

THE SYMBOLIC INDEPENDENCE FROM POWER

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ABSTRACT: Muraro's article begins from the philosophical question of the 'unthought', and asks how our very image of thought is transformed when the thinking subject is a woman, and her thought is specifically linked to the experience of a body. On the basis of a feminist interrogation of sexual difference which reveals the forms of violence inherent in certain claims to universality, Muraro tries to develop a thinking of politics which would rest on its symbolic distance or independence from power. Through readings of Freud, Macbeth, Saint Paul and women's narratives, Muraro investigates the dangers borne by the fusion of power and politics and explores the ways in which they could be disjoined.

KEYWORDS: Arendt; Feminism; Freud; Lonzi; Politics; Power; Saint Paul; Shakespeare

In one way or another, anyone who approaches philosophy always has to deal with the problem of what it means to think the unthinkable, to dwell on that extreme and undefended edge where thought loses itself, faints [*viene meno a sé, s-viene*], something that is often compared to or even equated with death. It is the opposite of a border, which we experience in a pleasing manner as we drift off to sleep; rather, it is the experience of a thinking precariously balanced between collapse and delirium. This experience is also lived and reflected upon by people who are not philosophers by vocation, in mystical or artistic research, to mention familiar examples.

I want to consider a situation that is close to this, but also significantly different, one which is acknowledged and investigated in the context of the psychology of discovery, and which to my mind is of far broader interest. I have formulated it in the following terms: what happens to thought when it encounters the unthought? I use the past tense because I am taking up again an already existing line of inquiry.¹ In the original ver-

1. In the first part of the article I take up again the inquiry that makes up Chapters 4 and 5 of my book *Al mercato della felicità. La forza irrinunciabile del desiderio* [*At the Market of Happiness: The Unrenounceable Force of Desire*], Milan, Mondadori, forthcoming 2009. This text freely reproduces my talk at the colloquium of the group Diotima at the University of Verona, 10 October 2008. The general theme of the colloquium was 'Power and Politics are Not the Same Thing'. The presentation of October 10 in turn reprised a contribution of mine to the journal *Via Dogana*, 86 ('Libreria delle Donne di Milano', *Via Dogana*, no. 86, 2008), for an

sion, this was my formulation: you can be deaf and nonetheless hear sounds thanks to the vibrations of the acoustic medium, you can be blind and intuit colours thanks to the magic of words; I wonder how thought can stop in its tracks and notice the unthought that is happening to it.

I proceeded by examining some texts that have nothing in common with one another, save the point we're concerned with, namely that they allow us to broach the situation of a thought that comes up against an unthought.

One is the story of a nurse, addressed to me in the context of a university course on the thought of sexual difference. Some years before, when she was still in training, helping an old patient to bathe, she ended up seeing for the first time, and with no prior warning, the genitalia of a hermaphrodite (a term she will get from an older nurse). The author of this story noted that during the bath, unusually, the wife of the patient was also present, 'as though she were keeping watch': but keeping watch over what? In my view, on the sexual identity of her husband, endangered by the gaze of the nurse on his genitalia, so much so that the nurse, in her story, does not call him a man but a 'human creature', eliciting my criticism.

The second text is the first act of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: Macbeth, returning victorious from the battlefield where he has risked his life for his king, encounters three witches who inspire in him the idea of taking over the king's place. A desire which shakes him and the symbolic order to its foundations. With the wisdom of hindsight, which is to say with the mediations that later emerge, we recognize in that desire a mute anticipation of what will turn out to be the principal characteristic of modern democracy, according to which everyone, male and female (in abstract terms, of course), can aspire to any public position or status.

The third text was one I composed on the basis of some passages in Freud's letters and essays, and it shows the path that took him, during the period of his first hysteric patients, to deceive and undeceive himself regarding the *trauma* of childhood sexual seduction, in the process acquiring an ear for the unconscious. It is worth noting that *trauma* is a term that we can apply to all the events of the type considered here.

