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CARIBBEAN STUDIES

ESTUDIOS DEL CARIBE • ETUDES DES CARAÏBES

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RESEÑAS

Teresita Martínez Vergne,***Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico:******Central San Vicente in the Late Nineteenth Century*****(Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992). (189 pp.)**

As do most 'younger' historians, I tend to deemphasize 1898, the year that marks the beginning of U.S. control of the island, as a watershed in the social, economic, and even political life of Puerto Rico.

Teresita Martínez Vergne,
Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico, p. ix.

Before the Spanish American War, however, there had been too much risk involved to interest American investors.

The conditions changed when the American Army landed on July 25, 1898, at Guánica Bay, near where the company's Guánica factory now stands. With Puerto Rico (then spelled Porto Rico) under the wing of the American government, and in a preferred position under its tariff system, opportunities in the island appeared more attractive.

South Porto Rico Sugar Company, Fiftieth Anniversary Report (New York: South Porto Rico Sugar Company, 1951), p. 2.

Teresita Martínez Vergne's *Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico: Central San Vicente in the Late Nineteenth Century* is a study of the foundation and rapid demise of a "central" sugar mill on the northern coast of Puerto Rico. Central San Vicente was established in 1873, the year of the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico, by Leonardo Igaravidez, a merchant and landowner. Six years after its foundation, the enterprise went bankrupt. Throughout the decade of the 1880's Igaravidez fought his creditors in the courts. In 1883-87, the mill was administered by a court-appointed receiver. Igaravidez spent some time in jail, returned to administer the estate under conditions

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imposed by the creditors in 1887, and died in 1888. Only six years elapsed since the foundation of the sugar mill and the beginning of legal procedures against its owner for defaulting on the debt.

Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico is an account of the disastrous failure of a sugar plantation after the emancipation of the slaves in the Island. It is rich in carefully mined empirical evidence and provides a detailed account of the social structure of a sugar mill in the aftermath of abolition. Martínez Vergne examines the process of land consolidation, the sources of credit available to the planter, the availability of local labor and the specific conditions under which laborers were willing to work for the plantation. However, there is a discrepancy in the book between the local analysis in the chapters which examine the empirical evidence, and the judgements presented in the introduction and the conclusion of the book. This discrepancy flows in large measure from the author's historiographical agenda, which seeks to efface the importance of the U.S. occupation of 1898. The attempt to show that 1898 was not a watershed in the social, economic or even political history of the Island leads the author to impose theoretical conclusions which do not flow from the evidence presented in the substantive chapters.

San Vicente's Failure to Centralize

Because San Vicente failed so loudly, the nature of the failure occupies a central place in the book. What were the factors that led to the demise of the experiment in San Vicente? An examination of the literature on the sugar industry allowed Martínez to locate a group of economic thinkers who formulated proposals for the restructuring of the sugar industry at the time of the abolition of slavery. These "economic reformers" proposed the concept of centralization and the introduction of the division of labor. The reformers recommended that sugar mill owners devote themselves exclusively to the industrial process of sugar fabrication, and that landowners devote themselves exclusively to the cultivation of cane.¹ This would allow mill owners to concentrate on improving their milling equipment by releasing them from the burden of the agricultural phase. Likewise, farmers would dedicate themselves exclusively to cane agriculture without having to meet the capital requirements to operate a sugar mill.²

The owner of Central San Vicente did not follow the recommendations of the reformers. Igaravidez attempted both to operate an

expanded, up-to-date sugar mill, *and* to plant and harvest the surrounding cane lands simultaneously. Instead of relying on farmers for its supply of cane, San Vicente took on the expenses of planting the canes and delivering them to the mill.³ *Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico* shows that San Vicente's failure to centralize weighed against its success. The difficulties associated with increased landownership are at least four, according to the study: (1) the cost of planting vastly superior amounts of land, (2) the combination of increased investments in machinery and increased investment in cane lands to feed the more voracious mills (3) the possession of lands in excess of what the mill required (4) the necessity to hire labor throughout the year for the weeding and maintenance of the sugar lands. The following textual quotes refer to the problems associated with the failure to centralize.

