

# THE TYRANNY OF MERIT

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What's Become  
of the  
Common Good?

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NEW YORK

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## WINNERS AND LOSERS

These are dangerous times for democracy. The danger can be seen in rising xenophobia and growing public support for autocratic figures who test the limits of democratic norms. These trends are troubling in themselves. Equally alarming is the fact that mainstream parties and politicians display little understanding of the discontent that is roiling politics around the world.

Some denounce the upsurge of populist nationalism as little more than a racist, xenophobic reaction against immigrants and multiculturalism. Others see it mainly in economic terms, as a protest against job losses brought about by global trade and new technologies.

But it is a mistake to see only the bigotry in populist protest, or to view it only as an economic complaint. Like the triumph of Brexit in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 was an angry verdict on decades of rising inequality and a version of globalization that benefits those at the top but leaves ordinary citizens feeling disempowered. It was also a rebuke for a technocratic approach to politics that is tone-deaf to the resentments of people who feel the economy and the culture have left them behind.

The hard reality is that Trump was elected by tapping a wellspring of

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anxieties, frustrations, and legitimate grievances to which the mainstream parties had no compelling answer. A similar predicament afflicts European democracies. Before they can hope to win back public support, these parties must rethink their mission and purpose. To do so, they should learn from the populist protest that has displaced them—not by replicating its xenophobia and strident nationalism, but by taking seriously the legitimate grievances with which these ugly sentiments are entangled.

Such thinking should begin with the recognition that these grievances are not only economic but also moral and cultural; they are not only about wages and jobs but also about social esteem.

The mainstream parties and governing elites who find themselves the target of populist protest struggle to make sense of it. They typically diagnose the discontent in one of two ways: As animus against immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities or as anxiety in the face of globalization and technological change. Both diagnoses miss something important.

## DIAGNOSING POPULIST DISCONTENT

The first diagnosis sees populist anger against elites mainly as a backlash against growing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. Accustomed to dominating the social hierarchy, the white male working-class voters who supported Trump feel threatened by the prospect of becoming a minority within “their” country, “strangers in their own land.” They feel that they, more than women or racial minorities, are the victims of discrimination; and they feel oppressed by the demands of “politically correct” public discourse. This diagnosis of injured social status highlights the ugly features of populist sentiment—the nativism, misogyny, and racism voiced by Trump and other nationalistic populists.

The second diagnosis attributes working-class resentment to bewilderment and dislocation wrought by the rapid pace of change in an age of globalization and technology. In the new economic order, the notion of work tied to a lifelong career is over; what matters now are innovation, flexibility, entrepreneurialism, and a constant willingness to learn new skills. But,

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according to this account, many workers bridle at the demand to reinvent themselves as the jobs they once held are outsourced to low-wage countries or assigned to robots. They hanker, as if nostalgically, for the stable communities and careers of the past. Feeling dislocated in the face of the inexorable forces of globalization and technology, such workers lash out against immigrants, free trade, and governing elites. But their fury is misdirected, for they fail to realize that they are railing against forces as unalterable as the weather. Their anxieties are best addressed by job-training programs and other measures to help them adapt to the imperatives of global and technological change.

Each of these diagnoses contains an element of truth. But neither gives populism its due. Construing populist protest as either malevolent or misdirected absolves governing elites of responsibility for creating the conditions that have eroded the dignity of work and left many feeling disrespected and disempowered. The diminished economic and cultural status of working people in recent decades is not the result of inexorable forces; it is the result of the way mainstream political parties and elites have governed.

Those elites are now alarmed, and rightly so, at the threat to democratic norms posed by Trump and other populist-backed autocrats. But they fail to acknowledge their role in prompting the resentment that led to the populist backlash. They do not see that the upheavals we are witnessing are a political response to a political failure of historic proportions.

