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KARL MARX'S

Theory of
Revolution

THE "DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT"

HAL DRAPER

KARL MARX'S
THEORY OF REVOLUTION

VOLUME 3

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THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

Hal Draper
with the assistance of Stephen F. Diamond



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KARL MARX'S THEORY OF REVOLUTION
Volume 3: The Dictatorship of the Proletariat
Hal Draper

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FOREWORD

This volume of *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution* (KMTR) is not about the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is about the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

That is, it is about the term. The difference takes us to the very heart of the present work. Let me explain.

1

This volume of KMTR is a bridge between the first two volumes and the next two. As presently planned, Volume 4 will take up Marx's views on other socialisms and on the "road to power"; Volume 5, workers' state and socialist society, that is, postrevolutionary problems.* My original intention was to discuss the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the last volume, since it is properly related to the workers' state period. This is entirely proper in terms of the real meaning of 'dictatorship of the proletariat', but it is unsatisfactory if we are to deal with the way 'dictatorship of the proletariat' has actually figured in the history of Marxist thought.

It is going to be our conclusion (this can be revealed in advance) that Marx used the term to mean nothing less *and nothing more* than a workers' state—what he commonly called the "conquest of political power by the proletariat." The period following a socialist revolution had several interchangeable labels in Marx's writings: 'workers' state', the 'political ascendancy (or sway, *Herrschaft*) of the proletariat', 'workers' political (or state) power', the 'rule (*Herrschaft*) of the proletariat', and some others; and one of these, used in certain contexts, was the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

*It will be evident to readers of previous volumes that the plan of KMTR has changed and expanded since my original description in Volume 1. As apology or explanation, I need only say that the project has taken shape in the making. Obviously, references in Volumes 1 and 2 to material planned for forthcoming volumes need amendment.

But this simple view has not been the usual one, as we will see. One of the problems is the persistent raising of the wrong questions. Thus, it has been written a thousand times, in complaint, condemnation or regret, that Marx “failed” to describe his ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in any detail. But this assumes that there is something *special* to describe, other than the workers’ state in general; and this is precisely what is untrue. Of course, it is quite in order to complain that Marx did not write more fully on what a workers’ state would or should look like, though here the reasons for his reluctance are better known. But in any case, the two complaints are one: there is no *special* revelation about the dictatorship of the proletariat’ (properly understood) that he could have made.

Marx, contrary to myth, had a good deal to say about the problems of the postrevolutionary period. There is the problem of defending the workers’ state against counterrevolution; of using force against enemies; of rooting out (or “smashing”) the old state machinery; of recasting governmental forms so as to maximize democratic control; and so on. All of these problems and more are raised by the term ‘workers’ state’ or its equivalents. Some of these problems have already been touched on in the first two volumes of KMTR, and, as mentioned, the postrevolution period as a whole will be the subject of the last volume.

The present volume, then, does not have the task of setting forth Marx’s positive views in this very important area. It does something else: it undertakes to clear away the underbrush that stands in the way of understanding Marx’s ideas.

I said that many problems are *raised* by the term ‘workers’ state’, but no one would suggest that the term itself provides answers. The case is different with the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. *Is it not true that this term was invented precisely because it points to special policies, policies that are specially dictatorial in some way? Do you not have a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ only if you do something sturdily dictatorial like, say, disfranchising the bourgeoisie, or giving double voting rights to certified proletarians, or at least occasionally throwing a brace of your critics into jail...?*

This is the sort of assumption that confers a special freight of meaning on ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, a burden that none of the other terms is thought to carry. This is the assumption that has been so thoroughly embedded in all literature about Marxism that it is seldom even discussed.

We know why this state of affairs persisted. The well-known fact is that the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ became a political football as soon as the Russian Revolution of 1917 presented its new state as a dictatorship of the proletariat. Communists and social-democrats, flanked by historians, scholars, and exegetes, launched into a bitter controversy, decade after decade, purporting to argue about what Marx meant by the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.

