Criticism in Political Philosophy. On the Advantages of Pragmatism over Ideologized Politics in Light of the Works of Witold Gombrowicz

Summary

The main goal of this article is to indicate the possibility of analyzing the works of Witold Gombrowicz from the perspective of political philosophy. Special emphasis is placed on the particular critical method used by the author of Ferdydurke. The essence of this criticism is the idea of the “equal-strength of opposites,” understood as the rejection of arbitrary and dogmatic (“ideological”) justification. My analysis encompasses three main themes found in Gombrowicz’s works: Ojczyzna versus Synczyzna (Fatherland versus Sonland), Cogito versus the Interhuman Church, and Polishness versus Europeanness.

Key words: W. Gombrowicz, criticism, political philosophy, Cogito, Interhuman Church, Polishness.


Because my choice of topic for this article may seem controversial to many – criticism in the works of Gombrowicz within a political context? – I consider it necessary to justify this choice. Thus, before I move to my analysis of the problems mentioned in the title, I will explain my understanding of the place of politics/the political in the works of Gombrowicz, as well as my understanding of criticism.

I understand politics from the perspective of political philosophy, which I take as reflection on the essence of the political and on its first principles. Thus, it is not about the analysis of concrete political events, nor specific legal issues (though, of course, the problem of the first principles, of the “spirit of the laws,” would fit within the scope of political philosophy so understood). At the same time, I understand the political in the broadest possible way: “the political” refers to the nature of collective human life organized under and according to some sort of władztwo. By władztwo I do not mean any particular form of ruling power or
even rule (Pol. władza) as such. Both rule and the particular forms it takes are merely consequences of władztwo. What, then, is władztwo? It is the principle or idea of a “central point of reference” inherent in man, either in his biological nature (“instinct”) or intellectual nature (“thought”).

I think that with such a definition of the “the political” and “political philosophy,” the thesis that W. Gombrowicz’s works may be analyzed from the perspective of political philosophy may be considered admissible. The main metathemes found in Gombrowicz – “pure form,” the Interhuman Church, Ojczyzna versus Synczyzna, and the facilitated life with its corollary problem of the archetype of Polish political culture – largely fit into the subject matter of political philosophy. They all deal with the issue of “władztwo” and the problem of the principles of community life.

The issue of criticism may raise significantly more doubts – both the understanding of it, and its manifestations in the work of the author of Ferdydurke.

The problem of understanding the notion of “criticism” and its role in philosophy is an extremely complex and difficult matter. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, I can only include a general outline of the problem here. Above all, I would like to emphasize that I treat the meaning and role of criticism in light of its Greek source – my point of departure is the meaning and understanding of criticism in Greek philosophy.

From an etymological perspective, “criticism” refers back to the Greek κρίνω, κρίσις, κριτικός. According to the LSJ, the basic meaning of κρίνω is “to separate,” “to put asunder,” “to distinguish,” and also “to decide,” “to judge,” or “to choose”; the basic meaning of κρίσις – “separating,” “distinguishing,” “decision,” “judgment”; while that of κριτικός – “able to discern,” “critical,” as well as “separated,” “picked out,” “chosen.” In reference to the etymology of the concept of criticism, Dariusz Kubok states: “philosophical criticism in the broadest and, as it turns out, also (historically) earliest, and (conceptually) most rudimentary sense, is tantamount to the ability to differentiate, distinguish, separate. […] This broadest form

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2 “It began promisingly. The Marriage, in his opinion, is closely bound to the historical cataclysms of our times, it is a ‘chronicle of history gone crazy,’ the action of The Marriage is a grotesque parody of real events. But then? Goldmann makes the Drunkard into the rebellious masses, Henry’s fiancée into the nation, the King into the government, and me into a ‘Polish squire’ who contained the historical drama in these symbols. I timidly protested, yes, I do not deny that The Marriage is a wild version of a crazy history; in the dreamy or drunken becoming of this action is mirrored the fantasticality of the historical process, but to make Molly the nation and Father the state…??,” Gombrowicz, 2010, p. 670. In the very rich secondary literature concerning W. Gombrowicz’s works and topics, the political aspect (or, better, meta-political aspect) is not very popular. In terms of exceptions, see: Kulas 2012; Szymankiewicz 2017.
of criticism may be described as *source-separative criticism.*”³ Referring in turn to Sextus Empiricus’ classification of the trends in ancient philosophy,⁴ Kubok specifies a narrower meaning of the term “criticism”: “In a narrow sense, […] criticism may be understood as a certain cognitive approach in opposition to dogmatism, which consists in constant inquiry, involves a ceaseless search for truth, and requires the most comprehensive analysis possible of any issue subjected to study, yet without claiming to have achieved any final, irrefutable truth. […] In this sense, criticism corresponds with the source Greek understanding of skepticism as zetetic anti-dogmatism. […] I propose to call this type of criticism *anti-dogmatic criticism.*”⁵

