Article

In Shit We Stand United
Solidarity and Separation on the Lower Grounds

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Abstract
In his *Interpretation of Dreams* Sigmund Freud quotes a poem by Heinrich Heine: ‘Selten habt Ihr mich verstanden/selten auch verstand ich Euch./Nur wenn wir im Kot uns fanden,/so verstanden wir uns gleich’. (‘Rarely did you understand me, and rarely did I understand you; Only when we found ourselves in the muck did we understand each other at once.’). In my contribution, I want to examine this ability of the excrement to function as a kind of universal equivalent for understanding; a kind of perfectly convertible currency or primordial gift (according to Freud's account). What is it that makes this border-element between culture and nature so specifically useful when nothing else seems to help in human communication? This question shall be raised specifically with regard to the "scatological rituals" examined and analyzed by Stephen Greenblatt as well as with to the issue that D. A. F. de Sade makes of the excrement in his "120 days of Sodom", where it plays an astoundingly predominant role when it comes to finding unequivocal proofs of human autonomy.

Key words: solidarity, universalism, solidarity, sadism, masochism, filthy rituals

1. The Lowest of the Lowest: A Medium of Understanding?
In one of his poems from his *Buch der Lieder*, German poet Heinrich Heine somewhat surprisingly points out the possible role of the abject as a medium of coming together. He writes:

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Selten habt ihr mich verstanden,
Selten auch verstand ich euch,
Nur wenn wir im Kot uns fanden,
So verstanden wir uns gleich (Heine 1946, 121).
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Rarely did you understand me, and rarely did I understand you;
Only when we found ourselves in the muck did we understand each other at once (transl. Hill 1993, 70).

Even if Heines German notion of *Kot* or else ‘muck’ does not necessarily and only designate shit, but all kinds of lowest respected matters (such as dirt, waste, sex, obscenity, vulgarity, stupidity, ebriety, kitsch, bullshit etc.), one can draw here a philosophical conclusion that certainly also concerns the excrement and related practices. Just as Thomas Hobbes remarked that mathematics unites people while politics splits them, one can say here: culture's lowest matters unite people, while higher matters cause misunderstandings and disagreements. In shit we stand united. But beware the moment we get out of it! More highly respected matters such as art or elegant fashion necessarily work as distinctive cultural capital; and maybe because of

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that they always cause uncertainties and controversial judgments. The lower we go, into popular culture, and even lower, into what it despises, the more certain we may then be to find unanimity. Contrary to the assumption that what unites people is an idea, we have to acknowledge here that the unifying force comes from something that appears to be a pure matter; something that, at least according to the young Socrates, does not participate in any idea; something for which there seems to be no idea whatsoever. In Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*, after Socrates having asserted that there are abstract ideas of the just, the beautiful, the good, and all such conceptions, Parmenides asks:

‘And is there an abstract idea of man, apart from us and all others such as we are, or of fire or water?’

‘I have often,’ he [Socrates] replied, ‘been very much troubled, Parmenides, to decide whether there are ideas of such things, or not.’

‘And are you undecided about certain other things, which you might think rather ridiculous, such as hair, mud, dirt, or anything else particularly vile and worthless? Would you say that there is an idea of each of these distinct and different from the things with which we have to do, or not?’

‘By no means,’ said Socrates. ‘No, I think these things are such as they appear to us, and it would be quite absurd to believe that there is an idea of them; and yet I am sometimes disturbed by the thought that perhaps what is true of one thing is true of all.’ (Plato 1953, Parmenides 130c-e)

This may remind us of the point recently made by Jean-Claude Milner and Slavoj Žižek about the distinction between human rights and civil rights (Milner 2017, Žižek 2017). Far below the ‘higher’ civil freedoms of opinion, reunion etc., there lurk the ‘lower’ human freedoms of access to water, hygiene, toilets, food and some personal space. ‘Higher’ and ‘lower’ people may divide precisely along this line of distinction; i.e. the recognition or the disavowal of the identity of both forms of rights. Bertolt Brecht nicely formulated this essential ‘materialism’ of human existence in his *Einheitsfrontlied* (United Front Song):

> Und weil der Mensch ein Mensch ist,  
> drum braucht er was zum Essen, bitte sehr!  
> Es macht ihn ein Geschwätz nicht satt,  
> das schafft kein Essen her. 

