

Marx's 'Men': Conceptions of Proletarian Masculinity in the Writings of Karl Marx

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Considerations of Marx by historians predominantly focus on his discourse regarding class and capitalism, with this analysis remaining ungendered until the 1970s with the advent of women's liberation and Marxist feminist historical texts.¹ Subsequently, discussions of class and gender in Marx's writings have focused almost entirely on his relationship to and discussion of femininity within his established class constructs.² However, an analysis of Marx's writings, including *Capital* volume 1, *Wage Labour and Capital*, and *The Communist Manifesto* reveal how Marx's discourse of class is inherently a discourse about masculinity, and about how that masculinity is challenged by capitalism. Marx presents class as relational and criticises the power imbalance created by the capitalist hierarchy; however the anxiety underpinning this imbalance exposes anxieties regarding masculinity, or more specifically the manner in which men hold and project power over others in order to assert said masculinity. In particular, Marx's discourse on the proletariat reveals anxieties regarding the role of industrialisation in challenging and displacing the masculinity of working men, by the machines and the bourgeois men who control their labour. Marx's discourse also reflects anxieties regarding proletarian masculinity in relation to shifting family structures, due to the movement of women and children into the industrial workforce and its subsequent impacts on patriarchal family structures.

The main conception of masculinity that Marx is arguably concerned with is the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as conceived by R. W. Connell.³ Connell's concept considers gender as relational and referring to a hierarchical organisation that unequally distributes power, with power granted to those who embody or possess the masculinity that is thought to be 'common sense' within society. Although hegemonic masculinity has traditionally been utilised by feminist scholars to emphasise the dominant power of men over subordinated

¹ David Morgan, "Class and Masculinities", in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn and R.W. Connell (California: Sage Publications, 2005), 176.

² Some of these key works include: Heather Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013); Val Burris, "The Dialectic of Women's Oppression: Notes on the Relation between Capitalism and Patriarchy", *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 27, Special Feminist Issue (1982), 51-74; Roisin McDonough and Rachel Harrison, "Patriarchy and relations of production", in *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production*, ed. Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe, (London: Routledge, 2013), 11 – 45; Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, (USA: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

³ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), chapter 3.

women, scholars such as Victor Seidler and Jeff Hearn have addressed how it also encompasses the power of certain men over other men.⁴ As Hearn argues, “‘men’ are formed in a hegemonic gender order that also forms ‘women’, but men are also active in different ways in forming and re-forming hegemonic differentiations among men’.⁵ Indeed, Connell’s concept places hegemonic masculinity as one of four codes of masculinity, whereupon hegemonic masculinity is the dominant, and operates in tension with the other three categories of masculinity: complicit, subordinate, and marginalised.⁶ Viewing gender, specifically masculinity, in such a way explicitly links gender to Marx’s class discourse – which is also presented as relational, hierarchal and responsible for inequalities of power, and operates under consistent tension between different groups’ competition both for power and for the fulfilment of masculine ideals.

Historians of masculinity also consistently work to conceptualise men as a gendered category. Certainly, the vast majority of scholarship on Marx and gender focuses purely on women as sexed beings, with minimal focus on men and masculinity in Marxism. Indeed, in these gendered analyses of Marx’s writing and within wider understandings of Marxist discourse, ‘man’ is nearly always presented as an empty category, a universal term, devoid of any cultural, social or sexed meaning. Yet in Marx’s writing and analysis, the adult male proletarian worker who provides his family livelihood, is the ‘archetypical protagonist.... of his class’ essential interest’.⁷ Throughout his writing, Marx consistently differentiates between bourgeois and proletarian men, highlighting the power imbalance between them, and engaging with understandings of what creates a masculine identity, namely a man’s patriarchal position in his family that allows him to both control the labour of his wife and children, and solely provide for them.

It is in this context that one can read Marx’s ‘men’ and his discourse regarding the position of the proletariat under capitalism as explicitly gendered, with the undermining of their masculinity a significant threat to them. Indeed, in *The Communist Manifesto*, one aspect of the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat Marx criticises includes ‘...patriarchal relations’, however, he does not define patriarchy. In discussing patriarchal relations, it can be argued that Marx’s discussion encompasses the two main conceptions of patriarchy, as both ‘the rule of the father’ and ‘the rule of men’.⁸ Certainly, aspects of the patriarchal relations Marx refers to are concerned with family relations, centring on man’s control over his family. Indeed, many writings and understandings of capitalism and socialism in the period focused on the emasculating experience of man’s diminished position as head of the family, or his rule of the father. Harold Benenson argues that Marx’s writings on family relations reflect the attitudes held by Victorian moralists, in that they ‘depicted the family realm

⁴ Victor Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 21.

