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Institutional Depoliticisation and School Governance. Hollowing Out Local Politics in Schools?

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ABSTRACT: *The depoliticisation of school governance is associated with technocratic management, over-optimism about its performance, and fundamentally a misleading view of public accountability that rests on formal participatory mechanisms without effective power. The purpose of this article is to discuss the implications of the managerial revolution on effacing the gap between school autonomy and political accountability at the level of the school organisation, and governing bodies. The analysis draws on comparative empirical data of changing governance patterns in secondary public schooling in England and France from the late 1980s. Some policy changes granting greater schools' autonomy are strictly managerial in nature, but taken as a whole these reforms contribute to the depoliticisation of political decision making in schools and at the local level.*

KEYWORDS: *Depoliticisation, Accountability, School governance, Local government, Managerialism*

Introduction

This article contributes to furthering our understanding of the policy terrain of the political depoliticisation of schools in England and France. It adds to the theoretical debate on the process of depoliticisation from the lenses of comparative public policy and governance. Intentionality and purposiveness are a central element in Peter Mair's definition of depoliticisation (Mair, 2005a), which this article applies empirically to the case of education policy. It is viewed as a tactic used by political elites to distance themselves from the policy arena

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(Flinders and Buller, 2006). As a policy strategy, depoliticisation entails the arena shifting of political responsibility from elected politicians, often represented on governing boards, in favour of school head teachers and managers who are put in charge.

Depoliticisation entails the reassignment of tasks from political parties to a number of non-political and unelected bodies and figures. This article addresses the question of depoliticisation in a comparative perspective, through the lenses of changing governance in state schools, resulting from New Public Management and associated reforms to grant greater autonomy to head teachers and remove politicians from governing boards (Mattei, 2008). The balance of organisational autonomy and political accountability is at the core of public management reforms of schools in the last thirty years. The malaise of the current democratic process is that partisan politics is hollowed out and becomes less appealing and effective, while alternative forms of decision making, including judicialisation, expert decision-making, and a reliance on non-majoritarian institutions, win great prominence and acceptance (Jessop, 2017). In a lecture entitled *The Future for Democracy: Politics in a Spectator Society*, Jack Straw, former Leader of the British House of Commons, observed that: «some of the argument now is more shades of grey, more technocratic, more about means than ends – and this may appear to make politics less intrinsically exciting and political leadership harder» (Straw, 2006: 10). Straw implicitly suggested that the intrinsically non-vibrant and anonymous nature of the world of technocracy makes policies obscure to ordinary citizens and professionals. However, to the extent that there are difficulties in generating legitimacy and trust in public services, political leaders' strategy of depoliticising decision-making may be the wrong remedy that increases, instead, the distance between citizens and politics (Hay, 2007).

The comparison between England and France presents an opportunity to examine how these European countries with a similar desire on the part of their central and local governments to improve the efficiency of public schools, but with very different institutional arrangements and historical patterns of state traditions (Kaufmann, 2003), have responded differently over time to convergent pressures of depoliticisation and neoliberalizing forces (Peck and Tickell, 2002). The reorganisation of school administration and organisations at both central and sub-national levels of government in many countries has been associated from the mid-80s with the shift from bureaucratic to managerial types of

public organisations (Aucoin, 1990; Hood, 1991). A new administrative paradigm is at the heart of the «managerial revolution» (Mattei, 2008). Its central myth is entrepreneurialism, associated with New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991; Christiansen and Laegreid, 2001). Organisational legitimacy is no longer derived from input and the legality of procedures, but from output and performance. These reform programmes strengthen the discretion of managers in relation to politicians, and transfer democratic representation to «civil society stakeholders» (Peters, 1996), and create structural buffer zone between politicians and policies (Flinders and Buller, 2006).

Depoliticisation is viewed in this article as one of the causes of the growing distance between institutions and civil society (De Nardis, 2017). Change does not only affect organisational structures, but it transforms the culture and normative values of liberal democracy. In the specific policy domain of education, head teachers are encouraged to become 'entrepreneurial'. Depoliticisation, thus, takes the form of a new type of governance for schools, in which the 'elected' element of political decision-making, more frequently played out in Governing Boards of schools, is scrapped away. In this article, we focus on the depoliticisation of 'politics' developed by Jessop (2017), and associated with the deliberate tactic of shifting responsibility from non-political figures to managers in order to run services more efficiently, and in an economical manner and «ostensibly (but not genuinely) free from state interference» (Jessop, 2017: 9).

