

Consumerism as an Ideology, A Critical Theory Perspective

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Abstract: This paper sets out to understand *consumerism* as a phenomenon of modern industrial society. Consumerism is here understood as a constitutive element of industrial capitalist economy. It is characterised fundamentally by commodification and the excessive preoccupation of society with the purchase of goods and services, spawned by the creation of unnecessary needs and excessive advertisements. Marketers entice consumers to increasingly purchase such commodities even though the need for such products may not necessarily exist. Thus consumerism can be understood ideologically as a practice in which the producers seek to dominate the consciousness of consumers, to a point where consumers are susceptible to the dominant forces of capital. Ultimately these forces threaten the autonomy of the individual, leading to the erosion of subjective individuality and authentic existence. On this basis, the paper argues that consumerism functions as an objectifying ideology of the capitalist class in bourgeois societies as it threatens and undermines individual autonomy. The paper will make use of Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* in order to show the distortion of consciousness caused by consumer culture. Further to this, Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* will be drawn upon in order to provide the analysis of social conformity and show how politically passive characters are created in capitalist society. The paper will make use of critical theory as a theoretical framework within which to understand the social phenomenology of consumerism.

Keywords: consumerism, capitalism, commodification, ideology, dominate

Introduction

With specific extrapolation from the works of Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm, the paper will provide an analysis and critique of consumerism as an ideology in capitalist society. Ideology can be regarded as a system of ideas and ideals that espouses a particular set of beliefs and programme of action. We are here interested in ideology as an instrument of the dominant class in society. As Marx noted in this regard "The dominant ideology of every society is the ideology of the dominant class". This means that the value system of society, its norms and conventions become a reflection of the value system of the ruling elite in society, what it deems to be important. As such ideology tends to mask power relations as the dominant class use ideology in order to establish and maintain social domination. The paper discusses consumerism as a capitalist ideology that promotes overconsumption and materialism.

Karl Marx and George Lukács are probably the first social theorists to discuss the extent to which even such 'things' as 'ideas', 'virtues', goods, services become objects of commodification as they are transformed into articles of trade (Tucker 1978). They identified these occurrences as the pathologies of the industrial society. However, Critical Theory helps us understand the various ways in which individuals in consumerist societies are led into what Marcuse calls a 'one-dimensional' mode of being through the creation of false needs. For this reason, the paper begins from the premise that everyone in a capitalist society is a consumer. This is why such societies are usually regarded as consumerist societies. Within such a society, the consciousness of the individual is manipulated in order to conform to the functional requirements (understood as one dimensional mode of thinking) of the capitalist system. As a result, individuals are typically unaware of the extent to which their thoughts and actions are already determined within the system. Individuals and groups believe that they are free, when in fact they are not, as they are merely acting in ways that advance the interests of the ruling elite, the capitalist class.

From this perspective, we are able to see that the system shows itself to be rigged in favour of the powerful in society. There is a necessary connection between the need to consume and the necessity to work; one reinforces the other. Accordingly, the proletariat *must* out of necessity and compulsion ‘sell’ its labour power in the open market as wage labour in order to survive in the market economy. This process disempowers the labourer in the sense that it alienates him/her from the power and product of his labour whilst at the same time, empowering the owners of the means of production. In a word it is a system that feeds vampirically on the labour of the oppressed. People are thus forever preoccupied with the need for work and consumption. It is an ideology of ‘thingification’ that keeps individual and group agency in check. For these reasons, Douglas Kellner (1989), considers consumerism itself as the dominant means of integrating individuals into contemporary capitalism by imposing a false consciousness. Singh (2018) on the other hand, argues that the commodities human beings own in the capitalist society seem to possess the power to confine and define them. Marcuse posits that we are confronted with the fact that advanced industrial society becomes bigger, richer, and better, while endangering its adherents (Marcuse 1964: ix).

