

“WHY NATIONS FAIL...” INTERROGATING THE THESIS OF DARON ACEMOGLU AND JAMES ROBINSON WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *In this essay, an attempt is made to examine the main thesis of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in their work titled **Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty** (2013), and this is situated within the context of Nigeria. Their main argument is that the development or under development of a country depends on the nature of its state institutions: countries with “inclusive” political and economic institutions are developed while those with “extractive” institutions are underdeveloped. We contend that whereas this thesis may be helpful in explaining the developmental conditions of other countries, the case of Nigeria is different: the country has “failed” not because of the nature of its institutions, but principally due to the egregious failure of leadership. Attention is also drawn to the fact that the position of Acemoglu and Robinson is part of the intellectual tradition whose *raison d’etre* is to extol and promote the neoliberal worldview and other western values.*

KEYWORDS: Nigeria; leadership; institutions; development; underdevelopment

INTRODUCTION

“Political and economic institutions, which are ultimately the choice of society, can be inclusive and encourage economic growth. Or they can be extractive and become impediments to economic growth. Nations fail when they have extractive economic institutions, supported by extractive political institutions that impede and even block economic growth. But this means that the choice of institutions – that is, the politics of institutions – is central to our quest for understanding the reasons for the success and failure of nations...”

- Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (2013: 83)

The foregoing assertion captures the central argument of Professors Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in their interesting piece of research work titled **Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity And Poverty**, the paperback edition of which was published in 2013. It implies that to these authors, the nature of state institutions and the primary purpose(s) for which they are deployed are central to the development (or underdevelopment) of any country. A similar view had earlier been expressed by Peter Evans (1989: 581), who, while

commenting on the underdeveloped section of the globe, argued that the differential effectiveness of Third World states as agents of industrial transformation can in fact be connected to differences in their internal structures and external ties. In his words, ...the most effective states are characterized by embedded autonomy, which joins well-developed, bureaucratic internal organization with dense public-private ties. In the least effective states, the mirror image – “incoherent absolutist domination” – combines undisciplined internal structures with external ties ruled by the “invisible hand”...

Acemoglu and Robinson’s five hundred and twenty-nine-page work primarily focuses on the major developmental routes available to, and taken by, different states. It is a penetrating intellectual examination of the history, economics, and politics of states with particular attention on the causal factors responsible for the differences in the levels of development of states. As the **New York Times** stated in its assessment, the book is “a wildly ambitious work that hopscotches through history and around the world to answer the very big question of why some countries get rich and others don’t”.

There is no gain-saying the fact that a researcher can hardly shed his/her biases and values in the course of conducting a serious research inquiry like the one the two professors carried out. Indeed, as Professor Onigun (1992: 6) observed, “there is no social science which is totally free from the biases and national interests of the investigator”. Unsurprisingly, the neoliberal, West-friendly ideological sentiments of the authors are discernable throughout the work.

Professors Acemoglu and Robinson have enlarged the body of literature and pool of knowledge about the issues of development and underdevelopment of human society, and their “prognosis for action” (Basse, 1997: 139) can be useful to countries that are **properly governed**. However, in this short essay, we contend that if applied to Nigeria, the authors’ thesis would not be very helpful. All the “inclusive political and economic institutions” and other accoutrements of governance can be available; but without the cardinal ingredient necessary for societal development (that is good leadership), no progress can be made. Sadly, this is what Nigeria lacks.

Since 1960 when the British colonizers departed, Nigeria and its people have suffered all forms of eviscerating misgovernance. On this score, all the post-colonial regimes in Nigeria – from the Tafawa Balewa-led neocolonial administration of 1960-1966 to the current tyrannical and calamitous regime of Muhammadu Buhari – are guilty. The evidence is everywhere: decrepit social infrastructure; burgeoning official corruption; colossal mass poverty; dubious and indefensible public debts; unprecedented level of insecurity; the growing rate of hyperinflation (with its attendant adverse effects on costs of living); the obvious impunity and lawlessness of public officials; decimation of the national currency, etc.