Finally, the fourth text is the tale of Paul's so-called conversion, as drawn from the Acts of the Apostles and his Epistles, and it reverberates in the reflection of Western Christian thought to this very day. I have taken into consideration recent texts linked to the discussion on so-called political theology and I have come to the conclusion that the Pauline trauma is once again making its effects felt.

I place myself among those who attribute a political thought to Paul, but in a sense that subverts the very idea of politics. More precisely, for me his thinking culminates in the idea of symbolic independence from power.

I have been led to this reading by the reflection on the relationship between politics and power in the women's movement and feminist thought. Despite all the confusion around State feminism, entirely aimed at fighting discriminations and instituting an equality between the sexes (which to my mind is practically impossible and perhaps

senseless), the feminist movement revealed that the aversion for politics understood as competition and struggle for power, an aversion widespread among women, is not a refusal of politics, but on the contrary a demand for politics: there is a demand that where the machine of power now stands, political life should come to be.

In my inquiry into the unthought, the question that lay in the background was and remains the following: what happens to thought when the thinking subject is a woman, when it becomes aware that it is the thought of a female thinker [*una pensante*], that is to say a thought linked to being a body? What does this mean for thinking itself? Is it inconsequential or are there repercussions, and if there are, how do they manifest themselves in the order of the true/false, in the linguistic-expressive order (for instance, the 'I' that assumes/does not assume female gender predicates), in the pragmatic order (that is, the symbolic and practical efficacy of words)? And what becomes of our ineluctable *historicity*? With this term, which is not a synonym for historicism or relativism, I mean that what presents itself to us in our experience is never something that is absolutely self-identical, nor incontrovertible; pure thought thinks necessity, but experience does not experience necessity, so that thought is called to the work of mediation in order that what there is does not come to nothing. I would even say that this call constitutes the very essence of thought and, at the same time, its kinship with politics.

That the thinking subject is of female gender simply makes manifest the historicity of thought, in very precise and inexorable terms, which remind us of our being, all, men and women, born of woman. Thought is presented with its dependence on being a body [*essere corpo*], in the most difficult form, that of an insurmountable asymmetry: that women are born from woman and men instead ... also.

Whence a troubling of thought that feminist research, both historical and philosophical, has amply registered. Thanks to it, we know a lot of things about the trauma represented for the life of thought when it discovers itself as the thought of subjects called women on account of sexual difference, in other words, the discovery that women think and that what a woman thinks is thinking for all.

In effect, this research has given rise, in past and present culture, to a panoply of defensive reactions. There has been discredit and ridicule (think of Molière ridiculing women of culture) and insecurity (the specialist of women's biographies Carolyn G. Heilbrun has spoken in this regard of a 'rhetoric of uncertainty'). Many feminines have become masculines. Many contributions of women to human culture have been salvaged by becoming contributions of men—whether by feint, theft or error—since the male sex has historically committed itself to safeguarding the thinking transcendence from its being a body, with everything that follows in terms of objectivity, impartiality, universality.

What's more, feminism has contributed to showing how the 'safeguard' offered by the unique masculine, of an objective and universal thought, bears so many affinities with the patriarchal order, that is with a system of domination that has constituted itself into a veritable civilisation.

It should be said that feminism, or rather part of it, in its turn gave rise to new de-

fensive reactions, promoting a view of the world in which women share power with men in a regime of perfect equality and heated competition. In American cinema there are plenty of female cops that surpass their male colleagues in terms of homicidal determination. The mass media, political parties, and intellectuals are pretty much aware only of this feminism, though it is minoritarian among women and remote from the beginnings of the feminist movement, in the sixties and seventies of the last century: just think of Carla Lonzi.²

The confusion between politics and power has today become extreme, putting politics into a state of agony. We should realize that politics is not something co-terminous with society: political life is an additional possibility of life in common and is given under certain conditions, so much so that there have been and can be societies without politics, where there are only power relations, contrast, envy and the desire for power, and where the best that humanity can conceive and realize is shunted to the side. We are moving in this direction, on an inclined plane that cannot be reduced to a question of democracy: faced with this drift, limiting oneself to the defence of democracy is a mistake which is making more than a few people of good will waste their time.

