



# SWP and women's liberation - Economism versus feminism?

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Over the past few years the SWP leaders have been arguing over whether working class men benefit from women's oppression. The answer seems fairly straight forward. Yes. They have higher wages than women, are more unionised, have more valued skills, they don't have to do much housework, and don't face problems of sexual harassment and assault.

Indeed, one of the leading contributors to the debate, Lindsey German, points out: 'The appeal of the argument that men benefit from women's oppression is a real one, and highly understandable. It appears to reflect reality.'

Yet she, along with Chris Harman, Sheila McGregor and in the background Tony Cliff, argue that to hold to such a view is non-Marxist, automatically leading to theories of patriarchy and separatism. Waging a battle on this powerful group is John Molyneux, arguing that it would be absurd to deny the benefits male workers receive.

## The context of the debate

An important aspect of the economism that characterises the politics of the SWP is the tendency to deny the existence of privilege within the working class itself. While the SWP acknowledges the existence of oppression, it fails to fully understand the consequences of this within the working class.

In the early 1980s a sharp debate took place within the SWP. In the previous period the SWP had organised amongst women with a special paper *Women's Voice* and had organised *Women's Voice* groups. This was in response to the pressure from the *Women's Liberation Movement* in the mid 1970s. Subject to this continuing pressure, *Women's Voice* (WV) became a vehicle for bringing feminist theories and practice into the SWP.

A revolutionary leadership, committed to a thoroughly Marxist programme should have fought to turn this situation round, making WV a vehicle for taking revolutionary ideas to working class women and combating feminism. There were enormous possibilities in that period for building a militant working class women's movement, with revolutionaries in the leadership. But instead, the SWP leadership fought to shut down *Women's Voice*.

Cliff, who had led the attack, convinced the majority of the leadership that separate organisations for women were dangerous, but doubts remained. The subsequent debate focused on trying to find a theoretical justification for the SWP's about turn on the question of work amongst women. In particular, they sought to deny that male workers benefited in any way from the existence of women's oppression.

First came an article by Lindsay German "Theories of Patriarchy" in 1981 (ISJ 2,12). German correctly argued against the feminist idea that men are the cause of women's oppression. But she went further:

"I would argue . . . that not only do men not benefit from women's work in the family (rather the capitalist system as a whole benefits) but also that it is not true that men and capital are conspiring to stop women having access to economic production."

Of course part of this is true. There is no 'conspiracy' by all men, ranged alongside the capitalists in a class war against women. But what about the attempts by generations of craft workers to exclude women from the workforce to 'protect'?

their trades? This needs a proper analysis and understanding rather than simple denial.

Similarly in trying to show that working class men do not have any real interest in perpetuating women's oppression, German ends up denying the inequalities that exist between men and women in the family

### **Just an hour or two a day?**

To bolster the SWP leadership's arguments Chris Harman repeated German's position in an article in 1984 . He outlines a general understanding of women's oppression, within which he once again tackles the problem of the role of male workers. He does it in the form of answers to an imagined argument against the Marxist position--that 'working class men are involved in maintaining the oppression of women and benefit from it, so they can't be involved in the struggle to end it '. Against this Harman states:

'In fact, however, the benefits working class men get from the oppression of women are marginal indeed. They do not benefit from the low pay women get--this only serves to exert a downward pressure on their own pay...The benefits really come down to the question of housework. The question becomes the extent to which working class men benefit from women's unpaid labour.'

Harman goes on to try and measure the benefits men receive from housework:

'It is the amount of labour he would have to exert if he had to clean and cook for himself. This could not be more than an hour or two a day, a burden for the woman who has to do this work for two people after a day's paid labour, but not a huge gain for the male worker.'

In this argument he says he is excluding the labour involved in bringing up children, an invalid, formal division since for most women housework is done for the whole family, whether there are children around, older relatives or anyone else she is expected to care for. But even if we take Harman's category of a couple with no dependents, the idea that 'an hour or two a day' less work for the man is not much of a gain is patently absurd. How many workers would accept one to two hours on their working day without a struggle? The fight for the eight hour day has been one of the working class's most determined battles, and now Harman happily adds two hours onto this for women when they get home, saying it makes little difference!