With the creation of false needs, Marcuse observes that capitalist society integrates individuals into the existing system of production and consumption through the use of mass media, advertising, industrial management, and contemporary modes of thought. He is of the view that the needs, so created, prevent people from achieving true satisfaction, and that they ultimately lead to unhappiness and dissatisfaction. So, fundamentally, his argument is based on the premise that industrial society functions on the basis of false a consciousness, which leads people to believe that they need things that are not exactly necessary. A paradox is therefore created in modern society whereby while most material goods get ‘bigger and better’ on the one hand, authentic individuality on the other hand, is ever more shrinking and threatened. According to Marcuse (1994: 11) “this absorption of ideology into reality does not, however, signify the ‘end of ideology,’ on the contrary, in a specific sense advance industrial culture is more ideological than its predecessor, inasmuch as today the ideology is in the process of production itself.”

An important concomitant of overconsumption is the role played by the advertising-industry. The advertising industry has intrusively reshaped human desires around material possessions. Such reshaping makes excessive consumption appear as natural, normal, and necessary. The advertising industry does very well in making people want things that they have no need for. It does this by creating a sense of insecurity or inadequacy in people, and then offering their product as the solution. This is extremely effective, and is one of the reasons that society consumes so much. In consequence, people desire bigger, faster, trendier, and fancier items. We can consider these as ‘learned necessities’. The market economy thus creates a wide selection of items from which to choose. Such carefully created selections create a false sense of freedom, an illusionary form of liberty as it renders consumers uncritically gratified. “Under the rule of a repressive whole, ‘liberty’ can be made into a powerful instrument of domination. Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. One’s freedom of choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom” Marcuse (1964:7), but the opposite.

When the consciousness of the consumer is distorted, he/she then takes the form of objects and the consumer become a subject that is divorced from their true nature and characteristics. Hence, consumers are made to appear as entities of the same nature and as ‘things’. Distortion then becomes the consumers’ mental state in a consumer society. In a consumer society, people are often bombarded with messages telling them what they should buy and why. This leads to a distortion of their true needs, where they begin to see and identify themselves with the objects. This can have a number of negative consequences, such as making them more likely to engage in compulsive buying, or to become disconnected from their true nature and values. Marcuse (1964:11–12) argues that “the capitalist system binds the consumers more or less agreeably to the producers [and] the producers indoctrinate, manipulate, and promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood”. When consumers are dominated by market ideologies, this as Marcuse observes, gives a semblance of a ‘pleasant’ form of social control:

The extent to which this civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man’s mind and body makes the very notion of alienation questionable. The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment etc. (1964:9).

In light of the above, Marcuse then goes on to argue that “domination, in the guise of affluence and liberty—extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives creating a truly totalitarian universe” (1964:18). ‘Totalitarianism’ can be understood not only as a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests.

With the above in mind, the following discussion will engage with four conceptual points from Marcuse's analysis of consumerist society, namely, false needs, loss of individuality, radical subjectivity, and negation. Fromm's insights on the constructions of society, will be drawn upon as well, in order to aide our analysis. Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* remains acutely relevant to the analysis of twenty-first century socio-economic issues. In this work, Marcuse explicitly critiques the hidden social domination of industrial societies. He explores, in detail how, manipulation is concealed in industrial societies, as the masses' ability to form opposing thoughts against social domination is made impossible by the nature of capitalism and technological rationality. It is with his insights in this works that we shall begin.

False needs

We have already seen above how the capitalist society imposes upon the individual alien or what Marcuse refers to as 'false' needs and alien possibilities. It is by way of instituting false needs that capitalism engenders servitude upon the individual. Accordingly, individually must evermore work in order to satisfy endless needs and wants. Marcuse wants to be able to distinguish vital needs from false needs, i.e. the destructive needs, generated by the forces of materialism (Kellner 1989:48). For Marcuse (1964:5) "'false' needs are needs superimposed upon the individuals by others with a particular social interest in keeping the masses repressed. Moreover, false needs perpetuate toil, aggression, misery, and injustice" The question of what true needs are, must be answered by the individuals themselves, but only when they are free to give their own answer. If they are incapable of being autonomous, if they are indoctrinated and manipulated at an instinctual level, then any answer to the question of what their true needs are, cannot be taken as their own (Marcuse 1964:6). According to Marcuse (1964) false needs are easily made to appear as necessities which, in turn, breed and maintain social control and dependence.

