

En conversación con Nancy Fraser In conversation with Nancy Fraser

Nancy Fraser

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Resumen

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Entrevista con la filósofa estadounidense Nancy Fraser.

La autora vincula el actual auge de las protestas con la tradición más amplia del movimiento antibelicista en Estados Unidos y con la lucha para acabar con las diversas formas de opresión interrelacionadas en las que se basa el sistema capitalista: explotación laboral, opresión racial, opresión imperialista, opresión de la mujer, sobreexplotación y destrucción del medio ambiente ... Todas estas formas de opresión, sostiene Fraser, no son sino diferentes expresiones de un sistema socioeconómico basado en la dominación y la desposesión como fuentes de riqueza.

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Resum: En conversa amb Nancy Fracer

Paraules clau

Preotestes
antibelicistes, Estats
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dominació capitalista

Entrevista amb la filòsofa nord-americana Nancy Fraser.

L'autora vincula l'auge actual de les protestes amb la tradició més àmplia del moviment antibelicista als Estats Units i amb la lluita per acabar amb les diverses formes d'opressió interrelacionades en què es basa el sistema capitalista: explotació laboral, opressió racial, opressió imperialista, opressió de la dona, sobreexplotació i destrucció del medi ambient... Totes aquestes formes d'opressió, sosté Fraser, no són sinó diferents expressions d'un sistema socioeconòmic basat en la dominació i la desposseïció com a fonts de riquesa.

Abstract

Keywords

Anti-war protest,
United States,
forms of
oppression,
capitalist
domination

Interview with US philosopher Nancy Fraser.

She links the current upsurge of protests to the broader tradition of the anti-war movement in the United States and the struggle to end the various interrelated forms of oppression on which the capitalist system is based: labour exploitation, racial oppression, imperialist oppression, oppression of women, over-exploitation and destruction of the environment... All these forms of oppression, Fraser argues, are but different expressions of a socio-economic system based on domination and dispossession as sources of wealth.

IN CONVERSATION WITH NANCY FRASER

Carme Vivancos-Sánchez

April 23, 2024

At the time of writing this short introduction to present our interview with American philosopher Nancy Fraser, a little over half a year has gone by since the launching on October 27, 2023, of the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip in retaliation for Hamas's attack on Israel's territory two weeks earlier. As by now, the death toll on the Palestinian side is nearing 35,000 civilians (vs. 1,460 casualties, 260 of them military, on the Israeli side) and growing by the hour,¹ not to mention the material destruction beyond belief that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have caused so far in Gaza. More than two thirds of those killed by the IDF's operations were women and children, while hundreds of aid workers² and almost a hundred journalists³ have lost their lives in the carrying out of their jobs.

¹ UN OCHOA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), "Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #157", <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-157> (retrieved April 29, 2024).

² US Press Releases, «Speakers in Security Council Condemn Deadly Israeli Airstrikes on Aid Workers in Gaza, Urge Immediate Action to End Violations of International Humanitarian Law» <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15653.doc.htm> (retrieved April 29, 2024).

³ CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists), «Journalist casualties in the Israel-Gaza war», <https://cpj.org/2024/04/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/> (retrieved April 29, 2024).

The timid condemnation of the US government to what has been denounced as a genocide⁴ and its continuing military and diplomatic support to Israel have sparked off in the United States a new round of social protest, one which is particularly visible in college campuses across the country, including those at some of the most prestigious universities in the world.⁵ The students' protests have been met with harsh repression by both campus administrators and public authorities, including students' arrests, college suspensions and even expulsion.

This is the context in which our conversation with Nancy Fraser took place. There, she connected today's upsurge of protest to the wider tradition of the anti-war movement in the US and the fight to put an end to the several interrelated kinds of oppressions on which the capitalist system relies. After all, as she has clearly perceived in her work, labor exploitation, racial oppression, imperialist oppression, women's oppression, environmental over-exploitation and destruction... are all but different expressions of a socioeconomic system based on domination and expropriation as sources of wealth. Thus, today's struggles should be seen as yet another episode in the latent, permanent, diverse struggles in American society to denounce and overcome the multiple biases of capitalism, struggles whose renewed energy these days give us renewed hopes of bringing about the deep structural change that is needed in order to get out of the several interrelated crises that the world is experiencing at the time.