Harman lapses into idealism in assessing the relative importance of the marginal gain that he concedes men do get as a result of women's oppression. He argues:

'...It cannot be said that the working class man has any stake in the oppression of women. Whatever advantages he might have within the present set-up compared with his wife, they are nothing to what he would gain if the set up was revolutionised.'

Socialism will be better for all of us. But the whole point is that outside of the context of major class battles that place class wide struggle and socialism on the agenda, advantages gained within the status quo by sections of the working class are very important to people. If the prospect for the dramatic change referred to by Harman seems a dim and distant one, with closures and unemployment the more immediate prospect then, hanging on to existing benefits becomes a real motivating force for many working class men.

How else can we explain the popularity of 'women out first' solutions? This reveals that, while working class men do not have a significant stake in defending the existing society, they are motivated, in real life, by the desire to cling to marginal and transient gains they have received courtesy of this society. Only if the prospect of the revolutionary alternative becomes real and immediate--and here the building of a mass revolutionary communist party is decisive--can the defence of sectional, or in this case sexual, advantages be really transcended and replaced by the fight for the historic, common interests of working class men and women.

### **Men oppressing women**

It was this particular aspect of Harman's article that drew fire from John Molyneux. He wrote:

'The problem with the Harman/Cliff/German position is that in minimising or denying the material roots of the sexual division in the working class it underestimates the obstacle to achieving class unity and therefore underestimates the conscious intervention required by the revolutionary party to overcome that obstacle.'

Molyneux himself puts forward a position which recognises the benefits male workers gain from women's oppression. He points to this as the material root of the strength of sexism within the class. Hence it is necessary for the revolutionary party to take special measures to counter this pressure. But from saying this Molyneux slips into arguing that men oppress women within the family.

The fault with Molyneux's position (despite it being much more sophisticated than that of his opponents) is that he does embrace tenets of feminist theory. He bases his argument exclusively on the relationship between men and women in the family. He fails to take the relationship of social forces as his first premise. Materialists must start from an understanding of oppression within the context of the dominant determining features of society, namely class antagonisms. All oppression is subordinate to, though stemming from, this fundamental contradiction in class society. The family is an integral part of capitalist society, but it is impossible to understand its role and the relationship of individuals within it if you do not start from its function for capitalism. Molyneux starts, not from the role of the family, but from the unequal division of labour within it. He asks how this is maintained:

'To a considerable extent of course it is maintained directly by the system through its socialisation of women into the housewife role, and, even more importantly, through its payment of higher wages to male workers...But it is also maintained by the system through male workers who refuse to do an equal share of the housework or, worse, insist that their wives do all of it.'

By simply looking at the family Molyneux cannot see that the key is not really who does what housework, but the actual existence of a privatised sphere of domestic labour. He concludes that men are actually the oppressors within the working class family. His paraphrase of Engels' analogy that 'within the working class family he (the male worker) is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat' does not save him from lapsing into feminism. The key question is what social conditions give rise to this oppressive relationship and how can they be overcome. For Engels, the systematic exclusion of women from social production was decisive in explaining why women were oppressed, not the division of labour within the family itself. This was in fact the result of capitalism's exclusion of women from the factories.

Women have to lose their chains to the household if they are to acquire the strength and solidarity to be fully liberated. Marx and Engels recognised this:

'We can already see...that to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labour. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time.'

### **The theoretical questions answered**

To understand the role working class men do play in the oppression of women it is necessary to look at the material roots of that oppression. It is wrong to look at the division of labour within the home, with women doing more than men, and simply conclude that therefore men oppress women. In this instance Sheila McGregor is actually partially correct in her reply to Molyneux when she says: 'Women's oppression does not consist in an unequal division of labour in the home but in a division of labour between the point of production and the home.' But McGregor herself then proceeds to make the equal and opposite error of denying the important role that the unequal divisions within the family have on determining consciousness.

The oppression of working class women is rooted in the existence of the family as the place where people live, are fed

and clothed, and children are brought up to become the next generation of workers. The whole process, the reproduction of labour power, actually results in workers, both the existing generation and the next one, being presented to the bosses ready for work. That special commodity, labour power, without which capitalism would perish, is produced not by a factory or in a socialised sphere of production, but in the private household of each family.

