

Conflict Transformation Theory and European Practice

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ABSTRACT

Theories of conflict play an important part in underpinning and guiding practical interventions in conflict. The theory of conflict transformation is distinguished from theories of conflict management and conflict resolution by its emphasis on the need for systemic change in order to alter the social structures, conflict parties and institutions within which conflicts are embedded. Since all conflicts are situated within a social context, which often shapes and may engender the conflict formation, transformation of conflict often requires change in the conflict's context. This suggests that conflict transformation theory needs to extend beyond the immediate site of conflict to become a theory of conflict-in-context.

The EU is one of a number of major international actors which affect the context of contemporary conflicts, especially on its immediate borders. This paper argues firstly that conflict transformation theory can be used to inform, analyse and assess European practice in intervening in conflict, and secondly that the theory should be extended to include the impacts of external agents such as the EU. This is to argue for a reflexive approach to theory and practice, allowing a critical interpretation of the interaction of interveners and protagonists in conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The first task is to identify what we mean by conflict transformation theory and how it relates to the practice of the EU. The academic literature distinguishes between *conflict management*, *conflict resolution*, and *conflict transformation*. Each term suggests a progressively larger and more ambitious scope of action. Conflict management aims to regulate and contain conflict, but not necessarily to end it. Conflict resolution aims to resolve the issue or incompatibility that divides the parties. Conflict transformation goes further in aiming for a change in the fundamental relationships, social structures and contextual conditions that gave rise to the conflict in the first place.¹

Sharp distinctions between these concepts are difficult to draw, since they are variously used in the literature and are inherently imprecise. Different authors have used each term to embrace the others. All draw on a common set of concepts in conflict theory and conflict analysis. All three terms can be used in a normative and a

¹¹ For two discussions, which use slightly different terminology and concepts, see the contributions by Miall and Riemann in Austin (2004). The following three definitions illustrate the uses of the terms in the academic literature: *Conflict management* ‘is the positive and constructive handling of difference and divergence. Rather than advocating methods for removing conflict, [it] addresses the more realistic question of managing conflict: how to deal with it in a constructive way, how to bring opposing sides together in a cooperative process, how to design a practical, achievable, cooperative system for the constructive management of difference’ (Harris and Reilly 1998, 18). *Conflict resolution* ‘involves a contention that an acceptable and durable solution to the issues in a particular conflict between adversaries has been discovered – or mutually created – by the parties themselves, possibly with some assistance from other “third” parties or possibly through their own efforts and sometimes with local assistance from “insider partials”’ (Mitchell, 2002, 2). *Conflict transformation* ‘represents a comprehensive set of lenses for describing how conflict emerges from, evolves within and brings about changes in the personal, relational, structural and cultural dimensions, and for developing creative responses that promote peaceful change within those dimensions’. (Lederach, 1997, 83).

descriptive sense. When used descriptively, all can have valid meanings which are far from the normative aspirations. The slaughter of the Melians 'resolved' the Melian dialogue. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour 'transformed' the Second World War. But resolution, transformation and management all have positive connotations in conflict analysis, and the normative aspirations associated with them are appropriate in different conditions. I do not wish to suggest that conflict transformation is an exclusive term or necessarily preferable to either of the others. I am sympathetic to the view of writers in the conflict resolution tradition who regard writing in conflict transformation as basically an elaboration of the fundamental ideas of conflict resolution.² In my view, 'a conflict transformation is a change in the goals, structure, parties or context of the conflict, which removes or changes the contradiction or incompatibility at its heart.'³

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION THEORY

Väyrynen stressed the need for a dynamic basis for a theory of conflict transformation, which would need to go beyond a theory of conflict settlement. 'The bulk of conflict theory regards the issues, actors and interests as given and on that basis makes efforts to find a solution to mitigate or eliminate contradictions between them. Yet the issues, actors and interests change over time as a consequence of the social, economic and political dynamics of societies'.⁴

Väyrynen proposed that conflicts could be transformed by four types of change: actor transformations (the emergence of new actors or change in existing actors), issue transformations (meaning a change in the way in which the parties

² Mitchell, 2002; Ramsbotham et al, 2005: 29.

³ Miall, 2007, 14.