1. Theories of depoliticisation

The purpose of this article is to understand the relationship between the depoliticisation of the political character of education and New Public Management reforms, aimed at improving the efficiently and economical effectiveness of public services (Pollitt, 2003; Hood, 2001). The analysis draws on empirical data of decision-making in secondary public schooling in England and France from the early 1980s to date. By depoliticisation, the article focuses on the distancing of political elites from the internal governance of schools, in favour of managerial power by school head teachers. This deliberate strategy includes a set of complex shifting of power (De Nardis, 2017) in the context of the prevailing neoliberal paradigm in contemporary liberal democracies.

The problem of how to limit technocratic dominance is not new. Many years ago, Seymour Martin Lipset observed that the great struggle of the future would not be between capitalism and communism, but between democracy and bureaucracy (Lipset, 1961). As Edward Page suggested (1991), professional politicians appointed to lead administrative organisations and political parties play an important role in preventing technocratic dominance. A balance then has to be struck between organisational autonomy, which presumably ensures more responsive and efficient local services by putting experts in charge, and political accountability, which makes these bodies accountable to ministers so that they can answer for their activities in Parliament and to the public more generally (Flinders and Buller, 2006; Burnham, 2001). The struggle between democracy and bureaucracy is also reflected in the scholarly debate about the regulatory state (Majone, 1996). Arguably, the predominance of managerial accountability and depoliticisation are 'the price we pay' for increasing the policy credibility of the European Commission, as sustained by Majone in his challenge to the relevance of traditional standards of legitimacy to European institutions (Majone, 1998). 'Managerial accountability' mainly refers to financial accountability, as public managers have become responsible for devolved budgets to schools and hospitals, and efficiency accountability, which refers to the process of generating value for money. Input and output oriented managerial types of accountability depend ultimately on measuring performance and assessing organisational efficiency.

As Dahl argued, the predominance of policy experts can be viewed as a 'guardianship' rather than a democracy (1989). However, representative democracy is impossible without the state bureaucracy, which is an instrument that serves a legitimately elected government and political elites (Schattschneider, 1975). The process of policy-making has become obscure owing to its technocratic complexity, even in the context of strong state traditions, as in Sweden (Lindvall and Rothstein, 2006). If output democracy starts to signal all its limitations in generating public trust and political credit for political parties, is the 'price' still worth paying? In any case, should a price be paid at all in first place for more efficient and economical public services? Has the democratic idea become a vision of political order that it is impossible in the complex universe of policy-making?

In contrast with some of the existing literature on the topic, this article analyses depoliticisation as it unfolds *within* the policy domain of education, for

change is not viewed here merely as a formal and procedural 'shift' in decision-making from political to apolitical arenas, but as the substantive element of policy reforms. There has been a growing and rich body of literature on depoliticisation in the fields of political science and political sociology in relation to European liberal democracies. As it happens, there is a hyperbole of multiple definitions provided by different scholars. It is possible to group these research debates according to scholars' position in relation to the characters of depoliticisation, its predominant type, and the implications for democratic theory and governance. Principal-agent theories point to the importance of formal controls, like partisan appointment at the head of executive agencies or budget setting, of elected politicians to limit 'agency losses'. Studies on the politics of delegation have addressed the question of post-delegation political control and agency's independence from partisan politics (Thatcher, 2005). The main concern of principal-agent theories is assessing the degree of agency loss, with relatively less emphasis on the wider implications of non-majoritarian institutions for the democratic polity as a whole. The central idea that depoliticisation implies a 'shift' from one political policy arena to another technical one underpins much of the public policy debate in England, including the recent work of Burnham (2001), Buller and Flinders (2005), and Jessop (2017), among others.

