ENDOGENOUS AND EXOGENOUS EXPLANATIONS OF
U.S. IMPERIALISM IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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May 1974
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March, 1974

*Draft of paper to be read at the 1974 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.
In 1873 a ship of the United States, the Virginius, was captured by a Spanish ship and taken into the port of Santiago de Cuba, where the Spanish began to shoot members of her crew and passengers in platoons. The U.S. attempted to mobilize a naval squadron, but was unable to gather any formidable fleet, and the crisis passed (Millis, 1956). America's physical isolation from the rest of the world had always been considered its best defense. Offensive capability had been considered an unnecessary and expensive encumbrance. Even as late as 1880, of the 1492 ships listed by the navy, only 48 were able to fire a gun (ibid.). During the early 1880's the navy's largest ship was sunk by colliding with a coal barge.

However, by 1883, the Congress was beginning to steadily increase the size and capability—both offensive and defensive—of the navy. In 1889, the U.S. acquired part of Samoa, with the justification that it was needed as a coaling station. By the end of the following decade, U.S. military forces had been dispatched all over the world in such countries as Hawaii, Brazil, Nicaragua, Venezuela, China, Philippines, and of course Cuba.

The change in military capability accompanied a change in the articulated justification of military matters and in the diplomatic stance of the government. Toward the end of the century, a doctrine of military preparedness acquired increasing currency. It was argued that the nation must be militarily prepared for war, just in case the occasion should arise. This new doctrine argued not only that the best defense was a good offense, but that as a newly great nation, the U.S. had more to lose in more parts of the world than it had previously.
Military capability was necessary to back up the diplomatic leadership of a newly great nation. In 1896, President Cleveland resurrected the Monroe Doctrine, declaring the Western Hemisphere off limits to Europe. He updated the doctrine by declaring the U.S. the peacekeeper and overseer of the area. By the turn of the century the U.S. was acquiring its own political colonies.

The culmination was the Spanish-American War of 1898. Now it was the U.S.' turn to destroy the Spanish navy, which it did handily in the Battle of Manila in the Philippines. The U.S. was becoming accepted by European nations as a great nation, still a second-rate power, but a respected force to be reckoned with. To the non-European world, the U.S. was increasingly being seen as an imperialist power. "Great power" and "imperialist power" became two sides of the same coin.

"Imperialism" describes a relationship between nations, or between a set of nations, not just a characteristic of a particular nation. It is an asymmetric relationship characterized by the penetration of one society by the agents of another, the creation of dependence, the extraction of resources (not necessarily natural resources), and the development of control structures oriented to the demands of the larger country.

Revisionist historians such as William Appleman Williams and Richard VanAlstyne have discussed the continuity of an imperialist orientation in American politics. They demonstrate the roots of imperialist sentiment among the founding fathers and its subsequent development through American history up to the Cold War. However, they fail to deal with the discontinuity in the machinery of imperialism--the military, diplomatic, and economic apparatus that gave a bite to America's imperialist bark.
It is this discontinuity that I am trying to explain. Throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century the U.S. increasingly penetrated other parts of the world, created instruments of control and dependence of other nations, and extracted resources from abroad, all administered through organizational means—military, diplomatic, and economic.

This paper will argue that conventional explanations of U.S. imperialism, which have concentrated on internal dynamics of the United States, are inadequate and ungeneralizable. Rather I suggest focusing attention on changes in the international system and changes in the role that the U.S. played in that system. It is argued that as the system expanded and decentralized, resources in the system became more available to the U.S. while internal changes in the U.S. political and economic structure, which were substantially facilitated by the international environment, increased the ability of the U.S. to participate more fully in the expansion of the international system.

The paper will first survey the most widely cited endogenous theories of the rise of U.S. imperialism leading up the Spanish-American War, followed by an outline of the development of the international system in that period. I will then sketch the interaction between change in the U.S. and change in the international system.

