

## THE SLOVENIAN APPROACH TO IDENTIFYING TALENT AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

### ABSTRACT

*In his theory of elites' circulation, Pareto examined the relationship between the social and psychological inequality. During the rise to power of a new elite (understood as a group of especially talented individuals) these two inequalities become more congruent. On the other hand, when a new elite is well established, it often becomes opposed to the influx of new talent, so, the opposite tendency in the above relationship prevails. It goes without saying that social development is stimulated in the first case, and blocked in the second. The vicissitudes of the Slovenian system of identifying and stimulating talent that has developed since the late sixties, are discussed in the light of this theory.*

*Key words: elite theory, Pareto, elite circulation, talent, ability, social inequality, Slovenia*

### Personal and social inequality

Unlike the others at this symposium, this paper is not concerned with an analysis of the situation regarding elites and social inequality. Instead, it deals with one of the essential social problems in this domain described by Rousseau in his renowned essay on the source of inequality between people.

Rousseau was actually the progenitor of the sociological approach to the issue of inequality. On the very first page of his essay he clearly distinguishes between 'natural' inequality, which refers to personal physical and mental characteristics and deficiencies, and 'moral' inequality, which derives from social conventions and is evinced in prestige, material wealth and political power. Rousseau adamantly refutes the possibility of any predetermined, necessary connection between these two forms of inequality. On the contrary, the crucial problem for him in finding the well-springs of social inequality is

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precisely explaining how it is possible for 'moral' inequality to develop in society more or less independently of actual personal qualities and deficiencies. Contemporary society runs against the law of nature for him because the less capable command the more capable, a handful of people wallow in plenty while the masses lack even the essentials.

In his critique of capitalist society Marx was of a like mind. In his Economic-philosophical manuscripts he quotes amongst others Goethe and Shakespeare who noted the magical power of property and money which ignores the qualities or shortcomings of people themselves. In Goethe's *Faust Mephisto* observes that when a man harnesses six horses to a wagon he is really appropriating their attributes and gallops off as fast as if he had 24 legs. In *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare similarly observes how money transforms a person's failings into strengths and the reverse:

*... Thus much of this will make black white,  
foul fair, wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.*

(Act IV, Scene III)

Marx concludes: "What exists for me with the help of money, because I can pay, that is, whatever money can buy, that is me, I own the money. Whatever is the power of money, that is my power. The attributes of money are those of its owner's, my attributes and essential power. What I am and what I can do, then, are in no way determined by my individuality. I am ugly yet I can buy the most beautiful woman. So I am not ugly, for money annuls the effects of ugliness, its repelling power. I am - by my individuality - lame but money provides me 24 legs; so I am not lame; I am weak, dishonest, a ruthless man, a person without spirit, but money and thus also its owner commands respect. Money is the highest good, so its owner is good; moreover money elevates me above the effort of being dishonest; it is thus assumed that I am honest; I am without spirit, but money is the real spirit of all things so how can its owner lack spirit? Moreover, one can buy people of spirit and is not the one who has power over the spirited even more spirited than they? Do not I, who can do anything thanks to money, have all a person's abilities? Does not my money then change all my inaptitudes into their opposites" (Marx 1966 II: 103-7).

Here Marx is referring only to the unmerited privileges the possession of money brings; the matter has its other side as well. Mention could also be made of people who, because they lack money, do not have the possibility of expressing their talent, to acquire knowledge, and cultivate themselves.

Nevertheless there is something essentially wrong with both Rousseau's and Marx's notions. It is because they radically distinguish between social and personal inequality that they actually prevent us understanding social change. If social position is exclusively dependent on social prejudices or money irrespective of a person's personal attributes, there is no scope for anything in society to change. The bearers of social power and the owners of money will persistently oppose change because they might lose their privileges and, on the other hand, they have enough power to successfully avert change precisely because of their privileges.

The theory of elites posited by Vilfredo Pareto may help us out of this social change quandary. According to Pareto, people win privileged social position by virtue of their exceptional qualities. All human societies are in effect 'aristocracies' in the etymological sense of the word, which is to say 'ruled by the best'. However once the 'best' have ascended to power they gradually begin to lose their qualities. They have secured their privileges and no longer need the abilities that helped them acquire them. They try to assure their privileges for their children even regardless of their abilities. On the other hand they increasingly insulate themselves against the entry of talents from the lower strata. Thus the elite gradually stagnates until it finally succumbs to a new elite which does not have material wealth and social privilege but is more capable and determined.