Nigeria is greatly and bountifully endowed with an enormous amount of resources which, if properly galvanized and managed, can catalyze the industrial transformation and development of any society. In fact, it can be said that Nigeria is a major beneficiary of nature’s limitless generosity and kindness. However, it is indescribably traumatizing to observe that over the decades, the country “has been mismanaged by incredibly inept and embarrassingly incompetent, clueless, and egregiously kleptocratic regimes” (Obo, 2014: 53)

The reality is that the Nigerian state is controlled by a very greedy and rapacious ruling class whose essence is self-aggrandizement and to the members of this class, the welfare of the citizenry means very little or nothing. Indeed, there is enough empirical evidence to support the view that those who control the Nigerian state use it to facilitate their self-enrichment and promote their vested interests as well as reinforce the misery and want of the masses; and the ultimate loser or victim is the Nigerian society (Obo, Coker and Omenka; 2014: 67 and 68). No state institution, no matter how “inclusive” can survive the annihilating improprieties of the ruthlessly destructive and viciously prebendalistic Nigerian political elites. As pointed out elsewhere, Nigerian elites have shown that they are callous, dangerous, unpatriotic and extremely avaricious. They have demonstrated that they are not leaders but criminal predators who have robbed the country of its future as well as bruised and violated the collective humanity of the people... (Obo, Omenka and Agishi, 2017: 22)

The performances of Nigerian rulers are worsening by the day, and it is becoming clear that only an extraordinary or a revolutionary or even a bloody mass action can take the country close to twenty-first century civilization. We fear that “as long as the Nigerian state is under the control of the ruinous class, there can be no light at the end of the tunnel for the Nigerian society and its people” (Obo, Coker and Omenka, 2014: 68). Against the backdrop of the comprehensively abysmal performances of all the post-colonial regimes in Nigeria, we are convinced that “the assumption so readily made that there has been a failure of development is misleading”, and that “the problem is not so much that development has failed as that it was never really on the agenda in the first place” (Ake, 2001: 1).

We do not agree with the view of Srinivas (1969 cited in Hettne, 1995: 28) that “methodologically it is a great problem to pinpoint what characterizes one’s own society”, and that “therefore a stranger has certain advantages when it comes to analyzing the distinctive quality of a particular society”. This is because we are, and have always been, in Nigeria, and we wear the shoe, so we know where it pinches. We are completely aware of the fact that Nigeria’s perilous elites have ruined the country.

A Word on Modernization Theory

Acemoglu and Robinson tried to distance themselves from the modernization school of thought; in this regard, they made a few critical comments about that theory in the last chapter of their work. For example, on page 443, the authors opined that modernization theory maintains that all societies, as they grow, are headed toward a more modern, developed, and civilized existence, and in particular toward democracy. According to them, many followers of the theory also claim that, like democracy, inclusive institutions will emerge as a by-product of the growth process; and moreover, even though democracy is not the same as inclusive political institutions, regular elections and relatively unencumbered political competition are likely to bring forth the development of inclusive political institutions.

On p. 444, it is stated that modernization theory is both incorrect and unhelpful for thinking about how to confront the major problems of extractive institutions in failing nations, and that the strongest piece of evidence in favour of this theory is that rich nations are the ones that have democratic regimes, respect civil and human rights, and enjoy functioning markets and generally inclusive institutions. Yet, the argument goes, interpreting this association as

supporting modernization theory ignores the major effect of inclusive economic and political institutions on economic growth.

And on p. 445, the professors drew attention to the fact that the historical record is even less generous to modernization theory: many relatively prosperous nations have succumbed to and supported repressive dictatorships and extractive institutions. In their opinion, both Germany and Japan were among the richest and most industrialized nations in the world in the first half of the twentieth century, and had comparatively well-educated citizens. This, according to them, did not prevent the rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany or a militaristic regime intent on territorial expansion via war in Japan - making both political and economic institutions take a sharp turn toward extractive institutions.

In spite of the afore-stated assertions, we argue that this work by Acemoglu and Robinson is not fundamentally different from other endeavours by other scholars to prop up the view that the North is industrialized and developed because it has done, and is still doing, the “right things”, and the need for the South to emulate it. As Francis Fukuyama (2012: 437), an ideologue of Western neoliberal “superiority” and “triumphalism” has stated, “institutions that confer advantages to their societies are routinely copied and improved by others; there are both learning and institutional convergence across societies over time...” In view of this, a brief remark on the modernization perspective is in order.

