

Critical Debates
*Populism in Latin America:
Past, Present, and Future*

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- Robert R. Barr, *The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2017. Figures, tables, appendixes, acronyms, bibliography, index, 252 pp.; hardcover \$75, ebook \$75.
- Elena Block, *Political Communication and Leadership: Mimetisation, Hugo Chávez and the Construction of Power and Identity*. London: Routledge, 2015. Photographs, figures, tables, appendixes, acronyms, bibliography, index, 266 pp.; hardcover \$124, paperback \$39.96, ebook \$24.98.
- Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. Notes, index, 352 pp.; hardcover \$29.95, ebook \$29.95.
- Robert S. Jansen, *Revolutionizing Repertoires: The Rise of Populist Mobilization in Peru*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Photographs, maps, tables, appendixes, abbreviations, bibliography, index, 288 pp.; hardcover \$112.50, paperback \$37.50, ebook \$37.50.

Although populism has been growing in prominence in intellectual circles, the phenomenon is not new. Some academics assert that populism began with the People's Party in the United States, the *narodniki* movement in Russia, or Boulangism in France (Judis 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Others trace its roots to Peronism in Argentina (Germani [1978] 2003; Finchelstein 2017) and populist mobilization in Peru (Jansen 2017).

Although in Europe and the United States populism is normally viewed as a recent phenomenon associated with the radical right and postmaterialism (Inglehart and Norris 2017; Mudde 2014), in Latin America, populism has had a long, varied history. Literature on the subject has identified three populist waves in the region: classic populism (1930–1950), characterized by a strong, charismatic leader and working-class mobilization (Di Tella 1965; Germani [1978] 2003); neopopulism in the 1990s, which saw a paradoxical alliance between populism and neoliberalism (Weyland 1996, 2001); and early twenty-first-century populism, linked with the appearance of a radical left (Collins 2014; Ellner 2003).

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As this brief survey suggests, analyzing Latin American populism is a complex task. Given the quantity and variety of populisms Latin America has experienced over its history (de la Torre 2017), studying the contemporary intellectual debate surrounding populism is particularly important. Therefore, this essay takes up the study of populism in Latin America, divided in three parts. First, it describes the principal theoretical approaches to populism; namely, the structural, discursive, political-strategic, ideational, and sociocultural approaches. Second, it briefly examines four recent books on populism in Latin America, written by a political scientist (Barr), a communications scholar (Block), a historian (Finchelstein), and a sociologist (Jansen). Third, it proposes some considerations for future research based on the four works reviewed and our own ideas, drawn from recent trends in the international literature on populism.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study of populism does not have a singular point of view; on the contrary, a growing number of contributions from various disciplines in the social sciences seek to explain the phenomenon and offer distinct conceptualizations. To provide background, we describe the five theoretical approaches in chronological order. Distinguishing among these approaches helps both to orient us in the contemporary debate on populism and to guide the future research agenda.

The structuralist approach comes from the strengthening of the import substitution industrialization model in Latin America and from the reaction to European fascism in the 1940s. According to this perspective, populism is a multiclass movement expressed through a heterogeneous right- or left-wing ideology (Germani [1978] 2003), to which the image of a charismatic leader is fundamental. To Germani, populism emerges when three conditions are present: the recent formation of middle classes, particularly urban ones; antagonism between the middle and upper classes; and the opening of physical and social space that arises when the distance between the middle and lower classes diminishes, creating opportunities to participate in the construction of a new society. For structuralists, populism is transitory or temporary. Di Tella (1965) and Germani ([1978] 2003) are the most frequently invoked theoretical references in this approach.

At the outset of the 1970s, when the Latin American left was gaining political ground, the discourse analysis approach appealed to poststructuralists trying to explain the new regional dynamic. As its name suggests, this approach centers on analyzing discourse and rhetoric. Seen thus, populism could perform the normative function of transforming politics and breaking with the liberal status quo.