⁴ Väyrynen, 1991, 4.

frame their interests and goals), rule transformations (meaning a change in the norms affecting the actors' interactions) and structural transformations (which involve a change in the relationship between the parties, a new power structure, or a change in the existing social structure). This framework can be expanded to include transformations in the context surrounding the conflict⁵, and the discourse through which it is understood⁶.

In a recent book I have endeavoured to develop the theory of emergent conflict and conflict transformation by stressing the fluid and changing nature of all the above elements of conflict.⁷ The context, the structure, the actors, the goals of the actors and the ways these relate, and the mental worlds of the actors and of the wider constituencies caught up in conflict are all elements here. The context, or the environment in which the conflict is situated, affects conflict both in direct ways, but also by changing the meanings of the stakes in conflict and the self-understanding and perceptions of the actors. For example, the context for the Northern Ireland conflict changed significantly with the development of the EU, which held out the hope that the old border might lose its significance; it was people who were divided, not territory, as John Hume repeated in his 'single transferable speech'. But even more dramatic was the change with the end of the Cold War when the leaders of Sinn Fein abandoned their view that the British had a 'strategic and selfish' interest in Northern Ireland. This allowed a reframing of the conflict as one between communities in Northern Ireland. Changes of context can lead directly to changes of goals on the part of the parties, and to the formation of new goals to meet new circumstances. Such changes of goals are crucial for altering the perceived incompatibility on conflict.

⁵ Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2005, 163-164.

⁶ Diez, 2008, forthcoming.

⁷ Miall, 2007.

By 'structure' is meant the pattern of relationships between the actors in conflict, and the surrounding social and political forms and institutions which determine these relationships. It may be difficult to resolve conflicts between parties when the issues in conflict concern fundamental asymmetries, such as dominance over minorities by majorities or similar power relations between groups stratified by class, ethnicity or beliefs. In these cases a transformation of the social structure may be a precondition of conflict resolution. In the Northern Ireland case, the asymmetric relationship between the dominant Protestants and excluded Catholics was balanced gradually by the political and economic weakening of the Protestants and the corresponding strengthening of the Republic of Ireland, together with the development of the pan-Nationalist coalition. Conflict structures are frequently nested in larger structures in the context, as when relations of dependency reflect international economic structures.⁸ Then the conflict may not be transformed without changing the relationship between the conflict and its environment, as Etzioni suggested in his theory of self-encapsulating conflicts.⁹ We could also include under structure the norms, rules, and institutions and dominant patterns of discourse which similarly structure and reproduce common patterns of social interaction; again, these may not be able to be changed within the site of conflict.

The third element is the actors, who are often taken to be fixed institutions in conflict theory, but can be seen as entities in flux for the purposes of conflict transformation. An actor is an organization of material interests and mental formations, shaped by the environment in which it operates, but also shaping that

⁸ Dugan, 1996.

⁹ Etzioni, 1964.

environment consciously through its own purposes. In most situations actors combine sub-groups and constituencies with a range of interests. They are held together by a sense of shared interest, or shared purpose, or shared fate, which is usually constructed by leaders, and may represent common experience or shared attributes. The formation of actors in conflict may be a direct response to conditions of conflict, and 'imagined communities' often share a prior experience of conflict. A crucial attribute of an actor is its sense of identity, which creates the 'we-feeling' which enables the group to act. A strong element of this 'actor-ness' is the collective willingness to pursue agreed goals. As Gilbert puts it, 'what makes a collectivity out of a sum of living human beings' is a 'plural subject'. 'Each must make willing clear his willingness to accept a certain goal jointly with others... Each must manifest willingness to constitute with the other a *plural subject* of the relevant goal.'¹⁰ What leads people to form particular groups is a matter of historical circumstance. 'In-groups' and 'out-groups' can appear out of the most insignificant attributes.¹¹ People may fall into a group haplessly when they are ascribed membership of an ethnic group. Or they may acquiesce in a group mobilised by others. Or they may enthusiastically submerge their own identity in that of the group. Whichever is the case, 'a cardinal feature of group identification is to take the goals of the group to be your goals,' as Bacharach puts it.¹² At the same time, members of groups have interests of their own, besides those that they hold in common, and changes in the interests and perceptions of constituencies and sub-groups makes for contested policies and sharp changes of course as new goals are adopted. Moreover, actors are continually changing with external conditions. Thus, both because of external or internal drivers, actors develop

¹⁰ Gilbert, 1989, 199.