⁴ International Court of Justice (ICJ), «Proceedings instituted by South Africa against the State of Israel on 29 December 2023», https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20231228-app-01-00-en.pdf?_cf_chl_tk=n1UnsGdp7Ec8MgHwLh8OZ_WorJPavLjp7jwMW_1ED2Y-1714382598-0.0.1.1-1749 (retrieved April 29, 2024).

⁵ Associated Press (AP), «A look at the protests about the war in Gaza that have emerged on US college campuses», <https://apnews.com/article/gaza-war-campus-protests-966eb531279f8e4381883fc5d79d5466> (retrieved April 29, 2024).

1. I would like to start the interview with a question that is surely very difficult to answer. As you have said before, and correct me if I'm wrong, feminism was "the entry-point to rethinking Marxism for you." Was it like this? If you were to start rethinking Marxism now, would you still do it from feminism? I am thinking especially about what you argue in your latest book, Cannibal capitalism, and the weight you give, for example, to the ecological issue, which you have defined more than once as something that "changes the rules of the game."

I'm not sure if feminism was what made me start rethinking Marxism. My trajectory as an activist and a radical thinker began with the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Liberation struggle, as well as with the Anti-imperialist Vietnam War struggle, which presided over my engagement with feminism. It was on the basis of those struggles that I first became a Marxist, before I was deeply affected by the emergence of second wave feminism. I think I was already interested in struggling within Marxism, which had to accommodate someone who was critical of imperialism and racial oppression. And then, of course, when feminism erupted and I became a radical feminist, I was already a Marxist. That then introduced a second complication into Marxism, the complication of gender, the relationship between capitalism and what some people called patriarchy or male domination. But that was a sort of second iteration of an earlier question about the relationship between capitalism and imperialism and racial oppression. And then, of course, as you suggested, I later became, like many people, just *struck* by the seriousness of the ecological crisis and the need to, yet again, go back and look at the critique of capitalism to try to determine what the relationship between capitalism and the ecological crisis and the destruction of nature was. So, in every case, I was essentially posing the question: is the relation between capitalism and racial oppression merely contingent or is it structural? Is the relation between capitalism and male domination

merely contingent or structural? Is the relation between capitalism and ecological devastation merely contingent or structural? I was posing these questions again and again, and in each case the questions became more complicated because they involved more dimensions. It no longer was just about imperialism or race, but about imperialism, race and gender, and then imperialism, race, gender and ecology, and then finally the whole question of a political crisis and a crisis of democracy. So, in every case, I was led to conclude that these were actually structurally grounded dimensions of oppression, injustice and irrationality, or crisis tendencies. So I ended up thinking that what some people called traditional Marxism, which was one-sidedly focused on exploited labor at the point of production, was not really adequate for the critique of capitalism, and so I was led to develop my so-called expanded view of capitalism in the book you referenced, *Cannibal Capitalism*.

2. In relation to what you just said about this expanded view of capitalism that you explain in Cannibal Capitalism and in relation to your intellectual production, I see that you find in anticapitalism the current way to keep alive the belief that there is an opportunity to battle this whole structure. What do you exactly think about this? Does this opportunity exist? Or do you think that neoliberalism and its subjection have already won the battle?

I definitely think that there is a great deal of emancipatory struggle and radical imagination. It's a time of revival of radicalism. You mentioned what is going on right now here in New York at college campuses around Palestine, and this is so reminiscent to me and people of my generation of anti Vietnam War struggles. It's a time of tremendous mobilization and energy, and I think that even though right now the struggles around Israel-Palestine are sort of center stage and very much drawing on people who have been involved in other struggles earlier, I think that that's a conjunctural fact and there are other places and there have been other recent