The role of women in this process is very specific. Women are the prime domestic workers who labour, unpaid, to bring up children, keep the house and care for any other dependent relatives. This occurs whether or not women have jobs outside the home. The primary role of the vast majority of working class women remains that of mother/wife. The centrality of this to capitalism is clear. Without the labour of these women in the home workers could be reared, fed and kept alive, but only at the cost of massive investment in the socialised places that would take the place of the family. Capitalism is incapable of completely socialising housework in this fashion even when women are needed to work in the factories and offices.

The role women have in the family is the very basis of their oppression. It is not a matter of a technical 'division of labour' such as exists in the class generally between different trades, because it actually condemns women to a sphere of work which is isolated, where the work itself is tedious, the pressures of feeding and maintaining the family are enormous--in short as Lenin described it:

'...She continues to be a domestic slave because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, stultifying and crushing drudgery.'

This work, not only tedious and unproductive in itself, also means that women are denied social contact with others of their class outside their immediate family. This is of central importance in preventing women from becoming organised, politically active and rebellious--they never have the solidarity and support of socialised production.

So McGregor is correct to say that the root of women's oppression lies in the distinct area of domestic labour in the family. Where she is wrong is that in concluding that since 'wives perform their duties on behalf of capital' she can reject the idea that working class men receive any benefit from that oppression. She argues that the division of labour is imposed on men and women, and that neither can escape their respective roles under capitalism. She notes that this division is reflected in wage bargaining, yet appears to be saying there is nothing that can be done about this under capitalism. The problem with her approach is that in trying to show that this is a class not a gender issue, McGregor ends up saying both sides suffer the same, thereby almost denying the fact that it is women, not men who are oppressed. This leads to a capitulation to the backward and conservative prejudices of men in the labour movement.

Working class men do benefit from the oppression of women, not because they are the cause of women's oppression, or that they are in some sort of unholy alliance with the bourgeoisie to keep women downtrodden, but by the very fact that they themselves are not specially oppressed as a result of their gender. The institution of the family is of greater material benefit to them than it is to women. This simple fact of life has enormous implications for the class and its consciousness both as individuals and collectively. Working class organisations are not automatically or spontaneously opposed to women's oppression, just as in fact they are not spontaneously socialist, contrary to the economist views of the SWP which see socialist consciousness stemming purely from struggle and not from the fight for communist leadership.

The struggle of revolutionaries to win the class to a conscious opposition to woman's oppression, which we know to be in the overall interests of the class, will be precisely that. A struggle. There are many examples of the problems women have had in attempting to get their own struggles taken seriously by the labour movement. Recent examples such as the Grunwick women and the Trico strikers only add to the list. The resistance men have is certainly partially based on their own position, whereby they fear loss of wages if women are brought into their jobs, and fear lack of a stable family or not having their tea on the table when they get in from work. When this happens--for example men opposing their wives' involvement in the miners' wives movement, something that was, unfortunately, common--then it must be fought.

## Oppression and sectionalism

Understanding the roots of women's oppression in the family provides the clearest answer to the problem being debated. Do working class men benefit from women's oppression? The question must be answered dialectically, something neither side in the SWP debate manage. When looked at in terms of the relationship between social forces, classes, as historical materialism must, then clearly the answer is no. Oppression weakens and divides the class. It creates an obstacle to the unity of the workers against the common class enemy. Women's oppression and the existence of the family also deny the working class, men, women and particularly youth, many rights and freedoms. It imprisons them in relationships and commitments which are often unhappy and oppressive.

But this answer is not enough. Oppression serves to divide and weaken the class precisely because it does create different interests between groups. The clearest examples are perhaps of oppressed nations, where imperialist powers plunder the land, the natural resources and the labour power of the indigenous people. The super-exploitation of workers in imperialised countries undoubtedly weakens the world working class and drives up the overall level of exploitation. But more than that, the acceptance by sections of the working classes in the oppressor nations that 'their' country is doing the right thing, weakens the world proletariat even more, as Marx explained with regard to British workers over the question of Ireland. But the reason why British workers fail to challenge the imperialist banditry of their rulers is not just based on excellent bourgeois propaganda, powerful as that may be. Relative to the workers in the oppressed nations, the workers in the imperialist country are better off. Indeed the superprofits from imperialism are in part used to grant improved living conditions to the working class of the 'home' country in order to try and maintain social peace. This is the material basis of the labour aristocracy.