The thought that believes it can withdraw from historicity, which is to say from the relation from what is other than itself, the thought that refuses the relativity of relation, is a thought that can hide its fallaciousness only through the possession of a power over other human beings. This possession in effect exempts one from the work of necessary mediation. But it has its price, because the exemption from the work of necessary mediation is the premise of the typical stupidity that manifests itself in the wielders of power over others.

In the world there is, there has always been, a lot of feminine intelligence, nourished by the necessity of mediation, active in human traffics and brilliant in the exchanges with nature, a non-linear intelligence, full of ruses and expedients, closely related to cunning. But everything would have remained in the domain of servility without the feminist consciousness-raising which interrupted the continuity of a social order which offered emancipation to women as a goal to be attained.

With feminist consciousness-raising, the unthought ceased to provoke defensive reactions, in order to become food for thought, that which makes one think. The end of the confusion between politics and power is an outcome of this break or displacement that I like to call a 'dodge', to echo the title of the film *L'esquive* by Kechiche (France 2003). The awareness of being elsewhere and otherwise—this is what it means to be conscious of oneself: not letting oneself be found within the trajectories of power, within its predictions, exposed to its manipulations; to exist in relation and in the verbal exchange of an autonomous and liberating practice.

When thought, struck by the trauma of being the thinking of a *she*, does not react

2. [Carla Lonzi (1931-1982) was a feminist writer, pioneer of a feminism of self-consciousness and sexual difference. She was a founder of the group and publishing house *Rivolta Femminile* and the author of, among others, *Sputiamo su Hegel* [Let's Spit on Hegel] (1970) and *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* [The Clitoral Woman and the Vaginal Woman] (1971).]

by defending itself in the ways that we're accustomed to, then trauma becomes a new beginning for oneself and a free sense of sexual difference. Our eyes and feelings are transformed: it is not simply a form of reasoning, but an experience. In light of this mutation, which is above all a political practice, the confusion between politics and power becomes visible, and the demand that this confusion be brought to an end arises spontaneously. We thus come to conceive of politics itself as a matter of gaining a free existence in spite of power. No: against power, but behind its back and to its detriment.

The free sense of sexual difference is like the agent of a distilling of politics; it shows how much will to domination there is in the aspiration to the universal, how much violence there is in the processes of objectivation, how much imbalance of power in the power of interpretation.

My main thesis, in this text and in this phase of my thinking, is that the radical antidote against confusion, for those who love politics and are trying to extricate it from power, is constituted by the symbolic independence from power, as we will now see.

The trauma of an unthought presenting itself gives rise to a number of manifestations, among which is the fear of deceiving oneself, which Shakespeare translates very effectively in Banquo's question.

'What, can the devil speak true?', Macbeth's comrade in arms asks himself, when the witches, prophecy begins to realize itself. He asks himself out loud, almost as if to get Macbeth to talk about the meeting with the witches, having noticed the profound turmoil that is affecting his superior.

Faced with the unthought, what an alert thinking fears is precisely deception. The danger is not that of being deceived, even though this too is present—because the deceivers who make you believe one thing rather than another do exist—but to deceive oneself because of something that is undeniably true. This is what the diabolical use of truth consists in, something that the inquisitors of all the world's churches specialize in. This is not the case with Macbeth, who is instead deceived by the 'truth' of his violent and sudden desire which he seeks to realize, without however offering himself as the site of a living meditation aimed at realising that desire, which would mean, above all: suffering and thinking.

Of course, one doesn't need to think of the devil to imagine that truth can translate into deception; there are periods and circumstances in which all expressible truths are deceptive. That is why we are here arguing about the unthought.

When we say that 'power and politics are not the same thing', I am certain that we say something true. By *saying the truth*, I mean that we interpret reality in the sense of saving it from 'coming to nothing'—and I add, without taking this further, that this 'coming to nothing' is not a figure of speech, but tends to embody itself in actual behaviours. Nihilism is not only philosophy, and it is not possible to say the truth if this truth is not, somewhere, in some way, at work or if it has really not begun to act.