⁵ Jeff Hearn, “From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men”, *Feminist Theory* 5, no. 1 (2004), 61.

⁶ Connell, *Masculinities*, chapter 3.

⁷ Harold Benenson, “Victorian Sexual Ideology and Marx’s Theory of the Working Class”, *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 25 (1984), 16.

⁸ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

as dependent, removed from active social conflicts, sharing a common purpose, and as woman's appropriate location in the existing society'.⁹ The shift in family structures under industrialisation that saw women enter the workforce and men lose full control over both their own means of production and their household's production rendered these developments threatening to men's hegemonic power over their household and labour, and thus threatening to the very morals of society. Subsequently, attempts to reassert 'the rule of the father' and thus reconstruct proletarian men's masculine identity 'rested on the exclusion [...] of women within capitalist relations of production and the dependency of women within the household', as well as resting on '[men's] subjections to capital and competition within the labour market'.¹⁰

These 'subjections to capital and competition within the labour market' can also be considered part of the 'patriarchal relations' that Marx discusses, as they reflect the conceptualisation of patriarchy as 'the rule of men'. These 'patriarchal relations' encompass the power imbalance between bourgeois and proletarian men, namely the 'rule' of bourgeois men over proletarian men via their ability to control the labour of the men they are granted power over. Indeed, John Tosh's research has indicated how understandings and conceptions of masculinity or 'manliness' in nineteenth century Britain were only 'secondarily about relations with women'.¹¹ Although man's position in the family, his 'rule of the father', and thus his ability to provide for and control the labour of his wife and children was an important aspect of his masculine identity that was threatened by capitalism, his relationship with other men was also highly important. Sylvia Walby's 1986 analysis of patriarchy is beneficial here, for she argues that patriarchy is 'composed not only of a patriarchal mode of production [in the household] but also sets of patriarchal relations in the workplace, the state, sexuality and other practices in civil society'.¹² With patriarchy thus intersecting with capitalist institutions and relations, the relationship between patriarchy and class becomes apparent. When the emergence of capitalism created divisions between bourgeois and proletarian men, and granted hegemony, or the 'rule of men', to bourgeois men who subsequently controlled the labour of proletarian men, patriarchal relations as referred to by Marx certainly became threatening for working class men's understandings of their masculine identity and sense of their now subordinated 'manliness'.

Indeed, it can be argued that the very class antagonisms and divisions that patriarchy penetrates and that Marx agitates against mirror a burgeoning crisis of masculinity under industrialisation. *The Communist Manifesto* opens with: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave [...] lord and serf, guild-master and

⁹ Benenson, "Victorian Sexual Ideology", 11.

¹⁰ Keith McClelland, "Some Thoughts on Masculinity and the 'Representative Artisan' in Britain, 1850-1880", *Gender & History* 1, no. 2 (1989), 166.

¹¹ John Tosh, "What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain", *History Workshop* no. 38 (1994), 183.

¹² Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment*, (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1986), 14.

journeyman ...oppressor and oppressed...'¹³ However, the examples of class struggles he lists are also purely relationships of power between men – indeed, the very manner in which Marx depicts class as relational allows for him to also express an underlying concern between gender relationships, including the oppressor/oppressed relationship as constituted between men. Not only are these class struggles relationships of power between men, they are also explicitly hierarchical – indicating the manner in which proletarian men, when subordinated by the hegemony of bourgeois men, remain in their position of oppression. Arguably, this oppression is then exacerbated by industrialisation. Whilst as a slave or serf, the working class man still maintained some labour autonomy and patriarchal control over the household, whilst only being oppressed by either the freeman or the lord; however, under industrialisation, the proletarian man is oppressed by “the machine, by the overlooker, and the bourgeois manufacturer himself”.¹⁴ Certainly, this oppression is exacerbated by the reduction of working-class man’s relational position in gendered hierarchy as a result of the bolstering of the hegemonic masculinity of bourgeois men, achieved by controlling and depreciating their labour power, and by reducing their patriarchal household power by enabling the entry of women into the labour force.