moments where the struggle around austerity, debt, social reproduction has been front and center, and I think it says something about the ongoing crisis. To me, it's a multidimensional crisis that includes a crisis of social reproduction, a crisis of ecology, a geopolitical crisis of the global order, which I think has to do with the break-up of a relatively uncontested US hegemony in the world order, and I would relate the Israel-Palestine issue to that. Anyway, all of these things are palpable and acute and severe, because, you know, in capitalism's history, crises are not always acute and severe and so evident, they are more latent and submerged and partial and so on, but this is a rather exceptional moment. So I do think that it's a moment when one issue takes center stage and then it sort of doesn't go away but it's knocked out of the center for a little while, and I think we can expect more and more of that. And the burning question is whether the participants in these various central battles and struggles develop a broad understanding of the fact that there's one social system, capitalism, that lies at the root of ecological crises, of geopolitical crises, of racial and imperial oppression crises, of social reproduction crises, democracy crises... It's one social system and it's kind of like a cancer that metastasizes and pops out in different places and I don't think that any single group, specific issue or, let's just say, any single issue, mobilization, or group movement is capable of getting to the root of this. I think it takes a combination, it takes an alliance, a counter hegemonic bloc, a coalition—people use different words for this—but it takes some form of more cooperation or integration of the various forces that are either already emancipatory or could potentially become emancipatory. So I might be more optimistic on one day and more pessimistic on the next day, and so on and so forth, but that's always the way things go, and I think it is important not to be too swayed by this moment of feelings of pessimism and optimism. The fact of the matter is I don't think there is any solution that does not involve deep structural change of the system, and to achieve that requires the kind of cooperation that I've been describing among other

various struggles. So, basically, what I've been doing, in the hopes of encouraging that kind of cooperation, was to sort of develop in *Cannibal capitalism* an account of these multidimensional crises, these intersecting crises, that helps people connect the dots and understand where the ultimate structural roots of all of these bad things lie, how they're connected to each other and how people may have different priorities, in the sense of different experiences of what is most urgent. And it's not the same everywhere, this depends on where you're situated but, despite the differences in situation and experience of what is most urgent, there could be greater awareness of the connections and the links, and I think this kind of understanding could have an impact, although I don't want to exaggerate what the impact of one given book or theory can be. But, anyway, the aim is to encourage big-picture thinking, and I hope that will lead to a kind of big picture, an activism that is informed by a big picture and could really deserve the name "counter hegemony", not just resistance here and there, but a counter hegemonic project to basically transform the social system in a deep way.

3. I wanted to pivot the conversation to the Israel-Palestine issue, as I believe it ties in with our discussion and also relates to what you just said about counter-hegemonic responses, so thank you for your response. Also, I've noticed in your writings that, particularly within feminism but applicable to other movements as well, there's a concern about the adoption of neoliberal methods. We have seen instances where, despite efforts to resist, the prevailing structures often seem to stifle alternatives. It's almost as if there's a back-and-forth struggle where there is a reaction against the status quo, but the economic underpinnings remain steadfast. What are your thoughts on this dynamic?

Well, let me start first with the United States, which is the context I know best, and I think that what I'm about to say is not completely unfamiliar elsewhere, but it may not have the same weight that it

has here. We live in the act of liberal democratic capitalist society, and this issue goes back a long way, long before neoliberalism. There have always been, in American politics, strong movements for legal reform, for liberal rights that do not in and of themselves change the fundamental property relations or the organization of Labor and so on and so forth. So, the US, like Britain, has had strong feminist movements in its history but they have been overwhelmingly liberal feminist ones; I don't say that there were never any more fundamental challenges... On the part of black feminists, on the part of socialist feminists or Social Democratic feminists, there have been, but I think we have to acknowledge that they have been the minority tendencies, in moments when there is a revolutionary ethos in the country and feminists absorb some of that revolutionary ethos and become more radical. This was the case, I think, in the 60's and 70's, when the US radical feminism emerged out of the broader New Left ethos and had a kind of, at least, revolutionary rhetoric and really strongly saw itself as part of an anticapitalist, an anti-imperialist and antiracist left. Then, basically what happened is what always happens in the United States, as that ethos begins to fade and normalize, then feminism—at least its majority tendency—reverses to the default position, which is liberalism in the United States. Basically by, let's say, the '90s, mainstream American majority of feminism had become an interest group within the Democratic party, focused on important issues like abortion access and fighting to criminalize marital rape and other forms of domestic violence and so on and so forth. I mean, it's not that these things were not important, but they were very much divorced from a questioning of the deep structures of capitalist society. And so these issues took on a liberal quality that divorced them from questions of the broader structure of the relationship between production and reproduction and so on. So, by the time we get to neoliberalism, we get a rather extreme version of corporate feminism, like Sheryl Sandberg, CEO of Facebook, where it's all about attention to a privileged stratum of