As Kubok points out, the trend which should be considered the most representative for anti-dogmatic criticism in ancient philosophy is skepticism. For our considerations it will be extremely fruitful to take a closer look at the fundamental arguments of the Pyrrhonian School.

Taking into account the so-called skeptic tropes, it is doubtless that the key skeptical argument is the argument from relativity (πρός τι) – everything in the reality we are investigating remains in relation to something else; in consequence, it is impossible for us to come to know anything in itself. In addition, all of our cognition is tangled up in a complicated web of relations in which changing just one factor can completely change the outcome of one’s investigation. In other words: in light of the great variety in the world, a dogmatic attitude (whether positive or negative) must involve disregarding a great deal of data, disregarding many possible and equally justified ways of interpretation. Such an attitude is not fitting for a philosopher, as it is a denial of reason.

One of the most significant arguments used by the skeptics, especially in an ethical, legal, and political context, is the argument from the multiplicity of persuasions, customs, and laws. This argument is used in essentially the same form by Socrates and the sophists.⁶ The essence of this line of argument can be stated thus: in regard to every formulated or possible to formulate opinion referring to every ethical, legal, political problem, an opposite opinion can be formulated. The opposing opinion will be just as justified as the initial opinion. It is impossible to determine which of these opinions is true and which is false on the basis of a rational, philosophical method of justification. We may call this the principle of the equal strength of opposing opinions. Consequently, the basis for criticism in regard to ethical, legal, and political matters must be an impartial analysis of opposing opinions. It is precisely such an understanding of criticism that can be found in the works of Gombrowicz.

⁴ See: Sextus Empiricus, Πυρρώνειοι ὑποτυπώσεις, I, 1–2.  
⁵ Kubok, 2015, p. 15.  
⁶ See e.g. Gorgias, *Peri tou me ontos e peri physeos.*
Above, I mentioned the metathemes present in the works of the Polish author. Each of these is formulated within the framework of opposing opinions, conceptions, and paradigms. Thus, the problem of “pure form” is shown in confrontation with the problem of content. The relationship between “Ojczyzna” and “Synczyzna” itself contains opposing ideas. The background for reflections concerning the “Interhuman Church” is always the Cartesian Cogito. The conception of the “facilitated life” and corollary problem of the Polish archetype of political culture are formulated within the context of reflection on the political culture of Europe. The object of this article is precisely an analysis of the mentioned metathemes and the particular opposing ideas that constitute their context.

To conclude these introductory remarks, I would like to clarify one more terminological issue regarding how I will be using the terms “ideology” and “ideologization.” By “ideology” I understand a dogmatic system of political convictions (overwhelmingly in the sense of positive dogmatism), rooted in a dogmatic understanding of justice and the good. Within the context of the above understanding of criticism – as a method of analysis based on the “equal strength of opposites” – I understand “ideology” as the arbitrary siding with one of these opposites. I take “ideologization” to refer to the method of either decision making and political action, or analyzing and explaining political matters on the basis of ideology. The relationship between “ideology” and “ideologization” thus understood remains in the same relation to criticism in philosophy, as dogmatism to criticism in philosophy.

II. The Main Themes – “Pairs of Opposites” – in Gombrowicz’s Reflection within the Context of Politics.

The topic I have undertaken is, of course, very broad. In a single article it would be impossible to exhaust even one of the topics discussed here. My goal here is simply to outline Gombrowicz’s approach to the problems he undertook; therefore, the reflections contained in this article are merely prolegomena to the problem mentioned in the title. I will concentrate on three pairs of opposites: Ojczyzna versus Synczyzna, Cogito versus the Interhuman Church, and Polishness versus Europeanness. The problem of “Pure Form” versus “Content” will be a recurring theme throughout these reflections, but will not be treated separately here. Let us also note that all of Gombrowicz’s metathemes are intimately connected; they are interpenetrating and complementary. Their separation in these analyses is somewhat artificial, but justified in that it facilitates a clear presentation.