For Laclau (1977), populist discourse, in effect, calls for the construction of a new popular identity based on the antagonistic relationship between a discredited elite and the people. The concept of the chain of equivalences is thus vital, referring to the articulation of social demands and the construction of a common enemy. The chain of equivalences, in the hands of the populist leader, creates a border and excludes the antagonistic “other” (Laclau 2005). The discourse approach has a clear normative pos-

ture, which maintains that populism is the only democratic discourse capable of unifying and inspiring majorities around a project of political transformation. The most cited references here are Laclau (1977, 2005) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

At the apogee of neoliberalism in Latin America at the end of the 1980s, the appearance of three political figures—Alberto Fujimori (Peru), Carlos Menem (Argentina), and Fernando Collor de Mello (Brazil)—obliged academics to reassess their conceptualization of populism. There emerged the political-strategic approach, which suggests that populism has to do with relationships of power rather than the distribution of material resources (Weyland 1996, 2001). From this perspective, populism is a political strategy leaders employ to win elections and stay in power, while using economic and social policy to the same end. Consequently, the political-strategic approach characterizes populism as a movement of the masses guided by a charismatic leader using an antielite, antigovernment discourse in a top-down fashion. Weyland (1996, 2001) exemplifies this approach.

The ideational approach, for its part, emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century and grew in importance with the rise of radical right parties in Europe and the pall of the Great Recession. It emphasizes that populism should be understood as an ideology or worldview (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), but not one with the same level of intellectual and historical complexity as ideologies such as socialism or liberalism. Instead, it refers more to a “thin” ideology that can easily combine with others, such as socialism, nativism, or authoritarianism (Mudde 2004). This feature can be seen in a comparison between the “exclusionary,” right-wing forms of populism in Europe and the “inclusionary,” left-wing forms in Latin America (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

In the conceptualization of populism employed by subscribers to the ideational approach, there must be a clear notion of the “pure” people, the “corrupt” elite, and the general will, much like the discourse approach (Mudde 2004). Unlike the discourse approach, however, the ideational approach offers no normative perspective, instead seeking to encourage empirical studies that examine the conditions in which populism functions as either a corrective or a threat to democracy. When applying this approach to Latin America, Hawkins (2009) and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013, 2017) are most frequently cited.

Initially inspired by the study of Peronism, the sociocultural approach aims to fill the gap between the political-strategic and ideational perspectives. It is characterized by the suggestion of a relational notion, centered on the sociocultural dimension. In this framework, “populism is defined as the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting in politics of the culturally popular and native, and of personalism as a mode of decisionmaking” (Ostiguy 2017, 84). The sociocultural approach defines populism as a political style and stresses the appellative as action. Populism deals in customs, behaviors, ways of speaking, and dress connected to low culture, through which it achieves closer identity with the people. At the same time, populism prefers more personalistic leadership styles and forms of decisionmaking in the political sphere. In addition to Ostiguy, authors like Moffitt (2016) and Tormey (Moffitt and Tormey 2014) adhere to the sociocultural conceptualization of populism.

RECENT RESEARCH ON POPULISM IN LATIN AMERICA

Now that we understand the distinct theories and concepts of populism more clearly, we can turn to the review of the four books that are the subject of this essay. We will show that each one adheres to one or a combination of the approaches discussed above. These authors' investigations show the state of the art in the study of populism in Latin America and also reflect a set of diverse theoretical approaches to, and ways of empirically addressing, the phenomenon. This section is organized by regional coverage and methodological scope, from case studies to comparative analyses.

The sociologist, Jansen, addresses the concept of populist mobilization, laying out its rhetoric, its class antagonism, and its appeal. He holds that the first country that experienced this new political practice was Peru, during its 1931 presidential elections. His contribution, therefore, not only raises an interesting case study but also challenges those academics who identify Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil as the pioneers of populism in Latin America (Germani [1978] 2003; Finchelstein 2017).

According to Jansen, changes in the social realities, characteristics, and dynamics of the political context, as well as the hard decisions facing political actors over time, permit a "revolution of repertoires." Outsider candidates Luis Miguel Sánchez Cerro and Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre developed a new mode of political practice: populist mobilization. During this critical election in 1931, political actors—facing shifting social conditions—implemented a combination of ideas, drawn from Italian fascism and German nationalism plus previous political strategies and tactics (such as hierarchically structured parties, local organizations, and mass and charismatic mobilization).