women and their struggles to basically achieve equality with the men of their own class and privilege. And this is not a feminism that is socially egalitarian in any broad sense; it's a class-specific feminism. So that's sort of what happens to the mainstream of feminism in neoliberalism but, at the same time, neoliberalism is really causing such deterioration in the living conditions of two thirds of Americans that it's wreaking havoc on people's ability to maintain living conditions... Some of them at least were used to that; their conditions were not generous and wonderful by any means, but somewhat viable. And so, this has caused the emergence of new radical forms of feminism that contest the hegemony and dominance of that liberalism and neoliberalism. So, when Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and I wrote the *Feminism for the 99% Manifesto*, we were trying to give voice and get attention on things that were already happening on the ground in the United States and elsewhere: the emergence of new radical forms of feminism some of which had already an anticapitalist ethos or, if they didn't have that in a fully developed way, were open to it and were interested in it. So I think that neoliberalism has actually been the catalyst for radicalization among feminists. I think it was for us when Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in 2016. This was like it's time to take a different course. And I just want to add one point, and it is that everything I just said about feminism could and should be said about the antiracist movement, about the environmental movement, and about various other Democratic movements. In other words, they, too, in the sort of what we call the Post Civil Rights era in the United States, like Black politics, also became some kind of interest groups within the Democratic party system, seeking reforms that did not challenge the system but conformed to it, reforms within the system, and the black movement had its own version of the "crack the glass ceiling", which they called the struggle to get "black faces in high places"; that's the exact equivalent. And then we got the green capitalism, and the environmental movement actually split, I think, with an important

segment that was always sort of wilderness kind of wealthy elite environmentalism becoming green capitalism. And then, with neoliberalization, other forms of much more radical environmentalism developed and, of course, as you know, from the movement for Black Lives we got a new kind of antiracist militancy in the United States that has given rise to a revival of interest in Black Marxism, which had fallen off the radar screen just as Marxist feminism had fallen off the radar screen. People are now studying and reading these thinkers and writers, so I think we see a very similar trajectory, a radical upsurge in the 60s and 70s which had an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist ethos, then the sort of reversion to liberal forms of identity, political group, specific politics, and now again the resurgence of radicalism and the attempts to create new forms of black Marxist thought, of feminist thought, and of eco-Marxist thought. So this is, from an intellectual point of view, a very exciting time.

4. You just touched upon the concepts of production and reproduction within the framework you've been outlining, and in the current social context. Additionally, I have seen that you've recently discussed the notion that an increasing number of individuals are becoming hybrids, navigating multiple dynamics simultaneously—from issues of expropriation and exploitation to those of gender and social reproduction. Could you elaborate further on this concept of hybridity and its implications within this broader system?

Like everybody else, I have been struck by the salience of the idea of intersectionality, as one way of talking about the connections and the dots, and connecting the dots. So I see the interest in intersectionality as a positive symptom, let's say, of the hunger, the desire for this larger framework of analysis, to get away from group-specific political thinking, to get away from single-issue politics, and to try to make connections. And what I've been trying to do, both in *Cannibal Capitalism* and in my more recent work, is to try to give a deep structural account of these so-called