That power's embrace is fatal for politics is well known, it's not my discovery. Power transforms those who believe they possess it into its cogs. It would not be difficult to demonstrate that, among men of action as well as political thinkers, the most brilliant

ones are those who oriented themselves, more or less consciously, precisely in the direction of holding political life back from being devoured by the logic of power. We call these men of politics, the others are men of power: I am thinking of the difference between Aldo Moro and Giulio Andreotti, but I am also thinking of the great political thinkers, like Machiavelli himself, thinkers who should be seen in this light as inventors of politics, there where before there was only the flat logic of power.

The logic of power can be summed up in two points: one says that power always holds the sword by its hilt, that it cannot stand the distinctively human experience of vulnerability; the other says that power uses everything and everyone, even those who have it. Many years ago, Giulio Andreotti made an ironic quip about the saying according to which ‘power ruins [*logora*] those who have it’, countering that it ruins those who *do not* have it. But he himself has become the living proof of what power can do to those who have it, as is brilliantly shown by the director Paolo Sorrentino and the actor Toni Servillo, respectively the author and principal interpreter of the film *Il Divo* (Italy 2008)

So, though I am sure that we are speaking the truth, I am still stuck with Banquo’s suspicion: that the devil too can speak the truth and that I may deceive myself. There is a fake politics, more common among women than men, which is based on taking a safety distance from power. I object to it that politics indeed cannot agree with power, but that the latter’s pressure cannot be ignored. Power is something that ‘presses’, in the sense of the Italian word *premere*: it both oppresses and attracts. To make power into the *raison d’être* of politics is aberrant; to keep it at a safety distance is illusory.

What does this mean in practice? Does it all come down to finding the right middle path between two extremes? Or can we, must we, find a less obvious and more incisive articulation?

From the exchanges that followed my first contribution on this theme (in the journal *Via Dogana*, 86, September 2008), there emerged the suggestion that we should enter into the devil’s territory, to wrest reality from it. What I mean with this colourful expression, which I stole from the writer Flannery O’Connor, is that we need to know how to give up any truth, even the dearest or most solid, to render speakable what the dominant discourse, even in our head, has silenced and which, because of this muteness, makes our experience insipid and our reality unreal.

The quarrel cannot fail to also, and perhaps above all, concern the word ‘power’. This is an extremely important word, whose use however has been concentrated in a meaning closely related to domination. In her political study regarding violence, *On Violence* (1970), Hannah Arendt quotes Voltaire’s definition ‘Power consists in making others act as I choose’, and those of others, among whom Max Weber: there is power anytime I can ‘assert my own will against the resistance’ of others.³ Given these definitions, with which she’s not satisfied, Arendt lets a positive meaning speak, a meaning which is untied from domination and subjugation. The risk here becomes that of ambiguity, and perhaps we need to run it, in order to chase our adversary to the very end.

Neither definitions nor terminology will help us escape the confusion that takes

3. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, New York, Harcourt & Brace, 1970, p. 36.

place within and without us, without any clear boundary, between power and politics. We need to distil, as I already said, that is we need to put an end to confusion by changing the relation between ourselves and the world, which in practice means putting ourselves in a situation, like the self-awareness group in the women's movement, in which it is possible to experience freedom (that is, to go to the roots of freedom) and to base the very idea of politics in this changed relation and this new experience.

Accordingly, the answer cannot be sought without running the risk of deception and ambiguity. I know women and men who have this courage, who make no concessions to ideology or dogmatism, but too often it happens that if they trip up, something that easily happens in the devil's territory, they don't want to recognize that they made a mistake. If this is the case, it's a thousand times better to stay out of it!

To think the unthought means doing without the criteria that would be indispensable for a secure judgment. However, by exposing ourselves to the risk of self-deception, of not being understood or losing our way, it happens that we make formidable discoveries, as long as we don't lose our awareness of this exposure. Flannery O'Connor would have said: as long as we don't forget that there is the devil and then there is grace.