> And while a man is flesh and blood  
> He will ask, if you please, for bread and meat  
> And windy words won’t be enough  
> For words aren’t good to eat.¹

The same as for eating, goes of course also for sleeping, clothing, drinking, washing and shitting etc. It is, after all, not only death that lately makes all humans equals, but rather

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¹ [https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/music/lyrics/de/die-einheitsfront.htm](https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/music/lyrics/de/die-einheitsfront.htm); [http://marxist-theory-of-art.blogspot.co.at/2010/10/united-front-song-einheitsfrontlied.html](http://marxist-theory-of-art.blogspot.co.at/2010/10/united-front-song-einheitsfrontlied.html); accessed: 2017-06-01)
and long before, it is the common needs of human life – goods which, by that very reason, have themselves to be kept common, and not privatized.

Just as shit, also eating is a matter which, by the higher classes is regarded as low – as Brecht remarks:

Bei den Hochgestellten
Gilt das Reden vom Essen als niedrig
Das kommt: sie haben
Schon gegessen (Brecht 1984, 633).

Amongst the highly placed
It is considered low to talk about food.
The fact is: they have
Already eaten.²

Moreover, Brecht emphasizes as a necessity for any emancipatory struggle the rememberance of the basic human needs for good life:

In Erwägung daß ihr uns dann eben
Mit Gewehren und Kanonen droht
Haben wir beschlossen, nunmehr schlechtes Leben
Mehr zu fürchten als den Tod (Brecht 1984, 653).

Considering that, then, you
Menace us with guns and cannons,
We decided that henceforth we fear
Bad life more than death.³

Precisely the materialist insistence on the necessities of good life is what enables the communards to even risk their lives. Adhesion to bodily needs is not, as Hegel in his Phenomenology had assumed, a hindrance for becoming a free master; but instead it is the starting point for a materialist struggle for good life in freedom (Pfaller 2011). The lowest matters are the common basis for acceding to the higher things. For, as Brecht puts it drastically,

Wenn die Niedrigen nicht
An das Niedrige denken
Können sie nicht hoch (Brecht 1984, 633).

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If the lowly do not
Think about what's low
They will never rise.4

2. Plurivocity in the Lowest: Demarcation Lines between the Coprophages
If we now, following Brecht, keep in mind the lowest things and practices, such as eating, and if we look then for the lowest object for them, what may come to our mind may be eating shit. So is eating of shit, that occurs in many cultures and practices, an instance of what Heinrich Heine has given us as a hope for universal understanding? Can we come together and be sure that a meal of shit will unite us, the ‘little pigs of Epicurus’ (as Horaz described himself and his materialist comrades). Is there a univocity in the eating of shit? Unfortunately, from a psychoanalytical point of view, we cannot confirm this. There seem to exist at least three practices that have been object to psychoanalytic study where the eating of shit occurs, but takes on entirely different meanings. These practices are: (1) masochism, (2) sadism and (3) scatologic rituals.

(1) Masochism

The eating of shit may for example occur in a masochist practice - when, say, the masochist, as a sign of his utmost humiliation and devotion to his lady, eats (or is forced to eat) her excrements. In an astoundingly charming and lovely way such – for many people repelling – practices have been depicted by the Japanese cartoon artist Namio Harukawa.

Even for experienced masochists this practice may still be a challenge, or an achievement that can only be reached after a long time of ‘training’. Yet, significant here is still the fact that even in this extreme case, masochism appears to be a parody of traditional ‘normal’ heterosexual relationships with their culture of ‘courtoisie’, veneration and worship of the lady. Wise husbands for example sometimes explain the secret of their happy marital relationship by the fact that they have learnt to say yes whenever tempted to say no. This may also be one of the

early lessons in a masochist training. To restrict one's own will, to even happily suffer for the pleasure of the lady, and to celebrate or ‘sublimate’ her quirks and whimsies so that they do not anymore appear as proofs of feminine folly but, on the contrary, as examples of mysterious superiority and divinity that merit unconditional obedience, are structural practices and features that can hardly be taken away from any heterosexuality without endangering the heterosexual pattern as such. In this sense, the radical excremental practice seems at least not to radically separate the advanced masochist from the ordinary heteronormative worshipper. Anyway, in masochism, the eating of shit is the significant mark of the slave.

