

Revising the Cambridge School: Republicanism Revisited

Political Theory

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Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith, by Istvan Hont. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy, by Richard Tuck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

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DOI: 10.1177/0090591716672231

On 11 December 2005 a major international conference was held at the University of Chiba to examine the contribution made by the “Cambridge School” to the study of political thought. Luminaries in the field of political theory and its history—John Dunn, Raymond Geuss, and J. G. A. Pocock among them—had been flown in to introduce a largely Japanese audience to the finer points of the distinctively “Cambridge” approach to intellectual history. But there was a problem. One of the speakers present, selected for his impeccably Cambridge credentials, opened his lecture by insisting that no such school existed. With that single pronouncement, the rationale for the event had been subverted. The offending contributor was none other than the late Istvan Hont, a Hungarian-born intellectual historian and political thinker, associated by many with the contextualist method, and thus regarded as an exemplar of the approach under discussion.

Hont died at the age of 65 on 29 March 2013 having spent the best part of his academic career as a Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, as well as a Lecturer, and then Reader, in the History Faculty. Hont began his Cambridge career in 1978 when he took up the position of co-director of a newly established research project on “Political Economy and Society, 1750–1850.” Three years earlier, Duncan Forbes had published *Hume’s Philosophical Politics*, partly the product of his Special Subject on the Scottish Enlightenment that Quentin Skinner, John Dunn and Nicholas Phillipson had all taken together. In the same year that Forbes’s book appeared, Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment* was published. Pocock’s narrative extended back to the intellectual culture of Quattrocento Florence. Nonetheless his study,

along with Forbes's, succeeded in reshaping the scholarly understanding of eighteenth-century political thought. Both works are generally taken to typify the contextualist history of ideas. When Hont arrived in Cambridge, both texts were major landmarks on the intellectual horizon.

From the late 1970s, then, Hont operated in a distinctly Cambridge milieu, and his approach to intellectual history was significantly Cambridge-inspired. Yet he was certainly not a Cambridge product. While his doctoral research at the University of Budapest had focussed, in a manner that would have been at least superficially congenial to Forbes, on David Hume and Scotland, his real goal had been to trace the intellectual origins of Marxist economic thought in the "classical" political economy of the eighteenth century. The undertaking was, from a Marxist perspective, deliberately unorthodox. Throughout his career, there was a fiercely heretical component to Hont's approach to intellectual inquiry. This fact goes some way towards explaining his position in Chiba in 2005. In declaring boldly that there was no Cambridge School, Hont was publicly registering his dissent. But what was he dissenting from?

Politics in Commercial Society represents the published version of Hont's Carlyle Lectures, delivered at the University of Oxford in 2009. The book sets out a comparative account of the political and economic ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith. Bearing the imprint of a lifetime's immersion in the intellectual history of the eighteenth century, the overall impression left by the work is one of dazzling ingenuity. This result is achieved by two outstanding qualities that Hont possessed as an historian. One was his exceptional imaginative facility, the other was his relentless scepticism. *Politics in Commercial Society* is endlessly rich in new insights and connections, and infinitely incredulous about established views.

Incredulity goes some way towards explaining Hont's refusal to accept the Cambridge label. In elaborating his view in Chiba in 2005, he declared that the Cambridge School might best be seen as an "anti-School"—as a kind of opposition to the predominant Schools of the age, whether Marxist, Liberal, Straussian or Postmodern. It might be responded that an anti-School is nonetheless a School. In regular social and pedagogical contexts, Hont was an explicit devotee of Cambridge practice, and indeed his latest book exemplifies its virtues—namely, the close contextual study of past texts in political theory. Moreover, Hont's sense of his specifically Cambridge pedigree regularly surfaces in his new book, which refers at one point to the cogency of the "view from Cambridge," at another to the benefits of the contextualist approach, and even to a "unanimous" opposition to prolepsis among the Cambridge cognoscenti (pp. 1, 4, 5).

