

# Commentary: Ontological Gerrymandering? Non-Identity vs. Differance Adorno Contra Derrida

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What the conjurers of ontological philosophizing strive, as it were, to awaken is undermined by real processes, however: by the production and reproduction of social life. The effort to justify “man” and “being” and “time” theoretically, as primal phenomena cannot stay the fate of the resurrected ideas.

T. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

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The system of language associated with phonetic-alphabetic writing is that within which logocentric metaphysics, determining the sense of being as presence, has been produced. This logocentrism, the epoch of full speech, has always placed in parenthesis, suspended, and suppressed for essential reasons, all free reflection on the origin and status of writing.

J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

The impetus to revisit Adorno today, though no longer principally historical, is at the same time, both historically informed and historically conditioned: That is, it derives from deep seated doubts about the developing disparity between the first and second generations of critical theory, it is equally the outcome of uncertainty about the totalizing tendencies associated with the contemporary ‘communicative turn;’ and yet, like a seedling, it springs forth finally only in the fertile foreground of an era that feels itself to be fragmenting and is henceforth haunted by Adorno’s harrowing analyses of the authoritarian personality, culture industry and administered society. *Cursory charac-*

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terizations of the recent renaissance with Adorno in terms of a revival of interest, may belie a much more ambitious interest in revival (Crook 1994; Zuidervaart 1994), clearly connected to Adorno's prescient anticipation of the problematics posed by postmodernism (Jameson 1990)<sup>1</sup> and made manifest in a variety of attempts to re-deploy Adorno in the contemporary context.

Yet, if Adorno's analyses of 'fractured totalities' bears familiar and sometimes canny correspondences with Foucault's focus on discontinuities and Derrida's deconstruction, it is by now bromide to simply cite Adorno as a proto-postmodern thinker (Best and Kellner, 1991:228-234). Moreover, alleged affinities with Derrida, however supported by some salient methodological similarities and an ostensibly parallel program for the dissolution of philosophy, are ultimately the purview of the pedestrian in so far as they tend to ignore and thereby undermine Adorno's anti-authoritarian impulses and manifestly materialist commitments (Habermas, 1993:185). Indeed, although both Derrida and Adorno take a careful reading of the text as the point of departure in their critique of western philosophy, Adorno's resolution of the problem of 'presence' found in Husserl is clearly at odds with Derrida's deconstructive turn (Dews, 1987: 36-39). Whereas Derrida denies both the stability of the hermeneutic horizon and the possibility of anything beyond the text and therefore urges an endless unravelling of texts, Adorno enacts a 'theoretically informed' reconstructive moment: one which not only links forms of philosophical thought with broader social forces, but also attempts thereby to expose the more sublime structures of reality. Both thinkers brave the paradoxes and perils associated with the critique of reason, but they are not guided by consonant concerns or convictions, nor ought their approaches be seen as different answers to the same problem (Habermas, 1993:185).

Adorno's efforts are intended to address and come to terms with the totalizing tendencies of thought, and specifically speak to the aetiology of fascism. For him, objective knowledge of these processes is still attainable, but only through a process of rigorous reconfiguration which recontextualizes philosophical phenomena in terms of their relationship to broader social and economic relations. Derrida's efforts are intended to undercut the logocentric foundations of philosophical thinking as an oppressive apparatus *tout court* and the process of deconstruction is, itself, seen as an act of justice. In what follows, I will argue by way of explication that cavalier comparisons between these two thinkers do not endure sustained theoretical inquiry and moreover, that Adorno's lasting legacy resides in his resistance both to the kinds of

textually totalizing impulses of some post structuralism and also the kinds of theoretically totalizing tendencies sometimes implied in the current communicative emphasis of critical theory. This thesis indicates that Adorno is in a middling position between the internecine schools of critical theory and post-structuralism and suggests that contemporary cultural theory might benefit from a more sustained engagement with Adorno. The first phase of my argument is explicative and consists chiefly in an overview of Adorno and Derrida at the level of method. In the second stage I shall simply suggest something of the benefit Adorno's approach brings to current debates in cultural theory and allude to some of the shortcomings associated with exhuming Adorno. My comments on the future of critical theory are in closing.