In an attempt to understand and explain the differences in the levels of development of different sections of human society – that is, why some countries are rich and developed and others are not, some theoretical traditions were developed by social scientists. One of these is what has become known as the modernization theory. The concept of modernization is defined as the “process of social change whereby less developed societies acquire characteristics common to more developed societies” (Lerner, 1972 cited in Nhema and Zinyama, 2016: 152). It has been stated that the emergence of the modernization theory was facilitated by three historical events in the post-World War II era namely:

- (a) the emergence and rise of the United States as a global power after the Second World War;
- (b) the spread of communism to the new nations emerging from colonial administration; and
- (c) the disintegration of European colonial empires in Africa, Asia and South America (Audu, 2013: 147).

The theory attempted to give prescriptions to developing nations on how best they could conceive and achieve development, and by so doing, it encouraged developing countries to assess their values, beliefs, traditions, norms and institutions for them to develop (Akanle, 2012: 54). According to Olayinka Akanle (2012: 54-55), within the modernization theoretical prism, until the behavioural parameters and societal institutions that are traditional are discarded and jettisoned, underdeveloped societies can never develop; this is because the theory is of the view that traditional values, norms, behaviours and institutions are antithetical to development in the real sense. Akanle (2012: 55) also points out that since societies and their institutions multiply, change and become complex to move from simple underdeveloped states to sophisticated developed situations, modernization theorists say that traditional societies cannot retain traditional values and institutions that are naturally atavistic to development as the society becomes complex. Hence, in Akanle’s (2012: 55) words,

...the theory believes that the yardsticks and standards of development of poor and developing countries are developed countries of America and Europe. That is, for developing countries to develop, they must be like America and European countries that are developed. They must take on many attributes of these nations and restructure their traditions, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours to be like Europeans...

It can be easily deciphered from the preceding passages that for modernization theory, the causes of the underdevelopment of Third World countries are internal to these states: their values, norms, culture, institutions and structures are deeply traditional in nature and therefore completely impervious to development. The only way out for these countries, according to this theory, is to emulate the developed West and change their entire value-systems and institutions. The modernization theory has been deservedly criticized for being unidirectional or unilinear; ahistorical; teleological; Eurocentric; racist; and immensely ideological. But “perhaps the most crippling weakness of the modernization theory is its oversimplified view of social change” (Coetzee *et al.*, 2007 cited in Matunhu, 2011: 67). The modernization theorists seem to completely gloss over the fact that “no society can now be studied as an isolated system but as a part of a larger, even ‘world’ society” (Otite, 1992: 6).

The experiences of many countries of the South – in terms of their developmental trajectories – indicate that there is a disconnect between the major premise and main conclusion of the modernization worldview. “The tradition in logic”, as Arthur Nwankwo (1990: 104-105) has reasoned, “is that, in order to achieve validity, the premise must necessarily be implied in the conclusion; and this is often proved by the impossibility of the conclusion being true when the premise is wrong – and vice versa”.

The point has to be made that insisting – as modernization theory does – that there is only one way or path to development – which is the Western way – amounts to fundamentalism. To use the phrases of Khalil Timamy (2007: x), “if fundamentalism refers to the fanatical and rabid adherence to a particular monolithic view”, then modernization theory can be seen as, “strictly speaking, the very embodiment of fundamentalism”. Surely, as Timamy (2007: viii) puts it, “the West has no moral authority to preach to others about fundamentalism when it is itself horribly guilty of fanatically advancing neoliberal fundamentalism the world over through high-pressure ideological evangelism”.

Nigeria and the Acemoglu-Robinson Thesis

As earlier alluded to, the major argument of Professors Acemoglu and Robinson in the work under examination is that the development of any society is largely contingent upon the nature and type of state institutions established, and the goal(s) which they are tailored to accomplish. According to them, development is only attainable in states with “inclusive” political and economic institutions whereas in countries with institutions that are “extractive” in nature, development is insurmountably encumbered. In their words, “countries differ in their economic success because of their different institutions, the rules influencing how the economy works, and the incentives that motivate people” (p. 73).