Marcuse views technology and science (in their current formation) as instruments of industrial domination. Science and technology, while they may be a source of good to society, are nevertheless instruments that deliver ever more wasteful and destructive products. Yet, this waste and destruction is concealed by an overwhelming glamour, fineness, and false hope to improve the standard of living (Marcuse 1964). To be sure, not all commodities are seductive instruments of capitalist manipulation and domination. It is important to note that not all consumers' needs are false needs. Some commodities are real, useful, and life-enhancing. Marcuse's concern, here, is to expose the artificial, useless items and activities which are made to appear as natural and real while they are not. Considering the above he articulates that

Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate, belong to this category of false needs. No matter how much needs have says become the individual's own (...) they continue to be what they were from the beginning (...) products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression" Marcuse (1964:5).

Loss of individuality

One of the deleterious impacts of consumer culture is the loss of individuality. Objectively, an individual is supposed to be independent and self-actional in terms of the manner in which he comports herself towards the world. She ought to proceed from the disposition of the self as the subjective centre within which to interpret the world. But capitalism and the material culture usurps these powers of the individual for itself, as such power is brought within the scope and grasp of consumerist ideology. The individual has lost, or is losing, individuality, freedom, and the ability to dissent and to control one's own destiny. For, society has become increasingly 'one-dimensional'. That is, it has become increasingly focused on material concerns and the satisfaction of capitalistic needs, and has become less concerned with spiritual or intellectual matters. As a result, people have become more conformist and less able to think for themselves.

When consumerism reifies the consciousness of the consumers and threatens their autonomy, genuine individuality comes to an end, because the masses conform to the demands of the system. Kaza (2000:29) argues that consumers cannot be assumed to be conscious consumers in the sense of being of being empowered with the right knowledge, since they know little about the manufacturing processes behind the products they buy. Not even 'socially conscious consumers' can be expected to understand these socially and politically reifying experiences. For, it follows from all that has been argued hitherto, that it is somehow difficult, in a totally administered society, to possess a clear, undistorted consciousness. In this regard, Erich Fromm (1955:131) observes that "the process of consumption is as alienating as the process of production (...) we are satisfied with useless possession". Hence, when ordinary materials are made to appear as more valuable and essential, consumption becomes a form of alienation, as the mass media create false and unnecessary needs, wants, goals, and standards for consumers. For Marcuse (1964:5), true needs ought

to be those needs that maximize individual autonomy and enhance life and well-being. These needs can be evaluated by the objective standards of priority.

So, under pressure from the administered society, the individual is rapidly disappearing (Fromm 1941). The production of cultural industries stands at the centre of this process. The culture industry- production and consumption of the standardized cultural goods, films, radio, TV and magazines (Horkheimer and Adorno 1982) uses images and spectacles to manipulate subjects into conforming to behaviours that facilitate the reproduction of capitalism as a system. Accordingly, the result of such processes as Marcuse (1964:10) observes, is that mass production and distribution overwhelms the entire individual.

Within this context, myths appear as reality and this reality presents itself as permanent. This influence creates a vicious circle whereby everything takes on a character which is not truly its own. Ideologies can have a powerful influence on the way people see the world. They can distort their view of reality, leading them to believe in things that are not actually true. Myths are often born from these distorted views of reality. Ideologies can be incredibly destructive, especially when they lead people to believe in myths as reality. This can create a vicious circle, where the myth becomes reality and the reality becomes unalterable. A vicious circle such as this, invokes as it brings to the fore the concept of 'reification' so eloquently adumbrated by Lukács. For Lukács, reification is understood as a process whereby social constructs are made to appear as natural and inevitable. Reification imperils the exercise of subjectivity. For, when humans beings are objectified, it robs them of any self-created meaning of social existence (Bronner 2011).