Owning such vast expanses, though, was actually detrimental to the interests of his [Igaravidez's] enterprise, not because the proposal for centralization was not implemented to the letter, but because high land-related expenses made it impossible for Igaravidez to meet his financial obligations. (p. xii)

Land related expenses in the context of heavy investments in machinery and other capital improvements were simply too much to handle. In the absence of immediate profits, payment of wages for agricultural labor and mortgage obligations on the land became too onerous when coupled with the necessary industrial investments. Reformers would have pointed to the failure to separate the cultivation of cane by others from the manufacture of sugar by Igaravidez himself as the weak point of the enterprise. (p. 39)

But from a strictly profit-making point of view, the possession of such vast amounts of land for no specific purpose was irrational. Simultaneously consolidating the five dependencies while applying innovative factory-like techniques apparently rendered impossible the coordination of the cultivation and the manufacturing processes. (p. 76)

Since the plans of reformers regarding the separation of the agricultural from the manufacturing aspects of production were never put into practice, San Vicente was forced to employ men in field tasks. (p. 107)

Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico contains overwhelming evidence that Central San Vicente failed to separate the industrial from the agricultural

aspect of the business, which is the same as saying that it failed to introduce the system of division of labor. There is also plenty of evidence that this failure hurt the operations of the industrial-agrarian complex as a whole. In this context, it is rather surprising to find in the introduction to the book the argument that central San Vicente's demise was *not* due to the failure to centralize.

What destroyed San Vicente was the limited access to investment capital for a project of its dimensions and the personal animosities that grew out of its owners' and manager's insistence on saving the enterprise, *not* the inability to separate the agricultural from the manufacturing processes as agricultural analysts recommended. (p. x)

Equally surprising is the assertion, despite repeated statements that San Vicente failed to centralize, that the enterprise *did* introduce the system of division of labor.

«The installation of sophisticated equipment, the *introduction of the division of labor*, and the adoption of innovative methods of production and administration seemed to mark the arrival of change in the northern coast.» (pp. 76- 77, emphasis mine).

In the literature of the period, the «introduction of the division of labor» and «centralization» were considered one and the same process. «Division of labor» meant, not the technical division within an enterprise, which is characteristic of factory production and which is also called the «detailed» or «manufacturing» division of labor, but a social division of labor in which producers exchange in the market. The «division of labor» meant, therefore, that the cane farmers who owned lands or leased them would plant cane and provide it to the sugar mills. The proposal for the separation of industry and agriculture was an attempt to tackle the problem of the scarcity of capital. It was expedient for mill owners to concentrate on the industrial aspect of sugar production while leaving the agricultural aspect to cane farmers. There is explicit recognition in *Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico* that reformers would have disagreed with San Vicente's lack of «division of labor.»

Reformers would have pointed to the failure to separate the cultivation of cane by others from the manufacture of sugar by Igaravidez himself as the weak point of the enterprise. (p. 39)

But instead of evaluating the proposals of the reformers against the realities of San Vicente, the study evades the issue altogether.

It seems more appropriate to examine Igaravidez actions as he judged and acted upon the situation he faced with the instruments available to him at the moment. Given more time, perhaps he could have ironed out the difficulties that arose out of landownership. (p. 39).

Would it not be more appropriate to ask whether the system of division of labor worked somewhere else? What happened in enterprises which did utilize the division of labor? Points of reference are needed to place the experience of San Vicente against other enterprises in comparable conditions. The case of Cuba presents an interesting counter-example, although in this comparison one must keep in mind the previous differences existing between the Cuban and Puerto Rican sugar economies in terms of economic development. In the Cuban case, abolition in 1883-1886 did not signify the demise of sugar production. Rather, the industry experienced a boom in the early 1890's as a result of the introduction of the *colono* system (system of «division of labor»). Prompted by lower tariffs in the United States, Cuban sugar mills produced the unprecedented amount of one million tons of sugar in 1892, barely six years after the release of the last slaves from the plantations.⁴ The system of division of labor and centralization brought successes in Cuba a decade after the experience of San Vicente.