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Although Adorno comes closest to a programmatic statement of principles at the level of method<sup>2</sup> in his landmark *Negative Dialectics*, the overall effect of his work<sup>3</sup> is only to emphasize the degree to which a materialist critique of philosophy effectively undercuts the distinction between theory and method. His procedure, however, is avowedly dialectical: it encompasses a negative deconstructive moment and a reconfiguring reconstructive movement, each of which also maintain their own dialectical character. In the first moment, Adorno juxtaposes antithetical concepts to produce a "logic of disintegration" and thereby expose "the irreconcilability of concepts" with the reality they purportedly describe (Buck-Morris, 1977:63). This procedure both denies the synthetic movement in Hegel and reflects the materialist contention that the contradictions between reason and reality are not ultimately reconciled by the movement of thought<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, Adorno's insight into the architechnonic nature of capitalist cognition is that concepts are in a perpetual process of attempting to appropriate their 'other' but that this impulse can never culminate in a synthesis. Recalling Lukacs' conception of reification in order to account for the fact that philosophical concepts are seen to have a reality apart from and *apriori* to productive processes, Adorno's analysis links the capitalist commodity structure to the abstraction of phenomena from their socio-historical roots. Philosophical idealism is thus understood both as a form of consciousness which arises out of the conjunction of specific socio-historical conditions and as a kind of all consuming rage which seeks to reconcile reason with reality through a totalizing movement of identification (Adorno, 1966)<sup>5</sup>. Adorno's key contrariant claim is that the contradictions of capitalist society cannot be

eradicated by “means of thought” nor can they “within thought” itself (Buck-Morris 1977:61). Hence, in opposition to the rage of idealist thought, Adorno asserts that there is, in principle, a non-identity between concept and reality. This principle of non-identity forms the foundation of negative dialectics (Habermas, 1989:187).

Adorno’s approach contrasts with the more mechanical ‘Ideologiekritik’ of other members of the Frankfurt school which inclined to an analysis of philosophy as an expression of superstructure. Adorno calls his process “immanent critique” and uses it to unearth and identify a dialectic process at work with philosophical thought itself. While his initial intent is only to “expose the contradictions which riddle idealist categories and, following their inherent logic, push them to the point where the categories were made to self-destruct”<sup>6</sup>, the ultimate goal of immanent critique is to transcend idealism by “leading its concepts via their own immanent logic to the point of self-liquidation” (Buck-Morris, 1977:70).<sup>7</sup>

Adorno’s deconstructive movement is fundamentally informed by the insight that the crisis of idealism mirrors the current social order such that as “reason and reality lost touch with each other outside of philosophy, they lost touch within philosophy also” (Buck-Morris, 1977:71). Hence, he argues that Husserl gives birth to a phenomenology aimed at objective knowledge of things in themselves but, because this mode of reasoning is riddled with the contradictions of capitalist thought, he ends up in contradiction. Phenomenology erroneously accepts natural phenomena as given immediately in experience but, in fact, is only able to achieve abstraction. Adorno argues, in contradistinction, that objective knowledge is possible through a process of concretion which links phenomenal forms to larger totalities. Objects are thus made to materialize in a sense that surpasses identity, but only by the mediation of conceptual reflection can their relationship be understood.

In order to combat the reification processes typical of capitalist thought, Adorno deploys his own principles of “differentiation, nonidentity, and active transformation,” (Buck-Morris, 1977:96) in an attempt to negate the hegemony of consciousness brought about by the mode of economic production. An analysis of the linguistic forms of idealist philosophy provides the point of departure for an exploration of their underlying connection to broader social and structural forces. Here Adorno is informed by a conception of the dialectic that surpasses the strictly Hegelian sense between the particular and the universal. Indeed, according to Buck-Morris, his supposition is that the structure of the general persists within “the very surface of the particular”