Perhaps one of the central contributions of Jansen's book lies in the concept of populist mobilization, defined as "the mobilization of marginalized social sectors into publicly visible political actions while articulating an antielite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people" (Jansen, 30). It adds to the discussion the mobilization of people who are socially stigmatized or frequently excluded from political power (e.g., the indigenous, rural inhabitants, and the new working class). Furthermore, it posits a set of diverse ideas, representations of reality, and modes of argumentation, as well as examples of oral and physical expressions that legitimize and incite action.

According to the author, political mobilization is not always accompanied by populist rhetoric. The term *populist mobilization* should be reserved for those situations in which popular mobilization and populist rhetoric reinforce one another. "The populist rhetoric animates, specifies the significance of, and justifies the popular mobilization; [while] the popular mobilization instantiates the populist rhetoric in concrete political activities" (Jansen, 33). In that light, Jansen's proposal ties in with contemporary studies that seek to understand the formation of populist social movements (e.g., the *indignados* in southern Europe) capable of effecting important changes to the political system (Aslanidis 2016, 2017).

In Jansen's assessment, the change in repertoire in Peru was due to the emergence of political actors and local organizations, which banded together to produce the populist mobilization of 1931. This process of "political experimentation" was related not only to the influence of fascist structures imported from Italy and Germany and implemented by presidential hopefuls, but also to the creation of local organizations around Peru promoting those ideas. For its part, "imitation" was associated with the mass mobilizations in public plazas like the Plaza de Armas in Lima, spaces that served as platforms for presidential candidates to expound a new rhetoric. Consequently, the populist mobilization became routine; that is, it became something that could successfully materialize. Through this process, "the Peruvian repertoire was revolutionized" (Jansen, 206).

In sum, Jansen places much importance on political mobilization when tracing the origins of populism in Peru. The mobilization of candidates Sánchez Cerro and Haya de la Torre in 1931, motivated by the economic and sociocultural changes of the day, paved the way for new social sectors, an insight that greatly resembles the structuralist approach. Additionally, Jansen places equal weight on the discourses and specific characteristics of the candidates, opening a comparison with the socio-cultural approach.

Block, in her book, analyzes the political communication of Hugo Chávez in four periods: the soft phase (1999–2000), the adversarial phase (2000–2003), the radical phase (2003–6), and the mimetic phase (2006–13). The author dives deeply into Chávez's hegemonic construction of power and identity and into his link with the Venezuelan people. The logic of linkage here is based on a complex, interconnecting process:

- (1) the use and reformulation of common cultural symbols; (2) populist ideologies and practices; (3) a savvy use of communication and media to exercise his power; (4) the boost of inclusive, compensatory, and participatory practices in which Chávez's constituents not only felt mirrored but also endowed with a refashioned, mimetised, identity eventually called Chávez. (Block, 20)

To Block, the concept of populism is a combination of theoretical approaches and of authors. She identifies ten characteristics of populism that Chávez progressively assumed from period to period, with an emphasis on the discursive construction of the people; for example, a turn away from representative democracy toward participatory, as well as antielitist, antiparty, and antiestablishment elements. Her theoretical construction of populism to understand *Chavismo* centers on a "political style of communication" (Block, 43).

The design of her research incorporates distinct methods. She considers discourses, media, and official documents, as well as interviews performed in Venezuela with politicians, both Chavist and opposition; journalists; community leaders; and academics. Based on this material, Block offers a detailed analysis of Chávez's political communication and identifies the four periods.

The soft phase emanated from the emotiveness of national politics, which depended on Chávez's perennial appeal to the emotions and cultural symbols par-

ticularly associated with Bolivarianism, political antipathy, and Christian redemption. The constitutional amendments that elevated participatory democracy over representative changed the dynamics between political, social, and economic actors in regard to *Puntofijismo*. This phase also had a “permanent campaign” strategy. For this phase, Chávez’s identity politics consisted in a dichotomous construction of the Bolivarian people (his voters) against his adversaries (the traditional political class).