I want to stress that to speak as I have, of the devil's territory, does not mean demonising power, and to speak of entering this territory is not an invitation to make compromises with it. The outcome can be something entirely different, and that is my aim.

Take the case of Freud: making his first uncertain steps in what would then become the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, he listens, from his first women patients, to repeated tales of sexual abuses suffered in childhood at the hands of members of the family, fathers not excluded. He is very struck by this, and to some extent troubled, but, since he's looking for a cause of his patients' illness, he does not recoil and perseveres. The doubt, however, stays with him—for reasons which are in part mistaken, it should be said (can fathers really do such things?)—pushing him into an unprecedented direction, where there is neither truth nor falsity, neither good nor evil. This will prove to be the right direction. In brief, Freud comes to understand that the patient, with her tale of seduction, has put into words and communicated to him a world which otherwise could not be put into words. Today we tend to think that these tales of sexual abuses in the family were veridical in a realist sense too, but this consideration does not invalidate Freud's move, to abandon the judgment about truth and falsity at the level of reality in order to shift to another level and become the ear listening to the unconscious. In other words, to become the living mediation in the place of the absent mediations.

A contradiction rears its head here: it seems that, by exposing ourselves to the risk of deception and ambiguity in order to rescue reality, we are led to some kind of independence from reality as a solution. That is precisely how it is: but we are dealing with a symbolic independence. Not an avoidance of reality, but a way of being in it without absolutising it. It is not even a matter of bracketing reality, which would be an idealist solution, since such a bracketing is not within our power. It is in our power to 'suffer and think', that is to remain in the state of impotent desire, to pierce the horizon in which the real is inscribed and takes on this or that name. This allows us to think without names

and to find ourselves in the place where the unthought happens.

This idea complicates our framework: the struggle against unreality requires something like a suspension of reality's dictates. But it also helps us to broach the theme of the disjunction between politics and power without demonising power, on the one hand, and without reducing ourselves to the rhetoric of dirty hands—on the other, a rhetoric which is generally used to justify the confusion between power and politics.

The dictates of reality are to some extent always complicitous with power, as Foucault maintained and illustrated. The 'ignorant' people always knew this, and in the end positivist philosophers discovered it too. Some of them, in the Vienna Circle, strained to define the dictates of reality in their pure state, without succeeding. Ernst Mach, their initiator, had no doubts that knowledge is always, to some extent, an interpretation: dictated by whom? In other words, we are not strictly speaking dealing with a symbolic independence from reality (which would be madness), but from power.

The symbolic independence from power, which I have already said is the agent of the undoing of the embrace between politics and power, is more than a moral virtue, and more than extraneousness from power. I don't know anything more radical in our tradition, when it comes to symbolic independence, than the following passage from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, whose radicality is such as to almost make what is at stake unrecognisable. This is what the apostle who wasn't one says:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due. Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 12, 21-13, 8).

I won't dwell on the philological issues raised by this famous passage on obedience to the constituted authorities, which are not such as to hinder its insertion into the context of my reflection; I would simply like to note that, in my quotation, the Pauline passage is framed by two phrases that recall its context, whose theme is love for others (*agape*). In this, I follow Karl Barth's authoritative teaching.

At bottom, the problem posed by this passage from the Epistle to the Romans does

not lie in its literal meaning, which is clear. The problem is another one, which is that it seems unacceptable to very many people because it appears to deny any value to the endeavour to change the order, or more often the disorder, of this world.

Whoever reads Paul with faith and fervour is tempted at this point to introduce some reasonable interpretation, to make him acceptable to our culture, or to posit a definitive historical distance. I think we should not make efforts in this direction, which would simply weaken the meaning of Paul's lines. They should be left in their literal meaning; the more astonishment they elicit, the better. The radicality of the solution that Paul teaches to the community of Christians of Rome is in fact such as to flip into its opposite. A veritable riddle. The astonishment increases if we recall that the writer is not a man of order; on the contrary, he was someone who was consciously defying the dominant civilisation, and those words are an integral part of the challenge. In light of this reflection, the text ultimately appears as a *cryptogram*, whose meaning is at first sight entirely opaque, but which becomes obvious as soon as you grasp it.