It may be argued that conditions in Cuba do not permit exact comparisons. But the claim that San Vicente's collapse was not linked to the failure to centralize requires a comparative point of reference, and the author does not provide any. A second claim made in the introduction of the book, that San Vicente failed due to lack of credit, contradicts the evidence which the author mined out of the archives so meticulously.

Central San Vicente was able to borrow funds from institutions in Puerto Rico, New York, Paris, and London.

LOANS OBTAINED FROM LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL FIRMS

Date	Company	Amount
1869	Látimer y Cía.	42,556
1869	Sturges Co. New York	100,000
1873	Látimer y Cía.	40,500
1873	Daniel Ancel et Fils, Paris	19,300
1876	Félix Simplicio Alfonso	40,000
1876	Ephrussi, Imperial Bank of London	90,000
1878	James Barber Son Co.	31,500
1878	Sociedad Anónima de Crédito Mercantil	45,000
1879	Sociedad Anónima de Crédito Mercantil	50,000

Source: *Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico*, (p. 73).

This can hardly be called lack of access to capital. On the contrary, San Vicente had a broad range of sources of capital, by any nineteenth century standards. The real point, however, is what constitutes «sufficient» capital and what or who determines the amount. The notion of sufficient capital cannot be divorced from the structure of the enterprise. An amount which is not sufficient to operate a sugar mill and surrounding lands may be enough to operate only the mill. Indeed, this is exactly what the proponents of the division of labor argued. The introduction of the division of labor was an expedient against the generalized scarcity of capital. Enterprises which function in markets must adjust to the imperatives of the market. To argue that lack of access to capital is what brought down San Vicente is to ask that the market adjust to the needs of one enterprise.

After the abolition of slavery, increases in productivity in the industrial operation were not matched by increases in productivity in the agricultural phase, which continued to function with seemingly timeless procedures.⁵ The really expensive part of the operations, as the case of San Vicente demonstrates, was the agricultural component, not the industrial one.

Proletarianization and the Development of Capitalism

Chapter 5, (The Failure of Central San Vicente: Labor) is perhaps the most interesting part of the study. It shows that the labor patterns of industrial capitalist society did not exist in central San Vicente. The inflexible work discipline [...] characteristic of industrial capitalism did not materialize. (p. 103) Workers received four cuerdas of land for cultivation and/or construction purposes or a room, and a cow for milk. Each laborer worked about three days a week. An analysis of the wage structure shows that the central responded to individual characteristics, such as personal contacts or the length of employment (personalized wage payment practices), rather than strictly economic considerations, in the determination of the wages. The skilled labor force and the labor force in the mill were Black. White workers refused to work late, and refused to work in the factory. (p. 116) All of these features were linked to the fact that access of laborers to the means of production preserved their independence of spirit and prevented their ruthless exploitation. (p. 102) The evidence suggests that workers in San Vicente gained access to independent means of production over time, in a process of de-proletarianization. (p. 122)

The body of *Capitalism in Colonial Puerto* shows that the San Vicente estate failed to centralize, that it did not introduce the division of labor, and that the process of proletarianization was not sufficiently advanced for the sugar mill to obtain a reliable, disciplined work force. These are important contributions to our historical knowledge of the nineteenth century in Puerto Rico. They help us understand why San Vicente failed and, more generally, why the sugar industry of Puerto Rico became secondary to coffee in terms of export value in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. However, one must disagree with the following set of assertions:

Historians [...] have argued that Puerto Rico's sugar industry had to centralize or perish. The success of heavily capitalized U.S. sugar centrales after 1900 adds weight to their contention. But the sugar industry did not have to centralize to survive, nor did U.S. investments have to flood the island for capitalism to become established. San Vicente stood—for a very short while—as an example that this was (and would be in the future) a fallacious argument. (p. xi)

This set of conclusions does not flow from the evidence presented throughout the book, although it is consistent with the attempt to deemphasize-

the importance of 1898. We do not know whether the sugar industry had to centralize to survive, but we do know that San Vicente did not centralize and did not survive. It may be true that U.S. investments did not have to flood the island for capitalism to be established. But the failure of San Vicente can hardly be interpreted as proof of the establishment of capitalism. The failure of San Vicente proves neither that centralization was unnecessary, nor that capitalism was successfully established.