In contrast to Rousseau and Marx who lay down an absolute dividing line between personal and social inequality, Pareto treats both forms of inequality within a process of dialectical interaction. For him personal inequality is the source of social inequality and social change is most intensive when the two are in greatest congruence. If this congruence is shattered social stagnation follows and ends with the demise of the old elite.

Our three authors differ in more than their interpretation of social events. They also differ in the standpoints from which they deal with them. While Rousseau and Marx approach the matter primarily from the ethical, Pareto proceeds from the functional standpoint. These are not mutually exclusive approaches of course. They are complementary. It should not be ignored that the question of the congruence between personal and social inequality is significant from both the functional as well as the ethical points of view. Furthermore, it may also be examined from the standpoint of human needs. Man's highest need, according to Abraham Maslow, is the need for self-realisation which compels the individual to realise all of his/her potentials. Naturally, the scope for self-realisation is greatest when personal and social inequalities are congruent. When this applies, the most capable have the greatest scope for realising their capabilities. There is a functional aspect to this as well. Namely, it may be expected that the society that gives maximal scope for its members to realise their capabilities will be the most successful society.

It has to be taken into account here, however, that people differ in their capabilities and in their personal traits. Thus, besides inter-individual there are intra-individual differences that have to be considered. By virtue of his qualities and abilities the one person may belong to both the 'elite' in one respect and the 'non-elite' in another. He may be an exceptional mathematician, but lack talent for music, or vice versa. 'Elite' is a relative concept. Consequently, self-realisation is not simply a matter of recognising the 'capable'. Above all, it means each person developing as far as possible the particular abilities that mark him. The greater the number of different abilities and traits recognised the broader is the scope for self-realisation in a given population.

Yet not all man's abilities are of equal significance. Activities differ in their significance for the functioning of social systems. This may be deduced from the fact that similar hierarchies of professional prestige are found in different countries and there are no substantial differences between industrial and pre-industrial societies (Treiman 1977: 116). Furthermore, these hierarchies correlate closely with length of education,

which is of course related to the fact that in modern societies education is precisely one of the principal channels of vertical mobility.

On the other hand, the hierarchy of professional groups is markedly tied to the level of intellectual capabilities. Characteristically the dispersion of abilities is greater with lower than with higher-level professional groups. Generally, the members of the higher groups have higher intellectual abilities; the members of the lower have both low and high abilities. A high level of intellectual abilities is thus a condition for entering a higher-level professional group. However entry does not guarantee anything by itself because disruptive factors may intervene, such as insufficient endeavour or an unfavourable social environment (Eysenck 1973: xi). This circumstance re-opens the question of the realisation of abilities.

It has been noted that a higher or lower degree of congruence between personal and social inequality is established spontaneously in social systems. What is relevant here is how this congruence can be increased deliberately. For small countries like Slovenia, which has limited financial and natural resources and relies above all on its human resources, this question is of particular relevance.

The congruence between personal and social inequality may be enhanced above all by systematically discovering talent and encouraging its development. One system of identifying the gifted that has been developed in Slovenia, its history and its fate are presented below.

## **The Slovenian system for identifying the gifted**

The system described in this section has never officially been defined as ‘Slovenian’, but it may be considered as such for the following reasons:

- because of all such systems that have ever been operative in Slovenia it has the longest history (over 30 years);
- because it is the most systematic and scientifically founded of such systems
- because it is the most extensive, both in terms of the number of youth encompassed and the complexity of the methodology employed
- because it is authentically Slovenian and not a copy of a foreign model.

This system began to develop in the framework of vocational guidance. Organised vocational guidance had started up in Slovenia before World War II but subsequently petered out due to the communist regime’s official denial of psychological differences between people. These differences were considered to be relatively small and mostly dependent on the environment and personal endeavour rather than on heredity. Consequently, the use of psychological tests and vocational orientation based on their application were viewed as ideologically dubious. Only in the late 1950s did the first vocational orientation<sup>1</sup> offices begin to be set up in the framework of the Employment Office.