1. Ojczyzna versus Synczyzna (Fatherland versus Sonland).
The problem of Synczyzna appears in many of Gombrowicz’s works. Already in his first story, *Ferdydurke*, we can find a foretaste of the analyses Gombrowicz later dedicates to this problem. We can also find Synczyzna in *Trans-Atlantic, Pornography, the Diary*, and in a way that is especially interesting to philosophers of politics, also in the play *Marriage*.

Gombrowicz created the neologism „Synczyzna” as a contrary of “Ojczyzna.” According to Gombrowicz, the latter’s despotism, its complete subordination, almost enslavement, of what is younger and dependent on it, requires a proper reaction. Synczyzna should be able to express itself independently: for itself, through itself, and in view of itself. Under Ojczyzna’s despotism, Synczyzna is treated solely as an extension of Ojczyzna, as an instrument serving the despot’s need for grounding, self-expression, and self-realization. But how does Ojczyzna justify its privileged position? Two things: precedence and causation. However, this argument is not so certain and unambiguous. Ojczyzna is the cause of Synczyzna, but only in the Natural order, so to speak. In the social order, things are quite the opposite: it is Synczyzna that is the cause of Ojczyzna, since children grant their parents the status of “parent”; it is thanks to youth that maturity becomes what it is. Moreover, childhood and youth are also first in the natural order from the perspective of the individual; childhood and youth are the causes of maturity, not the opposite. Therefore, the dominance of Ojczyzna seems to be a usurpation, based more on the law of the jungle, than on justice.

In many places in his works, Gombrowicz indicates a need for the “emancipation” of Synczyzna, a need for rebellion, so Synczyzna can come to power and take control of the socio-political order.

But is what Gombrowicz writes really so unambiguous? Is he really an uncritical glorifier of Synczyzna? Certainly not. The “heroes” of Synczyzna always suffer defeat. This is the case with Henryk in the *Marriage*, whole downfall is even more painful because it occurs on the grounds of principles established in the order of Synczyzna. Henryk’s defeat and helplessness are best illustrated by his own words from the last scene of the play directly preceding his warrant for his own arrest:

“I am innocent.
I declare that I am as innocent as a child, that I have done
Nothing, that I am ignorant of everything…
No one is responsible for anything here!
There is no such thing as responsibility! […]
No, there is no responsibility
Still, there are formalities
To be attended to…”

The New Order introduced by Henryk, which seems to be a realization of Synczyzna, constitutes a radical negation of freedom. The enslavement of everyone and everything, including oneself – is a greater defeat even conceivable?

In Pornography, likewise, Synczyzna suffers a defeat that is no less severe. An innocent pair of sixteen year-olds – Karol and Henia – is manipulated into murder, which is only the culmination of an ongoing, perverse, “purely Formal” manipulation on the part of Ojczyzna – Witold and Fryderyk. Their manipulation finds exceptionally fertile ground. The shocking description of the innocently sadistic crushing of the bug reveals the true (?) face of Synczyzna. Its innocence is just as real as its perverse sadism.

How, then, does the real relationship between Ojczyzna and Synczyzna, between maturity and youth, look in the thought of Gombrowicz? Let’s take a look at two significant quotations from the Diary: “to pass the world through youth; to translate it into language of youth, that is, into the language of attraction…To soften it with youth…To spice it with youth – so it allows itself to be violated,” and a little later, “And here one comes upon extreme formulas: maturity for youth, youth for maturity.”

Thus, we see that this relationship is decidedly more complicated than it seemed at first glance. Synczyzna and Ojczyzna interpenetrate – they mutually shape one another. However, Gombrowicz avoids easy one-sided constructions. At no point does his analysis or way of presenting the problem take on the form of ideologization. We are not dealing with an unjustified tilt of the relationship between the opposites toward the side of either one of them. This is due to the relationship being grasped in a critical-dynamic manner. This theme will appear once more in this article, in the context of Gombrowicz’s formulation of the Polish archetype of political culture.