## TECHNOCRACY AND MARKET-FRIENDLY GLOBALIZATION

At the heart of this failure is the way mainstream parties conceived and carried out the project of globalization over the past four decades. Two aspects of this project gave rise to the conditions that fuel populist protest. One is its technocratic way of conceiving the public good; the other is its meritocratic way of defining winners and losers.

The technocratic conception of politics is bound up with a faith in markets—not necessarily unfettered, laissez-faire capitalism, but the broader belief that market mechanisms are the primary instruments for achieving

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the public good. This way of thinking about politics is technocratic in the sense that it drains public discourse of substantive moral argument and treats ideologically contestable questions as if they were matters of economic efficiency, the province of experts.

It is not difficult to see how the technocratic faith in markets set the stage for populist discontent. The market-driven version of globalization brought growing inequality. It also devalued national identities and allegiances. As goods and capital flowed freely across national borders, those who stood astride the global economy valorized cosmopolitan identities as a progressive, enlightened alternative to the narrow, parochial ways of protectionism, tribalism, and conflict. The real political divide, they argued, was no longer left versus right but open versus closed. This implied that critics of outsourcing, free-trade agreements, and unrestricted capital flows were closed-minded rather than open-minded, tribal rather than global.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the technocratic approach to governance treated many public questions as matters of technical expertise beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. This narrowed the scope of democratic argument, hollowed out the terms of public discourse, and produced a growing sense of disempowerment.

The market-friendly, technocratic conception of globalization was embraced by mainstream parties of the left and the right. But it was the embrace of market thinking and market values by center-left parties that proved most consequential—for the globalization project itself and for the populist protest that followed. By the time of Trump's election, the Democratic Party had become a party of technocratic liberalism more congenial to the professional classes than to the blue-collar and middle-class voters who once constituted its base. The same was true of Britain's Labour Party at the time of Brexit, and the social democratic parties of Europe.

This transformation had its origins in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had argued that government was the problem and that markets were the solution. When they passed from the political scene, the center-left politicians who succeeded them—Bill Clinton in the U.S., Tony

Blair in Britain, Gerhard Schroeder in Germany—moderated but consolidated the market faith. They softened the harsh edges of unfettered markets but did not challenge the central premise of the Reagan-Thatcher era—that market mechanisms are the primary instruments for achieving the public good. In line with this faith, they embraced a market-driven version of globalization and welcomed the growing financialization of the economy.

In the 1990s, the Clinton administration joined with Republicans in promoting global trade agreements and deregulating the financial industry. The benefits of these policies flowed mostly to those at the top, but Democrats did little to address the deepening inequality and the growing power of money in politics. Having strayed from its traditional mission of taming capitalism and holding economic power to democratic account, liberalism lost its capacity to inspire.

All that seemed to change when Barack Obama appeared on the political scene. In his 2008 presidential campaign, he offered a stirring alternative to the managerial, technocratic language that had come to characterize liberal public discourse. He showed that progressive politics could speak a language of moral and spiritual purpose.

But the moral energy and civic idealism he inspired as a candidate did not carry over into his presidency. Assuming office in the midst of the financial crisis, he appointed economic advisors who had promoted financial deregulation during the Clinton years. With their encouragement, he bailed out the banks on terms that did not hold them to account for the behavior that led to the crisis and offered little help for those who had lost their homes.

His moral voice muted, Obama placated rather than articulated the seething public anger toward Wall Street. Lingering anger over the bailout cast a shadow over the Obama presidency and ultimately fueled a mood of populist protest that reached across the political spectrum—on the left, the Occupy movement and the candidacy of Bernie Sanders; on the right, the Tea Party movement and the election of Trump.

The populist uprising in the United States, Great Britain, and Europe is a backlash directed generally against elites, but its most conspicuous casualties have been liberal and center-left political parties—the Democratic

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Party in the U.S., the Labour Party in Britain, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany (whose share of the vote reached a historic low in the 2017 federal election), Italy's Democratic Party (whose vote share dropped to less than 20 percent), and the Socialist Party in France (whose presidential nominee won only 6 percent of the vote in the first round of the 2017 election).