Subsequently, throughout Marx’s discourse on the proletariat, there is an underlying anxiety about how industrialisation and changing deployments of labour impact the oppressor/oppressed relationship and power balance between men. In particular, Marx expresses concerns regarding a man’s control over his own labour – which he argues has changed due to capitalist industrialisation to a situation whereupon the working man has lost all autonomy and is reduced to a slave like capacity with no control over his household means of production or ability to independently provide for his family. He argues that ‘the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character’ and ‘the cost of production of a workman is restricted, almost entirely, to the means of subsistence that he requires for his maintenance’.¹⁵ Subjected to the power and whims of the bourgeois factory owners, the men of the proletariat are stripped of their previously-held masculine identity that was bolstered by productive capacity and control over the household means of production. In *Capital*, where Marx laments the ‘terrible and disgusting [...] dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system’, the old family ties he refers to are the patriarchal household structure prior to industrialisation, whereupon the father had been able to control the labour of those in his household.¹⁶ Indeed, prior to industrialisation, when production was either centred around household production or a man’s labour under a guildmaster or a lord, the father had sole control over what was produced in the household and who worked. Although he may not have had full control over his earnings and labour under feudalism, he still possessed the ability to be the sole provider and breadwinner of the family. As one example of a society less oppressive than capitalism,

¹³ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), in ed. David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 246.

¹⁴ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 251.

¹⁵ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 251.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital* volume 1 (1867-1875), (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 620.

Marx describes ‘the patriarchal industry of a peasant family, that produces corn, cattle, yam, linen, and clothing for home use’.¹⁷ As production moved into factories, this patriarchal power diminished as the proletarian man lost control of the means of production and subsequently lost the ability to support his family through his wages alone. As Marx details in *The Communist Manifesto*, ‘modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist’.¹⁸ No longer does the proletarian man hold the position of patriarchal master of his home; instead, he holds minimal control as a non-autonomous pawn in the factory. Indeed, one of the main shifts in the patriarchal control of proletarian men under industrialisation is the loss of control over their wives and children. As sociologists Roisin McDonough and Rachel Harrison have argued, ‘in the pre-capitalist producing family and in the working-class family in capitalism, patriarchy is also connected with the need to control the wife’s labour’.¹⁹ In *The German Ideology*, Marx details how the ‘nucleus’ of pre-capitalist structures had a ‘first form [...] which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband’, with this ‘latent slavery [...] the first property’ of man.²⁰ As will be discussed later in the paper, industrialisation strips the proletarian man of this property by forcing women and children to enter the workforce in order to maintain a sufficient livelihood for the family. Not only does this challenge the patriarchal power of proletarian men, but it challenges the hegemonic masculinity of proletarian men due to their loss of control over both their own and other’s labour.

Indeed, in the ‘Provisional Rules’ for the First International Workingmen’s Association, Marx details to proletarian men how ‘the economical subjection of the man of labour to the monopoliser of the means of labour, that is, the sources of life, lies at the bottom of servitude in all its forms, of all social misery, mental degradation, and political dependence’.²¹ Thus, he suggests that this is how domination, and thus hegemonic masculinity at the hands of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat, is exercised: control over the labour power of others lies at the root, and is the primary medium, of both class and non-class forms of domination, exploitation and oppression.²² In this regard, class oppression is inherently linked to gender, with control over the labour power of others, the predominant manner in which to achieve domination as it targets the core of an individual’s gendered identity, particularly ideals of masculinity that are constructed around holding power both over one’s self and subordinated genders underneath them. In previous economic and household structures pre-industrialisation, man’s ability to control both his labour and the labour of those subordinated by him is central to his understanding of his position in the patriarchy, and his conception of his masculinity as

¹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 171.

¹⁸ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 251.

¹⁹ McDonough and Harrison, “Patriarchy and relations of production”, 26.

²⁰ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (1846), in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 185.

²¹ Karl Marx, “Provisional Rules of the Association” (1864), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 20. (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 14.

²² Renzo Llorente, “Marx’s Concept of ‘Universal Class’: A Rehabilitation”, *Science & Society* 77, no. 4 (2013), 554.

fulfilling the hegemonic ideal thoroughly vested in man's ability to dominate and possess power over others. The subsequent loss of this, and the increased control and power over his labour granted to bourgeois men means proletarian men are rendered to a position of 'servitude in all its forms', dependant on bourgeois men for everything and disavowed any attempts to fulfil ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

The hegemonic masculinity of the bourgeoisie that is enabled by industrialisation is described as akin to the oppression by the machine; 'not only are [the proletariat] the slaves of the bourgeois class [...] they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine [...] and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself'.²³ Marx's anxieties regarding the consequences for masculinity are further apparent in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in which he argues that 'communism is the genuine solution of the antagonism [...] between man and man'. This reveals how class-based antagonisms have dangerous consequences for the distribution of power amongst men and subsequently their masculine identities as defined by the concept of hegemonic masculinity.²⁴ Namely, these dangerous consequences are the complete emasculation of men by eroding their labour power and sense of hegemony, as well as challenging their patriarchal power in both the workplace and the home. Stripped of all power and sense of identity, the proletarian man is placed in danger of being reduced to naught but an ungendered 'simple monotonous force of production'.²⁵