If anything, the failure of San Vicente suggests that centralization was necessary. The success of heavily capitalized U.S. sugar centrales after 1900 do not offer strong support to the idea that «centralization» and the division of labor were necessary. After 1900, U.S. corporations sought to establish unitary enterprises in which the mills owned all of the lands and rented them to *colonos*. These *colonos* were known as *colonos «financiados»*, «*controlados*», or «*de administración*», as opposed to *colonos* who owned their lands, who were called *colonos independientes*. U.S. centrales did not prefer the «division of labor.» They preferred the «company town.» A vast schism separates the enterprises of the twentieth century, dominated by U.S. monopoly capital, from unsuccessful experiments such as San Vicente. Here a great gap emerges between the empirical evidence carefully arranged in the chapters, and the assertions of the introduction and the conclusion. The assertions about 1898 are really part of another debate superimposed on this study. In my opinion the attempt to show that San Vicente was the embryo of Puerto Rico's 20th century plantations clouds the important contributions which the study unearthed.

The obliteration of 1898

The attempt to show that San Vicente could have been or was successful is linked to an attempt to amplify the development of capitalism: in nineteenth century Puerto Rico. The attempt to prove the last point is linked to an attempt to show that the economic conditions of the period after 1898 were not new phenomena, but rather gradual extensions of processes already under way before 1898. The author states explicitly that she belongs to a school of young historians who deemphasize the year 1898.

The attempt to minimize the effect of state intervention, and to write a «social and economic» history is welcome, because so much of the «old» Puerto Rican historiography was institutionalist, focusing on statesmen

and their decisions at the expense of the study of social and economic structures.⁶ Much of this historiography went together with nationalist myths about the Puerto Rican social formation in the nineteenth century. In their repudiation of U.S. colonialism, many nationalists portrayed an idyllic nineteenth century in which Puerto Rico was a place of free smallholders and society was free from class cleavages and social tensions. All aspects of this flawed optic must be corrected. However, in the attempt to correct the features which stem from the old historiography, the statements in the introduction and the conclusion of *Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico* obliterate realities more important than those uncovered. The impact of 1898 was assessed by the «old» historiography as uniformly negative for the Puerto Rican «nation.» The homogenizing concept of the «nation» erased social cleavages, and allowed the old historiography to assess 1898 as uniformly negative for Puerto Rico as a whole. This vision overlooked the fact that some sectors of colonial society, particularly the sugar producers, benefitted under the U.S. regime. The «old» historiography was concerned with matters of the state, at the expense of social and economic matters.

The attempt to correct the nationalist myths with a new vision leads in this case overboard in the opposite direction. When Martínez Vergne denies that 1898 was «a watershed in the social, economic, and even political life of Puerto Rico» she is surely overlooking the impact which the new colonial state had on the economy and social formation. The economic, legal, and financial infrastructures of the U.S. colonial state had a much deeper influence on the economy and society than the weaker Spanish state which preceded it. The transformations—social and economic— which the U.S. colonial state brought about were sweeping and decisive. To deny that 1898 was a watershed amounts to denying the immense social, political, and economic differences between Spain and the United States, the metropolitan powers that ruled over Puerto Rico before and after 1898. The consequences for this particular study are that the author searches for the social structures of 1930 in 1873, and she does not find them.

The U.S. colonial state created a momentous social and economic transformation after 1898. The tariff structures imposed led to the demise of the coffee industry and favored the sugar industry. In a space of a few years, Puerto Rico ceased to be primarily a coffee exporter and became a sugar exporter. A colonial tax imposed in 1901—the Hollander

Bill—expropriated thousands of farmers who became proletarians in the booming sugar mills. An immense social, economic and political discontinuity is what characterizes 1898, not the continuity which Martínez Vergne wants to impose on her evidence in the flawed attempt to show that the basic production unit of twentieth century capitalist economy of Puerto Rico, the central, already existed in the nineteenth century. The reality is that in the case of the sugar industry, 1898 represents a moment of discontinuity, for two reasons. The descent of the sugar industry in the second half of the nineteenth century was not stopped by the emergence of a few centrales. During the years of San Vicente's failed experiment, Puerto Rico experienced a boom of coffee cultivation. This boom ceased in 1898, abruptly. The sugar industry, which was almost extinct, experienced a boom after 1898. Central Guánica of the South Porto Rico Sugar Company, established in 1901, had capacity to produce over 100,000 tons of sugar, which is about 50 times the output of Central San Vicente.