The meaning which I glimpsed, as I have already remarked, is the teaching of the symbolic independence from power and the subtraction of oneself from its grip by eliminating any obligation or expectation in its regard. At the heart of the Pauline teaching lies the invitation to not chain ourselves to the level of the relations of forces by opening lines of credit with respect to the constituted authorities. Therefore, it's better to give to them everything they demand and not believe that opposing them would produce something that is other from the mere repetition of the evil which we are trying to combat. Remember the beginning and end of the passage, which situate themselves on another level of being, where those baptised in Jesus Christ now live, the level in which evil is fought with means that it is radically ignorant of, the level of love which is the only debt towards others. Beyond reactive opposition and revolutionary rebelliousness.

In his famous commentary to the Epistle to the Romans, Karl Barth says: the men of power who serve the order of this world will be punished by the revolt of the poor and they will receive their judgment historically; not so the revolutionaries, who are better and who fall into an error that no one rescues them from, because their defeat is the punishment of the dominant power, the most deceptive. That is why it is their error that must be corrected and that is why it is to them that Paul speaks.

We can find something both very different and very similar in the text of Hannah Arendt we've already mentioned, where she speaks of revolutionary violence, which mistakenly claims to be able to interrupt the repetitive course of human history.

If we look on history in terms of a continuous chronological process ... violence in the shape of war and revolution may appear to constitute the only possible interruption. If this were true, if only the practice of violence would make it possible to interrupt automatic processes in the realm of human affairs, the preachers of violence would have won an important point. ... It is the function, however, of all action, as distinguished from mere behaviour, to interrupt what otherwise would have proceeded automatically and therefore predictably.⁴

4. Arendt, *On Violence*, pp. 30-1.

As is well known, Arendt disagrees with those who theorize that politics is nothing but the struggle for power, and is even less sympathetic to the argument that violence is the quintessence of power. She proposes the following reflection, which has inspired me and many others in our research: 'It is, I think, a rather sad reflection on the present state of political science that our terminology does not distinguish among such key words as "power", "strength", "force", "might", "authority", and, finally, "violence"—all of which refer to distinct, different phenomena and would hardly exist unless they did. ... To use them as synonyms not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, but has resulted in a kind of blindness with respect to the realities they correspond to.'⁵ But she herself, as I've already noted, does not dispel the ambiguity of the word 'power' and speaks of a 'living power', originating in the concerted political action of many (her model, as is well known, is the democracy of 'councils', which she takes from Rosa Luxemburg). The symbolic break which the Pauline text articulates as fighting evil with good, is analogously given in Arendt by the explosiveness of an acting in concert that makes something happen in the order of freedom, and which replaces revolutionary violence by undermining the power of power, leaving it naked.

The thesis that we're advancing is sufficiently clear: politics untangles itself from power thanks to its symbolic independence with regard to power itself. Or better, politics is the name for our slipping away or untying ourselves from the tangle of the relations of force by which we are molded and restrained, in order to shift to another level, in a move whose character is distinctively symbolic.

The terms of the disentanglement (the *dénouement*, to borrow a fine French word) from the embrace between religion and power, which was immensely strong in the Roman Empire, such as they were thought and proposed by Paul to the community of the Christians of Rome, were reprised in our epoch by thinkers like Karl Barth and Simone Weil, authors who have continued to lend illumination and aid to much contemporary thought.

We are therefore dealing with a vision which has not been entirely forgotten, even if we leave aside its secular rediscovery by Arendt. But we know that Christianity, after having defeated the political theology of the Roman Empire, to a certain extent restored it. The Pauline idea of the symbolic independence from power functioned historically, but it later became the proverbial ladder which is thrown away once one gets to the top.

What's the point then for us (me) to bring it out again? My answer is brusque: it is not us, it is not me, it is the idea that forces itself upon us. The idea has reared its head with the historically unpredictable fact of women's freedom and it cannot be chased back, because it has the strength to open up a horizon which had been closed down.

Translated by Alberto Toscano

5. Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 43.

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