Additionally, Marx argues that not only do these bourgeois men compromise the masculinity of their workers by monopolising their labour and working identities but also by depriving them of their position as head of household via the employment of women and children as cheap sources of labour. In the context of nineteenth-century working-class masculinity, the notion of the 'male breadwinner' was considered a crucial component of the male identity in his financial power over and ability to care for his family, for 'working men increasingly tied their [masculinity] to the assertion that adult males should be the exclusive providers of their families' livelihoods'.²⁶ Within his discourse, Marx thus expresses concern regarding the impact of industrialisation on established family structures, detailing how industrialisation reduces the power of the proletariat man within his family, challenging his hegemonic masculinity, particularly over his wife, as both his labour and that of his wife and children is deployed under industrial capitalism. Marx details how 'the bourgeoisie has [...] reduced the family relation to a mere money relation' and in doing so, has denied the proletariat their previously held control over all members of the family that subsequently bolstered their masculinity identity.²⁷ Indeed, in *Wage Labour and Capital*, one of Marx's main critiques of capitalism is how the factory system undermined the male worker's ability to provide a family

²³ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 251.

²⁴ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 89.

²⁵ Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, in *The Marx Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (USA: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1972), 189.

²⁶ Benenson, "Victorian Sexual Ideology", 5.

²⁷ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 248.

livelihood, reflecting anxieties regarding the shifting place of hegemonic masculinity within the family.²⁸ He details how in order to replace ‘the man who has been discharged owing to the machine, the factory employs maybe *three* children and *one* woman’.²⁹ When previously the proletarian man’s wages ‘suffice[d] for the three women and a woman’, granting him sole control over the family’s income and labour and positioning himself as the family breadwinner, ‘now four times as many workers’ lives are used up in order to gain a livelihood for *one* worker’s family’.³⁰ Indeed, the proletarian man’s capacity to provide for his family as sole breadwinner that was integral to understandings of Victorian manhood is described by Marx as his ‘noble power’ which he loses under capitalism. As Marx details, ‘it is just this noble reproductive power that the labourer surrenders to the capitalist in exchange for means of subsistence received. Consequently, he has lost it for himself’.³¹ In order to obtain means of subsistence, the proletarian man is forced to ‘[throw] every member of his family on to the labour market’, instead of being able to be the sole provider for his family.³² His ‘noble power’ as patriarchal breadwinner is subsequently ‘lost’, engendering a subsequent loss of an aspect of his identity and thus his understandings of his own manliness. What he has lost for himself, in being forced to abandon his position as sole breadwinner and throw his family on to the labour force, is his assurance in the security of his hegemonic masculine position as patriarch that was apparent pre-industrialisation.

One of Marx’s concerns regarding the challenges to proletarian masculinity as a result of industrialisation is due to this inclusion of women and children in the labour force outside of the household. He argues that ‘the more [that] modern industry develops, the more is the labour of men superseded by that of women’.³³ Therefore, ‘differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class’, which can be interpreted as a loss of gendered identity/masculinity for the proletariat.³⁴ Furthermore, the involvement of women and children in the labour force constitutes them as economic agents that contribute to the family, thus disavowing the man of his ultimate economical and patriarchal control over the labour of his household. As he details, ‘by throwing every member of family on to the labour market, spreads the value of the man’s labour over his whole family... and thus depreciates his labour power’.³⁵ Marx’s anxieties regarding the instability of proletarian masculinity, particularly due to the precarious position of the patriarchal family economy under capitalism, are revealed in his need to ‘maintain the male-breadwinner family pattern’ by his support of working men’s demands for a ‘family wage’ income.³⁶ Indeed, the manner in which Marx advocates for a ‘family wage’ income is explicitly an attempt to reassert a sense of hegemonic

²⁸ Benenson, “Victorian Sexual Ideology”, 9-10.

²⁹ Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, 189. Italics authors own.

³⁰ Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, 189. Italics authors own.

³¹ Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, 181.

³² Marx, *Capital*, 517.

³³ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 251.

³⁴ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 251.

³⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 517.