The SWP's economism means for them that any and every economic struggle can--from within itself--generate socialist consciousness. The sectional and sexual divisions in the working class are down played. Yet, this ignores the fact that many struggles are conducted on a sectional, not a class-wide basis. Divisions in the class, between men and women, skilled and unskilled, black and white, cannot be wished away or overcome by exhortation. The SWP have no scientific understanding of these divisions. This was clear in Cliff's analysis of the labour aristocracy quoted approvingly by John Molyneux to back up his case. Cliff basically attacks Lenin for suggesting that imperialist capitalism divided the working class, by bribery, into an aristocracy and a mass, and that the aristocracy was the social base of reformism and the bureaucracy. Not so, says Cliff.

Capitalist prosperity allows the whole working class to gain and is thus the root of reformism; capitalist crisis sounds its death knell. This jimcrack 'Marxism' led Cliff to declare that reformism was as good as dead in the early 1970's. Yet, like Lazarus, it rose from the dead and later ushered in the 'downturn'. Cliff's theory did not equip the SWP to understand reformism's 1974 triumph at the polls. For them, no labour aristocracy existed; therefore, in an economic crisis reformism would collapse, having no social base.

This theory in fact reflects the sectionalism that exists in the working class. It suggests that not only are workers' historical interests identical but so are their immediate interests; hence, ever more sectional struggles would eventually add up to revolution. This ignored the reality of differentials, demarcation disputes, racist strikes, opposition to women's strikes. All of these testified to the fact that as capitalism did go into crisis and as the leadership of the unions failed to defend the interests of their members on a class wide basis, the real existing divisions in the class did not always disappear.

Sometimes they sharpened. Certainly, the divisions in the class are more complex--and Lenin was well aware of this--than simply between an aristocracy and 'the masses', but that division does exist and does have a material basis.

Chris Harman, Sheila McGregor and Lindsey German deny that the working class can ever have contradictory interests. To accept that contradictions do actually exist within the working class leads to revolutionaries having to argue with certain sections of the class that they support others in struggle for the solidarity and strength it gives to the whole class. The SWP would find such political arguments hard. They prefer therefore to opt for an analysis which says all workers have identical immediate interests.

McGregor poses it most clearly when she takes up the analogy used by Molyneux about the relative privileges of protestant workers in Northern Ireland. Molyneux argues, correctly, that these material privileges, in terms of jobs, housing and pay, although nothing in comparison to the privileges of the ruling class, nevertheless have an important effect on the protestant workers. They form the material roots of Orangeism and of the powerful cross class alliance between these workers and their exploiters. Whilst it is certainly true that the oppression of the Catholics is not in the overall interests of the working class, to the Protestant workers it appears that the defence of their own jobs and privileges is of more immediate importance than the civil rights of other workers.

Against Molyneux, McGregor argues:

'If, however, you separate off the immediate from the long term interests of Protestant workers, as John does in his article, then you end up arguing not only that it is in the immediate interests of Protestant workers to preserve their privileges over Catholics, but that unity is not in the immediate interests of the Protestant working class and therefore that Protestant workers realising their revolutionary potential is not in their immediate interests.'

This is a shoddy piece of polemic. McGregor hopes to show that Molyneux is ditching revolutionary Marxism. Having pointed out to us already that revolution is already on the agenda, McGregor, using chop logic, believes she has disproved Molyneux's argument. Molyneux clearly uses the example of the Protestants to show why revolutionaries must understand conflicting sectional interests in order to try and consciously overcome them, not pander to them as, McGregor suggests.