Endogenous explanations of U.S. imperialism

Conventional explanations of the rise of imperialist structures and actions in the last part of the nineteenth century have characteristically been endogenous explanations, that is, their focus of examination has been processes that are internal to the United States. Imperialism has been seen as the result of domestic developments affecting government decision-making about foreign policy.
There are four common explanations of the U.S. imperialist surge in this period: (1) the extension of America's Manifest Destiny to a new frontier; (2) a displacement of frustrations felt as part of a psychic crisis in the nation; (3) the maturation of a generation untouched by the horrors of the Civil War; and (4) the requisite expansion of markets, sources of raw materials, and new sources of investment concomitant with industrialization and the development of finance capitalism. The first three treat imperialism as a temporary aberration from a more benign foreign policy—an aberration that was corrected by such reformers as Woodrow Wilson. The last sees this period as a transition to an enduring relationship of the U.S. to the rest of the world. The last perspective is also the only perspective that can be put into the context of the larger international picture.

The interrelated notions of America's Manifest Destiny and empire as the new frontier were among the most popular theories of imperialism among academics around the turn of the century. Social Darwinism was wedded to a resurrected ideology of Manifest Destiny. This marriage gave birth to an argument on behalf of expansion by the superior white race and its democratic institutions. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner introduced his "Frontier Thesis." His highly influential argument was that the frontier had been the prime shaper of America's uniqueness. It was the key to the orderly development of political democracy, equality of opportunity, and individualism. A corollary of this argument was that the closing of the frontier when it reached the Pacific would lead to calcification of American society. Equality of opportunity would be replaced by the rise of aristocracy. Decadence would undermine hardy individualism. And the disappearance of the safety valve would result in increased malcontent and violence. Although Turner himself was not
an expansionist, his ideas were used quite effectively by imperialist partisans.

The historians who succeeded Turner pointed to the importance of the frontier in American history and identified an expansionist "urge"—an urge that could not be confined within the continental borders of the U.S. Thus westward expansion and international expansion were seen as arising from the same source. Imperialism was merely the continental cup running over.

The "expansionist urge" has been given an economic treatment by revisionist historians such as William Appleman Williams (1966, 1972) and Richard VanAlstyne (1960). Both discuss the continuity of American imperialist orientation. Williams places more emphasis on the economic changes underlying changes in imperialist sentiment as it moved from mercantilism through laissez faire to the age of corporate capitalism.

An explanation that takes greater account of the historical uniqueness of the decades around the turn of the century is Hofstadter's notion of "Psychic Crisis" (1968). He explains that the later expansion was into territory inhabited by aliens, with no intention of incorporating these territories into the United States. He cites the imperialist debate of the period as an indication that contemporaries of the period also understood such expansion as a departure. The drive toward colonial expansion, he argues, can be explained by a psychic crisis in American society caused by the depressions of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the labor violence of the period, and the assault on democratic sensibilities resulting from the tumultuous election of 1896, which exhibited a polarization reminiscent of the pre-Civil War era. The jingo press, spearheaded by sensationalist competition of Pulitzer and
Hearst, shifted the attention of the nation from its own domestic troubles into the international sphere. Personal economic problems were displaced into international aggression.

A variation on the psychic crisis theme is the "cyclical-nature-of-war" argument. It has been noted that major wars generally fall about a generation apart. When a generation has experienced a war, it becomes anathema to its members to submit themselves again to such torture. But the maturation of a new generation removes the deterrent of such memories, and the nation gives way to pressures that lead them once again down the path of carnage. A simplistic version of this argument identifies human nature as the force pushing toward war. More sophisticated versions discuss economic competition among nations or the influence of strong military pressure groups.

The generational perspective has rested on two arguments. Identification of the imperialist and anti-imperialist groups has shown that there is a substantial age difference in the members of these two groups. The leaders of the anti-imperialist organizations averaged about twenty years older than the leading imperialists. Most of the leading exponents of colonial imperialism and the war were not old enough to remember the Civil War. Secondly, belligerent partisans such as Theodore Roosevelt argued that the war would toughen and purify the moral fiber of the nation. War, Roosevelt argued, was the answer to what he felt was the moral degeneration of the nation. In the end he lamented that the "grand little war" had not been much of a war, but had been better than no war at all.