Burnham suggests that depoliticisation is mainly determined by exogenous economic circumstances linked to globalisation and politicians' inability to control economic conditions. Depoliticisation is understood as «the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making» (Burnham, 2001: 128). The prevailing form that it takes is rule-based economic management, departing from the old Keynesian, politicised and interventionist policies. Flinders and Buller's work adopts a similar definition of depoliticisation, as an active 'process' of displacing political responsibility to different decision-making arenas (e.g. 'arena shifting'). Hence, depoliticisation primarily responds to a strategy of blame avoidance, for politicians seek to avoid responsibility or unpopular decisions. One of the main shortcomings of this body of literature is that it is not comparative and its application is limited to majoritarian political institutions and governments. This limitation is compensated, however, by the development of a comprehensive classification of different types and tactics of depoliticisation which are useful analytical tools. Depoliticisation takes three different elements, according to Flinders and Buller. First, institutional depolit-

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icisation is the most widespread tactic whereby the public official enjoys a high degree of managerial discretion. Second, rule-based depoliticisation relates to policies that constraint politicians' autonomy in some fields of government activities. Third, preference-shaping depoliticisation is a tactic used by politicians to create a new political discourse and rhetorical reality. This article focuses on the first type, namely 'institutional depoliticisation'.

As far as the implications of depoliticisation for democracy are concerned, arena shifting, it is argued, does not necessarily imply a challenge to political legitimacy. The newly transformed government bodies and agencies to which politicians shift responsibility to for decision-making remain intrinsically politically legitimated institutions. Hence, depoliticisation is a misnomer for arena shifting (Buller and Flinders, 2005). This strand of the literature is less concerned for the implications of depoliticisation on the growing distance between citizens and institutions.

The main problem with this existing scholarship on depoliticisation of policy-making in England is that it somewhat minimises the wider implications of depoliticisation for representative democracy and the representative role of political parties and political elites. In this respect, it differs fundamentally from the scholarly work by Peter Mair on depoliticisation. He sustains that depoliticisation is a symptom of a profound democratic malaise, with far reaching implications for parliamentary democracies and electoral accountability. Peter Mair attributes the origins of depoliticisation to the failings of political parties by a process of mutual withdrawal (Mair, 2005b: 8). Parties are failing in two ways: first, in their capacity to engage citizens, and secondly in their representative function, as their political leaders retreat in institutions and public office holding. As far as the latter is concerned, Mair sustains that over time the dual roles of parties, namely representative and procedural, became separated from one another (*ibidem*: 22). He seems to suggest that the ensuing depoliticisation is a vicious cycle leading to the erosion of popular democratic control and electoral accountability (*ibidem*: 23). It leads to putting under stress the traditional and conventional models of representation and party democracy. Thus, depoliticisation is not only conceptualised as a type of polity, politics or policymaking, but it becomes a widespread and fundamentally non-democratic mode of governance, so as to «hollow out partisan politics» (Mair, 2005a: 25). Empirical findings presented in this article and elsewhere (Mattei, 2012) suggest that this

argument would not be fundamentally challenged by the thesis of a reassertion of politics (Pierre, 1995; Halligan, 1997) and re-politicisation (Jessop, 2017).

On one hand, politicians may try to adapt to the changed circumstances of managerial technocratic dominance, and diminishing political control of decision-making processes, by using more informal mechanisms, or by resuscitating the old practice of patronage and party appointment of the higher echelons of the bureaucracy. On the other hand, it is also important though to account for the impact of new organisational values, which have emerged as a result of New Public Management, on the reassertion of political control. The proposed article contributes to open up the question of whether parties will be capable of reasserting 'politics' within state institutions, or whether the process of hollowing out will continue relentlessly. Schools are not empty black boxes implementing decisions made by national governments, and they are not simply instrumental to political strategies. Entrepreneurialism has made schools themselves policy entrepreneurs of change. Their managers have gained a dominant voice and have cultivated allies outside political parties in the civil society. This political space of policymaking has been firmly occupied and depoliticised.