In reality, the debate was usually over something else, revolving around the Soviet state and its course of development, finally around the counterrevolution represented by the rise of Stalinism. I grant that this *something else* was of the greatest importance; but it was not clarified by a camouflaged assault on another front. The phrase ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ acquired the status of a shibboleth—a code word for both sides.

After most of a century of this sort of disputation, *Marx’s* ideas on the subject were buried under the mass of burnt-out squibs, dud cannonballs, and fizzes exploded during this ideological warfare. Few of the controversialists even cared much about what old Marx thought of it all, so long as a point could be scored in the real battle: the battle over the Russian Revolution and, later, over its corpse embalmed by Stalin.

This battle is not waged in the present volume. We will deal with the history of the question only through Marx’s and Engels’ lifetime, that is, to 1895. For the rest of this history, see Section 4 below.

2

As a result of the ideological wars, at almost every stage of the present investigation we have to strike down myths about Marx’s and Engels’ relationship to this and allied questions. In doing so, we have to deal with many statements that are—well, untrue. Now English is tricky about words like ‘false’, ‘falsity’, ‘falsehood’, ‘falsification’, and the like. The first two, says Merriam-Webster’s, do not necessarily imply conscious desire to deceive; the other two do. Now I happen to believe, with Dr. Johnson, that deliberate deceit in this area is rare: “It is more from carelessness about truth than from intentional lying that there is so much falsehood in the world,” said the great lexicographer, using ‘falsehood’ neutrally. Carelessness is not the main point: most people are so expert at sincerely believing whatever is convenient that simple mendacity is unnecessary; self-deception is the most effective kind.

In no case, then, will I imply that falsity involves falsification; but still a term is needed for this neutral ‘falsehood’. I have a lexicographical proposal. The word ‘fiction’ already signifies the relation of nonfacts without intention to deceive. Fables are surely a form of fiction, rather than falsification: when we come across cases of fabulation, let us call it *falsifiction*.

We need not, then, inquire into the subjective intentions of the fabulists. But their falsifictions will be a recurring motif of this study.

In 1962 I published a longish essay on "Marx and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" which introduced the innovative method of setting down and examining what Marx and Engels had actually written or said about the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', in order to determine what they meant.* This method was unorthodox, indeed singular, in comparison with the common procedure of the marxologists, which is to quote a snatch from Marx or Engels and then construct the corpus of "Marxism" by extrapolation, much as a paleontologist may invent a dinosaur from a single bone. But my eccentric procedure had the advantage of being fruitful.

The present volume is based in part on that seventy-page study, but a great deal of material has been added, and the scope has been substantially enlarged.

Part I, which examines the history of the word 'dictatorship', is not a philological excursion. It is basically an attempt to answer the following question: When in 1850 Marx first set down the phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat', what did the word 'dictatorship' (by itself) mean, not only to him but to the socialist movement and, indeed, to the general political public?

This part, therefore, is not a history of dictatorship (whatever the *thing* dictatorship is taken to be) but rather a history of *the term as a political statement*. To be sure, the distinction sometimes blurs in practice, as usual, but it is always the latter history that is the guiding aim. When the readers of Marx's magazine, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung/Revue*, first saw the words "dictatorship of the proletariat" in 1850, they responded with contemporaneous consciousness, not with our twentieth-century notions about the meaning of 'dictatorship'.

Part II performs the task of relating this history to the writings of Marx and Engels: it surveys how they used the word 'dictatorship' *tout court*. In this connection a great deal of ancillary political material comes to light, in particular on the dictatorial hankerings of certain socialist figures, some of whom are enshrined by marxologists as paladins of democracy and freedom.

Part III takes up the subject which is, in general, the secondary theme of the entire volume, viz., the relation of Marx to Blanqui and Blanquism. (It was represented in my 1962 essay by only a short passage.) The mass of literature on Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is permeated, saturated, and waterlogged with the myth (or falsification) that this phrase had some special origin in Blanqui or the Blanquist movement, and that Marx was, for some short or long time, a Blanquist in some sense, including the *Sticksickian*. It is

*This essay was published, in English, in the Paris journal *Etudes de Marxologie* (No. 6, September 1962), edited by Maximilien Rubel, who had been helpful in getting me started on this project. A summary, only about a third of the whole, was published in *New Politics* (New York), Summer 1962.

not just a question of establishing historical truth, though this is necessary; no one who is victimized by this falsification can understand Marx's views.