2. Cogito versus the Interhuman Church.

The context of the entirety of Gombrowicz’s creative output is the Cartesian Cogito. As he states in one of his works: “I am certain that this is in my consciousness but does not

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8 “There is peace. All the rebellious elements are/Under arrest. Assembly has also been taken into custody along/With military and civilian circles, vast segments of the popula/-tion, the High Court, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Boards and/Departments, all public and private authorities, the press/Hospitals and orphanages. All the Ministries have been placed/Under arrest, and everything else besides; in short, Your Maj/-esty – everything. The police have likewise been imprisoned./There is peace. Quiet. It’s humid,” Gombrowicz 1998, p. 155.
correspond to reality. For example, the centaur. Systematic doubt. Puts the world in doubt, in parentheses: 1. the object. 2. everything involving the object. The only certainty is that they exist in my consciousness. [...] the sciences which relate to reality (supposedly objective): sociology, psychology, except for the abstract sciences; mathematics and logic, because they do not concern the outside world, but are laws for my own consciousness.”

From the perspective of political philosophy, the consequences of Cogito are huge. Cogito is necessarily an indivisible unity. Its world is completely closed and impenetrable. This is a double impenetrability: on the one hand, Cogito is not able to go beyond itself; on the other, nothing external to Cogito is able to enter into the world of Cogito. How, then, is political philosophy possible at all within the context of Cogito? The basic categories of political philosophy – the state, power, justice – are conditioned upon multiplicity and divisibility. Therefore, the key question is: how can we derive this multiplicity and divisibility from Cogito? Gombrowicz suggests an original way of thinking about this issue in his play The Marriage.

It is dubito – “systematic doubt” – that lies at the basis of Cogito. Doubting the reality of any representation of the mind leads to one’s recognizing Cogito as the only certainty. However, the certainty of Cogito does not imply certainty as to the unreality of any of its representations. Therefore, what remains for certain-of-its-existence Cogito is an attitude of uncertainty, both with regard to the reality and unreality of representations. It is from these doubts, from this uncertainty, that the multiplicity and divisibility mentioned above are “born” (or “created”). A passage from the beginning of The Marriage serves as a great illustration of this reasoning:

“A void. A desert. Nothing, I am alone here

Alone

Alone

But perhaps I am not alone; who knows what is behind me, perhaps...something...someone is standing here alongside me, off to the side, off to the side, some id...some insuperable, ungovernable, idiotized, idiotouchable idiot, who can touch and...(With alarm) I'd better not move...no, don’t move, because if we move...he’ll move...and touch...(With growing uneasiness) Oh, if only something or someone would come out from somewhere...Aha! There’s something...

JOHNNY emerges from the shadows.”¹²

In this way, multiplicity and divisibility are created and justified. And it is in this context that political philosophy, as reflection on the relationship between Cogito and the world of “others” it has “created-dreamed up,”¹³ must be analyzed.

However, Cogito is not only the creator of the world – it is also an actor. It plays roles and gets masks-faces – gęby. What is very important – it also plays before the audience of itself:

“And yet if I, I, I alone am, why then
(Let’s try that for effect) am I not?

What does it matter (I ask) that I, I am in the very middle, the very centre of everything, if I, I can never be

Myself?
I alone.
I alone.

Now that you’re alone, completely alone, you might at least stop this incessant recitation
This fabrication of words
This production of gestures

But you, even when you’re alone, pretend that you’re alone

And you go on […]

Pretending to be yourself
Even to your very self. […]

Such are the Attitudes I might adopt…in your presence

And for your benefit! But not for my own! I’m not in need

Of ant attitude! I don’t feel
Other people’s pain! I only recite
My humanity! No, I do not exist
I haven’t any 'I,' alas, I forge myself

Outside myself” (pp. 180–181).