Hence, schools are no longer instrumental to political parties, but institutional actors with their own autonomous power. Welfare organisations do often adapt to their institutional context, but they often play an active role in shaping those contexts (Parsons, 1956). It remains to be seen how parties can influence the institutionalised rules pertaining to the externally legitimated managerial dominant paradigm. Earlier work has suggested that parties find it increasingly difficult to control welfare bureaucracies because the organisational legitimacy of hospitals and schools have changed and hybrid forms of accountability permeate public services delivery (Mattei and Benish, forthcoming). Welfare organisations show considerable ability to survive, precisely because they incorporate powerful myths and «institutionalised rules» (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Thus, organisational success depends not only on matching the demands of internal efficiency, but also on conformity to the prevailing neoliberal normative paradigms (Peck and Tickell, 2002). External institutionalised rules are a legitimate source of organisational structure, which is not only the result of apolitical engineering. Entrepreneurialism functions, then, as a new paradigm for schools, and its deeply rooted institutionalisation in representative democracies implies that there may be limited discretion in the future for any political party

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to repoliticise the process on the basis of the traditional representative role of political parties.

2. Governance changes in schools in England and France: Divergent approaches to local politics

2.1. *England*

The British education system, in comparison to the French one, has traditionally been decentralised. Until the late 1980s, publicly funded schools in England were under the control of local education authorities (a part of local councils, run by democratically elected members). Some schools had a religious character: their capital costs were partly-funded by the church and the schools had more autonomy. There was no national curriculum and the assessment system comprised public examinations (set by private examination boards) taken at the end of compulsory education and at the end of upper secondary education. Policy developments since the late 1980s, however, have marked a steady and radical departure from the central role played by local politics in the running of schools. The 1988 *Education Act* assigned to schools' governing bodies the strategic planning of schools and the role of accountability overseer of schools. Most recent reforms have consolidated the autonomy of schools in England and the declining role of local government (DfES, 2004).

The idea of leaving schools to teachers in a 'secret garden of the curriculum' has been under attack, at least since David Eccles, the Conservative Secretary of State in the 1960s, introduced that memorable description of teachers' autonomy (Timmins, 1995). The perception that 'something had to be done' by the mid-1970s was strengthened by the economic crisis of 1976 and the public spending cuts that followed. There was a widespread fear that the U.K. did not have an education system able to sustain economic competitiveness in the world economy. In 1976, the then Labor Party Prime Minister, James Callaghan, aimed to launch a 'great debate on education' in his famous speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, in which he directly challenged and criticized the teaching profession, as responsible for the perceived 'crisis' in education. He advocated more power to parents as a countermeasure. Callaghan's speech pre-

figured the confrontational assault that characterized Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's educational policies in the 1980s. Her and subsequent Conservative governments adopted three landmark reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, with the objective of creating an educational system based on 'choice and diversity', and significantly diminish the role of local government favoring instead schools' autonomy and self-governing.

The key and lasting changes of the Thatcher period were introduced by the 1988 *Education Reform Act*. This reform introduced a new system of funding. Schools were to receive so much per pupil enrolled – i.e., 'money followed the pupil'. The central government included a sum in local authorities' allocations depending on the number of school children enrolled. This was intended to be spent on schools and the requirement to do so became absolute by 2004. Local councils could add to this central funding as they wished but they were required to allocate the schools budget between schools on a weighted per capita basis approved by the central authority in England. If a school did not attract as many pupils as in the previous year because its exam results had been poor, or for other reasons, it lost money (Glennerster, 2009).

Secondary schools in England and Wales were given the option to opt out from the control of the local education authorities (LEAs) and to spend the funds received from the central government as they wished. But even local authority's managed schools received devolved budgets over which their governing bodies, advised by the head teacher, had complete control. These governing bodies consisted of parents elected by all the parents with children at the school, elected members of staff, and other local community members.

Governing bodies in England are based on the stakeholder model with various groups being represented, namely staff, parents, and lay people from the community. They typically meet three to seven times a year, and they do vary in size. Formal responsibilities of governing bodies have changed over time and their role has been most recently specified by the inspectorate Ofsted in their 2013 Handbook (Ofsted, 2013). Strategic planning, accountability, performance, and overall responsibility for standards are the main responsibilities of governing bodies. Local government does no longer need to offer support to them, and the role of local political decision-making has been declining steadily.