The only conventional explanation that goes beyond ideological or psychic explanations of imperialism is that industrialization
created a need for raw materials, while capitalism, a concomitant of industrialism, created a need for foreign investments. Walter LaFeber (1963) is the leading proponent of this point of view. He concentrates on the need for foreign markets. Like Hofstadter, he points to the depressions of the last quarter of the century, especially the Depression of 1893. Similarly, he points to a sense of crisis felt in the nation. However, whereas Hofstadter is talking about a sense of crisis in the society at large, LaFeber focuses on a sense of crisis among the business community. The country was felt to be in deep economic trouble. There was near consensus in the business community, as articulated in the business press, that the answer was foreign markets. He then argues that the government shared this opinion and acted upon it.

None of these explanations takes into account the fact that the other industrial nations of the world--Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, etc. were involved in imperialist excursions in the last third of the nineteenth century. Africa was partitioned in the 1880's. Britain was intensifying its penetration of India and the Near East, and hassling with the U.S. over control of Latin America. European statesmen rose and fell on their success in the acquisition of new territory. Almost all the industrial nations were trying to get a piece of the Orient. Even Japan, the newest industrial nation, was flexing its imperialist muscle in the Far East.

The explanations discussed above for U.S. imperialism do not apply to the European countries. There is no analogy to the Manifest Destiny notion. The Europeans did not start from an internal frontier, then expand to the edge of the sea and on across it. Although
industrialization is a precondition to modern imperialism, it can hardly explain the onset of imperialist policies of a particular country. Industrialization proceeded at different rates in different nations, with no perceptible pattern between the timing of industrialization and imperialist activity. If a certain level of industrialization created a need that could be met only with imperialist solutions, we would find that industrializing nations, as they reached the right plateau would each, in turn, become imperialist. Instead, we find that within a short period of time, all nations above a certain level of industrialization became imperialist.

If none of these explanations are adequate, how do we account for the common turn toward imperialism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century? The answer lies in their membership in a common system, an international economic and political system. Imperialism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century did not arise from processes within individual nations, but from characteristics of the world system. In a word, imperialism was one aspect of a transition from a unipolar, relatively stable, international system into a multipolar competitive system.

Expansion and change in the international system

From 1815, the world economy had centered around Britain. It was divided between one highly industrial nation, Britain, industrializing nations, which included most of Western Europe and the U.S., and the undeveloped regions. There was a relatively stable division of labor. Britain produced manufactured goods for a good part of the world. It imported raw materials and exported manufactured goods. Both undeveloped and developing nations were dependent on Britain as a market for raw materials and foodstuffs. The industrializing nations produced most
of the agricultural goods they needed, but were dependent on Britain for manufactured goods, for capital, and for technological knowledge. The system ran relatively smoothly. It was the golden age of "free trade."

After 1870, the system began to change. Not only was there a massive increase in the volume of international trade and exchange, there was fundamental change in the structure of the system. British hegemony was challenged by Germany and the U.S. in the West and by Japan in the East. The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the relative decline of Britain in the world system. By the turn of the century both Germany and the U.S. had surpassed Britain in the production of steel. The total industrial output of the U.S. passed that of Britain. The reaction by the European nations to these changes was an imperial grab for the undeveloped parts of the world.

Thus, imperialism was a reflection of the concomitant expansion of the international system and change in the relative dominance of national actors. As the international economy expanded, the stable unipolar economic system changed to a multi-polar competitive system. Expansion meant both increase in the volume of trade and extension of the boundaries of the system. Between 1860 and 1910 gross international trade increased an average of 46% per decade (Kuznets, 1966). The international system bounded by the North Atlantic was expanded to encompass the globe. Economically this involved the expansion of capital investment and trade. Politically, it involved a flurry of colony grabbing--the partition of Africa, the carving out of spheres of influence in Asia and the Near East. Colonial regimes and politically independent, but economically dependent regimes in the third world nations were strengthened as nation-building activities were undertaken.
These included methods of extraction, control, and servicing, structured around the needs of developing export economies. Customs facilities were built, roads and railroads constructed, and armies and police forces equipped to maintain stability when threatened by native resistance.