At first vocational orientation was limited to just counselling. This service was provided on request to individuals who felt the need for assistance in choosing their vocation. In time it became clear, however, that this choice is not merely the concern of the individual, it concerns society as a whole. Two key problems stood apart:

1. because of the smallness of the Slovenian nation, realisation of all its potentials is particularly important for its preservation;
2. the problem of social equality is inseparable from the foregoing because social deprivation is one of the main reasons why potentials are not realised.

These problems cannot be resolved through individual vocational counselling alone, they require systematic and continuous vocational orientation which encompasses the entire population and proceeds in three successive stages:

- the vocational education stage,
- the vocational counselling stage,
- the follow-up stage.

Conceptualised in this way vocational orientation is the concern of schools and work organisations as much as vocational orientation services or the Employment Office. Vocational education, acquainting pupils with the world of work, shaping work values and attitudes towards work, is one of the fundamental missions of the educational system as a whole. Similarly, concern for personnel development and advancement is one of the fundamental missions of work organisations. The Employment Office mediates between the educational system and work organisations. Naturally, it follows that vocational orientation is not just the concern of psychologists, but of teachers and personnel workers as well.

Based on these premises two fundamental vocational orientation activities have been carried out continuously since 1964, encompassing the entire generation of Slovenian youth each year:

1. All 7th grade elementary school-pupils are tested with a standard battery of ability tests;
2. At the beginning of the final, 8th grade of elementary school all pupils and their teachers are surveyed with a special questionnaire on vocational choice (VIP) which includes questions on social position and circumstances, self- and teacher's assessment of abilities, school achievement, interests, vocational aspirations and intentions, motives in vocational choice and obstacles and difficulties in the choice or realisation of vocational aspirations. At the same time this questionnaire is designed as a file in which test results, notes on vocational counselling, and data on the subsequent educational and vocational career of the individual are collected.

Systematic testing and surveying of the entire generation also serves as the starting-point for the system of identifying the gifted that began to be developed in late 1969. This system was developed principally because a huge drain of talent was observed in our educational system (Markiewicz-Lagneau 1969). A pupil's school achievement is only moderately related to his intellectual ability as indicated by objective psychological tests (Makarovič 1984). Even advancement from elementary to secondary school, which in the Slovenian school system is a critical career step, is only partly determined by actual abilities.

On the other hand, school achievement is strongly dependent on social inequality. A pioneering study conducted in elementary schools by Milica Bergant et al has shown that in the lower grades 58% of children whose fathers were college or university-

educated achieved 'excellent' grades (top of five categories) compared with only 5% of children whose fathers had not completed elementary school (Bergant ed. 1962). And even more than that. Toličič and Zorman show that children from lower social strata attain lower grades than those from higher strata even though they may score the same on ability tests, and furthermore, even though they may achieve the same scores on knowledge tests (Toličič, Zorman 1977). It has to be borne in mind here that ability tests themselves are not independent of social position. The differences between test scores and school achievement then are only an indication of just how great is the loss of talent during schooling due to social deprivation and assessment bias.

It may be added here that everyday vocational counselling experience shows that children from lower social strata with high intellectual abilities frequently are simply not aware of their abilities or do not have the material amenities to realise their ambitions.

Armed with this knowledge a campaign, *Millions for Talents*, was launched by the Republican Employment Office in the late 1960s to discover and provide scholarships for gifted children from lower social strata. The basic sources of data were tests and surveys complemented with detailed information on family circumstances and suitability for schooling. The advantage of this system of discovering talent over others is that it is based on data collected by uniform methods for the whole youth population. Other systems are often based on teacher recommendations or personal applications, both of which tend to heighten social bias in selection. It has been shown, namely, that in their assessments teachers tend to be biased against pupils from lower social strata (Makarovič 1984). It is no surprise, then, that young people from higher strata tend to be selected to take part in school competitions. The data that teacher recommendations draw on then, is strongly socially prejudiced. Similarly, relying on personal applications leads to marked bias for it will be primarily the better informed or more ambitious that apply for scholarships and these will generally be from the higher social strata. Consequently, it was made a basic rule that the scholarships cannot be sought, they can only be offered on the basis of results obtained by uniform procedures that cover the entire youth population.