The authors also stated that inclusive economic institutions, such as those in South Korea or in the United States, are those that allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities that make best use of their talents and skills and that enable individuals to make the choices they wish (p. 74). To be inclusive, in their view, economic institutions must feature secure private property, an unbiased system of law, and a provision of public services that provides a level playing field in which people can exchange and contract; and it must also permit the entry of new businesses and allow people to choose their careers (pp. 74-75).

Attention was also drawn to the fact that inclusive economic institutions foster economic activity, productivity, growth and economic prosperity; and secure private property rights are central, since only those with such rights will be willing to invest and increase productivity. The researchers also noted that a businessman, for example, who expects his output to be stolen, expropriated, or entirely taxed away will have little incentive to work, let alone any incentive to undertake investments and innovations (p. 75). According to them (p. 444),

...it is the societies with inclusive institutions that have grown over the past three hundred years and have become relatively rich today. That this accounts for what we see around us is shown clearly if we look at the facts slightly differently: while nations that have built inclusive economic and political institutions over the last several centuries have achieved sustained economic growth, authoritarian regimes that have grown more rapidly over the past sixty or one hundred years... have not become more democratic.

Acemoglu and Robinson, while focusing attention on one African country, observed that the modern Democratic Republic of Congo remains poor because its citizens still lack the economic institutions that create the basic incentives that make a society prosperous, and that it is not geography, culture, or the ignorance of its citizens or politicians that keep the Congo poor, but its extractive economic institutions (p. 90). They also stated that extractive political and economic institutions create a general tendency for infighting because they lead to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a narrow elite; and if another group can overwhelm and outmaneuver this elite and take control of the state, they will be the ones enjoying this wealth and power (p. 95).

The authors also opined that extractive institutions are so common in history because they have a powerful logic: they can generate some limited prosperity while at the same time distributing it into the hands of a small elite (p. 149). Moreover, the growth generated by extractive institutions is not sustainable and it is very different in nature from growth created under inclusive institutions; by their very nature, extractive institutions do not foster creative destruction and generate at best only a limited amount of technological progress (p. 150). In view of all these, Professors Acemoglu and Robinson were emphatic in their prognostication (p. 435):

...there should be little doubt that in fifty or even a hundred years, the United States and Western Europe, based on their inclusive economic and political institutions, will be richer, most likely considerably richer, than sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central America, or Southeast Asia...

It is clear that the “analytical tools” employed by Acemoglu and Robinson are “informed by a dominant Euro-centric epistemological paradigm” which is not part of “a social science that is

structured to answer to methodological needs and tools that can help generate new knowledge” (Nabudere, 2000: 4), and which is “designed to describe, analyse and empower the African people... and to change the negative social forces into positive social forces as they impact on the life chances of Africans...” (Kershaw, 1998, cited in Nabudere, 2000: 4). What they recommend are not largely different from other familiar prescriptions of the neoliberal orthodoxy; these recommendations essentially belong to “that stream of spoliatory strategies which powerful exogenous interests have employed to secure privileged access to Africa’s resources at the lowest expense” (Timamy, 2007: 5).

According to Timamy (2007: 5), the strategy of organized spoliation refers to an overarching system of lopsided economic relations where the industrialized countries, through varied instruments of manipulation and measures of control, extract a disproportionately large slice of advantages, the latter taking the form of inordinate financial transfers and gigantic resource flows from the South to the North. In his view, the asymmetry in the magnitude of the flows stems from the deliberate conditioning and partisan orchestration of fundamental forces in the international trading system.

Professor Timamy (2007: 55-56) has incisively made the point that a general diagnosis of Africa’s predicament undertaken by Western analysts and institutions suggested that the region’s regimented economic order underpinned by de facto dirigiste political arrangements were responsible for institutional inertia, gross inefficiencies, and an overarching asphyxiation of potentially productive entrepreneurial energies. He states that it was also noted that pervasive bureaucratic controls and political interference of economic processes bred a frustrating network of patronage and clientelism that shackled and suppressed the spirit of enterprise; the cumulative impact of these adverse conditions was the illegitimate containment of the powerfully liberating forces of individual drive, creativity, and innovation. In short, the ubiquitousness of states stifled individual initiatives and foreclosed opportunities for effective resource use.

