

communist manifesto engels historical determinism

The Communist Manifesto, a foundational text penned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, remains a powerful and often debated document in political and economic thought. While its call for revolution and a classless society is widely recognized, a deeper understanding requires exploring its theoretical underpinnings, particularly the concept of historical determinism. This article delves into how Engels, in particular, elaborated on this idea, shaping the interpretation of the Manifesto's historical trajectory. We will examine the core tenets of historical determinism as presented in the Manifesto, explore Engels' specific contributions to this framework, and analyze its implications for understanding societal evolution and revolutionary potential. By dissecting this crucial element, we gain a more nuanced appreciation of the Manifesto's enduring impact.

- Introduction to the Communist Manifesto and Historical Determinism
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The Communist Manifesto and the Core of Historical Determinism

The Communist Manifesto, published in 1848, is a seminal work that outlines the principles of communism and calls for the overthrow of capitalism. At its heart lies a sophisticated theory of history, deeply rooted in what is often termed historical determinism. This perspective posits that historical development is not a matter of random chance or the whims of great individuals, but rather a predictable progression driven by underlying, fundamental forces. For Marx and Engels, these forces were primarily economic and material. They argued that the mode of production – the way societies organize to produce the necessities of life – shapes all other aspects of society, including its political

structures, legal systems, and even its dominant ideas and beliefs. This deterministic view provides the framework through which they analyzed the rise and fall of different socio-economic systems, from feudalism to capitalism, and predicted the eventual triumph of communism.

The Manifesto itself vividly illustrates this deterministic outlook by tracing the historical role of the bourgeoisie. It argues that the bourgeoisie, as a class, emerged from the ruins of feudalism precisely because the existing mode of production became a fetter on the developing forces of production. The new class, driven by its material interests, revolutionized the means of production and, in doing so, reshaped society. This process, according to the Manifesto, is not an accident but a necessary consequence of the internal contradictions within each historical epoch. The inherent drive of the forces of production to expand and develop inevitably leads to the creation of new social relations, and when these new relations clash with the old, a period of societal transformation, often marked by class struggle, ensues.

Decoding Historical Determinism in Marxist Thought

Historical determinism, within the Marxist framework, is often referred to as historical materialism. This philosophical approach emphasizes the primacy of material conditions, particularly economic relations, in shaping history. It's a stark contrast to idealist interpretations of history, which might focus on the influence of ideas, religion, or the actions of prominent figures. Historical materialism asserts that the economic base of society – the sum of its relations of production – forms the foundation upon which the superstructure of politics, law, culture, and ideology is built. Changes in the economic base, driven by the development of productive forces, are seen as the primary cause of historical change, leading to transformations in the superstructure.

This deterministic view suggests a predictable pattern in history. Each historical epoch is characterized by a specific mode of production and a corresponding class structure. However, as productive forces advance, they eventually come into conflict with the existing relations of production. This contradiction creates social tension and class struggle, which, according to Marxist theory, is the motor of history. Eventually, this struggle culminates in a revolution, leading to a new mode of production and a new class structure that is better suited to the advanced productive forces. This cyclical yet progressive movement, propelled by the inherent contradictions of each stage, is a core element of historical determinism as understood through the lens of the Communist Manifesto and its interpreters.

The Primacy of Material Conditions

The cornerstone of historical determinism in the Communist Manifesto is the belief that material conditions, specifically the economic base, dictate the course of history. Marx and Engels argued that the way humans organize themselves to produce and distribute the necessities of life is the fundamental determinant of all social, political, and intellectual life. This economic base, comprising the forces of production (technology, labor, raw materials) and the relations of production (the social relationships people enter into during production, such as master-slave, lord-serf, capitalist-wage laborer), is the engine that drives historical change. As productive forces develop, they eventually outgrow the existing relations of production, creating inherent contradictions.

These contradictions manifest as class antagonisms. For instance, under capitalism, the forces of production (advanced machinery, a large industrial workforce) have developed to a point where they are incompatible with the private ownership of the means of production. This fundamental conflict between the socialized nature of production and its private appropriation, according to the Manifesto, inevitably leads to a crisis of capitalism and sets the stage for its revolutionary overthrow. The deterministic aspect lies in the assertion that this process is not a matter of choice or random occurrence, but a necessary outcome of the material contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production.