³⁶ Benenson, “Victorian Sexual Ideology”, 16.

masculinity among proletarian men by granting them the patriarchal position of sole breadwinner stripped from them by bourgeois men during industrialisation. His understanding of working-class concerns, foregrounded by an interest in maintaining and reasserting a ‘family wage’, thus reflects this intersection between gender and class anxieties, and particularly the importance of male hegemony over a household means of production and income. Certainly, the ideal of the ‘male breadwinner’ shifted from being a component of a common masculine identity available to the vast majority of men in pre-capitalist societies, to being explicitly associated with the bourgeois masculinity that achieved hegemony under industrialisation. Thus, Marx’s support for the male family wage can also be interpreted as an attempt to minimise the power division between bourgeois and proletarian men by increasing proletarian men’s capacity to achieve this hegemonic ideal of masculinity as rooted in one’s ability to control labour power. As Benenson has argued, ‘the underlying belief of the working-class male in his proper authority as family ‘head,’ his sole position as breadwinner, which assumed a wife’s devotion to homemaking, and his right to the vote as a man, linked his aspirations to the emblems of masculinity largely available to middle class husbands’.³⁷ Not only does Marx’s support for the ‘family wage’ standard of male earnings attempt to reassert proletarian men’s patriarchal control over their family; it also removes the necessity for proletarian men to spread the labour of his family, allowing his wife and children to remain in the household and the domestic sphere. This subsequently has the dual effect of both reinscribing patriarchal control in the household, and also bolstering proletarian hegemonic masculinity via their power of their subordinated wives who remain appropriately feminine in the domestic realm.

An important aspect of Marx’s criticism of industrialisation is the entrance of women and children, but particularly women, into the labour force under capitalism. He argues this holds significant consequences for proletarian masculinity due to the loss of hegemonic masculinity as expressed over his wife and her subordinated situation purely in the household. *Her* entrance into the labour force is seen as a loss of a property for the proletariat and the patriarchy; as Marx expounds, ‘the proletarian is without property; his relation to his wife and children no longer has anything in common with the bourgeois family relations...’³⁸ Marx in *Capital* also comments on how the entrance of women into the industrial workforce ‘undermined traditional family-structures, as women were to an certain extent ‘masculinised’ by their work’ as Heather Brown succinctly explains.³⁹ Marx details how a woman, upon entering the workforce, ‘cannot do her duty to her children’ and indeed, nor her husband.⁴⁰ When previously her position had been to remain in the household, caring for children and maintaining the household for her husband, her entrance into the workforce both masculinises her in her inability to fulfil the feminine role of mother, and challenges the hegemonic masculinity her husband asserts as the sole breadwinner and patriarchal provider for the family.

³⁷ Benenson, “Victorian Sexual Ideology”, 9.

³⁸ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 254.

³⁹ Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family*, 215.

⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 629.

Significantly, Marx details how these women and their participation in the labour force is perceived by men as ‘degrading to the[ir] sex’ and how ‘the men suffer greatly’, especially with women taking ‘the work of a strong man’ which ‘causes them to leave their homes’.⁴¹ This masculinisation of women thus challenges the masculinity of their husbands as they enter the labour force and become active economic agents and contributors to the previously patriarchal family. Proletarian men are thus faced with the disruption to the hegemonic status of their masculinity both in the home and the workplace, with industrialisation reducing proletarian men from patriarchs of their household, with full control over the household means of production, to slave-like dependants subordinated and emasculated by bourgeois men who control their labour, property, wives and wages.

Overall, Marx’s discourse on the proletariat can be interpreted with the notion of class antagonisms serving as reflective of inequalities of power between both men and men, and men and women. His writings on the proletariat, such as *Capital*, *Wage Labour and Capital*, and *The Communist Manifesto*, reveal underlying concerns regarding proletarian masculinity and its hegemonic position, which has been challenged by industrialisation. This is certainly apparent when we consider Marx’s men as sexed, gendered beings, who operate both within and under the confines of the patriarchy. In particular, the power of bourgeois men over proletarian men, due to the power over their labour, is seen as especially subordinating and emasculating when analysed through the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, the hegemony of proletarian men is explicitly challenged by the entrance of women and children into the industrialised labour force. Marx’s concern over the loss of traditional patriarchal family structures reveals an anxiety regarding the status of proletarian masculinity in the face of capitalism. As Morgan summarises, since its conception as a relational social division, ‘class [has been] gendered, [with] men allocated [...] the role of class agents’, with Marx’s discussion of the proletariat reflecting concerns over the status of hegemonic and patriarchal masculinity in both the family and the labour force in the face of bourgeois oppression.⁴²

⁴¹ Marx, *Capital*, 629-630.

⁴² Morgan, “Class and Masculinity”, 169.

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