¹³ The aspect of dreamy-creative relationship between Cogito and “the others” appears in The Marriage frequently, e.g. Gombrowicz, 1998, p. 97.
This game, the role-playing before oneself and before the “others” one has created shapes both Cogito and these “others.” This mutual shaping is what Gombrowicz calls the Interhuman Church.\(^\text{14}\) The world, the reality of Cogito is set in opposition to the Old Order understood as “Real Reality,” which is subject to an Objective and Absolute Criterion. In reality, of course, Cogito is lacking this Criterion. The Interhuman Church becomes something of a substitute. Gombrowicz writes in The Diary: “‘People’ are something that must organize itself every minute – nevertheless, this organization, this collective shape, creates itself as the by-product of a thousand impulses and is, in addition, unforeseen and does not allow itself to be ruled by those who make it up. We are like tones from which a melody issues – like words forming themselves into sentences – but we are not in control of what we express, this expression of ours strikes us like a thunderbolt, like a creative force, it arises from us unrefined. […] Doesn’t this phenomenon possess divine attributes, which are a result of interhuman power, that is, superior and creative, in relation to each of us separately?”\(^\text{15}\)

Again, we are faced with a situation, in which Gombrowicz’s critical-dynamic manner of writing renders it impossible to “pigeonhole” him and his reflection, to force it into an ideological, quasi-ideological, or systemic framework. His thought constitutes such an inspiring intellectual “charge” precisely because it is not blind in its passion. It does not aim at closing and resolving problems at all costs; instead, it always critically weighs both sides of every opposition. When indicating proposed approaches to a given problem, Gombrowicz always leaves them anti-dogmatically open. The above theses can be illustrated most convincingly by referring to how Gombrowicz understood the Polish archetype of political culture against the backdrop of the European archetype thereof.

\textbf{3. Polishness versus Europeanness.}

The discussion on Poland’s place in Europe and on the relationship between the Polish and Western European archetype of political culture goes back to the late XV century.\(^\text{16}\) The XVI century brought a „solution” decisive for the development of Polish political culture, the essence of which is revealed in the debate between Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski and Stanisław

\(^{14}\) It is necessary to emphasize that the conventional context of the Interhuman Church is not the only, nor the most important one. Gombrowicz states in The Diary: “As long as you understand Ferdydurke as a battle with convention, it will trot calmly down the well-beaten path; but if you understand that man creates himself with another man in the sense of the wildest debauchery, Ferdydurke will neigh and leap forward as if you had jabbed it with a spur, carrying you off into the realm of the Unpredictable. Ferdydurke is more a form-element (here, Polish “żywioł” could be better translated as untamed “passion,” “energy,” “force,” “dynamism” – P. Ś.) than a form-convention,” Gombrowicz, 2010, p. 288.


\(^{16}\) Pawiński 1884, pp. 123–181; Baczkowski 1989, pp. 26–32.
Orzechowski. Presenting its conclusion in the most synthetic way possible: the archetype of Polish political culture is different from the Western European archetype. Though “Polishness” belongs to “Latinness,” this “Latinness” is different than Western European “Latinness” – Poland does not belong to “Europeanness.” Freedom lies at the heart of “Polishness,” though this freedom – referring back to Benjamin Constant’s conception – is different from both “ancient” and “modern” freedom; it constitutes something of a synthesis of these two types of freedom, though its aim – a particular form of conviviality – is specific to Polishness.

Irrespective of the aforementioned resolution, the discussion has continued and continues today. The modern approach to the problem was expressed in the subsequent great debate between the historical school of Joachim Lelewel, on the one hand, and the Kraków historical school, on the other hand. This discussion has become the basis for a key distinction concerning the main trends in Polish historiography: the “optimists” and the “pessimists.”

In my opinion, Witold Gombrowicz’s stance on the problem of the Polish archetype of political culture is the crowning achievement of formulations of this problem found in Polish literature. It should be noted that though Gombrowicz is commonly perceived as a critic of “Polishness” (which would imply proximity to the Kraków School and the “pessimists”), a careful analysis of his works decidedly falsifies this assessment of the author of Trans-Atlantic’s reflection.

There can be no doubt that Gombrowicz took for granted “Polishness” distinctness from “Westernness”: “Our Slavic attitude to artistic matters is lax. We are less involved in art than the Western European nations and so we can afford a greater freedom of movement. This is exactly what I often said to Zygmunt Grocholski, who takes his Polishness (which is very elemental in him and is crushed by Paris) very seriously. His struggles are as hard as those of so many Polish artists, for whom the one rallying cry is ‘Catch up to Europe!’ Unfortunately they are impeded in this pursuit by their being a different and very specific type of European, born in a place where Europe is no longer fully Europe.”