Class Struggle as the Historical Driver

While material conditions provide the framework, class struggle is presented in the Communist Manifesto as the direct, active force propelling history forward. The Manifesto famously states, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." This is not merely an observation but a deterministic assertion that societal evolution is fundamentally driven by the conflict between opposing social classes, each with its own material interests tied to the prevailing mode of production. In each historical epoch, there are dominant and subordinate classes, and their struggle for power and resources shapes the trajectory of that society.

Under feudalism, the struggle was between the lord and the serf. With the rise of capitalism, this transformed into the conflict between the bourgeoisie (the owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (the wage laborers). The Manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie, in its historical ascent, played a revolutionary role by destroying feudal structures. However, by its very nature, capitalism creates the proletariat, a class that, due to its exploited position and its sheer numbers, becomes the agent of capitalism's eventual downfall. The deterministic element here is that the inherent inequalities and exploitative relationships within capitalism create the conditions for the proletariat's revolutionary consciousness and action, making communism an inevitable outcome of this historical process.

Friedrich Engels' Crucial Role in Defining Historical Determinism

While Karl Marx is often seen as the primary architect of historical materialism, Friedrich Engels played a crucial role in elaborating, popularizing, and even solidifying its deterministic aspects, particularly in his later writings. Engels, a close collaborator and intellectual partner of Marx, was not just a supporter but a key developer of their shared philosophical framework. He often provided clearer, more accessible explanations of their complex theories, making them more widely understood. His efforts to systematize Marxist thought, especially after Marx's death, significantly shaped how historical determinism was interpreted by subsequent generations of socialists and communists.

Engels' own experiences as a factory owner gave him firsthand insight into the workings of industrial capitalism, which he meticulously documented in works like "The Condition of the Working Class in England." This empirical grounding undoubtedly informed his understanding of the material forces at play. His writings frequently emphasized the objective, scientific nature of their theories, presenting

historical development as a predictable, almost law-governed process. This emphasis on scientific laws of history contributed to the perception of historical determinism as a rigid, inevitable unfolding of events, a perspective that, while intended to imbue the working class with confidence in their ultimate victory, also drew significant criticism.

Engels' Clarifications and Systematization

Following Marx's death in 1883, Friedrich Engels undertook the monumental task of editing and publishing Marx's unfinished works, most notably "Das Kapital," Volumes II and III. In doing so, he not only preserved Marx's intellectual legacy but also further articulated and systematized their shared theories, including historical materialism. Engels' prefaces and introductions to these volumes, as well as his independent works like "Anti-Dühring" and "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," played a significant role in shaping the common understanding of Marxist historical determinism. He sought to present historical materialism not just as a theory but as a scientific methodology for understanding history.

Engels' writings often stressed the "dialectical" nature of history, a process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, driven by the inherent contradictions within each stage of development. He explained how the growth of productive forces eventually clashed with the existing relations of production, leading to social revolution. His explanations frequently employed analogies to natural science, portraying historical laws as immutable and predictable, much like the laws of physics. This emphasis on scientific predictability and inevitability, while intended to demonstrate the objective basis of communism, inadvertently contributed to a more rigid interpretation of historical determinism, sometimes downplaying the role of human agency and subjective factors in the revolutionary process.

"Socialism: Utopian and Scientific" and Determinism

Friedrich Engels' influential pamphlet, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," is a key text for understanding his contribution to historical determinism. In this work, Engels contrasts the speculative, idealistic socialism of thinkers like Fourier and Owen with the scientific socialism developed by Marx and himself. He argues that their socialism is scientific because it is based on an understanding of the objective laws of history, particularly the deterministic progression driven by material forces. Engels presents the development of capitalism as a necessary historical stage, one that, despite its exploitative nature, has simultaneously created the material conditions and the social force (the proletariat) for its own supersession.