What, then, is the Cambridge School to which Hont self-consciously belonged as he wrote *Politics in Commercial Society*, but from which he

chose to distance himself in 2005? Cambridge-trained scholars like J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner and John Dunn, building on the work of predecessors like Peter Laslett, combined two dispositions from the start: a humanistic investment in the intellectual culture of the West, and a historicist awareness of the local contingency of its various traditions. Immediately this raised the question of the “relevance” of their subject of study. If their approach could be said at one and the same time to unearth instructive theories and reveal their historically rooted character, how might such avowedly bygone ideologies be used to guide us in the present?

In response to this conundrum back in 1969, Skinner argued that no particular “lessons” could be learned from studying the history of political thought, but that nonetheless an overarching insight could be gleaned from the activity: namely, historical awareness would enhance our sense of the “contingency” of our own values by continually demonstrating the historical relativity of past beliefs.¹ It might be reckoned that this is an insufficient reward to justify a career devoted to the study of past doctrines. And this, it seems, is what the next generation of Cambridge historians concluded. After all, it would be possible to subscribe to Skinner’s point about contingency without undertaking a laborious programme of reinterpreting past ideas.

Like Hont, Richard Tuck might be described as a third-generation member of the Cambridge School, and again like Hont his commitment to the relevance of past thinkers has tended to be more ambitious than the modest claims articulated by the early Skinner. This ambition was already evident in Tuck’s earliest work. His first book, *Natural Rights Theories*, was a bold attempt to explore the continuities and discontinuities between medieval natural law and the jurisprudence of leading seventeenth-century philosophers like Grotius, Selden and Hobbes. Part of Tuck’s aim was historiographical: he wanted to challenge the idea, championed by C. B. Macpherson in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, that the “egoistic” utilitarianism of Bentham and his disciples was derived from a “possessive” ideology developed by seventeenth-century natural rights theorists like Hobbes and Locke.² But if Tuck’s goal was to debunk the idea of a continuous lineage spanning the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and underlying modern capitalist societies, he was nonetheless anxious to demonstrate the pertinence of the Grotian tradition to contemporary thinking.

Since the Second World War, Tuck observed, the language of rights was everywhere in evidence, yet philosophers over the same period tended to treat them as “intractable.”³ This prompted Tuck to claim that seventeenth-century accounts might provide solutions to problems that modern approaches had failed to understand. There was clearly *something* to the notion of having a right, yet the ruling conceptions in political theory gave no idea of what that

was. Tuck proposed to show what that “something” had been, and in the process make a contribution to philosophy as well as history. The implication was that long departed philosophers could be revived to help us think.

This approach to historical study has been a constant in Tuck’s work. His second major monograph, *Philosophy and Government*, a path-breaking examination of the sceptical origins of modern political thinking, explicitly presented itself as more than a “purely” historical piece of writing: in addition it sought to show how we might cope with “broadly similar issues in our own time.”⁴ Six years later, in *The Rights of War and Peace*, a book that helped inaugurate the historical study of international thought, Tuck again insisted that earlier ideas, for all their obvious contingency, offered “the richest tradition we have for thinking about human freedom.”⁵ Skinner had famously argued in 1969 that “we must learn to do our thinking for ourselves.”⁶ Tuck, on the other hand, has insisted since 1979 that we can usefully draw on older ideas to illuminate present problems. This conviction similarly underpins Tuck’s latest study, a highly original analysis of the “invention” of modern democracy between the French Wars of Religion and the Age of Revolutions.

The Sleeping Sovereign is probably Tuck’s most challenging book to date. It is also his most historical in conception. By this I do not mean that the interpretations offered are more richly contextual, but that the understanding of the problem with which he is concerned is more deeply historical. Tuck’s earlier writing, including his 2008 volume, *Free Riding*, which was explicitly devoted to a contemporary issue in social science, was marked by a seductive promise: namely, that there were intellectual resources available in the past that could illuminate our problems in the present. The same lofty ambition to put the past in the service of the present has also pervaded Hont’s work. In his acclaimed 2005 collection of essays, *Jealousy of Trade*, which brought together a series of major studies that had appeared over the course of the previous two decades, Hont recommended the history of political thought as a means of eliminating repetitive patterns of argument.⁷ By implication, less compromised insights could be found among earlier thinkers, particularly among legal philosophers and political economists in the eighteenth century. In *Politics in Commercial Society*, these claims become explicit: Hont wishes “to tease apart the different sorts of political vision that are currently relevant to us by using the history of political thought as a guide” (p. 1).