Before they can hope to win back public support, these parties need to reconsider their market-oriented, technocratic approach to governing. They need also to rethink something subtler but no less consequential—the attitudes toward success and failure that have accompanied the growing inequality of recent decades. They need to ask why those who have not flourished in the new economy feel that the winners look down with disdain.

## THE RHETORIC OF RISING

What, then, has incited the resentment against elites felt by many working-class and middle-class voters? The answer begins with the rising inequality of recent decades but does not end there. It has ultimately to do with the changing terms of social recognition and esteem.

The age of globalization has bestowed its rewards unevenly, to say the least. In the United States, most of the nation's income gains since the late 1970s have gone to the top 10 percent, while the bottom half received virtually none. In real terms, the median income for working-age men, about \$36,000, is less than it was four decades ago. Today, the richest 1 percent of Americans make more than the bottom half combined.<sup>3</sup>

But even this explosion of inequality is not the primary source of populist anger. Americans have long tolerated inequalities of income and wealth, believing that, whatever one's starting point in life, it is possible to rise from rags to riches. This faith in the possibility of upward mobility is at the heart of the American dream.

In line with this faith, mainstream parties and politicians have responded to growing inequality by calling for greater equality of opportunity—retraining

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workers whose jobs have disappeared due to globalization and technology; improving access to higher education; removing barriers of race, ethnicity, and gender. This rhetoric of opportunity is summed up in the slogan that those who work hard and play by the rules should be able to rise “as far as their talents will take them.”

In recent years, politicians of both parties have reiterated this slogan to the point of incantation. Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Marco Rubio among Republicans, and Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton among Democrats, all invoked it. Obama was fond of a variation of this theme, drawn from a pop song: “You can make it if you try.” During his presidency, he used this line in speeches and public statements more than 140 times.<sup>4</sup>

But the rhetoric of rising now rings hollow. In today’s economy, it is not easy to rise. Americans born to poor parents tend to stay poor as adults. Of those born in the bottom fifth of the income scale, only about one in twenty will make it to the top fifth; most will not even rise to the middle class.<sup>5</sup> It is easier to rise from poverty in Canada or Germany, Denmark, and other European countries than it is in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

This is at odds with the long-standing faith that mobility is America’s answer to inequality. The United States, we tell ourselves, can afford to worry less about inequality than the class-bound societies of Europe, because here, it is possible to rise. Seventy percent of Americans believe the poor can make it out of poverty on their own, while only 35 percent of Europeans think so. This faith in mobility may explain why the U.S. has a less-generous welfare state than most major European countries.<sup>7</sup>

But today, the countries with the highest mobility tend to be those with the greatest equality. The ability to rise, it seems, depends less on the spur of poverty than on access to education, health care, and other resources that equip people to succeed in the world of work.

The explosion of inequality in recent decades has not quickened upward mobility but, to the contrary, has enabled those on top to consolidate their advantages and pass them on to their children. Over the past half century, elite colleges and universities dismantled barriers of race, religion, gender, and ethnicity that once restricted admission to the sons of the privileged. The

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Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was born of the promise to admit students based on academic merit rather than class and family pedigree. But today's meritocracy has hardened into a hereditary aristocracy.

Two-thirds of the students at Harvard and Stanford come from the top fifth of the income scale. Despite generous financial aid policies, fewer than 4 percent of Ivy League students come from the bottom fifth. At Harvard and other Ivy League colleges, there are more students from families in the top *1 percent* (income of more than \$630,000 per year) than there are students from the bottom *half* of the income distribution.<sup>8</sup>

The American faith that, with hard work and talent, anyone can rise no longer fits the facts on the ground. This may explain why the rhetoric of opportunity fails to inspire as it once did. Mobility can no longer compensate for inequality. Any serious response to the gap between rich and poor must reckon directly with inequalities of power and wealth, rather than rest content with the project of helping people scramble up a ladder whose rungs grow farther and farther apart.