In an attempt to empower 'consumers' (as parents and students were defined), the 1992 reform later transformed the role and composition of the gov-

erning bodies of schools. Parents acquired a major role as members of governing bodies, together with other lay people (DfES, 1992). Beforehand, local government councillors, who claimed to be experts on educational matters, used to be members of the school governing bodies. The composition of governing bodies also changed to allow greater representation of parents (in addition to school staff, other members of the community, including members of political parties). The view was that «scrutiny by parents, employers and the local community at large will be intense, interested and increasingly informed, to the benefit of our children» (Department for Education, 1992: 5).

The head teacher is responsible for the school's leadership and management; governors are expected to challenge and support the school, provide constructive advice and act as a 'critical friend'. They are not expected to be involved in the detail of the day-to-day operational management of the school. Legally, school governing bodies have responsibility for staffing and financial management (setting the school's budget, appointing staff and setting their pay in line with the national School Teachers Pay and Conditions Document. Governing bodies (whose most influential member is the head teacher) are accountable for how that money is spent via a method of common financial reporting, set down in statute. The relationship between head teachers and governors is also formally one of accountability of the former to the latter. However, in practice parents and lay members may not have the expertise and the skills, the inclination, and sometimes the information, to challenge the head teacher's budgetary decisions.

Overall, the accountability regime in English schools has moved away from one of predominantly professional accountability towards a combination of different types of accountability – professional, hierarchical, and market-driven types (Mattei, 2012). These are inextricably linked together. The focus on test results, as the main content of new types of accountability, is consistent with both hierarchical and market accountability at all levels – school, local authority, central government. Data from national tests are available to parents, so providing an account to parents as consumers under the market accountability regime. The same indicators are the focus of targets by the Treasury, by government departments and schools. In this changed policy context, teachers have lost ground in favour of other actors, such as head teachers and parents. From the late 1990s to date schools' autonomy ahs been consolidated and local government does no longer support governing bodies. Governors call the

head teacher to account, and local political decision-making has been made fairly irrelevant. As we will see in the next section on France, the local level of government remains highly influential in French schools, not only in terms of representation but also executive decision-making.

2.2. *France*

In 2004, a landmark reform decentralised the governance of primary and secondary schools in France (Loi n. 2004-809). Local authorities became responsible for staffing, budgeting, and strategic planning of schools. Centralisation, uniformity and neo-corporatism, however, were traditionally identified as the fundamental traits of the French educational system (Archer, 1979). The central government until the mid-1980s was responsible for the organisation of the educational services throughout the country, the regulation of national examinations, the definition of the content of the national curriculum, the training and recruitment of teachers and the control of teaching methods. Not much was left to the sub-national level of government or individual schools as far as educational policymaking and leadership was concerned.

The French Education Ministry is organised along regional lines. A rector is the minister's direct representative in the provinces. The rectorate is a complex organisational structure with major service delivery responsibilities. The rectorates represent the field services of the Education Ministry. Reforms in the 1990s have introduced globalised budgets and cost centres status for rectorates, which have conferred greater financial flexibility and autonomy in setting targets and allocating resources. However, as Cole and Jones show in their findings (2005: 575), there are obstacles to change, including the continued dependency of local services from the Finance Ministry and the opposition of trade unions, which are openly suspicious of moves to delegate greater responsibility to the field services. The modern école was built upon a dual power structure: the State set the rules for the organisation, and funding of the school and the teacher profession was largely autonomous with regards to their pedagogic activity. The long traditions of educational centralisation and the independence of the professions have been mutually reinforcing and have made the system closed to external public influences (notably parents and civil society).

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It was only in the midst of the economic crisis of the mid-1980s and the challenges posed by globalisation that a new legal entity and organisational level was created between the State and the teaching profession. The *établissement public local d'enseignement* (EPLE or school organization) was a new organisation designed to reorganise the State education system along the lines of a new decentralised state management. The reform, announced in 1975, and only enacted in 1985 conferred upon the schools explicit responsibilities and a new autonomy for the first time in the history of the French Republic. Schools became legal entities (EPLE) in their own rights with administrative, financial and pedagogical powers. Most importantly, the creation of the EPLE has triggered three processes (Demailly, 1993). First, it modified the relationship between teachers and head teachers by conferring upon the latter an unprecedented power to influence teachers' pedagogical decisions. Second, by promoting the autonomy of schools, EPLE created a demand for transparency and users' accountability about actions taken at that level. Third, the creation of the EPLE enhanced a process of professionalization of head teachers, encouraging them to develop new skills and to move beyond a merely bureaucratic role towards a new leadership role. The *principal* in the colleges and *proviseur* in the *lycées* gained new powers and responsibilities in the 1990s.