In 1997, in his Inaugural Lecture delivered as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Skinner modified his original injunction that political theorists, instead of mining the context-bound philosophies of the past, should learn to do their thinking for themselves. Now he proposed interrogating current liberal hegemony with the aid of insights gleaned from a world that had been “lost.”⁸ The intellectual historian on this understanding assumed the role

of archaeologist, equipped to retrieve “buried intellectual treasure” from the depths of remote societies in order to question the coherence of contemporary values.⁹ Instead of ruminating on politics unassisted, Skinner was arguing, we might better ponder its problems with the aid of recovered doctrines. The humanist could thus benefit from the labours of the historicist.

This approach has been implicit in Tuck’s writing from the start. Yet *The Sleeping Sovereign*, apparently, is different—at least insofar as its aim is to recover the origins of democracy rather than commend some particular account of democratic politics. In four condensed but penetrating chapters, the book acquaints its reader with the main landmarks in the history of sovereignty, stretching from Bodin down to the aftermath of the French Revolution, and then touching briefly on nineteenth-century American constitutional theory. At the centre of Tuck’s study is the distinction, first formulated by Bodin, between the rights of “sovereignty” and specific acts of “government.” This distinction, Tuck shows, became central to Hobbes’s thinking, and was adopted first by Rousseau and then by the Girondins in France. It has also played a significant role in shaping influential conceptions of the American constitution.

Tuck begins by showing how Bodin arrived at his distinction between sovereignty (*summum imperium*) and government (*administratio*) by thinking through the forms of regime outlined in Aristotle’s *Politics*. While Aristotle had a definite notion of a “dominant power” within a polity, he failed, on Bodin’s analysis, to appreciate what this really meant, thus bequeathing to sixteenth-century lawyers ideas that were inapplicable to the practical realities of French, and indeed of European, arrangements. Properly understood, Bodin emphasised, sovereignty included final control over legislation as well as the right to choose magistrates and ministers. Without these supreme entitlements, Bodin insisted, sovereignty was merely a shadow of itself—a right of final determination that was in fact not final at all.

To underline his point, Bodin argued that in a monarchical state, in which, by definition, the monarch was supreme, there might still exist an aristocratic or even a democratic government in which offices were open to the many or the few. Equally, Bodin went on to make plain, a perpetual democratic sovereign might appoint a monarchical government. The Roman dictatorship presented an obvious example. Interestingly, for Bodin, the Roman republic was a democracy even though periodically it conferred the office of dictator—not as a matter of sovereign right but as an impermanent, if powerful, form of administration. This idea of a supreme perpetual power that underlay the ordinary operations of government has encouraged previous scholars, Julian Franklin most conspicuous among them, to view Bodin as a leading apologist for monarchical absolutism, leaving little role in the French state for

alternative sites of constitutional power, and thus downgrading the authority of the *parlements*.

Tuck successfully turns this interpretation on its head. He shows how in both the *Methodus* and the *Republic* Bodin in fact conceded the traditional authority of *parlements*—but as institutions of government rather than as sites of sovereign authority: “The king’s function was to authorise or render legitimate law whose content was (ideally) determined by the *parlements*” (p. 41). Government need not be a mere creature of the king—the monarch legitimately *chose* his magistrates although he did not determine what they should *do*—but equally it was not entitled to lay claim to sovereign power. Embedded in this theory, as reconstructed by Tuck, is a genuinely “constitutionalist” conception of authority in the state: on the one hand there are the regular procedures of decision making, but on the other there is “a fundamental site of sovereignty” (p. 44). Ultimately it is this contrast that frames the argument of the book. The birth of constitutionalism in this sense is the enabling precondition of modern democracy, as Tuck sees it. In modern democratic states, unlike in ancient city-states, popular power is often expressed in terms of fundamental legislation while quotidian administration is reserved to a political class.