## THE MERITOCRATIC ETHIC

The problem with meritocracy is not only that the practice falls short of the ideal. If that were the problem, the solution would consist in perfecting equality of opportunity, in seeking a society in which people could, whatever their starting point in life, truly rise as far as their efforts and talents would take them. But it is doubtful that even a perfect meritocracy would be satisfying, either morally or politically.

Morally, it is unclear why the talented deserve the outsize rewards that market-driven societies lavish on the successful. Central to the case for the meritocratic ethic is the idea that we do not deserve to be rewarded, or held back, based on factors beyond our control. But is having (or lacking) certain talents really our own doing? If not, it is hard to see why those who rise thanks to their talents deserve greater rewards than those who may be equally hardworking but less endowed with the gifts a market society happens to prize.

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Those who celebrate the meritocratic ideal and make it the center of their political project overlook this moral question. They also ignore something more politically potent: the morally unattractive attitudes the meritocratic ethic promotes, among the winners and also among the losers. Among the winners, it generates hubris; among the losers, humiliation and resentment. These moral sentiments are at the heart of the populist uprising against elites. More than a protest against immigrants and outsourcing, the populist complaint is about the tyranny of merit. And the complaint is justified.

The relentless emphasis on creating a fair meritocracy, in which social positions reflect effort and talent, has a corrosive effect on the way we interpret our success (or the lack of it). The notion that the system rewards talent and hard work encourages the winners to consider their success their own doing, a measure of their virtue—and to look down upon those less fortunate than themselves.

Meritocratic hubris reflects the tendency of winners to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way. It is the smug conviction of those who land on top that they deserve their fate, and that those on the bottom deserve theirs, too. This attitude is the moral companion of technocratic politics.

A lively sense of the contingency of our lot conduces to a certain humility: “There, but for the grace of God, or the accident of fortune, go I.” But a perfect meritocracy banishes all sense of gift or grace. It diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate. It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes. This is what makes merit a kind of tyranny, or unjust rule.

## THE POLITICS OF HUMILIATION

Seen from below, the hubris of elites is galling. No one likes to be looked down upon. But the meritocratic faith adds insult to injury. The notion that your fate is in your hands, that “you can make it if you try,” is a double-edged sword, inspiring in one way but invidious in another. It congratulates

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the winners but denigrates the losers, even in their own eyes. For those who can't find work or make ends meet, it is hard to escape the demoralizing thought that their failure is their own doing, that they simply lack the talent and drive to succeed.

The politics of humiliation differs in this respect from the politics of injustice. Protest against injustice looks outward; it complains that the system is rigged, that the winners have cheated or manipulated their way to the top. Protest against humiliation is psychologically more freighted. It combines resentment of the winners with nagging self-doubt: perhaps the rich are rich because they are more deserving than the poor; maybe the losers are complicit in their misfortune after all.

This feature of the politics of humiliation makes it more combustible than other political sentiments. It is a potent ingredient in the volatile brew of anger and resentment that fuels populist protest. Though himself a billionaire, Donald Trump understood and exploited this resentment. Unlike Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, who spoke constantly of “opportunity,” Trump scarcely mentioned the word. Instead, he offered blunt talk of winners and losers. (Interestingly, Bernie Sanders, a social democratic populist, also rarely speaks of opportunity and mobility, focusing instead on inequalities of power and wealth.)

Elites have so valorized a college degree—both as an avenue for advancement and as the basis for social esteem—that they have difficulty understanding the hubris a meritocracy can generate, and the harsh judgment it imposes on those who have not gone to college. Such attitudes are at the heart of the populist backlash and Trump's victory.