The adversarial phase was based on laying the groundwork for structural economic changes and the discursive construction of two groups of enemies, businesspeople and the media elite. Characterizing this phase were growing social polarization between *Chavismo* and anti-*Chavismo* and growing “mediatization” of politics. Accompanying the Manichean political communication, dividing the “Bolivarian people” and the “oligarchs,” this period was marked by a general strike, which wreaked havoc on the Venezuelan economy from 2002 on, and a coup that ousted Chávez from power for 48 hours.

The radical phase shows how Chávez began gradually to include himself in the building of the national collective identity. Chávez continued to emphasize a Manichean discourse between “us” and “them” but struck a more conciliatory tone to reduce tensions. The “radical” Chávez implemented the Bolivarian social missions, such as his regime’s unique reclamation and redistribution program. The period also saw a referendum on his mandate, but the abstention rate was high. The opposition claimed electoral fraud and boycotted the 2005 elections. Chávez took advantage of the situation to reclaim legitimacy and the public’s faith before his 2006 re-election.

The mimetic phase lasted from this third electoral victory until Chávez’s death, through which the “Bolivarian people” symbolically became Chávez. During this period, according to Block, the objective was to establish socialism in Venezuela. To that end, the figure of Bolívar was reworked as an antielitist Marxist. The social missions helped in the construction of the *Chavista* identity in a dualistic and populist context. The personalization of politics intensified concurrently with international pressures.

In Block’s work, the characteristics of populism take shape in the figure of Chávez. His style of political communication, centered on the sovereign Bolivarian people, emphasized inclusion, participation, and recognition as “a redemptive form of left democratic populism” (Block, 205). The plebiscitarian linkages, as well as the antielite and anti-imperialist appeals, increased gradually. Symbolic Bolivarian, Christian, and antiestablishment representations grew from period to period. Additionally, the patronage and clientelism associated with the populist style intensified. By promoting top-down sociopolitical mobilization, Chávez sidestepped traditional formal institutions. Similarly, the mediatization of politics helped Chávez when confronting other political actors.

In analyzing Chávez’s political communication style through its discourse and rhetoric, Block relies on the discursive approach, but never casts aside those distinguishable elements of the other approaches. For example, when identifying how Chávez kept political power in his own hands by manipulating the media and

declaring states of emergency, her analysis coincides with the political-strategic approach. And just as tracing the incorporation of the symbolic “popular” in his rhetoric and discourse resembles the sociocultural approach, highlighting the role of ideology to parse Chávez’s political communication looks like an ideational approach.

The texts of Block and Jansen rely on sources of the era (e.g., the press, archives, and images) that permit them to identify the contours and complexity of *Chavismo* and the 1931 process of populist mobilization in Peru, respectively. They assemble literature and data, particularly in Spanish, produced in Venezuela and Peru. As a result, they offer a meticulous analysis of primary sources that is invaluable for understanding these cases of populism in depth.

Unlike Block and Jansen, who use case studies, Barr attempts to offer a comparative analysis of the causes underlying the third wave of populism in Latin America, which manifested itself with the ascension of the radical left associated with twenty-first-century socialism. He defines populism using two attributes: antiestablishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages. In more concrete terms, populism is defined as

a means of building and/or maintaining political power based on the mass mobilization of supporters through the use of antiestablishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages. In one respect, populism represents a challenge to those who wield power, on behalf of ordinary citizens and embodied by an individual. Yet it is not merely the idea that the status quo must change. It is instead a strategy of enhancing the power of an individual. A populist is someone who uses the strategy as a primary, though not necessarily only, means of generating support. Populists seek to develop (and successful ones do) a mass movement as a basis of power. (Barr, 44)

Seen thus, the definition of populism for Barr has a direct connection with the political-strategic approach. His focus on leaders who seek to obtain and hold power shows the importance, to him, of those formal mechanisms to, among other things, promote selective incentives and tilt the political pitch. Furthermore, he elucidates the role of political actors in the implementation of strategy involving antiestablishment appeals.