In a similar vein, George Hull (2013), notes that reification occurs when objects of experience are perceived as having characteristics which they do not truly have, and not having characteristics that they do have. Hence, reification consists in a distortion of the subject's immediate experience of the world. This can happen in a number of ways. For instance, people might see a person as being nothing more than their job title or social role. Or they might think of an object as being nothing more than its function. In either case, people are not seeing the person or object as a whole, complex being, but rather as a simplified, one-dimensional entity. Reification can have detrimental consequences. If people see each other as nothing more than their job titles or social roles, they may treat them as if they are nothing more than that. They may fail to see them as complex, individual human beings with their own hopes, fears, and dreams. According to Marx (1983), human consciousness is determined by societal relations and the economic basis that underpins such relations.

According to Lukács (1971), the structural features of a given society transform its members' experiences of the world; and the structure of capitalist society causes reifying misperception on the part of its members. Thus, in a capitalist society, individuals cannot be held responsible for their reifying experiences. Furthermore, since the human body is the site of interactions and experiences of being in the world, the human body such as the female body exists to bear, resist, or conform to heteronormative cultural impositions. Marcuse (1964: 11) speaking of the individual that is reified and swallowed up by her alienation, remarks in the following manner:

The more progressive stage of alienation has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one-dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification; before their tribunal, the 'false consciousness' of their rationality becomes the true consciousness.

In this stage, alienation is no longer something that can be overcome by the individual; it is a structural feature of society as a whole. The only way to escape it is to abandon the achievements of civilization altogether and return to a state of nature. This, of course, is not a realistic option. Eric Fromm is another critical theorist whose work sheds further light on how capitalism as a system perpetuates reification. However, he provides a psycho-existential analysis of the vagaries of capitalism. His analysis becomes useful firstly, in order to understand socially constructed myths, following his line of inquiry that social phenomena must be grounded in a concrete analysis of the history, politics, and social structures of any given society. Based upon such a nuanced and interdisciplinary approach, this paper posits that his analysis can help understand contemporary oppression in a consumerist society. Secondly, his analysis shows the difficulty with which social transformation and emancipatory politics are like a mirage, difficult to be achieved.

Accordingly, Fromm's work *Escape from Freedom* (1941) emphasizes how one's social character is shaped by the economic development of that society and how the modern world has created both new freedoms and increased anxieties. According to Fromm (1941: 34), the very conditions of human existence bring about "the need to be related outside oneself, the need to avoid aloneness". In his analysis of some the conditions that lead human beings to submission—even to irrational authorities—Fromm (1941: 173) states that an individual must do "no more than the

one to find someone to whom he can surrender, as quickly as possible, of freedom which, he, the unfortunate creature was born with". The need to relate to the world is an even more powerful driving force than the forces of instinct. Humans beings will even turn to religion or nationalism for refuge from "what man most dreads: isolation" (Fromm 1941:34). He also argues for a sociological account of human motivation based on "the relationship of man to others, to nature and to himself". In order to effectively achieve such an account, both Marcuse and Fromm moved slightly away from a socio-cultural analysis (in the Marxist sense), leaning more towards a Freudian psychoanalysis. In this regard, Fromm (1941:23) argues that Freud's ideas were essential for a social theory that could come to grips with the human potential for destructiveness inherent in fascism. This move takes them closer to Freud's assertions which emphasises the biological and psychological factors that determine human behaviour (Kellner 1991:7).

The central theme of Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* is that while freedom appears to be an obvious desire for everyone, it is actually a double edged sword. A freedom so strongly desired can seem to be a burden, too heavy for an individual to bear. Hence an individual may feel a need to escape from her freedom. An escape from freedom can only mean conformity. Fromm is analysing a situation where the masses give up their freedom and wilfully give themselves up to fascism. According to Fromm (1942: 222) there are two types of freedom, namely freedom from and freedom to. "

Freedom 'from' is a negative type of freedom, where individuals are free from some sort of restriction, authority or bondage. Freedom 'to' is a positive form of freedom where individuals can flourish independently. These concepts correspond with Isaiah Berlin's notion of freedom namely, negative freedom and positive freedom respectively. So, while freedom allows an individual the privilege of choice, it also comes with a significant degree of responsibility. Fromm explores the negative aspects of freedom to understand why people might be turning away from their freedom. While for instance, the destruction of feudal society in Europe, achieved negative freedom, 'positive freedom' was still not fostered nearly as much, even to this day, according to Fromm. As he puts it, "the lag between freedom from and freedom to had led, in Europe, to a panicky flight from freedom and into new ties or at least into complete indifference" (1942: 30). Although people may have more individual freedom than their ancestors could possibly have imagine, if they do not know what to do with it, then there is not much good.