intersections where class, gender and race cross one another and, let's say, empire and corporate as well. And trying to do that, my most recent work tries to look at how labor is organized in capitalist society, and how the society relies on, at least, three types of labor, not just the exploited labor of free workers in factories, which is where the traditional Marxist emphasis lies, but also the coerced, unfree, or semi-free labor of subjugated and typically racialized populations both within the periphery and within the core. And that, I think of as kind of expropriated sub-work, kind of inferior work, where people are not fully rights-bearing individuals able to freely contract and so on, where they are unable to command a wage that covers the full extent of their living cost as exploited workers, as it seems they are usually supposed to do. And there is also what I called "domesticated" work or social reproduction, but stressing the way it is kind of deformed by a history that, for a long time, really didn't even recognize it as work at all and treated it as non-work. So the idea was that there are at least these three forms of labor, and the system needs all three of them and it can't function without them but, historically, it has divided them and assigned them to three different groups of people: the white male proletarians in the factory or the exploited; the racialized expropriated sub-workers, often in the periphery but also the racialized population within the core; and then the ones who are responsible to produce and reproduce the generations that are the bearers of labor power. Now, for a while, these were rather distinct populations but—and I've finally signed a long way around here about your question on hybrids—I think there are a lot of interesting ways to trace how people who are in more than one of those situations think. They are expropriated and exploited simultaneously, or they are expropriated and domesticated simultaneously, or they are in all three circumstances at once. And, again, there have always been some hybrids, but neoliberalization seems to me to be really creating more and more hybrids, because one thing that goes on is that those who have clawed their way out

of expropriation to achieve pure exploitation in the most powerful trade unions and labor parties and so on, and especially in the social Democratic era, where there is a majority of men, where there were strong unions and so, those people are being dragged back into forms of expropriation as neoliberalism has weakened unions, has off-shored manufacturing and has replaced what were higher paid unionized manufacturing jobs with low wage service work. So a lot of people who might have been purely exploited earlier are finding themselves now expropriated and exploited at the same time. And then, from the other end, manufacturing gets relocated to the south in the United States, where there are no unions, or to India, China, the BRICS countries and so on, and those places are still burdened and suffering other forms of wealth-siphoning, which is another form of expropriation that is expropriation by debt. So, in other words, people might be working in factories there but, even if they get a semi-decent wage, their states are having to divert all the tax revenues to debt service and so there they're not getting any social services worth anything, and they are being expropriated through debt even if they're being exploited in the industry. So, that would be another kind of hybrid situation, and I think these hybrid situations are becoming more and more the majority. There certainly remain pockets of relative privilege, and there certainly remain large populations who are truly in dire straits given their sort of expulsion from the world of the recognized, given climate disasters that they're very prone to experiencing the front of, given the ongoing land dispossession and their being forced to live in *favelas* or other slum communities without water, electricity and even the basic utilities and infrastructure. So, it's not that the extremes are disappearing, but more and more people are finding themselves in some kind of mixed situation and, to me, that I mean, maybe I'm being Pollyanna-looking, but it seems that it ought to be easier for people to understand the sort of intersectional aspects of their situation. I don't know if it's easier, but at least there's a structural basis, they're less clearly divided from one another. That

could in principle lead to more solidarity, but it could equally lead to the opposite, because people who are losing status and conditions that they had before are very prone to scapegoating and blaming others for taking away their you know stuff. So it's a mixed picture again in terms of: do we get more solidarity or do we get much greater antagonism and scapegoating and victim blaming? Some of both, but I think it's up to us to try to push the narrative that encourages solidarity and say: it's not your situation is bad, but it's not really the fault of Mexicans, Muslims, blacks, immigrants, Jews or whoever the scapegoat is... So here's another story about who or what is to blame, about who your allies can be, and how you can empower yourself through building a broader set of allies.

5. I find it quite straightforward to grasp the concept of hybrids and the insights you've shared. Now, shifting gears a bit, I'd like to delve into the topic of care. In your analysis of the contradictions between capital and care, you have explored how capitalism affects the provision of care and reproduces gender inequalities. I'm interested in exploring the notion of love as that "free gift". How do you think these dynamics influence romantic relationships and the ways in which love is experienced in contemporary society?