Part III therefore presents a searching investigation of Marx's relation to Blanqui and the Blanquists. My aim has been to make it the most thoroughgoing available. In this respect, too, the present volume is a bridge to the volumes that follow. A positive presentation of Marx's views on force and violence in the social struggle will be made in Volume 4, but here we have to clear away some rubbish. This is also the function of the Special Note on the meaning of the term 'terror(ism)'—not only in Marx but in all the literature of the mid-nineteenth century—for few terms have rivaled this one in its capacity for obfuscation.

Part IV presents and examines every use by Marx and Engels of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or its equivalent. It covers the ground to which my 1962 essay was mainly devoted; but much has been added.* In particular, there are new sections on documents and episodes involving Marx or Engels which I would call *near-loci*. Special attention has been paid to cases where the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or something like it showed up in the writings of others.

In the course of Part IV I have taken advantage of the subject to cover some matters that might otherwise have been left out of KMTR as digressive, but which (even if *really* digressive!) have the habit of cropping up in marxological works. Thus, the "SUCR episode" of 1850 has been referred to in countless books, with various imaginative interpretations, but the whole story (that is, as much of it as we know) has never been presented. Here it is, in Chapter 12. Chapter 16 on Moses Hess may appear to be digressive; but there is no better way of showing what ideas about dictatorship were prevalent in the movement *alongside* Marx—by figures hostile to him. Hess's dictatorial conceptions are all the more important because Hess has a right to be called the father of social-democratic reformism. The split in the Paris Commune over dictatorship is rarely mentioned, but it should be seen as part of the total picture. For a final example: the most amazing thing about Engels' condemnation of Plekhanov's interpretation of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (Chapter 20) is that it is virtually unknown; yet here the Marx-Engels tradition voiced its ~~not~~ repudiation of the whole future course of the movement on this question.

The complete picture of Marx's politics! through the overall aim of KMTR—would be unfinished without these episodes, vignettes, and case studies.

*Locus 5, Marx's banquet speech of 1871, was not included in the 1962 essay; I published a supplementary note about it in *New Politics*, Summer 1962, page 130. (The rest of the locus numbers, therefore, are changed from the 1962 list.)

4

For interested readers, additional material on the subject of this volume is available from other sources.

(1) Some documentation, for example, has been left out of this volume purely for space considerations. The Special Notes should have included two studies which I published in periodicals, but they have been regrettably omitted. These are:

- “Karl Marx and Simón Bolívar: A Note on Authoritarian Leadership in a National Liberation Movement”—an essay on Marx’s analysis of Bolívar as a Bonapartist dictator.

- “Joseph Weydemeyer’s ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ ”—in particular its translation (full text) of the first article ever entitled “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” written by Marx’s friend Weydemeyer in 1852.

The background of these articles is explained in this text; their publication data are given in the Bibliography. Copies of these articles are obtainable, at nonprofit reproduction rates, from the Center for Socialist History (Berkeley), which I helped to found in order to facilitate historical research on the socialist movement.*

(2) As mentioned, this volume ends with 1895. The rest of the history of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ will be the subject of a separate work, tentatively titled *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ from Marx to Lenin*. This will trace the question through the Second International, in the Russian movement (particularly in Plekhanov and Lenin), during the First World Revolution of 1918-1921, and up through the Year One of the Russian Revolution, that is, until November 1918. The subsequent utilization of the term by Stalinism, as the label for a species of noncapitalist totalitarianism, is of no separate theoretical interest.

5

This volume is the same as previous volumes in format and other technical respects. The following reminders may be useful.