Regretfully, the process of identifying the gifted and awarding scholarships had only just gotten well under way when it was abruptly halted. Around 1974 there was a major shift in Yugoslav politics towards a hard line extolling the rôle of the working class and casting a cloud over all kinds of 'elitism'. Even though the scholarships were earmarked primarily for working class and farm children they were nonetheless abolished.

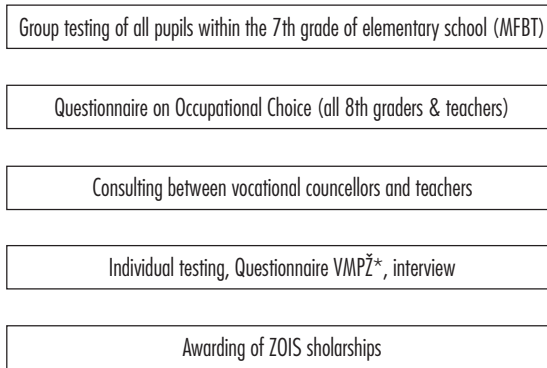
The scholarships were only re-approved by the highest party echelon in 1986. The Republican Employment Office financed research into the methodology of discovering talent that utilised data from earlier research that had been conducted continuously since the 1960s. Two new research projects were also carried out. A provisional set of instruments for identifying the gifted was designed on the basis of the previous research and discriminant analysis carried out to select the indicators that best differentiated between a 'gifted' group and a representative sample of the youth population. The selected indicators were factor analysed and a group of 12 indices identifying talent composed. These indices include two pertaining to social inequality. Pupils that rank low on a scale of social inequality win additional points on these indices. They serve to

correct the scores obtained on the other indices. Namely, notwithstanding all the efforts to compose socially unbiased indices, our indices were still found to correlate fairly strongly with social status.

Nonetheless, it may be claimed that this system of identifying the gifted has been constructed in a thorough-going way and is empirically tested. To our knowledge there is no other anywhere in the world that is as systematic, methodical and unbiased.

The stages in discovering talent under this system are presented schematically in Diagram 1.

### **Diagram 1** **Actual Slovenian System of Dealing with Talents**



\* VMPŽ - *Vprašalnik o možnostih uresničenja poklicne želje*  
(*Questionnaire of Chances for Realization of Vocational Aspirations*).

The scholarships awarded in this system are named in honour of Baron Žiga Zois (1747-1819) the first great patron and mentor of Slovenian arts and sciences.

The system was finally completed just before the declaration of Slovenia's independence. It might have been seen as the new Slovenian state's tool in development and international affirmation. But the fate that has befallen the Zois scholarship system is set out below.

### **The Fate of the Zois Scholarships**

Despite its internal elaboration the Slovenian system of vocational orientation has a crucial shortcoming, and the same holds for the system of identifying the gifted. As shown above, both systems were created inside the Employment Office yet they proceed from the assumption that vocational orientation is not solely the job of the office of employment but presupposes inputs by the schools and work organisations. Yet that is mainly where the process came to a halt.



The work of the Employment Office starts with testing in the 7th grade of elementary school, which is very late because at that point the pupils have most of that school behind them. For this measure to really be effective, it should follow a many-year process of systematic vocational orientation. However, the school system has never really accepted vocational orientation as its own. A group of vocational counsellors published a handbook of vocational orientation in elementary school in 1965 through the Institute for Schools. But the handbook has remained a dead letter and school curricula have been created without reference to it.

Vocational orientation rests on the assumption of differences between people. The optimal school from the vocational orientation standpoint, then, is one that devotes the greatest attention to individual differences. On the contrary, under the communist regime the schools followed a mechanical educational model that casts all pupils in the same mould, much like serial production in modern industries (Svetina 1992:217). All educational reforms under the Yugoslav communist regime, from the reform of elementary school to the 'directed education' reform of the 1980s tended towards homogenisation of the school system and the neglect of psychological differences between pupils. It should have been the reverse. The common, compulsory curriculum should have been limited as much as possible to give pupils the greatest possible scope for realising their own capabilities and interests in the most diverse fields. This would have stimulated those pupils that are now bored in school as well as those that fail and might have had an opportunity to do the things they do well.

