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New Scholar, vol. 9 (1984)

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The Historical View of Octavio Paz: A Critique of the Washington Address

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What does the humanistic view of a seminal thinker such as Octavio Paz tell explicitly and implicitly about the nature of change in Mexico? What meaning does the Paz view have for interpreting the spirit of Mexico? Can policy-makers use Paz's view? The Fronteras/*New Scholar* Symposia have posed these questions to help us examine the relationship of humanities and public policy. One could easily answer these questions by simply saying that whereas policy-makers may possess "information" or "hard" data upon which to make decisions, the humanist's wisdom or knowledge is necessary to make information meaningful. Too, given Paz's brilliant insights into "lo mexicano," it would be easy to reiterate that his works should be required reading for all who seek to understand Mexico. Yet it is necessary to play the role of devil's advocate and to examine more closely the Paz view in order to determine to what extent its bias must be taken into account by those who wish to interpret Mexico.

Paz's "Washington Address" of 1978 entitled "Mexico and the United States: Positions and Counterpositions" presents a sweeping, philosophical vision of Mexico's history and its place in the world. That address represents a culmination of Paz's view of the United States going back to his residence in Los Angeles during 1944. Attempting to define the meaning of Mexico, Paz found it convenient to compare and contrast the style of life and thought on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. That comparison emerged in his *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico,* published first in 1950 and expanded in 1959. His subsequent work entitled *Posdata* (1970; translated and revised as *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid,* 1972) represents a bridge between his book of the 1950s and his Address of 1978.

Although Paz speaks in these works about history, he does so in a way that few professional historians do. For Paz, the weight of Mexico's far, bloody past is so overwhelming that it dominates and totally defines the present. Paz's assumption about history is summed up in *The Other Mexico* (1972: 86–87):

> When I speak of the unconscious basis of our idea of history and politics, I am thinking, not of those who govern, but of the governed. It is apparent that the Spanish viceroys were unaware of the mythology of the Mexicans, but their subjects were not, whether Indians, Mestizos, or Creoles; all of them, naturally and spontaneously, saw the Spanish state as the continuation of Aztec power. This identification was not explicit and never assumed a rational form: it was something that was in the nature of

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> things.... After independence the process of sentimental identification with the pre-Hispanic world became so important that following the revolution it became one of the most notable characteristics of modern Mexico. What has not been said is that the vast majority of Mexicans has made the Aztec point of view its own and has thus, without knowing it, strengthened the myth that is embodied in the pyramid and the sacrifice stone.

For Paz, then, one could almost have predicted that, given Mexico's history, the Mexican army would "massacre" students as they protested against their country's political system at the Plaza of Tlatelolco, October 2, 1968. According to Paz (1972: 77–78):

> Mexico's character, like that of any other people, is an illusion, a mask; at the same time it is a real face. It is never the same and always the same. It is a perpetual contradiction: each time we affirm one part of us, we deny another. That which occurred on October 2, 1968, was simultaneously a negation of what we have wanted to be since the Revolution and an affirmation of what we have been since the Conquest and even earlier. It could be said that it was a manifestation of the other Mexico, or, more precisely, of one of its aspects. I hardly need to repeat that the other Mexico is not outside of but within us; we could not extirpate it without mutilating ourselves.... The double reality of October 2, 1968: it is a historical fact and it is also a symbolic acting-out of what could be called our subterranean or invisible history.
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> And I am mistaken when I call it an acting-out, because what unfolded before our eyes was a ritual: a sacrifice. To live history as a rite is our way of assuming it: if, for the Spaniards, the Conquest was a *deed*, for the Indians it was a *rite*, a human representation of a cosmic catastrophe. The sensibilities and imagination of the Mexican people have always oscillated between those two extremes, the deed and the rite.

In explicit terms, Paz's central assumption about the pyramid society of Mexico poetically explains the factor of violence in Mexican history.

The implicit meaning in Paz's view, however, is that Mexico can never escape its origins, never mind what happened subsequently. Paz accepts implicitly the psychoanalytic simile which portrays each individual's emergence from the womb as the determinant of subsequent life history: if the birth is "peaceful" then so will be the resultant character; if the birth is "violent," then that is the determining factor. The view that the manner of "birth" determines what follows is essentially a pessimistic one. It negates the role of change, whether for individuals or peoples.