(2) Sadism
Yet the same practice can also take on the exactly opposed meaning. Instead of being what designates the utmost slave, it can also become what designates the utmost master. This is the reason why this issue occupies such an important place in Marquis de Sade's novel 120 Days of Sodom. We have to keep in mind here Gilles Deleuze's perspicuous remark that sadism is not at all the complement, the other side of masochism (Deleuze 1991: 37ff.). Instead, masochism is always composed of two masochists, one subordinated, the other dominant; i. e. for example, one that eats shit, and one that lets the other eat shit. Sadism, on the other hand, is, as Deleuze has pointed out, not related to either side. This can be very clearly seen when it comes to the issue of shit. For it is in the first place the sadist himself (herself) who eats shit - a fact that would appear most paradoxical and could hardly be explained starting from the assumption of a complementarity between sadism and masochism.

But shit is not only a kind of shibboleth for the specificity of sadism compared to masochism. It is also one of the key issues that characterize the libertine passion, and accordingly the sadist programme, as such. Roughly 60% of Sade's book's pages are

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5 In a Lacanian perspective, all these practices seem to amount to the man's identification with the objet petit a, or the feminine phallus. Not only masochists, but also a good part of heterosexual men are after the phantasmatic figure of the phallic women - a fact that allows us to understand Lacan's witty remark that true heterosexuality may be less widespread than it appears.
dedicated to the issue of shit. In order to explain this at least at first sight astonishing fact, one has to keep in mind that Sade's work, as Jacques Lacan has pointed out (Lacan 1989: 55), is not a panorama or an encyclopedia of sexual perversions, but in the first place a philosophical work on an issue that it shares with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant: autonomy. What Sade's heroes aim at is not in the first place the satisfaction of their manifold desires, but the shaping of these very desires. They want to achieve a point where their desires do not anymore stem from the object, but where the libertine subject himself is the very origin of this desire - as it were the causa sui of his desire. This is why Sade's heroes are so eager to emphasize

‘...that it is not the object of libertine intentions which fire us, but the idea of evil, and that consequently it is thanks only to evil and only in the name of evil one stiffens, not thanks to the object...’ (Sade [1785] 2002, 139-140).

The Sadean libertines do not only strive for sexual arousal; instead, they seek an arousal that has its cause nowhere else but in their own, self-chosen philosophical principles. Therefore almost every object appears suspect to them; for there is no certainty that it is not some of the object's advantages which cause the desire; that - speaking in Kant's terms - there are not any 'pathological' inclinations mingled into this arousal. The ideal object for an autonomous arousal, or for an arousal of autonomy, would therefore be an object that in itself could prove ‘that it is not the object ... which fire us’. And which object could provide such a proof better than an object most devoid of any advantages or Platonic perfections whatsoever – namely, shit? This is the reason why the excrement causes such excessive joy amongst the Sadean libertines:

‘Président, your prick is in the air again,’ said the Duc; ‘your fucking remarks always betray you.’

‘My prick in the air? No,’ the Président said, ‘but I am on the verge of getting some shit from our dear little Sophie, and I have high hopes her delicious turd will precipitate something. Oh, upon my soul, more than I'd expected,’ said Curval, after he'd gobbled up the hash; ‘by the good God I'd like to fuck, I believe that my prick is taking on some consistency’ (Sade [1785] 2002, 306).