In Tuck’s story it was Hobbes who first ran with the Bodinian distinction. Grotius and Pufendorf, on the other hand, were dissenters from his conclusions. Grotius’s divergence is powerfully signalled in his denial that the Roman dictator was less than sovereign merely on account of holding power for a fixed duration: “it is falsely supposed,” Grotius wrote in response to Bodin, “that all sovereignty ought to be perpetual.”¹⁰ Despite this crucial difference, it does not follow, as Tuck suggests, that Grotius equated sovereignty with government simply because he ascribed supreme authority to the Roman dictator while for Bodin true *imperium* still resided with the people. Later in *The Rights of War and Peace*, in refuting Polybius’s account of mixed government in Rome, Grotius differentiated between the form of government and “the Nature itself of Sovereignty”: while organs of government in Rome like the senate and the consuls might have administered affairs, they did not possess what Grotius termed supreme (or sovereign) “Right.”¹¹

More important for Grotius’s argument was his claim that the political community could be distinguished from its system of government. The former he termed the “common subject of sovereignty,” the latter its “proper subject.” This “common subject”—or, as we might say, nation—underlying the system of government was in turn described by Grotius as a *coetus perfectus* whose identity persisted through changes of regime. The idea of a national “community” that pre-existed the form of government was later employed by Pufendorf, and presupposed by Locke. Yet it was precisely

this depiction of a “people” as having prior claims over its sovereign that Hobbes was determined to expose. This led him to develop an elaborate theory of state construction, beginning with the creation of a primordial democracy, which might then alienate its powers to a sovereign monarchy or aristocracy.

It is this category of a primordial democratic people that lies at the very heart of Tuck’s argument in this book as well as at the centre of Rousseau’s political theory. In fact, it is largely as a reading of the *Social Contract* that Tuck’s argument excels. We are told that Rousseau accepted Hobbes’s strictures on the jurisprudence of Grotius, and then founded legitimate power on primordial democracy—except for Rousseau this original legislative will could not by rights be alienated to a representative sovereign agent. This did not rule out a representative government, however, and here the distinction between sovereignty and government returns. As Tuck cogently demonstrates, the core of Rousseau’s thought was not a product of nostalgia for the politics and culture of the ancient city-state, as is commonly assumed. On the contrary, modern citizens, unlike the ancients, cannot participate in *government*—yet they can control their rulers through acts of democratic sovereignty. This insight, Tuck contends, captures something that became essential to democratic politics, so much so that it can be credited with its “invention.”

It transpires, then, that “constitutionalism” in this peculiar sense is fundamental to democracy. As Tuck sees it, the idea of an underlying constituent power, which might express itself in fundamental acts of legislation yet otherwise concede the reigns of government to rulers, represents the breakthrough that made modern democracy possible. It is this idea, Tuck proceeds to argue, that underlies the so-called Girondin commitment to the plebiscite as a means of conferring legitimacy on the apparatus of government in the context of the French Revolution. It was also fundamental to the American commitment to “ratifying” basic constitutional provisions. Ultimately, Tuck concludes, the notion of primordial acts of will that legitimise the exercise of public power, a notion based on the distinction between sovereignty and government, introduced “something like direct democracy into the modern world” (p. 162).

As we have seen, Tuck’s procedure in *The Sleeping Sovereign* is historical as well as historicising. He does not simply wish to locate the debates that he recovers within the context of their original historical milieu, he also wants to show how we are products of the past. Modern democracy, he claims, is an outgrowth of the idea of popular sovereignty expressed in the form of control over fundamental legislation. In the early years of the American republic, this right of control was commonly vested in a majority of the people. Jefferson, for instance, “repeatedly endorsed majoritarianism” (p. 231). Yet the “radicalism” of majoritarian democracy was soon betrayed. In the nineteenth

century, European fears about the power of the people began to impinge on American commentators, and accordingly the democratic ideals of the revolutionary period faded.