Engels meticulously details how the dialectical movement of history, fueled by the contradictions between developing productive forces and the existing relations of production, inevitably leads to the proletariat's rise and the establishment of communism. He frames this not as a possibility but as a certainty, a law-governed outcome. For example, he explains how the internal contradictions of capitalism, such as its tendency towards crises of overproduction, demonstrate its inherent instability and pave the way for its demise. This pamphlet, widely disseminated, cemented the idea of historical determinism within socialist thought, presenting communism as the inevitable, scientifically determined future of humanity.

Key Tenets of Historical Determinism in the Manifesto

The Communist Manifesto, through its analysis of history, lays out several core tenets of historical determinism that are crucial for understanding its message. These tenets collectively paint a picture of history as a process with an underlying logic and a predictable direction, driven by the material conditions of human existence. The document doesn't present history as a series of disconnected events but as a continuous, unfolding process with a discernible pattern and an ultimate destination. This deterministic worldview is what underpins the Manifesto's confidence in the eventual triumph of the proletariat and the establishment of a communist society.

The Manifesto's deterministic framework is not merely an academic exercise; it is intrinsically linked to its revolutionary call to action. By demonstrating that the contradictions of capitalism are inherent and that its overthrow is a necessary historical outcome, Marx and Engels aimed to empower the proletariat, providing them with a sense of historical inevitability and purpose. This belief in the deterministic trajectory of history was intended to foster revolutionary consciousness and mobilize the working class for their inevitable historical mission.

The Role of Material Forces and Economic Relations

As previously discussed, the bedrock of historical determinism in the Manifesto is the assertion that material forces and economic relations are the primary drivers of historical change. The Manifesto explicitly states that the "economic structure of society" is the "real foundation" upon which the "legal and political superstructure" is built and to which "definite forms of social consciousness" correspond. This means that changes in the way societies produce their material sustenance – the forces and relations of production – are the fundamental cause of all subsequent social, political, and ideological shifts. This is the essence of historical materialism: history unfolds according to the laws governing material production.

The Manifesto traces the historical progression through different modes of production – from ancient communal society, through slavery, feudalism, and finally to capitalism – arguing that each transition was necessitated by the inability of the old mode of production to accommodate the development of new productive forces. For example, it details how the rise of the bourgeoisie was a direct result of the development of new methods of production and exchange (like manufacturing and expanding markets) that could no longer be contained within the feudal system of production. This deterministic outlook suggests that each stage contains the seeds of its own destruction and the conditions for the emergence of the next stage.

Class Struggle as the Engine of History

The Communist Manifesto's most famous declaration, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," encapsulates another crucial tenet of its deterministic historical outlook. This statement posits that the conflict between social classes, defined by their relationship to the means of production, is the primary engine of historical development. Each epoch is characterized by a dominant class and an exploited class, and their inherent antagonism drives societal transformation. This is not a contingent or incidental feature of history but its fundamental,

deterministic mechanism.

The Manifesto argues that the bourgeoisie, in its own historical development, necessarily created the proletariat. As capitalism advanced, it concentrated wealth and power in the hands of the few and created a large, increasingly impoverished working class. This inherent exploitation generates class consciousness and a shared interest in overthrowing the capitalist system. The deterministic aspect lies in the assertion that this conflict is not merely a possibility but an inevitable consequence of the capitalist mode of production, leading inexorably to a proletarian revolution that will abolish class distinctions altogether.

The Inevitability of Communism

A central, and often debated, tenet of the historical determinism presented in the Communist Manifesto is the inevitability of communism. Based on their analysis of historical laws and the inherent contradictions within capitalism, Marx and Engels predicted that communism was not merely a desirable future but a scientifically determined outcome. They argued that capitalism, by its very nature, generates the conditions for its own demise and the emergence of a classless society.

The Manifesto suggests that the increasing socialization of production (where many individuals collaborate to produce goods) clashes with the private appropriation of the profits generated. This contradiction, coupled with the immiseration of the proletariat and the cyclical crises of capitalism, creates an untenable system. The revolution, therefore, is not seen as a choice made by individuals but as the necessary resolution of these historical contradictions. The proletariat, as the revolutionary class, acts as the historical agent that fulfills this predetermined outcome. This deterministic prediction provided a powerful impetus for revolutionary movements, offering a vision of a just and equitable future that was presented as historically ordained.