To reverse the secular decline, Timamy continues, African countries were urged to embrace market, political and institutional reforms; they were reminded that the Western world was able to achieve spectacular levels of economic affluence and material prosperity because free-market principles and unalloyed market policies guided it. He also observes that to potentially achieve the same, a stricken Africa was told that adherence to those lofty principles of market orientation would be indispensable. The book written by Acemoglu and Robinson belongs to this category; therefore, their perspective cannot provide the panacea for Nigeria’s developmental problems. As Professor Mahmood Mamdani (1996: 188) has reminded us, “a perspective that sees a social movement as a simple historical residue or as the unmediated outcome of a policy decision is incapable of explaining it, for it necessarily ends up denying the movement any social history”.

Nigeria and many other Third World States which are ex-colonies were severely plundered during many years of colonial rule; any discourse on the developmental shortcomings in these socio-formations which excludes a methodical and systematic x-ray of the immensely disruptive and deeply crippling impact of colonialism on them is flawed. In fact, it is difficult to even understand the crisis of underdevelopment in these states without having an idea of the ineffably huge adverse effects – on these countries – of man’s inhumanity-to-man which

colonialism represented. According to Professor Okwudiba Nnoli (2011: 40), colonialism, like all forms of imperialism is a very reactionary force which mutilates the full collective personality of its victims, humiliates them in various ways, exploits them viciously, takes undue advantage of their weaknesses and inhumanly disorients them, thereby distorting their lives. In fact, in his words,

it denies them any claim to full human existence, using its power to reduce them to a subhuman standard of living. In the process, it destroys their individual and collective creative genius, rendering them subject to the whims and caprices of the creative genius of other peoples in a way totally alien to men/women's humanity. In its single-minded pursuit of colonial interests, it throws all caution and morality to the wind, and does not hesitate to use violent instruments and dubious devices to achieve its mission.

There is no doubt that it would take many years of hardwork by a patriotic, visionary, dedicated, and an uncompromisingly committed leadership for any ex-colony to realize its developmental dreams. The problem of leadership deficit which Nigeria has experienced over the decades can be easily traced to the overtly manipulated transition midwifed by the British colonizers which culminated in the emergence of the country's first batch of post-colonial rulers. That political process was obviously primed by the British colonialists to produce, not leaders, but agents of neocolonialism.

We concede that state institutions can be very helpful in catalyzing development in societies whose affairs are well superintended. Regrettably, the case of Nigeria is different; this is a country which is immensely blessed with numerous resources but which has been thoroughly ruined by those who have had the opportunity of overseeing its affairs. No society can make any developmental headway with the degree of obliterating misrule which has been inflicted on Nigeria since 1960. This leadership bankruptcy was captured over a decade ago by Patrick Wilmot in the following words:

after almost half century of independence Nigeria, the potential Superpower of Africa has travelled in reverse gear. If Nigeria had been a motor vehicle, it would have been scrapped. And the scrap dealer would probably have refused the metal because of its flaws. On every measure of performance for a state with its wealth of human and material resources, Nigeria has been a failure. Nothing works – from health, education, housing, manufactures, telephones, roads, the historical record is almost blank. In a thousand years, scholars could look back and sigh 'there's no sign here that wise men once ruled' (cited in Uhumwhangho, 2008: 25).

The disheartening state of the Nigerian society clearly reinforces the view that a nation's destiny anchors largely on the quality and substance of its leaders. Nations that have achieved greatness in the twenty-first century have one thing in common: the system works; and these nations are endowed with selfless leaders who exhibited exceptional intelligence, courage and vision at every turn, to chart the best course, define the right path, and make the citizens believe in the outcomes (Oladipo, 2013 cited in Obo and Adejumo, 2014: 142).

Members of Nigeria's political class have never regarded the overall development of the country and the promotion of the wellbeing of its people as their foremost priorities; "whereas in many other countries, those who govern often do so in the national interests of their countries, those at the helm of affairs in Nigeria regard their offices as avenues to enrich

themselves and enjoy the highest levels of publicly-funded luxury and comfort” (Obo and Adejumo, 2014: 142).