The logic of this excitement can probably most properly be described by a comparison not with Kant's practical philosophy, but with his aesthetics – along the lines of Kant's aesthetics of the sublime. The aesthetic pleasure that romantic souls are able to derive from such unlikely objects as stormy seas or terrifying mountains does definitely not stem from the perfection of these objects. ‘For what is sublime’, Kant emphasizes,

‘in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very

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6 Cf. for example p. 128: "'Ah, by God!' said Curval, 'will you now say that youth and pretty looks are indispensable to an elicitation of fuck? Why, once again 'tis the filthy act that causes the greatest pleasure: and the filthier it be, the more voluptuously fuck is shed.'"
inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility. Thus the vast ocean cannot be called sublime. The sight of it is horrible; and one must already have filled one's mind with all sorts of ideas if such an intuition is to attune it to a feeling that is itself sublime, inasmuch as the mind is induced to abandon sensibility and occupy itself with ideas containing a higher purposiveness' (Kant [1790] 1987, § 23, 99).

The only ‘perfection’ of an object that appears sublime is, as it were, a perfection of second degree: it lies in the fact that the object itself makes it perfectly clear that it does not have any perfection. It perfectly and most adequately displays its own inadequacy (for a sublime experience). The sublime experience occurs precisely when the object's utter inadequacy to represent an idea of reason is reversed – in the Romantic observer's mind – into a representation of this very inadequacy.

The specific quality of objects such as the stormy sea or the dangerous cliff – or, as instructed by Sade's libertines we may add: shit – is that these objects appear most likely to prove that it is not them but the beholder's mind, filled with ideas, that caused the pleasure. If any object whatsoever can be contemplated in a favorable light by a creative mind, it is still only some objects which definitely prove that it was the mind, and not the object, from which this favorable light has been shed. Only horrible and disgusting objects can ‘objectively’ prove the subjective nature of the sublime experience.

Yet even such an ‘objective’ proof does not unite the subjects. Even if the libertines agree upon this aptitude of shit to induce a sublime experience of autonomy, this does not imply that shit would unite human beings, their aesthetic preferences or their understandings. Rather, the sublime attitude causes most astonishment amongst other people; normal, rational people observe with wide open eyes and with no understanding whatsoever how the libertines eat their excrements - just as 'the good and otherwise sensible Savoyard peasant' in Kant's account who 'did not hesitate to call anyone a fool who fancies glaciered mountains' (Kant [1790] 1987 § 29, 124). For the libertines, their sublime passion serves as a mark of distinction that separates them from the crowd; from all the people who happily indulge in heteronomous pleasures, dictated to them by their pleasant objects, and do not strive for autonomy. In this sense, it may be argued, the libertines are most autonomous with regard to the object of their sublime experiences. But they are not independent from the judgment of other subjects. They need these 'good and otherwise sensible' people in order to distinguish themselves - not only from them, but also from some ‘bad and not at all sensible’ people who might enjoy disgusting things just by pure lack of any taste whatsoever. The experience of the sublime, as can be well seen with regard to Susan Sontag's study of the kitschy Camp culture (Sontag 1964), always seems to require three different classes of observers: first, an entirely naive and tasteless group of unconditional kitsch (and shit) lovers; secondly, a reasonable group of people who estimate the good and tasteful things but despise the tasteless ones (like Kant's good peasant); and thirdly, a most sophisticated elite group with a sublime taste that is able to find the tasteless objects 'so bad that they become good again' - or to state, as Sontag puts it, ‘it's good because it's awful’ (Sontag 1964).

Both lower groups are required for the romantics and the libertines to accede to their sublime experiences. The principle at work is the idea ‘one could have believed’, or ‘it is as
if (1) [that] disgusting matters were nice, and (2) [that] they were just disgusting. Only as long as believers for these two opposed assumptions can be imagined, the sublime experience is possible. Without superiority to such other groups, the libertines and romantics are in danger to fall back, without any distinction, into the first, uneducated, barbaric group. This danger can nicely be illustrated with the anecdote from Casanova's memoirs that Octave Mannoni has perspicuously commented upon (Mannoni 2003, 84-7): When Casanova tries to fool a few peasants with a kind of magic ceremony and when all of a sudden due to an upcoming storm the peasants leave the place, eventually Casanova himself is taken by unsurmountable anxiety. When the believer, the gull, or the fool, start lacking, the naïve belief seems to fall back on the impostor, the knave; or, in other words, the knave himself falls back into the role of the naïve fool. The pleasure with superstition, as well as the sublime experience require the bodily presence of some naïve other that functions as a protection against the naïve belief in the ‘as if...’. The Sadean experience of shit thus does not only function as a separator from that of the masochist, but it is inherently based on the separation from naïve others. In shit only libertines (and maybe some deviant Kantian romantics) can stand united – but against all others.