Critiques and Interpretations of Historical Determinism

The concept of historical determinism as presented in the Communist Manifesto and elaborated by Engels has been a focal point of significant debate and criticism since its inception. While intended by Marx and Engels to provide a scientific and objective basis for their political program, many scholars and critics have questioned its rigidity and its implications for human agency. The deterministic nature of the theory has been interpreted in various ways, leading to both strong endorsements and forceful rejections of its premises. Understanding these critiques is essential for a balanced assessment of the Manifesto's enduring legacy.

The deterministic element, particularly the idea of inevitable historical progression, has been accused of oversimplifying the complexities of human societies and the role of individual choice and social movements. Critics argue that while economic factors are undoubtedly important, they do not solely dictate historical outcomes. Other factors, such as culture, ideology, political action, and the contingent actions of individuals, also play crucial roles that are not fully accounted for in a strictly deterministic model. This has led to ongoing discussions about whether historical materialism should be understood as a strict determinism or a more nuanced framework that acknowledges multiple causal factors.

The Question of Agency vs. Determinism

One of the most persistent criticisms of historical determinism in the Communist Manifesto revolves around the perceived tension between historical inevitability and human agency. Critics argue that if history is determined by immutable economic laws and the dialectical progression of class struggle, then the role of human choice, free will, and conscious action is significantly diminished. If communism is an inevitable outcome, what is the purpose of revolutionary struggle beyond fulfilling a preordained destiny? This has led to accusations that Marxist theory can be fatalistic.

However, proponents of Marxism often argue that historical determinism does not negate agency but rather channels it. They contend that while the broad sweep of history may be determined by material forces, human beings still make choices within those determining conditions. The proletariat, in this view, becomes the conscious agent of its own liberation precisely because it understands the historical forces at play and acts accordingly. Engels himself, in his later works, seemed to acknowledge this tension, suggesting that while the broad lines of historical development are determined, the specific path and the timing of events can be influenced by human action and the "accidental" circumstances that arise. This suggests a more complex interaction between determinism and agency than a simplistic reading might imply.

Economic Reductionism Critiques

Another significant critique leveled against historical determinism, as expounded in the Manifesto and by Engels, is the charge of economic reductionism. This critique posits that the theory places too much emphasis on economic factors as the sole or primary cause of historical change, neglecting the influence of other crucial elements such as culture, religion, politics, ideology, and individual psychology. Critics argue that reducing all social phenomena to their economic roots is an oversimplification that fails to capture the multifaceted nature of human societies and their development.

For instance, the rise of nationalism, the impact of religious movements, or the influence of charismatic leaders are often cited as examples of historical phenomena that cannot be fully explained by economic determinism alone. While Marx and Engels did acknowledge the existence of a superstructure, their framework often implies that these elements are ultimately determined by the economic base. Critics argue that this hierarchical relationship is too rigid and that elements of the superstructure can, in turn, influence the economic base, creating a more dynamic and less predictable interplay of forces. This has led to various attempts to revise or expand Marxist theory to incorporate a greater appreciation for non-economic factors.

Engels' Later Works and the Nuances of Historical Determinism

In his later years, particularly after Marx's death, Friedrich Engels engaged in extensive correspondence and writing that offered further insights into the complexities of historical determinism. While he remained a staunch defender of historical materialism, his later

communications reveal a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between material conditions, consciousness, and human action. These writings suggest a move away from a rigid, mechanistic interpretation of their theories and towards a more dialectical understanding that acknowledged the reciprocal influence of various societal factors.

Engels' later works are crucial for understanding how his conception of historical determinism evolved. He grappled with how to explain the specificities of national histories and the role of contingent events, which seemed to challenge a purely deterministic model. His efforts to clarify and defend Marxist theory often involved acknowledging the limits of strict economic determinism, while still upholding the fundamental importance of material conditions as the ultimate underlying cause of historical development. This period of his work offers valuable context for interpreting the original intent and the later developments of Marxist historical theory.

The Reciprocal Influence of Base and Superstructure

In his later writings, Engels began to articulate a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between the economic base and the social superstructure. While the Communist Manifesto and earlier works emphasized the determining role of the base, Engels' later correspondence, particularly with thinkers like Franz Mehring and Conrad Schmidt, acknowledged that the superstructure could also, in turn, influence the base. He recognized that political, legal, philosophical, and religious ideas, while ultimately rooted in material conditions, could also have a reciprocal impact on the direction of history and the development of the economy.