Barr’s empirical analysis is a combination of a comparative methodology (qualitative comparative analysis) and case studies. His research objectives are to know and determine the reasons that populism does or does not arise; similarly, he seeks to differentiate between outsider, maverick, and antiestablishment candidates. (For a similar distinction, see the work of Carreras 2012).

In the regional analysis of Latin America, Barr covers six countries that had populist candidates between 1996 and 2010 (Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela) and five without, as negative cases (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay). The case studies serve to generate new variables (e.g., the influence of the international stage on domestic Bolivian politics) and to support his comparative findings. In the case studies, Barr highlights the role of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia.

The key outcome (i.e., dependent variable) includes two considerations: the categorization of each presidential candidate as populist or not and the portion of votes each won. The independent variables are the institutionalization of the party system, the perception of corruption, confidence in political institutions, the economy of each country, neoliberal economic reforms and the resultant exposure to the international market, and the unmet social needs of the citizenry.

In calibrating (i.e., operationalizing) these variables, Barr holds that a weakly institutionalized party system with a high perception of corruption explains support for antiestablishment candidates. Antiestablishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages under the right circumstances can be powerful weapons for a populist leader. Similarly, the plebiscitarian linkages can permit the electorate to directly reward or punish a populist leader.

Although Barr finds cases during the period studied that lack populist candidates, he does not expand on them. Instead, he emphasizes the cases of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela—all emblematic of radical populism—to illustrate his empirical work. Only in the comparative analysis does he incorporate candidates who lack populist characteristics and refrain from antiestablishment appeals.

The fourth author, Finchelstein, explores the historical connections between fascism and populism in comparative perspective. He attempts to expose the problematic relation between the two concepts and their links to violence as well as politics. In this sense, he seeks to understand the relationship of populism and fascism with the political system. Consequently, he emphasizes the relevance of both concepts and the context in which they develop. His analysis centers on a review of cases from Latin America, the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Europe and the Middle East.

As Finchelstein defines them, fascism and populism are two contextually interconnected historical formations, but historians and political scientists rarely analyze them together. He maintains that the objective of fascism is to destroy democracy from within and create a totalitarian dictatorship. That involves abolishing civil society, political tolerance, and pluralism, essential characteristics of democracy. Consequently, fascism redefines the popular foundations of sovereignty, substituting political representation with the will of the dictator, who acts in the name of the people.

For Finchelstein, populism is an authoritarian form of democracy that emerged first as a reformulation of fascism after World War II. Modern populism arose from the defeat of fascism, as an attempt to reintroduce the fascist experience to democracy. According to the author,

Modern populism arose from the defeat of fascism as a novel postfascism attempt to return the fascist experience to the democratic path, thus creating an authoritarian regime form of democracy that would stress social participation combined with intolerance and rejection. (Finchelstein, 97)

In populism, political rights are put under stress but never eradicated. In sum, Finchelstein maintains that modern populism pushes democracy to its limits but does not destroy it, meaning that it is not fascism's equivalent.

According to the author, under fascism, the enemies of the people are the enemies of the state. Under populism, in contrast, it is the homogenization of the people that breeds intolerance within democracy (i.e., challenges democracy without destroying it). For Finchelstein, fascism opposes electoral representation and thus is against continued elections; populism favors holding elections, albeit with limits on political competition and while vigorously attacking its enemies. In fact, although the dictatorial experience of fascism was behind the first surge in populist movements and regimes, it helps to define the latter in opposition to their dictatorial origins.

Finchelstein emphasizes the importance to populism of the linkages between the leader and the people. He also raises the issue of the media's influence in recent decades on the construction of the populist imaginary (e.g., Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Donald Trump in the United States). The references to "populist gods" and "macho populism" form part of those constructions.