¹¹ Such as eye colour, in experiments carried out in US schools, or arbitrary divisions into roles as in Sherif's famous Robbers Cave experiment. Horowitz, Smith, Tajfel and others discuss the basis of group identification.

¹² Bacharach, 2007, 75.

new interests and goals as circumstances change. Conflicts may emerge as a result of incompatibilities between these goals.¹³ Similarly conflicts may be transformed when changes of leadership lead to the setting of new course, and when new actors or institutions emerge, as when the institution of a security community mitigates mistrust between formerly antagonistic states.

The fourth element involved in conflict transformation is changes of goals, which affect the incompatibilities at stake in the conflict issues. It is, of course, for actors to construe their own goals, in the light of their circumstances, but there are clearly constructive and destructive ways in which they can do so.¹⁴ It has been demonstrated that decision-makers consider the situations they face with reference to strings of goals, organized in cognitive maps.¹⁵ The formation of new goals and strategies and the discarding of old ones is a continuous activity for actors faced with changing situations. The way actors frame their situation is crucial to the definition of a conflict, and reframing is often a crucial part of negotiations. Substitution, modification or replacement of existing goals together with the adoption of shared or superordinate goals, are common elements in conflict resolution.¹⁶ Sinn Fein started as a Marxist party committed to the defeat of British colonialism and Irish unity. It has now accepted that Northern Ireland will remain under British administration until a majority decides otherwise, and seeks parity of esteem between the communities. The Democratic Unionist Party organized itself around ‘no surrender’ to Catholic demands. In 1979, Mr Paisley said, ‘If you compromise, God will curse you.’ In 1981 he added, ‘There’s no such thing as reconciliation. When you marry Christ to

¹³ For a formal model of this process of emergent conflict in response to external change, see Miall, 2007, chapter 2.

¹⁴ Kriesberg, 1998.

¹⁵ Axelrod, 1976; Eden, 1988.

¹⁶ Bartos and Wehr, 2002; Pruitt, 1986.

Beelzebub, then we'll be ready for talks.' Yet in March 2007 the two arch-enemies entered into a power-sharing agreement. Sinn Fein had come to prefer a political role with a prospect of progress towards its goals to a hopeless armed struggle, and the Unionists had come to prefer a return to devolved government to the exclusion of the Republicans.

We have already discussed how identity is related to group formation. There is also a strong link between identities and goals, as our willingness to identify ourselves with a group depends on at least acquiescing in the group's adoption of goals on behalf of the group. As group identities change, so do goals, and conversely change of goals may alter identities. This is one way in which identity conflicts may come to an end. Incompatibilities may dissolve and exclusive identifications come to be seen as irrelevant because the main identifying features of the groups have changed. The notion of 'British Irish' and 'Northern Irish' identities within a framework of parity of esteem and a stronger association between Britain and Ireland is an example of such an aspiration, though evidently one yet to be realised.

A fifth element in conflict transformation is at the level of events: the behaviour, communications, perceptions and cognitions of individuals, leaders and groups. These are the warp and weft of conflict: the statements, promises, threats, interpretations, and actions which make up the day-to-day history of conflict. It is evident that conflict behaviour can settle into long patterns of destructive and antagonistic behaviour, and that communications can become locked into a negative pattern in which 'no' is the only message heard and expected from the other. The gestures, signals and initiatives which alter these flows and open the possibility of de-

escalation and of re-framing of the conflict configuration may be steps towards the transformation in the conflict's tone.

The transformation of complex conflicts is usually an elaborate choreography involving shifts of position, language, nuance, symbols and communications. The five types of transformations listed above all take place at different rates and with different articulations. They may be analysed through detailed historical analysis, formal models, or more specific theories of specific types of conflict transformation. For example in the case of ethnonational conflicts, Azar's theory of protracted social conflicts¹⁷ can be used as an application of this theory, and can be extended to cover the dynamics of transforming PSCs, as I have shown elsewhere.¹⁸

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND EXTERNAL AGENTS

Turning to the impact of the EU on neighbouring conflicts, it is clear that European influence does have an effect on the context, structure, actors, goals and events in many conflicts. It therefore appears appropriate to use conflict transformation theory in the analysis of European practice. In its own relationship to theory, however, the EU collectively and the institutions within the Commission specifically have yet to adopt this particular theoretical framework. Indeed, it is hard to find a clear match between any academic theories of conflict and the practices and doctrines adopted by the EU, particularly since state actors, the Commission and the EU's development officials are all involved in conflict mitigation from somewhat different standpoints. The EU has taken conflict prevention as the leitmotif of its

¹⁷ Azar, 1990.