(3) Scatologic Rituals

Another instance of a comparably programmatic way of eating excrements, but with an entirely different philosophical or political aim, occurs within what Stephen Greenblatt has called ‘filthy rituals’ (Greenblatt 1982). The essay starts with the report of US cavalry Captain Bourke, Indian fighter and amateur ethnographer, about a strange encounter in 1881 with a group of Zunis in New Mexico. The indians who had promised to show their esteemed guest a secret dance not only surprisingly appeared to mimick a (Mexican Catholic) Christian ceremony, but also started to drink several gallons of urine, not without regretting that the narrow space of their guest's house did not allow them for more, in particular eating the excrement of men and dogs – a practice that this group actually used to perform at other occasions (Greenblatt 1982: 1-2). The observer, Captain Bourke, may, as Greenblatt states,

‘indignantly deny the implicit suggestion that communion is the eating of excrement in both kinds, and may write, with relief and snobbery, that ‘Hebrews and Christians will discover a common ground of congratulation in the fact that believers in their systems are now absolutely free from any suggestion of this filth taint,’ but he does so in the preface to a work directly inspired by this disquieting experience, a 500-page study - the result of ten years' obsessive research – the Scatologic Rites of All Nations’ (Greenblatt 1982, 2).

While believing that it was the exclusion of shit that united allegedly ‘higher’ religions such as Hebrews and Christians, the poor Captain himself gave proof to the contrary: that it was shit (and its ritual consumption) that united all nations. His manifest disgust or ‘phobia’ may, Greenblatt argues, hide some desire or ‘philia’, ‘a kind of nostalgie de merde’ (Greenblatt 1982, 4). Greenblatt subsequently points out that scatologic behavior can be regarded as a recurrent situation in cultural history: whenever a social group feels to be deemed inferior by another group, it may start to deliberately humiliate itself in
the face of the others by eating excrements or by displaying similarly shameful carnevalesque performances. The notorious art performance Kunst und Revolution (also known as Hörsaal 1 Aktion) by the Vienna actionists Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Peter Weibel and Oswald Wiener on June 7th, 1968 at Vienna University may testify to this. Mike Kelley's photograph Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood (1990)7 may be seen as a late ironic echo, or even a nostalgic memory of that heroic period of Viennese avantgardism. As Greenblatt argues, this behavior has to be seen as a gesture loaded with ambivalence: on the one hand, it is a protest against the inferiority that the other, superior group appears to impose upon the acting group; but at the same time, it is an acknowledgment of this very inferiority:

‘The gesture of insult is at the same time an acknowledgment of defeat, for the satiric humor of the oppressed, no matter how telling it may be, always assumes the condition of oppression, perhaps even reinforces that condition, both by releasing aggression nonviolently through laughter and by confirming in the minds of the conquerers the impotence of the conquered’ (Greenblatt 1982, 4-5).

Psychoanalytically, this recurrent behavior of inferior groups can be understood as a form of acting under counter-transference. The inferior group starts displaying precisely what it feels that the superior group sees in them. They start acting, as it were, in the others' imaginary film. This can today often be observed in so-called reality-TV. When, for

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example, an urban TV-team visits a provincial bar to report about the local customs, the provincial people immediately understand their interpellation as exemplary cases of barbarism and start displaying more barbaric manners than even they can possibly ever have. To the disdainful expectation of the others they react aggressively, by giving them what they ask for. And, usually, this satisfies the surprised gaze of their observers who are happy to find such proofs of the ‘reality’ that they had been looking for.