(Buck-Morris, 1977:97). Adorno's notion of the concrete particular expresses this synecdoche concept of the relationship between part/whole. His argument is that the imprint of the macrocosm can be read in the microcosmic. Hence 'particulars' contain cryptic codes, initially enigmatic, that are subject to subsequent differentiation/de-differentiation in an effort to expose their underlying structural connections. This process consists in a rigorous separation, dissection and differentiation of the forms to derive isolated elements. Conceptual phenomena typically supposed as similar are emphasized as dissimilar, while phenomena typically taken as dissimilar were shown to have underlying commonalities. The latter process, which was achieved by a juxtaposition of opposites worked to reveal an inner logic of structuration at work within capitalist society, while the former, worked to expose the false connections between phenomena perpetrated by ideology. The method found application not only in natural phenomena but also in the relationship between phenomenal forms and linguistic referents, as is demonstrated in Adorno's analysis of history and nature as concepts.

The second phase of analysis, that of non-identification, consists of Adorno's attempt to locate individual elements according to a conceptual architecture borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist theory. Phenomenal forms here are not subsumed under conceptual categories but rather, the categories themselves are tailor made to fit and describe the form. In providing for such phenomenal priority, Adorno is adhering to the dictates of a method which implies the reflexive connection between thought and being. Conceptual categories do not identify social phenomena but merely provide for the possibility of interpretation. Hence, the principle of non-identification denotes the fact that respective phenomena provide an image of the concept, but are not identical to it. Phenomena are instead understood as mimetic approximations while retaining their concrete referential status.

The dialectical method culminates in a transformative manner. The ideological or structural underpinnings of the phenomenal forms laid bare and situated within the context of a larger Marxist/Freudian theoretic, the isolated pieces of Adorno's analysis are now available for reconstruction according to the inner logic revealed in analysis. The roots of the contradiction are exposed and what appeared as one thing is discovered to be "essentially its opposite" (Buck-Morris, 1977:99). This transformative movement identifies the acme of the dialectical process of reconstruction in which Adorno reassembles the isolated elements by mediating them in a way that they could become representational. The cryptic nature of the ciphers and their recon-

stitution into constellations of concepts provided by Marx and Freud allows for reinterpretation and redeployment.

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From the foregoing it should already be clear that there are some obvious continuities between Adorno and Derrida. Both insist on a rigorous reading and rereading of texts as the key to excavating their underlying structure. Both are also informed by the assumption that the structure of philosophic texts, when pushed to extremes, actually culminates in contradiction. Finally, both are substantially influenced by Husserl in the critical development of thinking about the contradictions implied by the western philosophical project. In Derrida's case, however, the grounds for arriving at the claim for contradiction are substantially different from those arrived at by Adorno. Indeed, in Adorno, a principle of non-identity between the concept and reality informs his method, while Derrida deploys the notion of "différance" in his deconstruction. Adorno identifies Husserl's phenomenology as the apex of idealist thought and engages in a vigorous critique of the transcendental associated with the *epoché*. Derrida, however, is not entirely content to simply abandon the phenomenological commitment to a transcendental standpoint with its attendant protection from the perils of relativism and historicism (Dews, 1987:5). As Peter Dews has convincingly argued, Derrida discovers that language emerges as the "necessary condition" of all communication while writing his introduction to Husserl's "Origins of Geometry". Here it becomes clear that speech is not the expression of objects, but in fact "constitutes objects" and hence, it is speech itself which is the "concrete condition of truth" (Dews, 1987: 36). Most significant to Derrida, however, in Husserl, is the realization that writing is the *telos* of speech. That is to say, that writing is the permanent form, independent of any specific subjectivity. Derrida sees this finding as doubly contradictory both because writing itself is not transcendental, but rather is historical and transitory, and also, because speech as opposed to writing, is privileged as an intentional act that makes meaning present in the Husserlian schemata. This insight is into the paradoxical "status of writing that forms the basis of Derrida's analysis of philosophical and literary texts" (Dews, 1987: 36). The focus of deconstruction as an activity is to "discover the systematic incoherences within a text, rather than striving to reveal a unified meaning, a project referred to as deconstruction" (Norris, 1987:46). Deconstruction 'works to undo the idea, the ruling illusion of Western metaphysics, that reason can somehow dispense with language and arrive at a pure, self authenticating truth or method' (Norris, 1991:34).