Changes in the structure of the international economy were highlighted by the demise of British hegemony and the ascension of the U.S., Germany, and Japan. British primacy of the international market declined until after the First World War when it totally evaporated. The British share of world trade in primary products fell from 30% in 1876 to 19% in 1913, its share of the world export market of manufactured goods fell from 41.4% in 1880 to 29.9% in 1913. In the same period Germany's share rose from 19.3% to 26.5% and the U.S. from 2.8% to 12.6% (Hobsbawm, 1968). Between 1899 and 1913 the U.S. and Germany accounted for more than half the increase in total exports of manufactured products from the major industrial countries (Alcroft, 1968).

Between the 1850's and 1870, there was a considerable shift in the distribution of British foreign investment from the Atlantic economy to the larger world economy. This acceleration of an earlier pattern was characterized by a steep decline in the proportion of British investment in Europe and a marked increase in the investment in British colonies and dominions. British investment in Europe had decreased from 66% in 1830 to 55% in 1854. By 1870, only 25% of British investment was in Europe, and by 1914, it was down to a bare 5% (Kenwood and Lougheed, 1971).

Investment in the colonies and dominions rose from 5% of all foreign investment in 1857 to 33% in 1870. Two thirds of that amount was in India or 22% of the total. By 1914, the colonies and dominions
were absorbing 46% of all British foreign investment (ibid.). The share absorbed by the Western hemisphere remained nearly the same. The U.S. absorbed about a quarter of the total although the type of investment in the U.S. shifted from agriculture, dominated by cotton, to industrial, dominated by the railroads and other heavy industry. Investment in Latin America averaged about a sixth of all foreign investment over the entire period (ibid.).

Even in absolute terms, British investment in Europe was stagnant. It barely increased from just under $700 million in 1854 to slightly over $930 million in 1870 and crept up to $1,000 million by 1914. At the same time, investments in the colonies and dominions had grown from just over $60 million to $1250 million in 1870 and mushroomed to over $5 billion by 1914.

Decentralization in the international economy is reflected not only in the quantitative leveling among nations, but in a loosening of the network of trade. British centrality in the network gave way to a more decentralized system.

Between 1870 and 1913, developments in the multilateral payments system eased the international flow of capital, commodities, services, and income payments, greatly facilitating commercial relations. This was an important factor in the expansion of trade discussed above.

Prior to 1870, the network was structured around a set of relatively disconnected trade triangles. Each developed out of different circumstances, but each had Britain at the center. One triangle included Britain, Western Europe and the Baltic. There was a slave triangle--Britain, Africa, and the West Indies. Britain, China and India formed another. And Britain, the U.S. and Latin
America formed a fourth triangle, in which British deficits in the U.S. were offset by surpluses in the Latin American states (Kenwood and Lougheed, 1971).

After 1870, this system changed as the triangles became emeshed into a more complex pattern that was wider in scope. Non-British nations were developing stronger ties among themselves, although Britain continued to be at the center of the hub. Within the new system, the United States and Germany emerged as separate links in the chain of international trade.

At the beginning of the period most of the U.S. trade was primary products and was with Europe. In 1876, 81.5% of all U.S. exports went to Europe, including Britain. By 1901, the figure had dropped to 76.4%, it fell to 50.0% by 1913 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1961). The U.S. had a surplus with Europe and a deficit with the rest of the world. By the mid-1890's, the U.S. was a net exporter of manufactures. It had a large surplus with Britain and the Great Plains--Canada and Australia (not to be confused with the Great Plains region of the U.S.). It was this surplus with the Great Plains that financed a deficit in the tropics. The tropics, on the other hand, had a surplus with Europe, which partly balanced their deficit with Britain. The U.S. was becoming less dependent on economic links with Europe and expanding its ties to the rest of the world.

After the 1880's Germany also emerged as a separate link in the network. Germany was experiencing rapid industrialization and a relative decline in its agriculture. The Great Plains states started to replace the U.S. as the source of surplus in agricultural commodities. During this period, German deficits with other European
countries became surpluses as the Germans found them to be a healthy market for manufactured goods.

The role of the newly powerful nations in the expansion of the world system was partial and indirect. They contributed to each of the two developments that we have been discussing: the increased volume of activity and the change in structural centralization. Their penetration into markets of the old nations, both in and out of Europe was a competitive challenge and an upset of equilibrium in the network of payments, creating a need for new sources of trade surplus. At the same time the nations of Europe were becoming more closed from each other by such means as raising protective tariffs.