During the Renaissance period however, a small portion of the population found a way to thrive in the newly found freedom, although a lot still did not as they were left to feel insecure and anxious. They needed to find a way to escape the burden of freedom. This need for escape led to the rise of Protestant Reformation during the Renaissance, led by two figures: Martin Luther and John Calvin. While their philosophies differ slightly, the basic idea behind both of their teachings are the same. Luther and Calvin both offered comfort to the masses by encouraging them to submit themselves to God. They were to become part of something bigger than themselves. By handing themselves to God they do not have to be responsible for their newly found freedom. In exchange for submission, they were promised emotional security. No more feelings of doubt and anxiety as long as they were to live their lives for God. The rise of Protestant Reformation laid down the groundwork for a mind-set that was susceptible to psychological submission to authority, as well as the operations of the capitalist era. Submission to God was essentially a temporary fix to combat the burden of freedom that eventually became a permanent lifestyle for many individuals in the West. As the above has shown, the enormous responsibility and burden that freedom engenders leads members of society to abdication and submission. For thinkers such as Marcuse (and other critical theorists) however, there is need ultimately for humanity to overcome and transcend the vagaries of oppression and reification that is so characteristic of bourgeois society. We will confine our musings in this regard on the notion of negation and radical subjectivity as they emanate in Marcuse's thoughts.

Negation and Radical subjectivity

To be sure, Marcuse advocates for the abolition or the 'negation' of the present system of domination (Marcuse 1964: 6, 62, 66). For him, 'one-dimensionality' which is a mode of existence that capitalism brings about, leads to an inauthentic mode of being. Inauthentic existence is the condition of "dejection" and being lost in the factual limitations of present circumstances. As such there is duty ultimately, upon the oppressed to overcome and supersede such a system.

Marcuse, nevertheless, acknowledges that revolt against social control is not easy. Accordingly, the oppressed may opt, rather for 'escape' instead of negation. As we have noted, consumerism functions as a mechanism to escape reality (the reality of being socially repressed) by undermining alternative ideas. As Marcuse (1964:9) put it, "The intellectual and emotional refusal to conform appears neurotic and impotent". More fully, thoughtless submission to systems of production appears sensible when technology, culture, politics, and economy merge into an omnipresent system that swallows or repulses all alternatives (Marcuse 1964: xvi). Under a capitalist system, opportunities for liberation are

missed because people and governments are, in effect, sleepwalking through life. Marcuse (1964:33) calls this a “pure form of servitude: to exist as an instrument, as a thing”. Although a one-dimensional human being conceives itself as free, Marcuse (1964:20) argues that this freedom of choice is illusory. It is illusory because subjects are preconditioned to make their choices from within predetermined settings.

In his work, *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse speaks of the paradox of creation *and* destruction as constitutive forces of capitalism that are inextricably linked. This means that, the means of production, which are designed to improve the standard of living, also have the potential to be used for destructive purposes. This ambiguity creates tension that is inherent in capitalism. Marcuse believes that this tension is what drives history forward. The creative forces are constantly striving to improve the human condition, while the destructive forces are always present, threatening to undo all the progress that has been made. This dialectical tension is what makes change possible. Without it, we would be stuck in a state of inertia. Marcuse's analysis provides a helpful way of understanding the complex and often contradictory nature of capitalism. It is clear that the system is not perfect, but it is also clear that it contains the potential for good. For Marcuse, the mechanism which ties an individual to his or her society has changed from overtly repressive political systems (for example, slavery or racial segregation) to a form of social control based on the materials consumers are enticed to desire. All products are thus cunningly presented as desirable, so that consumers are trapped by advertising and thereby lulled into such a state that they can no longer conceive of any need for revolt (Marcuse 1964). As a result, the subject is enslaved by subtle mental chains. The product itself does not keep factories busy. The product must be supported by ever more advertising.