One of the deepest political divides in American politics today is between those with and those without a college degree. In the 2016 election, Trump won two-thirds of white voters without a college degree, while Hillary Clinton won decisively among voters with advanced degrees. A similar divide appeared in Britain's Brexit referendum. Voters with no college education voted overwhelming for Brexit, while the vast majority of those with a postgraduate degree voted to remain.<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting on her presidential campaign a year and a half later, Hillary Clinton displayed the meritocratic hubris that contributed to her defeat. “I

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won the places that represent two-thirds of America's gross domestic product," she told a conference in Mumbai, India, in 2018. "So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward." By contrast, Trump drew his support from those who "didn't like black people getting rights" and "didn't like women . . . getting jobs." She had won the votes of the winners of globalization, while Trump had won among the losers.<sup>10</sup>

The Democratic Party had once stood for farmers and working people against the privileged. Now, in a meritocratic age, its defeated standard bearer boasted that the prosperous, enlightened parts of the country had voted for her.

Donald Trump was keenly alive to the politics of humiliation. From the standpoint of economic fairness, his populism was fake, a kind of plutocratic populism. He proposed a health plan that would have cut health care for many of his working-class supporters and enacted a tax bill that heaped tax cuts on the wealthy. But to focus solely on the hypocrisy misses the point.

When he withdrew the United States from the Paris climate change agreement, Trump argued, implausibly, that he was doing so to protect American jobs. But the real point of his decision, its political rationale, was contained in this seemingly stray remark: "At what point does America get demeaned? At what point do they start laughing at us as a country? . . . We don't want other leaders and other countries laughing at us anymore."<sup>11</sup>

Liberating the United States from the supposed burdens of the climate change agreement was not really about jobs or about global warming. It was, in Trump's political imagination, about averting humiliation. This resonated with Trump voters, even those who cared about climate change.

## TECHNOCRATIC MERIT AND MORAL JUDGMENT

Taken by itself, the notion that the meritorious should govern is not distinctive to our time. In ancient China, Confucius taught that those who excelled in virtue and ability should govern. In ancient Greece, Plato imagined a society led by a philosopher-king supported by a public-spirited class of

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guardians. Aristotle rejected Plato's philosopher-king, but he, too, argued that the meritorious should have the greatest influence in public affairs. For him the merit relevant to governing was not wealth or noble birth, but excellence in civic virtue and *phronesis*, the practical wisdom to reason well about the common good.<sup>12</sup>

The founders of the American republic called themselves "Men of Merit," and hoped virtuous, knowledgeable people like themselves would be elected to office. They opposed hereditary aristocracy, but were not keen on direct democracy, which they feared could bring demagogues to power. They sought to design institutions, such as the indirect election of the U.S. Senate and the president, that would enable the meritorious to govern. Thomas Jefferson favored a "natural aristocracy" based on "virtue and talents" rather than an "artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth." "That form of government is the best," he wrote, which provides "for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government."<sup>13</sup>

Despite their differences, these traditional versions of political meritocracy—from the Confucian to the Platonic to the republican—share the notion that the merits relevant to governing include moral and civic virtue. This is because all agree that the common good consists, at least in part, in the moral education of citizens.

Our technocratic version of meritocracy severs the link between merit and moral judgment. In the domain of the economy, it simply assumes that the common good is defined by GDP, and that the value of people's contributions consist in the market value of the goods or services they sell. In the domain of government, it assumes that merit means technocratic expertise.

This can be seen in the growing role of economists as policy advisors, the increasing reliance on market mechanisms to define and achieve the public good, and the failure of public discourse to address the large moral and civic questions that should be at the center of political debate: What should we do about rising inequality? What is the moral significance of national borders? What makes for the dignity of work? What do we owe one another as citizens?