McGregor uses the example of the Nottinghamshire scabs to try and show how false it is to believe that one section of the class can have different interests. In an amazing feat of logic she points out:

'The majority of miners in Nottinghamshire thought it was in their immediate interest not to join the national miners strike but scab instead. Do we therefore postulate that their deeply held backward views somehow coincided with their immediate interests? Is it true they got 52 wage packets striking miners did not receive, so did they immediately benefit from working? Does that mean it was in their immediate interests to scab?'

Yes! That in fact would be a good definition of a scab: someone who puts their own immediate, short term gain before that of the class or his or her workmates. But you cannot deny that they did get 52 wage packets and a better wage deal as a result of scabbing. Of course revolutionaries must point out that in fact the Notts scabs have severely damaged their own interests by their actions. Their 52 wage packets will seem little compensation when their pits are closed, when management impose stricter working conditions and pay restraint. They are left weakened by having lost their collective strength as trade unionists, committed as they are now to company unionism and class collaboration. It was on this basis that militants had to argue against the scabs, not just on money or immediate gain. In fact the whole basis of that Great Strike was the class conscious understanding of 'us now, you next'. Arguing these points with any section of workers can be difficult, especially in conditions where so few struggles are victorious. The SWP with its method of tailing the most advanced militants rather than offering revolutionary leadership, are left unable to argue for anything other than consolation to workers that little or nothing can be done, however, because of the 'downturn'. When that is over we can get back to good old basic (sectional) trade unionism.

The examples of the Nottinghamshire scabs and the Protestant workers in Ireland points to another important factor in the argument. The bourgeoisie are well aware of the sectional divisions within the class. They consciously exploit these. They like nothing more than to see workers in pitched battle with each other. They are prepared to fund and fuel these divisions, hence the payment of scabs during strikes even when they are unable to actually produce anything because no-one else is at work. By offering higher wages to certain sections, and by encouraging prejudices they hope to weaken the class.

### **Women's oppression and working class men**

To return to the original debate, the position of working class men is similar to other sections of the class with particular benefits or advantages. Working class men do not cause the oppression of women, either generally or in their

own families and relationships. However, they certainly do perpetuate that oppression, all too often in brutal ways. When men deny their wives rights to go out, to decide when to have kids, when to go to work, they are oppressing them. But similarly, when mothers deny their daughters rights to go out, wear what they want, do what they want, they too are perpetuating oppression.

But this is not way really the point. Relations between individuals are not of the same scale in determining roots and causes of oppression as class antagonisms. It would be false to conclude that since women often oppress their daughters that they are therefore the oppressors or that they have any real interest in maintaining that oppression. But what has to be understood is that the existence of the family, the ties that women, men and children have to it in terms of the necessary functions it performs (which capitalism fails to provide in any other way), affect behaviour and consciousness.

Perhaps the best way to explain the difference between working class women and men is to understand that they are not social equals. And if a man enjoys greater opportunities relative to a woman then clearly he has certain benefits over a woman and these benefits are sanctified by an edifice of sexist ideology. Far from this edifice crumbling as a result of common struggle alone, as Harman, McGregor and German assert, the Bolsheviks--in the shape of Trotsky--had a different view. After the conquest of state power Trotsky argued that social inequality still existed and found its reflection in the oppressive relations that prevailed in the family. His standpoint is a million miles from that of German et al:

'But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an infinitely more arduous problem. All our domestic habits must be revolutionised before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family, in the normal sense as well as in the conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality in social work or even in politics. As long as the woman is chained to her housework, the care of the family, the cooking and sewing, all her chances of participation in social and political life are cut down in the extreme.'

A rather different perspective on the one or two hours Harman so complacently writes of. The real world of household drudgery that millions of working class women endure every day is seemingly a mere trifle to him. Real communists recognise the weight of these chains and fight to smash them.

Ideas do not fall from the sky. Peoples' consciousness is based on material conditions, which themselves are extremely complex. Bourgeois ideology is very important, but does not in itself explain why, for example men are sexist to the extent that they are. Such sexism is based at least in part on the fact that men would prefer to keep their dominant position which has led to certain apparent advantages. Of course women themselves are often the most vigorous defenders of the family and in many societies, the church. They defend those things which most reinforce their own oppression. It is clear that women are often backward in their ideas due to their isolation in the home and their lack of contact with other workers.