Consumerism reifies and incapacitates consumers from making autonomous decisions. “The tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the façade of objective rationality. Hatred and frustration are deprived of their specific target, and the technological veil conceals the reproduction of inequality and enslavement” says Marcuse (1964:32). The activities of the consumer society (production, marketing, and consumption) are thus clearly based upon prejudices and preconceived antagonistic ideologies. If social construction requires the complete deconstruction of existing prejudices and preconceived antagonistic ideologies, then it is important to know whether a subject with a distorted consciousness can be potentially revolutionary or engage in radical socially transformative activities. According to Marcuse (1964: 6-7), “[t]he more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more unimaginable the means by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation”. In an advanced industrial society, scientific and technical progress is thus made an instrument of domination. ‘Progress’ in this regard is therefore not to be understood as a neutral term. It moves towards specific ends, and these ends are defined by the possibilities of ameliorating the human condition (Marcuse 1964:16).

However, as a true critical theorist, Marcuse is in a search of radical subjectivity. He argues that, without a strong and clear notion of subjectivity, there is no hope for individual freedom and no agency for progressive political transformation. He anticipates subjects who will overcome limited and oppressive forms of being, challenge essentialism, reconstruct their world view, and emancipate themselves. According to Kellner in (Marcuse 1964: xvii), Marcuse's theory presupposes the existence of a human subject with freedom, creativity, and self-determination who stands in opposition to an object-world, perceived as substance, which contains possibilities to be realized and secondary qualities like values, aesthetic traits, and aspirations, which can be cultivated to enhance human life. Marcuse (1964: 220) posits that “the transcendent project must be in accordance with the real possibilities open at the attained level of material and intellectual culture.”

What can be gleaned from the above is that human life in a consumerist society is a continual, but futile, search for meaning and happiness. People, thus, give in to whatever seems to promise pleasure. Paradoxically, however, most if not all, pleasurable activities enslave humanity. And for Marcuse (1964: xvlii) “in the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives.”

In so far as Fromm is concerned, fear of freedom becomes the main cause of conformity. He observes that “[a] great number of our decisions are not really our own but are suggested to us from the outside; we have succeeded in persuading ourselves that it is we who have made the decision, whereas we have actually conformed with expectations of others, driven by the fear of isolation and by more direct threats to our life, freedom, and comfort” (Fromm 1941:169). Alex Honneth (2008:34) argues that every subject involved in the capitalist form of life, will necessarily acquire the habit of perceiving themselves and the surrounding world as mere things and objects. The consumers’ perception of commodities has alienated them from themselves and from the *telos* that is purpose/goal of commodity-production. Moreover, according to Honneth, this very misperception is the process leading to alienation and objectification. Non-reifying involvement is impossible in capitalist society since reification is the result of the

production and exchanging of commodities with economic value. Hence Marcuse posits that “non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole” (Marcuse 1964:2).

Conclusion

The paper had set out to understand *consumerism* as a phenomenon of modern industrial society. It emerged that consumerism is a constitutive element of industrial capitalist economy without which there would be no capitalism. For it is characterised fundamentally by commodification and the excessive preoccupation of society with the purchase of goods and services. Thus the consumer culture embedded in capitalism as was observed, is spawned by the creation of unnecessary needs and excessive advertisements.

The works of Marcuse and Fromm were engaged with in order to critique the distortion of consciousness caused by consumer culture. From this it emerged that one of the deleterious consequences of consumerism is the loss of individuality, qua authentic individual. This as, consumer culture as a phenomenon which suppresses and absorbs potentially revolutionary elements and negates them by integrating the masses into the capitalist status quo. The central concern relates to the ability of capitalism to destroy the preconditions of critical, revolutionary consciousness. Social oppression as it were, sustains itself by distorting the consciousness of the masses and by ensnaring them. Fear and desperation plays an important role leading to conformity.

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