Of course, this interpretation by the superior group completely overlooks the dimension of protest contained in this action. The transgression of social norms performed by the inferior group indicated – especially through the use of items pertaining to the superior group – that not the inferior, but the superior group was the transgressor; the shit-eater, as it were. This is the ‘black truth’ implicated in the ‘impossible’ behaviour and standpoint that the inferior group takes on in such a performance (Pfaller 2017a, 2017b): the transgression of the norm by the inferior group is to be seen as a desperate claim for the fulfilling of the norm by the superior group. To put this into Lacanian terminology, one can say: on the level of the enunciated content, the inferior group acknowledges its inferiority; yet on the level of enunciation, they protest and make a claim against the superior group’s transgression. While what they do may appear low, the fact that they do it may reveal a subject position beyond this lowness – just as, to take a different example, an utterance like ‘you are safe here’ is, by what it says, assuring, but by the fact that it is uttered may actually appear disquieting.

Obviously, this form of communication can easily be misunderstood. Moreover, it can even lose its double meaning due to cultural change. The liberating force of blunt talk and filthy action, nicely described and analyzed by Thomas Mießgang (Mießgang 2013), can vanish once a culture starts to ‘liberalize’ itself and to abandon previous standards. To quote one of Mießgang’s examples, for instance when the former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer as a young MP in the 1980s appeared in parliament with his sneakers on, this could still be read as a gesture of protest – and as a demonstration indicating that not he, Fischer, but his opponents were hurting a certain standard. A few years later though, this gesture lost most of its critical power due to the fact that customs in clothing became liberated. Fischer’s performance then could be understood as the mere expression of a time when one did not have to care so much anymore about one’s dressing manners; or even as an affirmation of the neoliberal devaluation of democratic institutions.

Thus one can say that filthy rites seem on the one hand to unite their performers with their observers by the fact that, containing two contradictory messages at the same time, they allow for full affirmation without the restrictions that every non-contradictory message necessarily includes. The hilarious, joyful, ‘decathectic’, ‘cathartic’ quality of such actions may stem precisely from this fact. Whatever contains a meaningful, definite, unequivocal message, can only be confirmed by partial affect. Only the contradictory message of the ironic filthy rite provides the pleasure of full affirmation and complete decathexis of affect. In this sense, one can say that in the shit of the filthy ritual we can stand united.

On the other hand, it has become clear that this unity is of utterly deceptive nature. Not only it separates the understanding of the performers from that of their observers; it
separates it also from the understanding of other, more ‘liberal’ epochs; not to speak of
the utterly different understandings that advanced masochists or libertines may have of
the matter.

3. Moments of Filthy Clarity
Yet there seem to be cases where our materialist assumption about the uniting power of
the lowest matter still seems to apply. In Don Siegel's movie Escape From Alcatraz, the
imprisoned hero, played by Clint Eastwood, meets another, life-long black prisoner. The
atmosphere between them is initially one of mutual mistrust; yet, still they manage to
exchange a few remarks which allow them to regard each other as pretty smart, and not
just as a racial enemy. In a later scene, in the prison’s court, the black prisoner sits on top
of the stairs and Eastwood approaches him, stopping shortly in front of him. The black
prisoner then asks Eastwood why he did not sit down beside him, and if it was because
he is a coward, or because he is a nigger-hater. Eastwood answers calmly, it was because
he is a nigger-hater – and at the same moment sits down beside him. This clever move is
the only way out of the philosophical dilemma that the tricky question of the black
prisoner has playfully presented to him – either to humiliate himself or to insult the
other; or, even worse, by saying something nice, to appear as a pretender. For every nice
word, or every assurance that one was not a ‘nigger-hater’, would have sounded in this
context as mere hypocrisy. In this atmosphere of mistrust, the only way to show that one
has sincere respect for the other is to insult him by what one says, yet show that one
respects him and does not regard him as an idiot by the fact that one says it (and by
acting accordingly). When the atmosphere is poisoned and loaded with mistrust, one
cannot unite on the level of the enunciated content where even every true word would
sound false – just like on a theater stage where even a true baroque chair looks like a
cheap imitation. Only when we give each other shit by what we say, can we break this
illusion and stand united on the level of the fact that we say it.

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