Engels famously stated that "the economic situation is the basis, but the[...] relations of production [...] are not only determined by the economic situation but also exert their own influence." This nuanced perspective suggests that history is not a one-way street dictated solely by economics. Instead, it is a complex dialectical process where the economic base sets the fundamental conditions, but the superstructure can actively shape and modify those conditions. This acknowledgment opened the door for interpretations of historical materialism that were less rigidly deterministic and allowed for greater emphasis on the role of consciousness, political action, and cultural factors in historical change.

The Role of "Accidents" and Contingency

Engels also addressed the issue of "accidents" or contingent events in history, which posed a challenge to a purely deterministic worldview. In his correspondence, he debated whether historical outcomes were entirely predictable or if chance played a significant role. Engels conceded that while underlying historical laws existed, their manifestation could be influenced by contingent factors. He used the example of specific individuals, like Napoleon, whose personal qualities and actions, while arising from specific historical circumstances, could nevertheless have a significant impact on the course of events.

This acknowledgment of contingency suggests that Engels, and by extension Marx, did not subscribe to a fatalistic view where every event was rigidly predetermined in every detail. Instead, their determinism operated on a broader, more structural level. The economic contradictions would

inevitably lead to a crisis, and the proletariat would inevitably rise, but the specific timing, the exact nature of the revolution, and the individuals who played key roles might be influenced by a range of contingent factors. This more flexible understanding of historical determinism allows for a greater appreciation of the role of human action and the unpredictable nature of historical processes, while still maintaining the core Marxist assertion of the primacy of material forces.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Communist Manifesto and Historical Determinism

The Communist Manifesto, profoundly shaped by the concept of historical determinism, remains a pivotal text in understanding political and economic thought. The theory, emphasizing the material basis of society and the inexorable march of class struggle, posits a directional and predictable evolution of history, culminating in the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of communism. Friedrich Engels played a crucial role in articulating and popularizing this deterministic framework, often presenting it as a scientific law governing societal development.

While criticisms regarding economic reductionism and the tension between determinism and agency are valid and have fueled extensive debate, the core ideas of historical materialism, as presented in the Manifesto, continue to offer a powerful lens through which to analyze social and economic change. The emphasis on material conditions, the role of class conflict, and the critique of capitalist exploitation remain relevant in contemporary discussions about inequality and societal transformation. The enduring legacy of the Communist Manifesto and its embedded historical determinism lies in its ability to provoke critical thought and inspire ongoing engagement with the fundamental forces that shape human history and society.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does Engels' concept of historical determinism in the Communist Manifesto explain the inevitable rise of communism?

Engels, influenced by Marx, argued that history progresses through stages driven by economic forces and class struggle. Historical determinism suggests that the inherent contradictions within capitalism, particularly the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, would inevitably lead to a proletariat revolution and the establishment of a classless, communist society.

What role does economic determinism play in the Communist Manifesto's view of historical change?

Economic determinism is central to the Manifesto's deterministic outlook. It posits that the 'mode of production' (the economic system and its accompanying class relations) is the fundamental basis of society and the primary driver of historical development. Changes in the economic base are seen as inevitably leading to changes in the 'superstructure' (politics, law, culture, ideology).

Does the Communist Manifesto suggest that historical events are predetermined and unavoidable?

The Communist Manifesto, through the lens of historical determinism, presents a strong argument that the trajectory of history is largely predetermined by economic forces and class conflict. While individual actions contribute, the overarching movement towards communism is depicted as an inevitable historical unfolding, not a matter of chance.

How does Engels' historical determinism address the concept of agency for individuals or social classes within historical events?

While historical determinism emphasizes the powerful, overarching forces of economic development and class struggle, it doesn't entirely negate agency. The proletariat, as a class, is presented as the historical agent capable of recognizing their exploited condition and acting collectively to bring about revolution, thereby fulfilling their determined historical role.

What are some criticisms of the deterministic approach to history presented in the Communist Manifesto?