As the European system expanded, peripheral areas became sites of profitable activity for the new as well as the old power. The doctrine expressed by French Premier Jules Ferry in 1890 was to be echoed by Americans later in the decade:

Colonial policy is the daughter of industrial policy. The protectionist system is a steam-engine without a safety valve if it does not have as correlative and auxiliary a healthy and serious colonial policy. . .European powers of consumption are saturated. New masses of consumers must be made to arise in other parts of the globe, else we shall put modern society into bankruptcy and prepare for the dawn of the twentieth century a cataclysmic social liquidation of which one cannot calculate the consequences.

(quoted in Moon, 1927 p. 44)

These changes undermined the equilibrium in the international system upon which the system of free trade had depended. Free trade was a system in which stability had been maintained and competition limited through British hegemony. Control in the international system had operated through a system of interdependency such that each actor maximized his position in the system through playing the system as it existed. The system of interdependency operated to maintain British hegemony But as newly developing nations (U.S., Germany, and
Japan) cut into markets originally cornered by older nations (especially Britain) these older countries, following British lead, turned to colonial policies to recoup their losses. The British reaction to the challenge against her hegemony was penetration into new areas of the world. Other nations reacted in a similar fashion.

Leaving the economic sphere for the moment, increased competitiveness in the international system is evident in the diplomatic arena as well. Singer and Small (1966) discuss changes in the international diplomatic system in this period. From 1815, the beginning of the formal system of diplomacy, until about 1878, there was a multi-polar system, operating on a balance of power. Britain was clearly the strongest state, but did not exercise hegemonic dominance. Deviation in the system induced the operation of feedback mechanisms. Aggression in an area was met with multilateral action, designed to conserve the balance of power.

After 1879, the system atrophied. Alliances for longer terms began to rigidify the system. An increase in bipolar alliances hampered the operation of feedback mechanisms. Smaller nations, becoming less confident in the operation of the system for protection, began to make bipolar alliances with larger nations for protection. The major powers were losing confidence in the system to fulfill their needs and increasingly acted for their immediate self-interest and paid less attention to the effect of their behavior on the system as a whole. The competition, Singer and Small argue, led to the imperialistic scramble, the arms race, and finally the First World War.

**U.S. Imperialism**

Germany and the U.S. were latecomers into the imperialist venture. As challengers, they did not have the same defensive reaction
to changes in the international economy as the more established powers. Their first goal was penetration of the old system. Moreover they both lacked the domestic political structure and military apparatus to compete successfully internationally.

The conspicuous emergence of imperialism is a reflection of a changing relationship between the environment and government and enterprise in a country. The changes in the structure of the international system made it more accessible as a pool of resources to enterprise in the U.S., while enterprise in this country changed in ways that made it more capable of tapping those resources abroad. The U.S. government was increasingly able to mobilize the resources necessary to act as a great power in the international political system—a powerful military machine, influence over the foreign policy of other nations, and a strong financial apparatus, both private and public.

U.S. economic imperialism was an outgrowth of the economic place of the U.S. in the international system. U.S. colonialism was a reflection of attempts to penetrate parts of the international system, activity which was impossible without a national economy and a strong national state with an effective military and diplomatic apparatus. In other words, the significant development leading up to the Spanish-American War is not the motivation to control, but the novel capacity for control.

American ability to tap international resources was enhanced in three ways:

(1) As indigenous financial institutions grew, the relative control by Europeans over the U.S. economy decreased.
The creation of a national economy enhanced international activity but the creation of a national economy was financed substantially by international investment in the U.S. In the 28 years from 1869 to 1897 the amount of foreign investment in the U.S. more than doubled from $1.5 billion (mostly in government bonds and some railroad securities) to $3.4 billion (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1961) with much of the increase coming from reinvestment. Over approximately the same period, from 1870 to 1900, the value of manufacturing capital of the U.S. multiplied more than five times, from $1.7 billion to $9.8 billion (Nearing and Freeman, 1925).

The structure of capitalization changed in ways that was favorable to American control of the economy. From 1870 to the end of the century, "The United States was becoming self-sufficient with respect to its capital needs, and indeed was soon to reach the point of providing capital needs for other nations." (Myers, 1951, p. 574).