Though, philosophy strives to efface its textual or “written” character, the signs of that struggle are “there to be read in its blind spots or metaphor” (Dews, 1987:38). Deconstruction is thus an activity of reading that “remains closely tied to the texts it interrogates”, and “can never be set up as a self-enclosed system of operative concepts”(Norris, 1991:22). In fact, Derrida more than Adorno, maintains an extreme and exemplary scepticism when it comes to defining his own methodology. The “deconstructive leverage supplied by a term like writing depends on its resistance to any kind of settled or definitive meaning” (Norris, 1991:54).

Notwithstanding his own cautions about method, it is clear that Derrida deploys the notion of *differance* to accomplish his analysis and at the same time develop an alternative way of proceeding. That is, a new mode of thought that “suggests the impossibility of closing off differing and deferral of meaning and the possibility of a potential of an endlessness in interpretation” (Norris, 1991:46). *Differance* as a mutable notion derives from the Saussure’s description of language as a differential network wherein “there is no one to one relation between signifier and signified, the word as (spoken or written) and the concept it serves to evoke” (Norris, 1991:46). Derrida redeploys the distinction between *parole* and *la langue* but argues against Saussure’s spoken as opposed to written priority. Derrida argues that this is a propensity in Western philosophy more generally, find in Saussure a “blindness..which does not recognize in language a speaking signifying system which exceeds all bounds of ‘presence’ and speech” (Norris, 1991:49). Derrida sees a whole metaphysics at work behind the privilege granted to speech in Saussure’s methodology. As is well known in the contemporary context, Derrida shows a whole plethora of dualisms which betray an implicit or explicit privileging of one term over the other.

Derrida formulates a specific and “shifting battery of terms which cannot be reduced to any single self-identical meaning” (Dews, 1987:42) to develop a deconstructive analysis of texts that denies this privileging even as it undercuts it. *Differance* is perhaps the most well known of these, since it sets up a “disturbance at the level of the signifier (anomalous spelling) which graphically resists reduction” (Norris, 1987:46). Its sense remains suspended between the two french verbs “to differ” and “to defer.” Its Derridian revolutionary significance consists in the extent to which the former is found to yield to the latter: meaning is always deferred. Yet, the designation ‘*differance*’ also exceeds a solely strategic function and may identify Derrida’s own entrance into the metaphysical. Indeed, as Dews argues, the

term 'differance' not only indicates Derrida's attempt to pursue an alternative heading, it also represents 'the non-originary convergence of meaning and non-meaning that is, in fact, unthinkable' (Dews 1987:5). Whether and to what extent this really represents Derrida's venture into the metaphysical, however, is a matter best left to another inquiry.

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The critical continuities and contrasts between Derrida's deconstruction and the procedure of immanent critique developed by Adorno can now be developed more clearly. Principally there are five somewhat superficial similarities which bear observation and a number of key differences at the epistemological level which have quiet clear implications for both further study and critical theory. Both thinkers are quite clearly engaged in an analysis of "apparent philosophical contraries" in an attempt to show how they implicitly or "surreptitiously depend on one another" (Dews, 1987: 48). This is evident in Adorno's discussion of history/nature and subject/object. In Derrida there are many examples: speech/writing and signifier/signified being principle. Both thinkers are also concerned with "reversing the traditional order of these privileged dualisms is order to expose their false foundations" (Dews, 1987: 48). This characterization may be more accurate in the case of Adorno, however, since he wants to reverse the order only to overturn the inequality between subject and object that is produced by bourgeois social relations. Derrida, although engaged in this project, appears to see it as a stage, with the higher goal of calling into question the grounds for the distinction. Adorno, in contrast, does not want to get rid of the subject/object distinction but instead wants to direct attention to the fact that it is a product of a specific material conditions. Both thinkers are also essentially opposed to identity based essentialism and the attempt in philosophy to transcend language and yield direct knowledge of the transcendental signifier. Adorno acknowledges that this goal is epitomized by Hegel and Derrida sees this in Husserl. Yet again, they are different at this level as well. For Adorno is quite clearly critical of identity at the epistemological level while Derrida is critical of identity at the level of the subject. Derrida primarily asserts an attack on the basis of knowing through subjective meaning. Still, both locate the source of contradiction in Western philosophy in the attempt to textually suppress or repress the meanings in an effort to produce truth claims and both insist on using the text itself as the ultimate material for analysis and disclosure, making a virtue of careful reading to discover what the text does not want to say. In Adorno's case, however, this technique derives from a

commitment to rework and renew the categories of thought whereas in Derrida it derives from a desire to show volatility of textual meaning.