On the basis of this assessment, contemporary American politics fall short of true democracy insofar as it has reduced the role of the constituent power of the people acting through majoritarian voting. It thus turns out that Tuck's objective is not so much to explain how we got to where we are, and therefore not (in the strictest sense) a purely historical project. His aim is instead to remind us of what we might have had, and to commend the clarity with which this was thought out between Hobbes and the Girondins. Like Skinner, Tuck wants a "radical" alternative to liberal democracy, and his defence of that alternative is ultimately philosophical. Yet, unlike Skinner, he places his faith in modern direct democracy understood as majoritarian control over fundamental legislation.

Tuck's endorsement of democratic majoritarianism as the optimal means of realising both equality and agency represents a clear if understated critique of the ideal of republican liberty variously promoted since the 1980s by Quentin Skinner. Much of Hont's argument in *Politics in Commercial Society* is similarly driven by a muted if pervasive criticism of Skinnerian political theory. It thus turns out that Hontian scepticism about the Cambridge School amounts to a rejection of both the normative and historical vision implicit in Skinner's republicanism.

Hont pursues his goal by first reclaiming the term "republican" and then associating it not just with the politics of Rousseau but also with the principles defended by Adam Smith. On the one hand Hont draws attention to the polysemic character of the term "republic" (p. 4), but on the other he identifies its fundamental meaning with the idea of a law-based regime. This conception is traced to Montesquieu, for whom, according to Hont, constitutional regimes and systems of personal rule are starkly contrasted, with the former being designated properly civil (or republican) polities (*res publicae*), comprising both monarchies and republics, whether democratic or aristocratic in kind (p. 43). The story Hont then proceeds to tell is about the rise of republican government in a "capacious sense that allowed both republics . . . and monarchies to be *rei publicae* [*sic*]" (p. 61). In setting out his case, the brand of republicanism associated with Philip Pettit is relegated to the margins, while that of Skinner is identified as a "sideshow" in European history (pp. 76, 87, 107, 108).

Hont organises his analysis around the competing visions of republicanism developed by Rousseau and Smith, based on a set of shared ethical principles and a divergent political programme. For this reason, *Politics in Commercial Society* can best be described as a comparative interpretative

project that juxtaposes the thought of its two protagonists observed from different angles. This leads to some curious results, in which both figures are variously presented as sharing a “theoretical proximity”, a “family similarity,” an “equivalent background,” and morphologically comparable arguments (pp. 1, 26, 41, 42). What this assortment of comparative propositions adds up to in practice is the claim that while both thinkers shared a fundamental commitment to commercial society, and a neo-“epicurean” moral philosophy to go with it, they parted company when it came to both their “republican” principles and the historical analysis that underpinned them. A book whose original purpose is presented as that of revising the received antithesis between Rousseau and Smith—the one a supposed “enemy” of modernity, the other its foremost “apologist” (p. 1)—thus ends up underlining the differences between them, despite their thought being grounded on a common anthropology.

The great strength of Hont’s book lies in the unparalleled sophistication with which he investigates the idea of commercial society, above all its normative foundations. The phrase “commercial society,” Hont observes, is Janus-faced—pointing at once to a form of society dominated by market exchange and to a mode of individual interaction regulated by need and inter-personal comparison. The subtlety of Hont’s engagement with the work of Hobbes, Mandeville, Hume, Rousseau, Smith, and Kant in connection with this theme is unsurpassed. Yet for all Hont’s unrivalled insight into the dynamics of “unsocial sociability” as explored by these figures, there is a tendency to bunch them together as a group, thus assuming that their shared “epicurean” vision counts for more than the differences between them (if indeed the idea of an epicurean revival has genuine historical traction). The principles animating this utility-based tradition of thought are pitted against those informing the idea of Christian fellowship: “Traditionally, Christians heavily criticized commercial society,” Hont writes (p. 4). Without labouring the point, it becomes clear that one of the underlying objectives of the book is to reclaim the potential of market society from Christian and Socialist polemics.