- *Notes*. There is a sharp distinction between *reference notes*, which are relegated to the back of the book, and *footnotes*, which are intended to be read as part of the text. The general reader is advised to ignore all the superscript numbers that pepper the pages: the reference notes mainly offer information

*For information and rates, address the Center for Socialist History, 2633 Etna, Berkeley, CA 94704, enclosing a self-addressed stamped envelope.

on sources and some other technical matters, but never affect the line of thought.

● *Quotes.* Inside quoted passages, all emphasis is in the original, and all [bracketed words] represent my own interpolations.

● *Degree-mark symbol.* This unorthodox sign is used to indicate that certain quoted words or passages are in *English in the original*. A double degree mark (°) at the beginning of a quotation means that the whole passage was originally written in English. Inside a quotation, words or phrases originally in English are marked off using the symbol like quotation marks, °as here.° (This is done only when necessary, not in every case.)

● *Translations.* Where possible, I have used English translations from the volumes so far published of the Marx-Engels *Collected Works* (MECW) or from the three-volume Marx-Engels *Selected Works* (MESW). All translations or revisions of translations not otherwise ascribed are my own responsibility.

● *Single quotes.* These, with the punctuation outside, are used to indicate that a word is being exhibited—that a term is being used as a term—rather than being either quoted or used as an integral part of the sentence.

I | **DICTATORSHIP:**
ITS MEANING IN 1859

1 | FROM ROME TO ROBESPIERRE

The question is: what did the word ‘dictatorship’ (*dictature, Diktatur, etc.*) mean in the year 1850, when Marx first used the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’?

The assumption of the marxologists, it seems, has always been that it meant exactly the same thing that we mean by it in the late twentieth century. Few people, to be sure, will admit making this assumption consciously; but all have incorporated it into their argumentation; and in any case no marxologist has ever questioned it.*

But the present-day meaning of ‘dictatorship’ does not go back to the beginning of time; in fact, it is relatively recent. The first warning of this fact that I came across was sounded by Henry R. Spencer in 1931 in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*: “Dictatorship is a term which has undergone notable change in meaning.” He explained its original meaning, and added that, while modern times have seen absolutism, despotism and tyranny,

the concept of dictatorship has until recently been kept separate and history has used it to designate an emergency assumption of power. . . .

In the decade following the [First] World War, however, there was a widespread tendency to use the term dictatorship as synonymous with absolutism or *despotism*.¹

Actually, the change must have begun before the First World War, in the last decades of the nineteenth century. There is often a period in which new and old meanings jostle in the public consciousness; Spencer’s date probably marked the end of the jostling,† But his essential point is true and important: the present-day aura around the word ‘dictatorship’ is relatively modern.

* I must explain that I use the term ‘marxologist’ only pejoratively, much as others use ‘kremlinologist.’ I do not do ‘marxology’; my subject is Marxism.

† For example, in 1906 Lenin, discussing the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, showed awareness of a terminological problem: “The idea that there can be a dictatorship without any police, or that dictatorship need not be a police dictatorship, seems strange to [people],” he remarked.²

1. THE ROMAN *DICTATURA*

To understand what ‘dictatorship’ meant in the middle of the nineteenth century, we must go back to Rome. The reason is not antiquarian: the old Roman meaning was not dead in 1850.

During most of that century, ‘dictatorship’ still retained a great deal of its original reference to the institution called the *dictatura* in the constitution of the classical Roman Republic, an institution that lasted for centuries. It had three main features:

(1) It was constitutional and legal. The constitution itself provided for the naming—in time of invasion or civil disorder, that is, of crisis and emergency—of a one-man ruler who united specially extended powers in his hands.

(2) It was temporary. The maximum duration was six months, but usually the dictator handed his power back sooner, whenever the emergency ended.

(3) It was limited in significant ways. Most particularly, while the laws were temporarily abrogated, the dictatorship could not make *new* laws. The dictator’s jurisdiction was primarily not civil but military, whether against an external foe or internal dissension. Money had to be voted; the Senate held the purse strings. The dictator’s authority was confined to Italy. Power of life and death over citizens was early limited by law. And in fact, in the course of time, changes were made in the limitations and conditions of the *dictatura*, precisely because it was not conceived to be an independent autocracy, and because there was an obvious danger that this institution would be put to unintended use.