Those who rule Nigeria regard public resources meant for the development of the society as perks which have to be stolen or misappropriated. It has been pointed out that there is a close correlation between the massive stealing of public resources by Nigeria’s rogue elite and the socio-economic retardation of the country and the excruciating poverty plaguing the people; the more resources the rulers steal, the less is available for the promotion of the public good (Obo, Omenka and Agishi, 2017: 28). Indeed, Nigerians have suffered almost irreparable damage from the deliberate, deliberative and pre-mediated collective looting of the public treasury by criminally-minded and underperforming politicians and senior bureaucrats, and thus waste, mismanagement, squandermania, and profligacy have become the name of the game at the expense of the delivery of basic public goods and services” (Amuwo, 2012 cited in Obo, Coker and Omenka, 2014: 70).

The tragedy in Nigeria is that the country has never been governed by a leader. We do agree with Bayo Oluwasanmi’s (2015) description of a leader:

any fool can steer the ship, but it takes a leader to chart the course. Leaders who navigate do even more than control the direction in which they and their people travel. They see the whole trip in their minds before they leave the dock. They have a vision for their destination. They understand what it will take to get there, they know who they’ll need on the team to be successful, and they recognize the obstacles long before they appear on the horizon... A leader knows when to lead, what to do, and where to go....

Clearly, it is a gross misnomer and a conceptual misrepresentation to describe those who have presided over the affairs of Nigeria since 1960 as “leaders”.

CONCLUSION

Generally, this essay is in support of the assertion that “the imperialism of dominant paradigms, concerning democracy as well as development, must be challenged” (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1996: 14). The reality is that, as Susantha Goonatilake (cited in Hettne, 1995: 67) has observed, development thinking within the social sciences is largely a product of the West and it is as such an outsider’s view of our development, especially by outsiders from countries who colonized us. This view reinforces Otite’s (1992: 10) contention that we have been indoctrinated to adore that part of our presence which is foreign, with a false consciousness that serves the interest of those who teleguide the foreign aspect of our presence, using powerful technology and tested strategies.

Acemoglu and Robinson’s work is part of the large pool of literature underpinned by a Eurocentric ideology which preaches the superiority and universality of Western values. For these two scholars, the crucial role governmental institutions play in the development or under development of a country cannot be overemphasized. Their main argument is that the West is developed and will get richer because of the nature of its state institutions: political and economic institutions which are “inclusive” and which promote popular participation and other individual rights and liberties as well as facilitate entrepreneurial creativity and private enterprise.

There is no doubt that the problem of defective or inappropriate state institutions is part of the avalanche of factors responsible for “why nations fail”. For us, Nigeria has failed principally because of the abysmal failure of leadership. Professor Niyi Osundare (2015: 9), for instance, captured a key dimension of this problem when he stated that:

Nigeria has enough resources to make life reasonably comfortable for all of us if only our rulers would steal less, and think more of us and the future of our country. No country can ever be happy if it is a land of ten millionaires and a hundred million paupers. And that is what Nigeria is and has been. And that is what it must NOT continue to be.

It is instructive to note that “the preoccupation of the political class with rent seeking has turned the rest of society into prey” (Evans, 1989: 570).

While Professor Isawa Elaigwu (1998: 31) has asserted that “it is pertinent to note ... that there is a **problem** with identifying **causes** of problems”; and that “often social problems are so multidimensional that it is only possible to identify approximate causes of approximate problems, whose solutions are only approximate”, we argue that the case of Nigeria is straightforward: the country’s development has been unparadoxically retarded by decades of pauperizing rulership. In fact, the frustrations of Nigerians are captured in one of the poems of Tanure Ojaide (cited in Mundt, Aborisade and LeVan, 2008: 708) thus:

We have lost it,
The country we were born into.
We can now sing dirges
of that commonwealth of yesterday –
we live in a country
that is no longer our own

We have no doubt that if Nigeria was handed over to a Thomas Sankara, or a Nelson Mandela, or a Lee Kuan Yew, or a Bin Saeed and an Al Maktoum, or even an Obafemi Awolowo, the country would have been a much better place. With its diverse and enormous amount of resources, what Nigeria needs to flourish is good leadership. Quality leadership can attain great heights for a society, the imperfections or inadequacies of state institutions notwithstanding.

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