It is also undeniable that in many places in his works, Gombrowicz takes an extremely critical stance towards “Polishness.” As he states in the Diary: “I, who am terribly Polish and terribly rebellious against Poland, have always been irritated by that little, childish, secondary, ordered, and religious world that is Poland. I attributed Poland’s historical lack of dynamism as well as Poland’s cultural impotence to these characteristics because God led us around by our

17 Frycz Modrzewski 1953; Orzechowski 1984.
18 Lelewel 1855; Bobrzyński 1987.
little hand. I compared this well-behaved Polish childhood to the adult independence of other cultures. This nation without a philosophy, without a conscious history, intellectually soft and spiritually timid, a nation that produced only a ‘kindly’ and ‘noble-minded’ art, a languid people of lyrical scribblers of poetry, folklorists, pianists, actors, in which even Jews dissolved and lost their venom…My literary works guided by the desire to extricate the Pole from all secondary realities and to put him in direct confrontation with the universe. Let him fend for himself as best as he can. I desire to ruin his childhood."

Gombrowicz’s interpretation of the archetype of Polish political culture is grasped within the context of the aforementioned problem of the relationship between Ojczyzna and Synczyzna, between maturity and immaturity. As in the case of that problem, Gombrowicz nuances his position in the discussion on the Polish archetype. Although his point of departure lies in a critique, not only does Gombrowicz not stop there, but he also goes so far as to note the valuable aspects of what he initially criticized: “Ruin a childhood? In the name of what? In the name of a maturity that I myself can neither bear nor accept? It is the Polish God, after all (in contrast to Weil’s God), who is that splendid system that has maintained man in a sphere of indirect being, who is that veering away from the ultimate that is demanded by my insufficiency. How can I desire that they not be children if I myself, *per fas et nefas*, want to be a child? A child, yes, but one that has come to know and has exhausted all the possibilities of adult seriousness. This is the big difference. First, push away all the things that make everything easier, find yourself in a cosmos that is as bottomless as you can stand, in a cosmos at the limits of your consciousness, and experience a condition where you are left to your own loneliness and your own strength, only then, when the abyss which you have not managed to tame throws you from the saddle, sit down on the earth and discover the sand and grass anew. For childhood to be allowed, one must have driven maturity to bankruptcy. I am not bluffing: when I pronounce the word ‘childhood,’ I have the feeling that I am expressing the deepest but not yet roused contents of the people who gave me birth. This is not the childhood of a child, but the difficult childhood of an adult.”

I will venture the thesis that in his critical approach based on the “equal strength of opposites,” Gombrowicz transcended the “optimism” – “pessimism” opposition. In choosing either of these dominant ways of interpreting the Polish archetype of political culture, one runs the risk of falling into dogmatism, into ideology, at least in certain respects. In a sense, supporters of both the apologists and the critics went down this road. Studies in XIX- and XX-

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century political thought (especially up until 1939) reinforce this conviction. There is no room here to elaborate on this issue in depth, but I will indicate one important feature of a majority of formulations of the problem of the Polish archetype of political culture. Each of these formulations points to a certain quality, deeming it a “virtue” or a “vice.” However, the justification for this is often, if not always, arbitrary. Consequently, the assessment of the Polish archetype and attitude of given trends or thinkers to it is reduced to the sum of partial, arbitrary resolutions. In contrast, Gombrowicz shuns easy and arbitrary assessments. His approach is entirely different: each aspect of the analyzed problem can be perceived negatively or positively. This depends entirely on the context and on the way a particular attitude is justified. Deepened consciousness of a particular aspect of the archetype plays a key role here. If an apparently unambiguously positive feature is not fully considered, if it does not result from in-depth reflection but is instead the result of personal preferences, stereotypes, class biases, and the like, then it is essentially something negative – it constitutes an expression of the superficiality of intellectual life. On the other hand, what may initially seem like a negative element – if it constitutes the culmination of in-depth reflection on the context and conditions of the archetype – may turn out to be a great creative force allowing for the harmonization of the national culture with the requirements of progress and modernization.

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