For Hont, both Smith and Rousseau believed that morals were a by-product of the pursuit of happiness, and therefore rejected the idea that the good life consisted in a noble enjoyment of virtue. This left them pondering the question of whether chasing after happiness offered a sufficient moral compass to guide a just society. It was commonly observed in the eighteenth century that the pursuit of physical and imaginative satisfaction had bred extravagantly unequal societies. Rousseau and Smith were equally preoccupied with how this situation might be reconciled with a legitimate system of government. Hont’s book is concerned with the contrast between their answers to this question.

As Hont sees it, Rousseau's thought is based on the intuition that Montesquieu's monarchical *res publica* was fundamentally illegitimate—partly because the principles underpinning its cohesion were bound to fail, but more importantly (if relatedly) because it was built on drastic inequality. Rousseauian conjectural history was intended to explain the emergence, through deceit and imposture, of illegitimate rule based on the division between rich and poor. Only an explicitly intended agreement to subject power to legislative control under “moderately” egalitarian conditions, as outlined in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, could hope to establish political legitimacy on the back of successively fraudulent regimes (pp. 71–73).

On Hont's reading, Smith drew on Hume to take issue with the details of Rousseau's conjectural narrative, yet he also presented an actual history of ancient and modern Europe designed to explain the gradual achievement of republican forms of government—first in Greece, with the creation of the city-state in response to economic and military pressures, and later, after the fall of Rome, with the gradual emergence of a kind of *Rechtstaat* under the influence of commercial improvement. Armed with this deeply historicist insight, Smith challenged the idea, trailed in the work of Rousseau, that a republic, understood as a government of laws, could only be founded through an explicit contract. Instead, for Smith, unaccountable absolutism could be subject to legal regulation, not, as vulgar Whiggism had tended to propose, by means of a revolutionary *coup*, but under the benign and incremental influence of an expanding commercial society. The trick was to ensure that economic growth could be managed without creating counter-productive imbalances (pp. 109–10).

One particular reason why these rival accounts of politics in commercial society deserve close attention is that, as Hont fleetingly states, the modern representative commercial republic from the nineteenth century to the present can be understood as “a synthesis between the work of Rousseau and the work of Smith” (p. 24). This is certainly a bold, if not an extravagant claim, pointing to an elaborately Hegelian conception of the processes of historical development. In the same idiom, we are told at one point that the thought of Hume represented an “*Aufhebung*” of the ideas of Hobbes and Hutcheson (p. 54). At another point Smith is tellingly presented as having put “all his analytical energy into preventing” the final victory of absolutism over moderate republicanism (p. 109), implying that philosophical determination might impact on the world as we know it. Even among the most keenly disabused intellectual historians there is a perilous tendency to view the murk of politics through the prism of ideas.

This points to a situation of wider concern to the theorist committed to a historical approach to politics. There is little of what the conventional historian might think of as “history” in either of these books. Instead, historical

study begins to look like the history of philosophy. And yet this outcome contains within it a more disturbing difficulty still. Both Hont and Tuck think of contemporary thinkers as mired in confusion, leading them to recommend the history of political thought as in effect an archive of serviceable insights. Not only does this encourage both commentators to view the past in terms of a succession of brilliant thinkers, it also brings them perilously close to claiming that philosophy offers solutions to historical problems. The Cambridge School has long struggled to reach a consensus on the relationship between history and philosophy. These two exceptional volumes by the most outstanding third-generation practitioners of Cambridge-style contextualism dramatically improve our understanding of major thinkers in the past, but they leave us with the dilemma of how we might convincingly explain their role in subsequent history down to the present.

Notes

1. Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969), pp. 3–53, p. 53.
2. Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 2–3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
4. Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. xi.
5. Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 234.
6. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," p. 52.
7. Istvan Hont, "Introduction" to *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 156.
8. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. x.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
10. Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, ed. Richard Tuck (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 2005), 3 vols., III, p. 282n.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 308–9.

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