¹⁸ Miall, 2004.

engagement with external conflicts, though giving it an idiosyncratic definition, as ‘short-term measures to reduce manifest tensions and prevent the outbreak or recurrence of violent conflict’. Peacebuilding is regarded as ‘actions undertaken over the medium or longer term to address root causes of violent conflicts in a targeted manner.’¹⁹ Another important concept is ‘structural stability’, defined as ‘a situation involving sustainable economic development, democracy and respect for human rights, viable political structures and healthy social and environmental conditions, with the capacity to manage change without resort to violent conflict.’ In its external relations the EU perhaps operates most obviously on the basis of *conflict management*. It aims particularly to avoid violent conflict and to channel neighbouring conflicts into institutional channels. ‘Crisis management’ is a more immediate priority than conflict resolution. Yet the EU and the institutions it works through such as the OSCE do also strive at times for *conflict resolution*, exploring mutually acceptable outcomes with the parties, suggesting ways of reframing perceptions and positions, and at times offering proposals intended to meet the interests of the parties (the Ahtisaari plan for Kosovo is such an example). Yet, in its arsenal of policy measures, ‘operational conflict prevention’, including crisis management and its associated measures, is probably of less long-term significance than ‘structural conflict prevention.’ This is because the EU’s most powerful influences are structural – its markets, trade policy, political ideas and system of governance. These are examples of diffuse rather than direct power²⁰. As Diez’s illuminating typology suggests,²¹ the European influence operates through social relations as much as through actors, and at the societal level as well as at the level of political leadership. The unintended influences (unintended

¹⁹ Communication from the Commission on the European Union and the Issue of Conflicts in Africa: Peace-Building, Conflict Prevention and Beyond, 6 March 1966, SEC (96) 332.

²⁰ Barnett and Duvall, 2003; Diez 2008 (forthcoming).

²¹ Diez, 2008 (forthcoming).

because they have an influence on conflicts in neighbouring regions, in ways that are not always as planned by the EU) sometimes outweigh the effects of intended interventions. In these respects the EU may *transform* conflicts in its border areas, in benign as well as in malign directions. Both diffuse and direct influences become especially powerful when the countries concerned are candidates for EU accession.

In order to reach a reflexive assessment of conflict intervention, it is desirable to bring the external agent into the theoretical frame. This requires an appreciation that the intervenor is not a 'deus ex machina', capable of making positive or negative impacts on the conflict at will. Rather, the intervenor is itself a complex political and social system, with its own significant context, actors, structure, goals and events. We can set up an enlarged frame for analysing the intervention by considering these aspects of both the intervening system and the conflict system together. This immediately makes it clear that the context which faces the intervenor (in this case, the EU's international role, its wish to establish itself as a powerful civilian actor on the world stage, its members' *milieu* goals and so on) affects its motives in conflict interventions and hence the context of the conflict. Similarly, the structure of the EU, as a multi-level system of governance in which the states remain dominant, and some states are more dominant than others, strongly shapes the nature of its interventions and may affect the structure, for example, of state-nation relations in the conflict. The actors which form the EU – states, societies, institutions – have a variety of goals and this shapes their conflict interventions, which may be coordinated or not. Sometimes, as in Bosnia, divergent foreign policy interests of the powerful states have a strong impact on EU interventions. Competition between different institutions, such as the Council and Commission, may also spill over into

conflict management activities, as in the 'Proxima' Policing Mission in Macedonia.²² Conversely, the different traditions and connections of member states also offer constructive possibilities for conflict transformation. Changes of actor (such as changes in the Council Presidency) and changes in the goals of the EU and its member states can clearly impinge significantly on conflict interventions.