Criticisms often point to the oversimplification of complex historical processes, the potential for ignoring the role of culture, ideas, and individual choices, and the difficulties in empirically verifying such a sweeping deterministic thesis. Critics argue that history is more contingent and less predictable than the Manifesto suggests.

How does Engels' idea of 'base and superstructure' relate to historical determinism in the Communist Manifesto?

The 'base' (economic relations) is seen as deterministically shaping the 'superstructure' (politics, ideology, culture). According to historical determinism, the ruling class's economic dominance allows them to control the superstructure to maintain their power, and conversely, a shift in the economic base necessitates a transformation of the superstructure.

In what ways has the concept of historical determinism in the Communist Manifesto been influential, despite its criticisms?

Despite criticisms, the deterministic framework provided a powerful and influential lens for understanding historical change, particularly the dynamics of class conflict and the potential for revolutionary transformation. It inspired socialist and communist movements worldwide and significantly impacted sociological and historical thought, even for those who adopted a less rigid form of determinism.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the Communist Manifesto, Engels, and historical determinism, with descriptions:

1.

The Communist Manifesto: A Critical Edition

This edition likely provides the original text of Marx and Engels' seminal work alongside scholarly introductions and annotations. It would delve into the historical context of its creation, exploring the socio-economic conditions that shaped its ideas. Furthermore, it would analyze the Manifesto's core arguments concerning class struggle and historical progression, potentially examining its enduring influence and interpretations.

2.

Engels, Historical Materialism, and the Origins of Communism

This book would focus on Friedrich Engels' crucial role in developing the theories underpinning the Communist Manifesto. It would explore his contributions to historical materialism, the concept that economic and social conditions drive historical change. The text would likely trace the intellectual lineage of these ideas and how they coalesced into the revolutionary program outlined in the Manifesto.

3.

The Dialectic of History: From Hegel to Marx

This title suggests an examination of the philosophical roots of historical determinism as applied by Marx and Engels. It would trace the development of dialectical thought from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and its transformation into Marx's materialist conception of history. The book would likely highlight how this philosophical framework justified the idea of history progressing through inevitable stages, leading to communism.

4.

Class Struggle: The Engine of History

This book would likely focus on the central tenet of the Communist Manifesto – that history is fundamentally driven by conflict between social classes. It would explore how this concept of class struggle operates as a mechanism for historical change, leading from one mode of production to another. The text might also analyze how this deterministic view of history informed revolutionary strategy.

5.

The Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat: A Marxist Analysis

This title points to an in-depth exploration of the two primary classes identified in the Communist Manifesto. It would analyze the historical development of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, their respective roles in capitalist society, and the inherent contradictions between them. The book would likely present their conflict as an inevitable consequence of historical forces, leading to the proletariat's rise.

6.

The Specter of Revolution: Historical Determinism and Social Change

This book would investigate how the concept of historical determinism fueled the revolutionary fervor described in the Communist Manifesto. It would explore the belief that the collapse of capitalism and the advent of communism were predetermined historical outcomes. The text might examine the psychological and social impact of this deterministic worldview on revolutionary movements.

7.

From Feudalism to Capitalism: A Deterministic Trajectory

This title suggests a historical analysis of societal transitions viewed through a lens of determinism, as advocated by Marx and Engels. It would likely trace the historical progression from feudal modes of production to capitalism, highlighting the economic and social forces that propelled this change. The book would use this historical trajectory to support the broader argument for the inevitable transition to communism.

8.

The Role of Ideas in Historical Determinism

While often emphasizing material conditions, this book might explore how ideas and consciousness are understood within Marxist historical determinism. It could analyze how the ideas of communism, as articulated in the Manifesto, were themselves a product of historical circumstances and, in turn, acted as a catalyst for change. The text might grapple with the interplay between material forces and intellectual movements in driving history.

9.

The Future of History: Predictions and Realities of Communism

This title implies a comparative analysis between the deterministic predictions of the Communist Manifesto and the actual historical outcomes of attempts to establish communist societies. It would likely examine whether the predicted inevitability of communism materialized as envisioned by Marx and Engels. The book would critically assess the deterministic framework in light of historical experiences.

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