In this sense, the system of vocational orientation and discovering and encouraging the gifted should be extended downwards into the lower grades of elementary school and pre-school educational institutions. It should be extended upwards as well. Each pupil's development should be followed continuously and systematically through the secondary and tertiary levels as well as the elementary, and the broadest of choices made available to him/her. Work with the gifted should not be limited to just providing scholarships, man does not live by bread alone. Moreover this work should be individualised because the gifted require different kinds of assistance. Those lacking financial resources for their education need scholarships above all; others need supplementary activities; yet others above all need to be left alone.

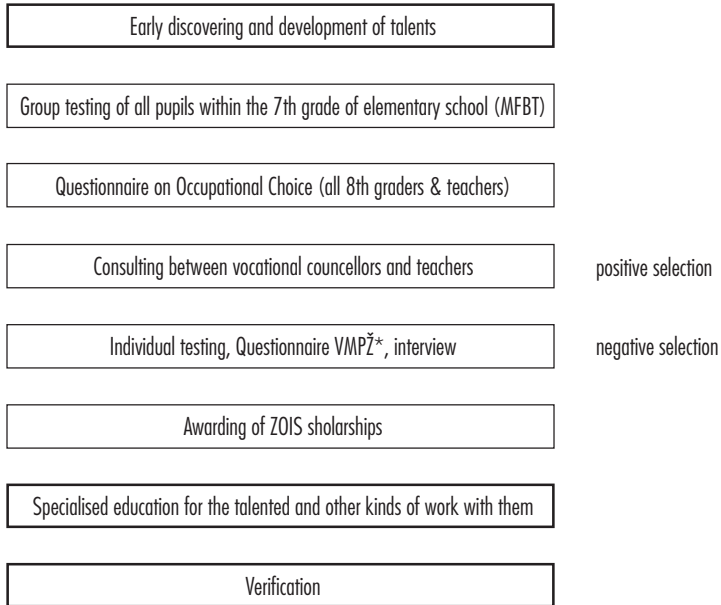
In addition to clearing the way to the development of the gifted, it is of course necessary to systematically follow their development, which is the only way to verify the method of identifying the gifted (Diagram 2).

All of these issues have remained more or less open in the newly-formed Slovenian state even though we entered into it with a developed system of identifying talent. It was naturally anticipated that these issues would be dealt with more effectively than in the former communist regime.

Initially, post-communist Slovenia had an anti-communist coalition government, the DEMOS coalition, which has been followed by the almost absolute dominance of a liberal democratic government.



**Diagram 2**  
**Projected Slovenian System of Dealing with Talents**



\* VMPŽ - *Vprašalnik o možnostih uresničenja poklicne želje*  
(*Questionnaire of Chances for Realization of Vocational Aspirations*)

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDS) grew out of the former communist youth organisation that had served as a training ground for top communist party positions and hence top social positions as well. As such it has developed into the party of the new middle class that had taken shape in the framework of the communist system. For this class party membership had long since lost any ideological import and was primarily a career matter. Moreover, its values were actually diametrically opposed to declared communist values. Instead of equality and solidarity this new middle class prized individuality, competition, material wealth and social position, which is to say precisely all that communism considered to be vestiges of capitalism. In contrast to the party bureaucracy it subscribed primarily to technocratic values.

At the same time the values of this new middle class are connected to those of the former, pre-Second World War, middle class. The predominant social group in prewar Yugoslavia had been the farmers and lower middle class, while the working class was rather weak. Consequently the main political contest was between the 'clericals' and the 'liberals', which is typical of the present-day so that the continuity is striking<sup>2</sup>. In the postwar period the communist party seized power, declaring itself the avant-garde of the proletariat. Through industrialisation the party went on to create a proletariat, but by monopolising power and prohibiting free unions it blocked the development of a

workers' movement. Furthermore, the party membership was drawn primarily from the middle class.

So that the reasoning that follows may be easier to follow it must be pointed out that the LDS has held the posts of minister of education and sport and minister of labour, namely the two positions of greatest importance for the development of vocational orientation, for the entire time it has been in power.