Bearing in mind this expanded framework, it is clear that we can distinguish positive and negative aspects of the EU's impact. On the positive side, the presence of a large, relatively peaceful, relatively prosperous bloc of democratic states, adhering to a common body of laws and aspiring to a degree of unity, offers significant opportunities for changing conflict patterns in neighbouring states. The EU possesses both the motivation and the capacity to create a new political space that can open up possibilities. By virtue of its size and integration, the EU creates considerable public goods, and the benefits of obtaining access to these are significant. Thus, states which were determined to move quickly to seek EU membership had a strong motive to patch up quarrels that appeared to stand in the way. Even then, the willingness to actually resolve such conflicts, rather than simply to prevent them barring EU entry, was often limited. For example, the dispute between Hungary and Slovakia over the Gabčíkovo dam remained unresolved even after the ruling by the ICJ, and Estonia's compliance with EU and OSCE demands for generous treatment towards its Russophone minority was grudging. Nevertheless, by offering a variety of ready-made political models and constitutions, the EU and its member states provided many of its former neighbours with means for resolving their own conflicts. For example, even before the fall of communism, the Estonian Soviet decided in 1990 to adopt the

²² Ionnides, 2006.

Irish electoral system as the basis for elections. The single transferable vote system encouraged politicians to seek support in both the main linguistic communities and so encouraged a degree of political moderation, and allowed a centrist Estonian political party to become a mouthpiece for the Russophone community.²³ In these diffuse and unintended ways, the European impact may have prevented conflict.

Another significant contribution has been the framework of laws, norms and standards for human rights and minority rights which could be used as a reference point in minority disputes. One of the major unintended impacts of Europe on its post-communist neighbours was the reversal of previous patterns of ethnic dominance. All at once, in many states, former minorities became rulers of their own states, and people who had previously been members of the majority found themselves as minorities. This has created profound difficulties, as in former Yugoslavia. Yet the framework of minority protection, support for minority languages and media, and the existence of monitoring bodies and High Commissioners at least in principle offers some capacity for managing such conflicts. The Ahtisaari Plan, for example, offers constitutional guarantees to Kosovo's minority Communities. The difficulty has been securing government compliance with these standards, and even EU member states have ignored them when political priorities pointed in another direction. For example, the abandonment of the Badinter Commission in Bosnia, and the failure of the EU to require full compliance with minority protections in the case of the Roma communities in a number of European states, indicate that this capacity is not always enforced. Minority issues certainly remain a point of live contention in many parts of Western Europe. Yet, at least in principle, the combination of multi-level governance,

²³ Khyrichikov and Miall, 2002.

soft borders and protection for minority groups offers some degree of balancing. They also provide minority members and others with a set of legitimate standards by which not only states in conflict but the EU itself can be held to account.

In relation to actor changes, the EU's impact has been significant. Most of the political parties among the EU's eastern neighbours have realigned themselves along European party lines, and most states have adopted ostensibly parliamentary systems with multi-party elections. Yet this has not always had the desired effects, especially in the light of the quasi-democratic quality of post-communist societies and their infusion with nationalist agendas. Democratisation has led directly to ethno-national conflicts, and a version of the majoritarian principle has been used to legitimise attacks on ethnic groups. This highlights the unintended impacts of western Europe on its eastern neighbours – the creation of weak states, shadow economies, personalised and weakly based political parties.²⁴ This has created dilemmas for the Europeans – with whom should they deal? Here the multiplicity of European actors provides ample scope for the recipients of conflict intervention to stir conflict among the intervenors. An unavoidable responsibility of the external agent is recognition, both of states and of those in them who are to be taken as responsible interlocutors. But recognition decisions are charged with significance in conflict. In particular, the choice of negotiating partners creates dangerous dilemmas. In the former Yugoslavia, the decision of European statesmen to negotiate with nationalist leaders strengthened the position of these leaders in their own societies and on the world stage. Direct attempts to coerce them and compel compliance with European proposals had limited effects, unless pressed to the point of overwhelming military force. In the light of the

²⁴ Schopflin, 1994.