It worked—for three centuries: that means it worked. For centuries the practice of the *dictatura* stayed within the constitutional, legal framework of the Republic and did not degenerate into tyranny. The first *dictatura* was said to have been established in 501 B.C.; the last of the general dictators (leaving aside a minor type of *dictatura* I have not mentioned) took office in 216 B.C.

Finally, like all other institutions, this one broke down. When Sulla and Caesar had themselves appointed “perpetual dictators,” this meant the scrapping of the constitutional *dictatura*. Even so, Sulla laid down the office after a few years and retired. Caesar instituted a dictatorship in our current sense as a result of destroying the institution in the original Roman sense—and incidentally gave rise to a whole family of new terms (Caesarism, kaiser, czar, etc.).

Was the *dictatura* the cause of the phenomenon that came to be called Caesarism? When first Sulla, then Caesar, wanted to establish his personal *imperium*, the *dictatura* was inevitably at hand. It was the obvious institution for them to seize on and abuse. Therefore, in 44 B.C.—after the assassination of Caesar—a law was enacted abolishing the *dictatura* as part of the constitution.

The far-from-world-shaking result was that, when Augustus took over and returned to republican forms, he called himself not dictator but Number One or *Número Uno*—depending on your translation of *princeps civitatis* or *princeps*.

It was not the *dictatura* that created Caesarism or the Caesarist type of dictatorship; it was Caesarism that bent the *dictatura* to its purpose. If not that, something else would have been found, as always. Significantly, this prefigured the fate of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.

2. SURVIVAL OF THE *DICTATURA*

Something like the Roman *dictatura* still exists in the contemporary world. It is called martial law (on the Continent, state of siege), a form of crisis government or emergency regime. It has the essential features of the Roman device: behind martial law is understood a framework of constitutional law, not tyranny; it is temporary; it can abrogate laws (temporarily) but cannot legally impose new laws or constitutions.

Modern history, which has seen many invocations of martial law, shows that it does not *necesarily* lead to tyranny, though it can be abused. It is not regarded as *ipso facto* undemocratic, though a particular invocation may be so, of course. It is not only consistent with democratic institutions but, when it is directed against a threat to these institutions, it appears as a veritable democratic bulwark.

An academic conservative, Clinton Rossiter, has offered an extensive examination of martial-law forms of government as the modern incarnation of the Roman *dictatura*, in a book called *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in the Modern Democracies* (1948). The best-known example of such a “constitutional dictatorship” was provided for by Article 48 in the Weimar Constitution of pre-Hitler Germany, a constitution sometimes called the most democratic in the world. This offers the classic case of what may be called the political version of Murphy's Law: viz., *if anything can be abused, it will be*.

Between 1919 and 1925 this “constitutional dictatorship” was invoked 135 times,³ by Social-Democratic and other governments pledged to combat “Marxism” and revolution. Although Article 48 gave the president of the republic authority to issue emergency decrees in face of a threat to public order, it was actually used frequently to impose economic and other measures for which popular democratic sanction was lacking. When the economic situation eased up, in 1925-1930, it was invoked only nineteen times. By 1930 it was used by Chancellor Brüning to maintain his government, with the support of the Social-Democrats, on the basis of an economic program of cuts in welfare that could not get a majority vote in the Reichstag. The historian

Arthur Rosenberg sees this situation as the death of the Weimar Republic: “The Reichstag thus abandoned the struggle with the unconstitutional dictatorship of Brüning and his friends by a majority vote.”⁴ The republic then collapsed from one dictatorship into another, the Nazi dictatorship coming as the end term. In 1931-1932 Article 48 was invoked 101 times.

It is usually argued that the “constitutional dictatorship,” that is, Article 48, was not used but misused; no doubt. But the situation would not have been different if there had been no convenient Article 48 to abuse. The real history of Weimar was a struggle of social forces, not an exercise in political forms. Still, we have to understand the political forms of the struggle.

