of modern democracies is motivated by demands that the state take on a parental role, this element must be characterized by *generality*. Persons become subject to tax on the one hand and eligible for transfer payments on the other by their membership in the polity and not by their identification as a member of this or that group, as defined in nongeneral terms (see Buchanan & Congleton, 1998). Any departure from the generality norm, any discrimination, must introduce classification among persons, which violates the classical liberal presupposition of equality.

Major programs in the welfare-state budgets are, at least nominally, organized on generality principles. Tax financed or pay-as-we-go pension schemes are general in coverage, although with built-in redistributive elements. Tax-financed medical services are open to all members of the community, although here, too, there are built-in redistributive features. Contradictions emerge, however, as the fiscal demands placed on these programs increase, almost explosively, in the face of changing age profiles and rapid advances in medical technology. Pressures will increase, and indeed are already observed, to contain such demands in part by explicitly introducing departures from generality, by imposing means-tests as criteria for eligibility for transfers. To the extent that changes are made in this direction, public support for the programs that stem from the parental motivation must decline. As increasing numbers of persons come to recognize that, with the changes, the state will no longer take care of them, even in some remote residual sense, their image of these programs is dramatically modified. The transfers will come to be viewed as discriminatory payments to politically selected groups, rather than transfers to an inclusive class of eligibles.

On the other hand, if the generality principle is preserved, even if not fully honored, the predictable demands on the fiscal capacities of the welfare states are simply not sustainable. Efforts to meet the commitments under the various programs, most notably the pension and medical services systems, would require that the extraction of taxes from pretax market returns goes well beyond the limits that are behaviorally feasible, quite apart from public choice questions about political will. After all, the Laffer curve relationship is a very real constraint in any polity.

Almost without exception, the welfare-state democracies are being, and will be, increasingly confronted with the disjuncture in the two-pronged decision structure, which, ultimately, reflects the clash between classical liberalism and socialism. As their preferences are expressed through the political process, citizens may genuinely want to extend the parental role of the welfare state, to allow the state to replace God. At the same time, however, citizens may, at their private choice margins, seek to minimize their tax obligations. The liberal principle that persons are to be free to create taxable capacity as and if they so choose is not consistent with the socialist principle that the welfare dependency be expanded beyond plausibly acceptable fiscal limits. The first half of the new century will determine how this basic conflict may be resolved.

7. Prediction and Prospect

Straightforward prediction, based on an assessment of the workings of democratic processes, as observed, would suggest that the budgetary pressures will provoke increasing departures from generality norms in various welfare

programs. Means testing or targeting will be extended well beyond current levels. The ranks of those who are explicitly classified as dependents of the nanny state will be reduced, perhaps substantially. As noted, such a breakdown in the generality norm will be accompanied by withdrawal of political support as claimant groups come to be seen as net parasites on those who create taxable capacity. Western welfare democracies may well approach the model for “the churning state”, described by de Jasay (1985), in which differing groups compete among themselves for claims against each other.

Of course, such predictions need not be fulfilled. As an example, consider predictions that might have been made, say, from the early 1970s. Who might have predicted that Margaret Thatcher’s reforms would move Britain dramatically up in the European league tables; that Ronald Reagan would restore the American spirit; that the Soviet Union would collapse? Western welfare democracies have not yet passed the point of no return. Public attitudes, as reflected through political leaders, may come to embody the recognition that the collectively generated demands on the fisc cannot be met from revenues produced from tax structures that remain plausibly acceptable. The principle of generality in welfare programs may be maintained, more or less, as the demands are scaled back within reasonable limits. As such reforms are implemented, increasing numbers of the citizenry may actually shed off, at least in part, the sense of dependency on the state.

The legacy of Marx is a spent force. The legacy of Bismarck is alive and well. It can, however, be contained with leadership and understanding, as Bismarck himself thought possible.

8. Postscript

This paper has been written on the presumption that terrorism, through the damage inflicted, the reaction and response, along with preventive measures, will not permanently change the basic institutions of Western democracies. If this presumption is invalid, the effects can only be to reinforce the central argument advanced. Terror, in actuality or in threat, almost necessarily places the individual citizen in a more enveloping dependency relation with the state. Events may dictate that the range and scope of collectivized controls be extended. And, along this dimension, even the ardent classical liberal finds difficulty in mounting effective opposition.

In such extension, a comparable tension to that instanced above will arise. Pressures will emerge for departures from the institutions of generality and toward the introduction of discrimination with consequences that are perhaps worse than those involved under the welfare umbrella, narrowly defined.

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