obstacles placed on progress in peace-building by the nationalist parties, the evolution of new actors, with different programmes, may be a precondition for progress in Bosnia. Hence it is necessary to act not only with leading politicians, but also through the diffuse effect of social relations. EU diplomats and others do cultivate relations with a range of social actors. There is pressure through civil societies and through trans-national influence for different standards of political behaviour. But the limits of this pressure, especially in conflict conditions, are always clear. Actor change is largely a matter for the people in the affected societies to bring about. The point for conflict transformation, as Lederach has insisted²⁵, is that it may not always be most effective to seek change at the level of existing political elites. If this is the case, there are then complex communications required, both within the constituent political actors on the intervening side, as well as on the side of the conflict parties. Second-track or third-track processes may identify possibilities for movement that the official negotiations neglect, but these will have to be championed, not only in the conflict arena but also at home, against suspicion and scepticism. Most peace processes involve the step-by-step construction of parts of a package, sometimes along unofficial tracks, sometimes along official tracks, that eventually has to secure at least the acquiescence of both the intervenors and conflictants. Seen in this way, the evolution of peace agreements is rarely achieved by a single third party mediating with the parties in conflict, still less by the diktat of an imposed settlement. Rather, proposals for conflict transformation appear in the complex space created by the political systems of both intervenors and conflictants.

²⁵ Lederach, 1997.

External agents may have significant effects on the issues in conflict and contribute to changes of goals. The goal is usually for these to come about through negotiation, which is intended to identify changes that all can agree. Often, however, the effects are indirect. It is difficult to avoid the goals of the intervenors and the proposed solution themselves becoming issues in a continuing struggle. In this way, intervenors are readily drawn in to the conflict. For example, the Estonians regarded the EU as taking Russia's side in the dispute over the rights of the Russophone minority. And yet, in 1993-4, pressure from the EU was significant in inducing goal changes on both sides. The Estonian government did step back from its threat to act against the towns of the North East, and the Russophone minority did step back from its threat to secede. Eventually the government made concessions in representing the rights of the Russophones to participate in local government. The conflict, in some ways, still remains unresolved, although no longer in danger of violence. Yet it is rare to be able to adduce examples of changes such as this brought about by direct pressure. Rather, diffuse influence on the way parties' frame goals and link them to wider aspirations in the European arena is more likely to be significant. Even for non-members, the European rules, norms and procedures set expectations, and actors have the choice of coordinating around these expectations. Keohane describes an institution as 'a persistent set of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioural roles, constrain activity and shape expectations.'²⁶ In this sense, the European institutions are also institutionalising their periphery.

Finally, with regard to the level of changes in micro-events, communications, and cognitions, the refraction of these events through a wider European consciousness

²⁶ Keohane, 1989, 3.

cannot help but shape the conflict. As an audience and a critical public, the European publics are important, as witnesses of conflicts, capable of being stirred to action. Here again, effects are not necessarily positive. The western media's concentration on the violent and the shocking gives incentives to those who wish to use forceful methods to achieve their aims. Under-reporting of non-violence and of peaceful initiatives weakens the scope for peaceful change. The western media make the message and they interact with the protagonists in the framing of modern conflicts. At the same time, the reactions of Europeans, the arousing of their sensibilities, the degree to which they accept or refuse to tolerate atrocities, shapes the governments' political response. Thus refracted, events such as the market-place bomb or the massacre at Racak can have a transformative effect.

CONCLUSION

Conflict transformation theory is less well-established than conflict management and conflict resolution theory, and much remains to be done to develop it. Our understanding of the choreography can be greatly improved. This paper has suggested that context changes, structure changes, actor changes, goal changes and changes in events, behaviour and communications are part of this choreography, and can be useful in exploring the story of particular conflict processes. Conflict transformation does not always achieve a desired objective, and does not always proceed in the intended direction. Transformations can be malign as well as benign. However, the term may better capture the range of processes involved in the undoing of complex conflicts than the resolution of goal conflicts on their own or the limitation of conflict behaviour.

I have argued that a rich theory of conflict transformation should include the context of conflict, and in turn this should involve the external agents which are attempting to bring about the transformation. Such a reflexive approach points to the complex interactions between the context, structure, actors, and goals of the intervenors and those of the protagonists. Together these create a political space which has to be understood in order to evaluate the development of peace processes, and to better understand the intended and unintended, direct and indirect effect of the intervenors on the conflicts. Reflexive theories of conflict are essential if we are to critically assess conflict transformation activities by the intervenor and the protagonist.

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