Other momentous social and economic transformations shook the island. Unlike Cuba and the Dominican Republic, after 1898 Puerto Rico did not have to import labor from neighboring islands during the sugar harvest. There were plenty of laborers available locally (i.e. landless peasants), enough to supply the sugar mills of the island and to export to other countries. This phenomenon was due, to a large measure, to the process of expropriation generated by the colonial tax of 1901—the Hollander tax. This state generated process of expropriation created the conditions which transformed Puerto Rico's agriculture in less than a decade. Sugar mills in the twentieth century had access to something which San Vicente was denied: landless peasants, who became agricultural proletarians, in large numbers.

Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico should be read for its empirical evidence as a study of a central which failed because it did not introduce the division of labor and could not find a reliable, disciplined work force. It is a positive contribution to our understanding of the late nineteenth century. It helps understand why the sugar industry continued to decline until 1898. It reveals the absence of landless peasants in large numbers capable of constituting an agricultural proletariat in the sugar mills. In this respect it does help us assess other historical phenomena, including the changes which took place after 1898, because it has sharpened our image of colonial society before 1898. However, the weakness of the book is that the introduction and the conclusions

are not derived from the evidence presented in the middle chapters, but rather from an historiographical agenda which seeks to efface the importance on 1898 as a landmark in the social, economic and political history of Puerto Rico.

César J. Ayala

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NOTES

1. Martínez Vergne, *Capitalism in Colonial Puerto Rico*..., 31-32. In Cuba, similar reforms were proposed by Reed, Ruiz y Compañía. *Memoria de un Ingenio Central en Puerto Príncipe*. (Havana: La Propaganda Literaria, 1880), by José Curbelo, *Proyecto ara fomentar y poner en estado de producción seis Ingenios Centrales de 1,000,000 arrobas cada uno, con Alambique, para trabajar las mieles que resultan de la elaboración*. (La Habana: La Propaganda Literaria, 1882), and by many others.
2. For the process of centralization in Cuba see: Fe Iglesias García «El censo cubano de 1877 y sus diferentes versiones.» *Santiago* (Universidad de Santiago de Cuba), 34 (June, 1979), 167-214; «Changes in Cane Cultivation in Cuba, 1860-1900.» *Social and Economic Studies*, 37:1-2 (Mar.-June, 1988), 341-363; «Azúcar y crédito durante la segunda mitad del siglo XIX en Cuba.» *Santiago*, 52 (1983), 119-144; «Algunos aspectos de la distribución de la tierra en 1899.» *Santiago*, 40 (1980), 119-178; «El movimiento de pasajeros entre España y Cuba, 1882-1900.» (manuscript made available by the author); Iván Santos Viqueles and Hernán Venegas Delgado, «Un siglo de historia local: el barrio de Arango (1825-1933).» *Islas* (Universidad de Santa Clara, Cuba), 63 (1979), 13-64; Rebecca Scott, «Class Relations in Sugar and Political Mobilization in Cuba, 1868-1899.» *Cuban Studies*, 15:1 (Winter, 1985), 15-28; Hernán Venegas Delgado, «Acerca del proceso de concentración y centralización de la industria azucarera en la región mediana a fines del siglo XIX.» *Islas* (Universidad de Santa Clara, Cuba) 73 (1982), 65-121.
3. It seems that the absence of a «division of labor» between mill and farm which characterized San Vicente was indeed typical in Puerto Rico. M. & J. Rosich, *Fabricación de azúcar de moscabado en relación con las factorías centrales* (Ponce: 1902), p. 7, argue that: «siendo los hacendados a la vez, agricultores e industriales no han podido fijar toda su atención al mejor laboreo de las tierras y cultivo intensivo de las cañas.»
- Luis Medina Mercado, *El proceso de acumulación de tierras ocasionado por el desarrollo del capital industrial azucarero: el caso de la Fajardo Sugar* (University of Puerto Rico, Thesis, 1987), traces 34 cane haciendas in the municipalities of Fajardo, Luquillo and Ceiba, beginning in 1886. By 1901, only seventeen were functioning as sugar producers. (p. 117). The process of differentiation into mill owners and colonos in the area occurred after the foundation of the Fajardo Sugar Company in 1905. «En este nuevo arreglo económico la mayoría de los hacendados se convirtieron en colonos dedicados a la siembra y producción de la caña de azúcar. Ante la imposibilidad de mantener ambas fases por los cambios que venían ocurriendo y su difícil situación crediticia, optan por aquella fase productiva que es era más factible al momento.» (p. 52).
4. Oscar Zanetti, «En busca de la reciprocidad.» *Santiago* (Universidad de Santiago de Cuba), 57 (1985), 165-208.
5. Laird Bergad, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century: the Social and Economic History of Monoculture in Matanzas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 328, notes, after an examination of agricultural yields in the 1830s and at the turn of the twentieth century, that the transformation of the social organization of cane agriculture was not