However, it is also true that it is women (a militant minority of women) who understand and struggle against their oppression. This is where the difference between the sexism of men and the 'sexism' of women lies. It is women workers, not male workers, who will lead the struggle against that oppression, and most rapidly ditch their prejudiced ideas. For men it will always be more of a struggle because it challenges so much and yet does not appear to immediately benefit them, not that is until they fully understand the liberatory potential of women's emancipation and its inseparable links with the achievement of proletarian power.

When it comes down to the question of how revolutionaries relate to women workers the purposes of the debate in the SWP becomes apparent. If male workers gain nothing but actually suffer as a result of women's oppression, then it should be no problem to convince them of the need to support women's liberation. This is the argument of Harman/McGregor/German who say that in periods of struggle, like the miners' strike, the Russian Revolution and other examples, it becomes apparent to all that women's oppression weakens them and it is thus in the interests of all workers to fight it. McGregor points out that: 'The role of miners' wives during the strike is, in fact, a powerful

illustration of the fact that it is in the immediate interests of working class men for women to fight their oppression and for men to support them in doing so.'

This is in fact a gross oversimplification of what happened. In the first place, the women were struggling in support of the men, not against their own oppression. As the strike developed a small (but very militant and prominent!) minority of miners wives broke out of the confinement to soup kitchens and welfare, and began going out to pickets, to speak to other workers and build solidarity. These women necessarily came into conflict with their own and their husbands' ideas about 'women's roles'. And it was often not easy. Many women would tell of the problems they had getting the men to agree to stay at home and look after the children whilst the women went out to picket. Obviously as a result of these battles the consciousness of many miners and their wives changed. But it was by no means automatic. The fact that the wives' organisation was denied associate membership status of the NUM soon after the strike shows the remaining prejudice of many of the men, not just to women, but to the militancy they represented.

Attitudes do change in the course of struggles, and this is why revolutionaries can be confident of winning millions of workers away from their prejudices in such situations. But it requires the conscious intervention of revolutionaries and class fighters to achieve this. The Russian Revolution--the other example used to show how anti-sexist the class is--demonstrates the potential. But the battles which women, in the Bolshevik Party as well as outside, waged in order to get their interests taken seriously, deserve study. The Bolsheviks were not themselves perfect; it took Kollontai, Inessa Armand, Nikolaeva and others to pressure them into setting up Women's Departments.

A communist conclusion to this debate would understand that women themselves are central to the struggle against their own oppression. Not all women are, however, because this is not primarily a sex question; but working class women, who have most to gain in overcoming oppression and exploitation, and from liberation and working class power. Recognising the central part women will play in their own liberation is not a concession to feminism as the SWP old guard would say:

'We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves.'

And what rabid feminist said that? Lenin, in a speech to a conference of non-party women in September 1919. What Lenin also said which contradicts the SWP line of being opposed to special forms of work and organisation for women inside the party and outside, was:

'The Party must have organs--working groups, commissions, committees, sections or whatever else they may be called--with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among women...We must have our own groups to work among them, special methods of agitation, and special forms of organisation. This is not bourgeois 'feminism', it is a practical revolutionary expediency.'

The members of the SWP who are confused by the debate over benefits would perhaps do better to spend their time studying the real history of revolutionary parties and their work on women. Cliff's distorted histories of Zetkin and Kollontai, followed by these shrouded excuses for a failure to take the woman question seriously, will teach them little of value. Study of the Bolsheviks, and of the German Socialist Women's Movement under Zetkin will be far more use.

Then perhaps the SWP would have more to offer the heroic miners' wives at the end of the strike than the patronising--"well join the SWP if you want to remain active". Women from the mining communities, just like other working class women who are thrown into militant struggle need to organise themselves, build a mass working class women's movement, fight not for feminism but for class unity including their own demands as women.

Within such a movement communists will fight for their own programme and their own leadership. Such a mass movement is not counterposed to the party, but an arena within which it can fight and grow. The SWP refuse to sanction or build such a movement. They fear too much their own weakness They cannot stand the possibility of



contamination with feminism again. So rather than fight such ideas in practice, they retreat into their journals to conduct their debates in private.

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