The basic feature of the educational reform that has been launched in Slovenia since its independence is a heightened emphasis on efficiency. This may be seen especially from the design of an intensely competitive external examination at the end of gymnasium, and the extension of elementary school to 9 years with the entire generation being subjected to three external knowledge examinations. This has two adverse consequences. In the first place, standardised examinations of knowledge primarily indicate mastery of information and only to a lesser degree the ability to apply it and the capacity for creative thinking. Secondly, external examinations put efficiency pressures on both the pupils and the teachers. School is turned into an exam exercise-room and ceases to be a place where the pupil expresses his/her personal interests for there simply is not any time left. Japan is a typical case where the extreme competition for enrolment at university discourages pupils from selecting courses that do not heighten their enrolment chances (Southern et al. 1993: 404-5). Otherwise, very few courses for gifted children are available at Japanese schools. Although the system is extremely selective, success is generally ascribed to hard work more than abilities (Wu, Cho 1993:799).

The latest Slovenian conception of educational reform similarly neglects care for the gifted. The White Book on Education in Slovenia (Krek ed. 1995) barely mentions the problem of the gifted, and makes no mention whatever of Zois Scholarships. The subject is only treated obliquely in a section on 'pupils with special needs' which refers primarily to pupils with physical, mental or personality handicaps or emotionally disturbed children. These groups of children are dealt with in fair detail, even statistically, but all that is said about the gifted, in passing, is: 'Many authors include gifted children amongst children with special needs, which expands this group - these are all pupils that require special education in order to develop their abilities' (Krek ed. 1995: 115). All thirty years of research and practical work with the gifted by vocational counsellors is simply ignored.

However, the problems are not restricted to just the school system, they affect the Employment Office too. For the past thirty years the office's vocational orientation service has been practically the only agency in the country dealing systematically with identifying gifted children and providing scholarships. Recently this service has begun to experience greater and greater difficulties. As noted above, scholarships are only one form of care for the gifted who have very diverse, individual needs for assistance. Since the scholarships are practically the only form of assistance provided, the idea has generally taken hold amongst the public that only children awarded Zois scholarships are 'gifted'. This has led to pressures by higher-class parents, some of them influential figures themselves, to remove the means test or 'property census' as a criterion in award-

ing the scholarships. Thus the scholarship has become a status symbol and is rapidly losing its primary function.

Whereas the means test criterion has been loosened, the school achievement criterion is being tightened. Although neither the minister for education nor the minister for labour attended a Symposium on the tenth anniversary of the Zois Scholarship in 1996, the latter signed a decision at that time, which was subsequently published in the official gazette, that the scholarship is to be cancelled if the pupil fails to achieve above-average school grades. This rule flies in the face of the many geniuses who failed at school because they were unable to adjust to its vacuousness. It also ignores the social determination of school grades discussed above.

The award of Zois scholarships has further been hampered by requirements for the presentation of various formal certificates of participation in competitions, prizes and awards. In place of creativity as such, public awards and success have become the main criteria in awarding the scholarship. A more serious blow has been dealt to the systematic identification of gifted children and vocational orientation in general. It is planned to abolish testing in the 7th grade of elementary school. The tests were carried out for the last time last year. Once the testing has gone, the Zois scholarships may continue to be awarded but their meaning will have changed completely. They will depend primarily on social status and will be won primarily by those who are already privileged in the social system.

The irony of the whole story is that a scholarship system that managed to establish itself under a communist system is falling apart in post-communist Slovenia, which might have been expected to give it new wings.

But the laws of sociology must prevail. As Vilfredo Pareto observes, when an elite comes to power it begins to isolate itself. It looks first to assuring social status for its own members irrespective of ability and at the same time prevents talented people from the lower strata from making their mark. This is happening with Slovenia's new middle class, which gained its position in the communist period largely through political opportunism and unscrupulousness. Of course it is no 'elite' really, which is why it feels all the more threatened by the true elite which would form on the basis of ability and personal qualities.

## NOTES

1. As used here the term 'vocational orientation' corresponds to the French *l'orientation professionnelle*. The usual English term '*vocational guidance*' implies a directive approach that does not conform to our basic philosophy in this domain.
2. Similar continuity from the pre- to the post-communist middle class and a related continuity between the old and the new liberalism are found in other East European countries. It has been found in the *International Value Survey* of local political leaders that endorsement of capitalist values is highest in Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. Quite different values predominate in Sweden, Austria and the countries on the territory of the former-Soviet Union (Makarovič, Jug 1994).

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