Professor Rossiter had no doubt that “dictatorship” might be needed to defend “democracy”—constitutional dictatorship, that is. Constitutional dictatorship, he wrote, has been used “in all free countries, and by all free men.” Indeed

It is in this twentieth century and indeed in these very days that the age-old phenomenon of constitutional dictatorship has reached the peak of its significance.

And

Our problem is to make that power [of the United States government] effective and responsible, to make any future dictatorship a constitutional one. No sacrifice is too great for our democracy, least of all the temporary sacrifice of democracy itself.⁵

Rossiter, a democrat and a patriotic American, would know what to think if he heard a *dictator* talking about “temporarily” sacrificing democracy in order to save it. Yet this would not shake his view that a democracy must have this device at its disposal. Obviously, any particular invocation of a “constitutional dictatorship” can be justified only by a specific sociopolitical analysis; nor can it be impugned simply by pointing with alarm.

Twelve years after publishing his *Constitutional Dictatorship* Rossiter crowned his labors of erudition with a work, *Marxism: The View from America* (1960), in which he did not fail to pay the usual respects to Marx’s ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ Only somehow, in the intervening years, Rossiter had forgotten all about his insight into the concept of ‘dictatorship’ and the survival of the Roman meaning. His new book had not a single sentence showing awareness that ‘dictatorship’ did not always mean what it means now to any newspaper reader. In fact, in at least one passage he lightly takes it for granted that ‘dictatorship’ means only “absolute power,”⁶ and that it meant this to Marx, as to anyone else, at any time and place. Elsewhere, in a genial moment, he credits Marx with a thought about “this proletariat, operating through the famous dictatorship”⁷ This breezy reference is to the dictatorship made

“famous” by one ignorant book after another, not to the ‘dictatorship’ discussed by Rossiter in 1948.

There is another piquant example of the fixed idea that ‘dictatorship’ is historically immutable: a multivolume reference work with the notable title, *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by P. P. Wiener. History of ideas: that is exactly what we need! It has, for instance, a long historical article on the career of the word ‘despotism’. But there is no article on ‘dictatorship’, and among all mentions of the term that can be traced through the index, there is not a single sentence to intimate that this word has not always meant what it does now.

On the other hand, there are some different cases: modern political scientists who understand that the Roman meaning of ‘dictatorship’ still has life. For example, Charles . Merriam explained in 1939 that it was a misnomer to call the Nazi regime a dictatorship. His discussion shows, not a softer view of Nazism, but a reminiscence of the classical ‘dictatorship’, and a feeling that it was still viable for him.⁸

In the same year, the theoretician of liberalism R. M. MacIver published a discussion of dictatorship in which he thought it useful to point out that the old Roman sense “is not unknown in the modern world.” He was referring to the Weimar constitution. Then he linked this thought with Marx as follows:

The original Marxist doctrine of the “dictatorship of the people” [*sic*] had in it something akin to the Roman idea. It was to be a temporary and exceptional form of government to prepare the way for the inauguration of a new dictatorless—in fact, stateless—order.⁹

Clearly, like Rossiter in 1948, MacIver did not think that the Roman *dictatura* was quite as dead as a doornail, and also had a glimmering of the situation in the nineteenth century.

Third example (to make a trio): Elie Halévy, in his much-praised book *The Era of Tyrannies* (1938), explains why he uses the word ‘tyranny’ instead of ‘dictatorship’:

The Latin word ‘dictatorship’ implies a provisional regime, leaving intact in the long run a regime of liberty which, in spite of everything, is considered normal . . .

unlike the Greek ‘tyranny’.¹⁰ He was not motivated by any special knowledge about Marx’s use of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, for on this point he displays the usual ignorance.¹¹

I am not citing these three cases to show that the Roman meaning of *dictatura* has been forgotten in our century. On the contrary: by their use of these words were exceptional—more than a bit surprising. True, exceptions still occur: for example, the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*’s “wise counsel that resorted provisionally to dictatorship.”¹² This

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