(2) The scope of formerly local markets in the U.S. was becoming increasingly national and international as the economy became dominated by giant corporations. The growth of the railroads not only made possible the transportation of goods across long distances, but provided the occasion for the development of national investment markets. This period saw the development of national corporations, a flurry of mergers, monopolies and oligopolies. By 1904, 318 industrial combinations, including 530 separate establishments owned 40% of all manufacturing interests (Eichner, 1969; Ashworth, 1952). At the same time, total current prices of exported merchandise nearly tripled from $526 million in 1876 to $1460 million in 1901 (U.S.
Department of Commerce, 1961). By 1893, American trade exceeded that of every country in the world except Britain (LaFeber, 1963). Not only were exports crucial to the economy objectively, but there was a near consensus among the business community and the political leadership in the latter part of the century that exports were the key to economic well-being (ibid.; Pratt, 1936).

(3) The national government was involved in state-making activities, expanding its jurisdiction into new areas of society and developing the organizational apparatus to exercise these new jurisdictions.

The national government had a stake in imperialism over and above facilitating domestic prosperity through foreign economic activity. Industry and finance were necessary for the U.S. to be a great power in the world, a goal that had existed since the nation was born. State-making activities involved both internal political consolidation—as national political structures were erected—and external expansion—as the diplomatic and military apparatus benefitting a great power were developed.

Dominance in the national government was shifting from the legislative to the executive as the government was beginning to develop national policies rather than responding to specific issues. Government revenue doubled from $281 million in 1875 to $589 million in 1901 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1961). The coercive power of the national government was strengthened by the expansion, consolidations and professionalization of the army and navy, especially the navy.

Conclusion

This paper has identified some of the shortcomings of endogenous explanations of nineteenth century American imperialism. The foremost
criticism is that the myopia of most conventional accounts has precluded integration with accounts of concomitant European imperialism.

The questions raised by this discussion have to do with the interaction between the growth of the international system and the development of new strong states. It has been the thesis that growth and change in the international economic and political system in the last third of the nineteenth century enhanced the economic and political development of the United States (as well as Germany and Japan), which in turn, substantially changed the international system, the consequence of which is imperialism.

This raises general questions about the development of national states and about the effect of new actors in the international system.

Our focus on the development of political structures has shifted attention away from the Weberian issues of legitimation, rationalization, and participation, which have dominated sociological treatment of the subject—issues which are found in the work of Bendix (1969), Lipset (1963) and Huntington (1966), and in the voluminous literature on political modernization of third world nations. States are treated as autonomous units, changing in response to endogenous processes. The emphasis here has been on the material and structural preconditions that make possible the growth of administrative bureaucracies, instruments of coercion and penetration by the state into society—issues found in the works of Tilly (1974), Moore (1966), and others.

In dealing with the international system, this paper has not dealt in detail with the consequences of horizontal dimensions, such as polarity, homogeneity, and stability, which are found in works by Deutsch and Singer (1964), Kim (1970), Kaplan (n.d.), and Luard (1968). Rather I have focused on the vertical dimension, including variables such as dominance and
centrality, as in the work of Wallerstein (1971, 1972), Bukharin (1966), or Singer and Small (1966).

The final, unanswered question is the generalizibility of these processes. It is no doubt true that the growth of political and economic structures in developing nations is substantially related to their relationship to the international system. But unlike American expansion, there is little periphery for the new nations to draw resources from. However, there are indications that some of the third world nations are increasingly able to challenge the hegemony of the developed nations. Not only are the Arabs presenting an economic challenge, but probably more important in the long run are possible political challenges from China and such increasingly strong nations as Brazil, in Latin America, and Indonesia in the Pacific.* Our daily headlines are already reminding us of some of the consequences of these developments. These consequences fall into the agenda not only of sociologists of development, but also sociologists of the polity and economy in general. The rise of a world economic and political system is one of the central facts of modern history, but it is a fact that social scientists have been slow to recognize. Such a recognition can be a corrective lens that can bring into focus issues that have formerly been blurred by myopic observation. Such change can only be for the better.

*There are, of course, also equally strong arguments for the continued dependence of third world nations on the "superpowers." See e.g. Cockeroff, et. al. (1972).
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