Despite these commonalities in approach, there are significant differences between the two thinkers that have important consequences. Namely, Derrida's insistence on the "dissemination" of the text appears to have the "logical consequence...not [of the] volatilization of meaning but its destruction" (Dews, 1987:186), while Adorno's approach to the relationship between facticity and concept does not end in such annihilation. Meaning is achievable through analysis and reconstruction using the process of exact fantasy<sup>8</sup>. Derrida on the other hand, struggles with the impossibility of even provisional closure.

Adorno and Derrida also differ substantially in respect to their assessment of experience. The former provides for a concept of experience that mediates between subject and object in such a way that "something" is given, but nothing is given "immediately". Derrida's appeals to experience simply seem to imply "a lapse to a metaphysics of presence" (Dews 1987:188). This has clear implications for the range of mobility and phenomena explored. Adorno is free to analyze how material conditions work to determine and mediate experience without falling into a performative contradiction. The concomitant consequence is that Derrida seems ultimately able to offer only a negative project for sociology, one which is appealing only in so far as it invites insight into the multiplicity of possible readings and contingencies implied in any reading. In contrast, Adorno's approach takes us into theory as a practical activity.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, with Derrida "thought seems more tied to a conception of consciousness" (Dews, 1987:189) than with Adorno's, despite the former's claims to the contrary. The basis for this allegation consists in the fact that Adorno establishes a schemata of identity and non-identity as interdependent. The supposition of a non-identity between concept and facticity provides for an ongoing dynamic of development but is not fundamentally grounded in a correspondence between the subject and object. Derrida, however ironically, appears to recapitulate the very hazard he is trying to avoid by making "différance" so preeminent as to culminate in absolute identity. It's omnipresence in the Derridian scheme arguably negates its impact.

There are, no doubt, other things to say about these two complex and thinkers, and much more might be made of their similarities and differences in a more expansive forum. For the present purposes, it still remains to turn

to the question of Adorno's anti-authoritarian impulses and more specifically, contemporary debates about the requirements and possibilities for 'critical theory'.

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To revisit Adorno today, in full knowledge of the vicissitudes that have accompanied the evolution of critical theory is to suggest not simply that something of the analytical acumen of the first generation of the Frankfurt School has been lost in more recent incarnations of critical theory, but also a desire to regain it. If nothing else, the foregoing analysis has suggested that the currency of Adorno's approach in the contemporary context consists at least in part in the fact that his text driven approach does not devolve into the totalizing abyss of endless analysis often identified with post-structuralism. Yet, Adorno's approach also seems to resist the tenor of totalizing ambitions often associated with communicative theory. The significance of this resistance becomes clear when one considers current debates about the nature and possibilities associated with the critique of reason. Indeed, whereas Derrida is alleged to have perpetrated a dissolution of reason by truncating the foundations for philosophical thought (Habermas, 1987), Habermas is frequently charged with having reinstated the authoritarianism of reason by insisting on another metanarrative. Both camps want to lay claim to forms of post-metaphysical thinking and both are vulnerable to critiques on the grounds of their totalizing tendencies. Adorno offers a third way: one which is neither premised on the endless dissembling of the text nor the straining claims of the ideal speech situation, but on the simple claim that there is always, in principle, a non-identity between concept and reality.