Let me say that I think that capitalism is about the invented romantic love. We had courtly love in the Middle Ages, but I do think that capitalism as a structure and as an organization has put a lot of stress on love... I'm talking about, let's say, partner-love. So, first of all, it's the only society that really has institutionalized, in a deep way, the division between family and factor, care, and work, even though feminists have been arguing for a long time that care is work. The real fact is that we set up these resident spaces, which are supposed to be where intimacy and emotionality goes on, and then these other spheres that are the economic spheres, where we interact with strangers and other coworkers, whatever our relationships are with them; it's all in a realm of an economic space. So there is this division, which I believe is what implants a gender

binarism deep in capitalist society; one side of it is sort of the feminine side, and the other side is the masculine one, and that in itself is already a strong encouragement for heteronormativity and a discouragement, a kind of, let's say, abnormalization, of gay and lesbian or any forms of non-binary and cis emotional attachments and so on. So love has already been given a certain contour; it's supposed to be *the other* from competitive relations, the kind of relationship that is supposed to characterize the sphere of reproduction; it is supposed to be altruistic. It is historically, although lower-class women and some men have been paid to do it for the aristocracy, the higher classes are supposed to be doing whatever they're doing out of love. And that also means that that sort of love is the opposite of work and of the achievement orientation, trying to rise and to produce and be an agent. So this is very much—I don't know if it's the right word—a distortion, because I don't know what pure love would be, but it's definitely a shaping of what we think of by “love”, and it puts a big stress on romantic partnership relationships because they have to somehow bear the whole weight of being “the other” from this powerful apparatus of corporate mainstream political life. That's so powerful... And where do we retreat and find something else that supports us and nurtures us and gives us encouragement and support and so on? So this puts a huge stress, I think and that there's this one place where you're supposed to sort of recoup all the stress... While, again, as feminism knows, the household is itself a space of tremendous stress, as well as work, complicated negotiations, power imbalance and so on and so forth. So the love thing becomes, I think, a way of mystifying the difficulty of this overall arrangement, including the difficulty of the household as a sphere. Now, that's not to say that people don't actually experience love; we all do, and we need it in a form or another. It's part of what being a human being means. So I would say that there are a lot of things that go on at the same time. If we just start with women, women normally love their children and, in some way or another,

may love their partners, including when those partners are men, but this love is so pressurized, and it is crisscrossed with difficulties which I think can be traced to the organization of capitalism as a society and which don't have to be so stark for us. I'm not saying that life is easy in matters of love, who knows, but it doesn't need to be this hard and this problematic. I especially appreciate feminist thinkers like Alexandra Kollontai, who tried to theorize what love should look like within a socialist society or a communist society as opposed to what it would look like in a capitalist society. I don't think any real existing social society ever solved this conundrum by any means, but it's a good question to ask and one worth thinking about

6. I find this perspective on love as “the other” quite intriguing; it's definitely got me thinking in new ways. I'll move on to the last question, which ties in with the idea of family abolition. Considering what you've explained and your analysis of how capitalism affects care, do you see any connections between these theories and your own? What are your thoughts on the idea of abolishing the family?

There is definitely a connection, because of the various contradictions and pressures and difficulties of actually having a family life that is genuinely enlivening and genuinely good, which is very hard. And then, if it classically goes with the idea that responsibility for children and therefore for the future of the whole human race falls essentially on the family, on this private institution, there may be this support or that support coming from the state, but that's sort of supplemental; and then we have all sorts of experimentation of people who want or would prefer to live in a commune, where the whole work-intimacy relation would be completely different. These things would be intermingled rather than separated. There are people who prefer to live asexually, and there is celibacy; there are people who are polyamorous or against monogamy, so I would myself hesitate to say that there's one right answer to this, at least from where we sit. It seems like we live in

an unviable, very contradictory and very difficult institutional setup that makes family life seem to some people very undesirable, but we have to say that for other people it may be difficult but it is still experienced as some kind of place where I can be me against that hostile world. Both views are true. I think what I would like to see is a kind of society that deinstitutionalizes that sharp split between production and reproduction, and it then makes it clear that society has a big responsibility for children, that this shouldn't be a private thing. And, apart from meeting all kinds of basic needs, including the needs of parents and children and so on, it otherwise leaves lots of space for experimentation. And I would like to see a society or a design, a societal design, that does not assume that we either have to have no families or we have to have only one kind of family. I think that we need to really be inventive and build a social organization that allows experiments in living. So I have a certain hesitation in relation with the theory of family abolition, but I appreciate it as an experimental line of thought and as a reflection, a serious reflection, on the difficulties that family life is under today.



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