This morally blinkered way of conceiving merit and the public good has weakened democratic societies in several ways. The first is the most

obvious: Over the past four decades, meritocratic elites have not governed very well. The elites who governed the United States from 1940 to 1980 were far more successful. They won World War II, helped rebuild Europe and Japan, strengthened the welfare state, dismantled segregation, and presided over four decades of economic growth that flowed to rich and poor alike. By contrast, the elites who have governed since have brought us four decades of stagnant wages for most workers, inequalities of income and wealth not seen since the 1920s, the Iraq War, a nineteen-year, inconclusive war in Afghanistan, financial deregulation, the financial crisis of 2008, a decaying infrastructure, the highest incarceration rate in the world, and a system of campaign finance and gerrymandered congressional districts that makes a mockery of democracy.

Not only has technocratic merit failed as a mode of governance; it has also narrowed the civic project. Today, the common good is understood mainly in economic terms. It is less about cultivating solidarity or deepening the bonds of citizenship than about satisfying consumer preferences as measured by the gross domestic product. This makes for an impoverished public discourse.

What passes for political argument these days consists either of narrow, managerial, technocratic talk, which inspires no one; or else shouting matches, in which partisans talk past one another, without really listening. Citizens across the political spectrum find this empty public discourse frustrating and disempowering. They rightly sense that the absence of robust public debate does not mean that no policies are being decided. It simply means they are being decided elsewhere, out of public view—by administrative agencies (often captured by the industries they regulate), by central banks and bond markets, by corporate lobbyists whose campaign contributions buy influence with public officials.

But that's not all. Beyond hollowing out public discourse, the reign of technocratic merit has reconfigured the terms of social recognition in ways that elevate the prestige of the credentialed, professional classes and depreciate the contributions of most workers, eroding their social standing and esteem. It is this aspect of technocratic merit that contributes most directly to the angry, polarized politics of our time.

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### THE POPULIST UPRISING

Six decades ago, a British sociologist named Michael Young anticipated the hubris and resentment to which meritocracy gives rise. In fact, it was he who coined the term. In a book called *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), he asked what would happen if, one day, class barriers were overcome, so that everyone had a truly equal opportunity to rise based solely on his or her own merit.<sup>14</sup>

In one respect, this would be something to celebrate; the children of the working class would at last compete fairly, side by side with the children of the privileged. But it would not, Young thought, be an unmitigated triumph; for it was bound to foster hubris in the winners and humiliation among the losers. The winners would consider their success a “just reward for their own capacity, for their own efforts, for their own undeniable achievement,” and would therefore look down on those less successful than themselves. Those who failed to rise would feel they had no one to blame but themselves.<sup>15</sup>

For Young, meritocracy was not an ideal to aim at but a recipe for social discord. He glimpsed, decades ago, the harsh meritocratic logic that now poisons our politics and animates populist anger. For those who feel aggrieved by the tyranny of merit, the problem is not only stagnant wages but also the loss of social esteem.

The loss of jobs to technology and outsourcing has coincided with a sense that society accords less respect to the kind of work the working class does. As economic activity has shifted from making things to managing money, as society has lavished outsize rewards on hedge fund managers, Wall Street bankers, and the professional classes, the esteem accorded work in the traditional sense has become fragile and uncertain.

Mainstream parties and elites miss this dimension of politics. They think the problem with market-driven globalization is simply a matter of distributive justice; those who have gained from global trade, new technologies, and the financialization of the economy have not adequately compensated those who have lost out.

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But this misunderstands the populist complaint. It also reflects a defect in the technocratic approach to governing. Conducting our public discourse as if it were possible to outsource moral and political judgment to markets, or to experts and technocrats, has emptied democratic argument of meaning and purpose. Such vacuums of public meaning are invariably filled by harsh, authoritarian forms of identity and belonging—whether in the form of religious fundamentalism or strident nationalism.

That is what we are witnessing today. Four decades of market-driven globalization have hollowed out public discourse, disempowered ordinary citizens, and prompted a populist backlash that seeks to cloth the naked public square with an intolerant, vengeful nationalism.

To reinvigorate democratic politics, we need to find our way to a morally more robust public discourse, one that takes seriously the corrosive effect of meritocratic striving on the social bonds that constitute our common life.

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