Finchelstein's book takes a normative position, highlighting the relation and differences between fascism and populism. It abounds in description, dedicating special attention to the Peronist populist experience. Finchelstein clarifies that "populism is not a pathology of democracy but a political form that thrives in democracies that are particularly unequal; that is, in places where the income gap has increased and the legitimacy of democratic representation has decreased" (Finchelstein, 5). In other words, only if it managed to extinguish democracy could populism become something more—dictatorship. In this sense, Finchelstein's book agrees with the work of Müller (2016), who holds that "populism is something like a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant peril" (Müller 2016, 11). Similarly, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) stand not far off: they maintain that populism prefers a political system that fluctuates between competitive authoritarianism and electoral democracy.

Finchelstein's questioning of fascism and populism over time and assigning a protagonist role to a charismatic leader who, in turn, wields diverse tools (economic and communicative) to legitimize himself in the eyes of his people resembles the structuralist approach. Furthermore, the appeals and construction of the image of the leader before the people show an affinity with the sociocultural approach.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Although the four books discussed come from distinct disciplines and subscribe to different theoretical approaches, they reflect the more than modest striving in the literature to understand the phenomenon of populism in Latin America. A distinctive element among them lies in the historical component of populism. These contributions, Jansen and Finchelstein in particular, make manifest once again that populism is not a new phenomenon. This element matters not only because it permits widening the framework of analysis and generating new empirical questions, but also because it shows the utility of diving deep into cases and inquiring into the logical possibility of discarding or corroborating the existence of signs and traces of populism, such as the populist mobilization in Peru's 1931 election.

Meanwhile, the fact that in practice, populism is not a new phenomenon does not mean that the research agenda is played out. On the contrary, our review of these books showed us that an amalgam of possibilities still exist. Reflecting on the theoretical links exhibited by the four books, we note that the ideational approach is not very popular in the region. The approaches explicitly or implicitly employed in the reviewed books are the political-strategic, discursive, structuralist, and socio-cultural. This could suggest a window of opportunity for future research on populism in Latin America.

A large part of recent literature on populism posits that there exists a growing consensus on the use of the ideational approach, particularly among those dedicated to studying populism in Europe (Akkerman et al. 2016; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). However, this review shows that the ideational approach is not dominant in research on Latin America. To conclude, we would like to propose that the introduction of the ideational approach in future investigations of populism in the region could permit adapting the analytical tools and causal arguments developed in that approach.

What would this exercise achieve? The ideational approach holds that it is necessary to study both the supply of populism and the demand for populism. This has two potential benefits: to analyze the sentiments, motivations, and emotions of the individuals who demonstrate some affinity for populist attitudes, since the presence of a charismatic leader is not a sufficient condition (Akkerman et al. 2014; Aslanidis 2016; 2017); and to track—using different methodologies—which political actors produce populist messages. In effect, the ideational approach invites examination of the contexts and political identities of the voters who might support a populist government. In this sense, the embrace of ideology(ies), on top of the discontent of the people, in the right context, with the right discourse and leader, are the conditions that pave the way for populism.

Additionally, the ideational approach permits the identification of patterns common across different regions (as shown in the studies of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser 2016). The minimalist definition of populism in the ideational approach appears more easily to allow the theory to “travel” to different realities, unlike the definition by Weyland (1996; 2001), in which personalism is a core characteristic and, consequently, party structure or social mobilization is excluded from the analysis.

Two further elements—useful for empirical application and related to the ideational approach—could be considered in future research: the use of surveys and of field and natural experiments. Through surveys, the populist attitudes of the electorate can be captured, as demonstrated in the studies of Rico et al. (2017) or van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018). Meanwhile, through experimentation, we could measure the effects of populism on democracy in general or on a specific institution or political process. Bornschieer’s study (2012) provides some of the first evidence of that function as it attempts to explain why, despite similar transformations in the dimensions that have structured the political space since the end of the 1980s, far right populist parties have emerged in some Western European countries and not

others. Similarly, recent contributions emphasize the use of (experimental) surveys for discovering, for example, the variations in legitimacy of the populist radical right (e.g., Berntzen et al. 2017).

NOTE

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