The governance of French secondary schools is based on consensus and negotiation between a plurality of actors and interests represented in the Governing Board of secondary schools in France, so-called *Conseil d'Administration* (CA). It is morally composed of thirty members belonging to three different constituencies in equal parts (so-called *represéntation tripartite*): one-third are appointed members of the regional and local government and the municipalities, or the inter-communal organisations, plus the head teacher, his deputy, and the financial director; one-third are elected representatives of the teaching profession, non-teaching school staff, and trade unions' representatives; and one-third are elected representatives of students and parents. The exact number of each group depends on the size of the school. Differently from the English case, local government is fully represented in each school's CA.

Unlike the English case, in French schools the CA is the main decision making body at the school level, and not merely a consultative body or a scrutinising body. The CA acts as an executive board taking key decisions associated with the budget and strategic planning of the school. It takes legally binding decisions

and is supported by the regional and local administration in doing so. Its functioning and responsibilities are all regulated by national law (Articles L421-4 and Articles R421-20 and R421-24 of the *code de l'education*). In practice, the key players within the CA are teachers and the head teachers, with other groups being rather silent or less influential. A recent report by the French National Inspectorate General highlighted the critical issue of promoting the engagement of parents in the governing bodies, currently dominated by other actors (Inspection générale de l'Education nationale, 2006). Moreover, the same report has noted the excessively bureaucratic and rule-founded governance of governing bodies, and called for streamlining the administrative process.

Conclusions

New Public Management reforms were based in the 1980s on a rather misleading view of state management and any promise in the late 1990s associated with the reassertion of political control over technocratic decision-making and administrative fragmentation was based on a rather simplistic view of political decision-making and governance systems. This article showed that the changes in schools' governance reflect the shift in the 1990s from technocratic government to depoliticised modes of state management (Burhman, 2001). The comparative analysis of this study emphasised that depoliticisation of political decision-making in schools have affected English schools much more than French ones, especially as far as the role of local government and local political governance is concerned. Any claims of the re-assertion of politics and re-politicisation needs to be assessed against the profound restructuring that has occurred since the late 1990s in the internal redefinition of political and administrative responsibilities of governing bodies in schools.

The cases of French and English schools have shed light on national variations of institutional depoliticisation across countries. Thus, we cannot conclude that the depoliticisation of school governance has affected educational systems in the same way. There are marked variations that this article highlighted. In France, governing bodies of public schools are mainly political-administrative bodies with strong executive responsibilities for the strategic management and budgeting of the school. They are quite large assemblies, usually composed of 30

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members, with members coming from the regional or municipal government in equal numbers as representatives of teachers and parents. Local government is a powerful actor in France, and the 2004 reforms have consolidated this role. On the contrary, the representation of parents in governing boards of schools is given a much greater weight in England. Local councilors in the past were members of governing bodies of English schools, but this has changed radically in the 1980s with the Conservative reforms discussed in this article, and with the steady and unabated consolidation of schools' autonomy.

In April 2019, French teachers demonstrated against the reforms initiated by the Education Minister Blanquer. They were advocating less 'politics' in education and lamenting that politicians were getting involved in pedagogical choices. It seemed a world apart from the past intimate relationship that existed between teachers unions and political parties in France. As De Nardis has acutely observed in his work, depoliticisation has serious implications for contemporary political and economic systems. It seems to be a deliberate tactic to instigate public opposition against institutional politicisation in favor of depoliticized modes of governance. Further empirical research is needed to advance our understanding of the growing distance between disillusioned citizens and political institutions, and how depoliticized state management is the cause and not the solution of this. Depoliticisation may have contributed, significantly, to the growing distance between state institutions of service delivery and their users.

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