matched by changes in productivity. The data about yields of cane per unit of land in Secretaría de Agricultura de Cuba, *Porfolio azucarero* (Havana: Secretaría de Agricultura de Cuba, 1915), suggests that agricultural productivity may have actually declined.

6. This discussion would benefit from an explicit list of the «traditional narratives and political explanations of events,» which Matínez Vergne wishes to overcome.

7. Andres Ramos Mattei, *La sociedad del azúcar en Puerto Rico: 1870-1910*. (Rio Piedras: Decanato de Asuntos Académicos del Recinto de Río Piedras de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1988), also deemphasizes the historical discontinuity around 1898.

Historia del Pueblo Dominicano, 2da ed.

Franklin J. Franco Pichardo. Santo Domingo:

Sociedad Editorial Dominicana, 1993. 659 págs.

La historia de la República Dominicana es única entre las naciones latinoamericanas. Pocos países como éste tienen una historia tan compleja, a pesar de su pequeño tamaño y población. Sólo para comenzar, fue en esta tierra donde nació el Nuevo Mundo; la primera ciudad, primera iglesia, primera universidad. Pero también en ella se dieron las primeras masacres de indios y fueron llevados a trabajar los primeros esclavos africanos. A través de su historia, la República Dominicana ha sido escenario de conquistas, invasiones, devastaciones, ocupaciones militares, guerras civiles, largas dictaduras y gran cantidad de gobiernos efímeros. Ha sido objeto de la codicia de poderes extranjeros como España, Francia, Inglaterra, Haití y los Estados Unidos. Y ha tenido varios nombres, Ayú, Quisqueya, La Española, Santo Domingo, y finalmente, República Dominicana. Con ésto queda claro que tratar de escribir una historia de una nación tan compleja no es tarea fácil, ni para principiantes.

En la actualidad, tres textos se destacan como los más conocidos y usados en lo que respecta a la historia dominicana. Estos son: el *Manual de Historia Dominicana* de Frank Moya Pons, la *Historia Social y Económica de la República Dominicana* de Roberto Cassá, y la *Visión General de la Historia Dominicana* de Valentina Peguero y Danilo de los Santos. Aunque existen otras grandes obras sobre la historia dominicana, estos tres textos son los más comunes y contemporáneos, es decir, surgieron durante los últimos quince años y son el resultado de las investigaciones de una nueva generación de historiadores profesionales que se educaron tras la caída de la dictadura de Rafael L. Trujillo en 1961. A estos tres «grandes» se añade ahora uno nuevo, la *Historia del Pueblo Dominicano* (2da ed.) de Franklin J. Franco Pichardo.

Franklin Franco es harto conocido por sus méritos académicos. Sociólogo de profesión y catedrático de la Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD), tiene a su haber importantes obras que lo sitúan como de los científicos sociales más prestigiosos de la República Dominicana. Anteriormente, ha publicado *Clases, Crisis y Comandos*

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