The importance of non-totalizing approaches to theorizing that still retain a commitment to truth claims cannot be understated, not simply because internecine struggles between postmodernists and modern perspectives are ultimately incommensurable, also because, apropos of Adorno, the kinds of social, economic and political conditions that contribute to totalizing thinking and therefore an resurgence of irrationalism are equally apparent today. Indeed as Stephen Crook notes on introducing a new collection of Adorno's essays on culture.

while paranoia has been consigned to the modern side of the modern/postmodern divide in at least one account, there are grounds for regarding paranoia as linked to postmodernizing change. The paranoid character of many *fin de siècle* concerns

about health and the environment is really quite marked: our brains will turn into blancmange if we eat beef, power lines will give us cancer, we will be boiled by global warming or fried by ultra-violet light. Of course, the age old adage holds that 'just because your paranoid it doesn't mean there are not out to get you' and our fears may be well grounded. It is not the scientific basis of health and environmental issues which is at issue here so much as the way in which they are generated by forms of media coverage which might be regarded as encouraging paranoid thinking. (Crook 1994:27)

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While the future of critical theory remains uncertain, there has perhaps been too much celebration and too little debate among critical theorists about that the overall implications of the movement away from an epistemological grounding in the philosophy of the subject to one based in claims to an intersubjectively secured epistemological grounding. The totalizing tendencies associated with the communicative turn, however, are by now well known, and include not only the attempt to universalize Kohlbergs theory of moral development but also the claim to an ideal speech situation. Still, recent work in critical theory suggests the situation is changing even as awareness about the developing disparity between the first and second generations of critical theory continues to grow. Recent work in critical theory undertake to overcome this tendency toward polarization between the first and second generations of the Frankfurt School (Dubiel, 1992: 5) while other works perpetrate a rigorous critique of the more grandiose claims of the Theory of Communicative Action (McCarthy 1991: Welmer 1986). Behind each of these efforts there lingers Adorno's silent, but nonetheless adamant lament that we ought to wonder about the dissolution of the subject that has come to characterize our time, and not simply embrace it.

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## NOTES

1. Jameson develops a compelling critique of attempts to appropriate Adorno as a contemporary proto-postmodernist. (Jameson, 1990: 4-5), and the concluding sections (Jameson, 1990: 1-3) of the work.
2. Although a number of works have excavated and explicated the connections between theory and method in Adorno, this discussion draws heavily on Susan Buck Morris'

"Origins of Negative Dialectics" which is clearly the best analysis to date on the methodological movements and theoretical influences that underlie Adorno's approach.

3. On the question of an oeuvre, commentators differ. For example, the clear and pronounced continuities in Adorno's work are enough to persuade Jameson to propose a synchronous reading. Jay, however, is content to take one essay as paradigmatic of his approach. Adorno clearly saw his work as linked and continuous. However, it is unlikely that he would have been sympathetic to attempts to treat any part of his work as representative of the whole. Indeed, as Jameson notes (1990:5), Adorno insisted in a brief exchange with Benjamin that one must be thoroughly acquainted with the diversity of his work before any attempt at assessment. This might be seen as somewhat ironic, since Adorno's approach to other texts is that the structure of the whole is contained in the particular.

4. Buck Morris states: "Adorno saw no possibility of an argument coming to rest in unequivocal synthesis. He made negativity the hallmark of his dialectical procedure precisely because he believed that Hegel had been wrong: reason and reality did not coincide. As with Kant, Adorno's antinomies remained anatomical, but this was due to the limits of reality rather than reason".

5. This discussion entitled "Idealism as Rage" is perhaps most informative about Adorno's overall approach to philosophy. The spectre of Nietzsche appears as Adorno writes "the system is belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism. It disfigures Kant's humanism and refutes the aura of higher and nobler things" (Adorno, 1973 : 22).

6. "It is this goal, the accomplishment of the liquidation of idealism from within, that Adorno had in mind when he formulated the current demands of philosophy as necessitating a logic of disintegration" (Morris: 69).

7. "the need to liquidate philosophy emerged out of the philosophical material at its present stage of development. Adorno used terms of natural decay in his speech to describe idealist concepts and tenets of philosophy, treating them like material objects with a life and a death of their own, and thereby conveying their historical character and transitoriness". (Morris, 70). Again, this is an extensive discussion of in the first section of Negative Dialectics.

8. Although I have not had space enough here to detail this method, I do not mean to imply that it is inconsequential in Adorno's overall analysis.

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