If Paz is preoccupied with the influence of one moment in time (the time of the Aztecs at the Catholic Conquest of Mexico by Spain), it is also important to note that Paz's view is entrenched in one moment of time—the 1930s. Regardless of the influence of birth in 1914 on Paz himself, Paz was influenced by Mexico's intellectuals who were obsessed beginning in the 1930s with diag-

nosing their country's developmental problems as involving psychological self-definition of nation and requiring resolution of a deep-seated "inferiority complex." Indeed, in 1934, when Paz turned twenty, Samuel Ramos published his seminal work entitled *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*. Ramos' theory of why Mexico felt inferior developed from a basis in the psychological doctrine of Alfred Adler, which emphasized time of childhood or adolescence as the period when a sense of inferiority takes shape. Generalizing from the individual experience, Ramos saw Mexico's nineteenth-century experience in imitation of things European as reflecting his country's crisis of adolescence. Ramos summarized this view in the third edition of *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (1951; trans., 1962: 172–73):

> Outstanding events of our nineteenth-century history led to the formulation of Mexican nationality, events which constituted a series of quite adverse collective experiences. When independence had been achieved, Mexicans found themselves unprepared for political life; a period of disorder began in which the nation constantly tottered between anarchy and dictatorship. Thus weakened, Mexico was no match for the United States in the War of 1847 and in defeat lost a significant portion of her territory. The unbalance continued with the ceaseless struggles among political parties, making inevitable the instability of all institutions. Maximilian's empire and French intervention were a further blow to national autonomy. Frequent civil wars weakened the economy and aggravated general impoverishment. The regime [of Porfirio Díaz, 1876–1911] favored only the ruling class; public education was in a precarious state and higher education was scarce. It was quite natural, then, that these misfortunes should lead to "self-denigration," that is, to a negative view of nationality. A factor not to be ignored is foreign opinions, which is usually magnified or exaggerated in its view of Mexico as a backward country, continuously wallowing in chaos and incivility. From the campaign of disrepute commonly associated with ... North American news services' worldwide circulation of accounts of the Revolution of 1910, Mexico was inundated by unfavorable opinions that added to a general lowering of national esteem by Mexicans themselves. One result of this devaluation was a mutual distrust among Mexicans; another was a weakening of the social spirit of solidarity and co-operation. Men now felt more strongly the need to rely on their individual resources.

Further, Ramos was able in the third edition of his classic book to comment on Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude*, which owed so much to the Ramos analysis of 1934. Ramos wrote (175–76):

> Octavio Paz ... calls the Mexican's conduct a mask. Behind this mask he discovers an inclination to solitude which the title of the book expresses, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. But a more realistic observation would show, contrary to Paz's thesis, that solitude is not the result of voluntary choice, but rather of a disrupting element that makes human character antisocial. Solitude is only a refuge which is sought unconsciously. The Mexican does not desire or enjoy solitude. Rather, solitude afflicts him because

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> of his timidity, his touchiness, and his distrust—all of which are clothed in inhibitions. The love or taste for solitude is the exclusive asset of men endowed with an intense and rich inner life, and only in solitude itself can solitude become a joy. It constitutes an aristocracy of the spirit, the exceptional possession of poets, philosophers, or mystics. It is not cultivated by the common man.

Here, we have a major difference between the views of Ramos and Paz, with Paz moving beyond psychology to humanistic definition of the "spirit of Mexico"; but to capture the imagination of intellectuals throughout the world as well as in Mexico, Paz had to simplify issues. Thus, he overrode racial, class, geographic, and climatic differences in life over time to present to the world "the Mexican." True, in the implicit debate that emerged over the timing and type of psychological crisis affecting Mexico (Ramos, 1934; Paz, 1950; Ramos, 1951; Paz, 1970 and 1978), Paz accepted an increasingly complicated view, especially when he analyzed the competition between traditional and modern societies in Mexico; yet Paz has remained a pessimist about Mexico's future. If Ramos seemed to be an optimist when he argued that Mexico could overcome its pyschological problems of self-definition, in Paz's implicit view Mexico cannot resolve its psychological problems should it continue to be influenced by the U.S. path of "development," a path in danger of leading to social, economic, and political ruin because of a poverty of spirit.

The Paz view that emerged from the 1930s and 1940s was acclaimed in Mexico during the 1950s and 1960s by a new generation of Mexicans who had graduated from the universities as a byproduct of the industrial revolution undertaken with verve by President Miguel Alemán (1946–1952). Ironically, the concomitant educational-enrollment revolution initiated by Alemán at first turned against the technical ideas espoused by that modernizing president. Paz seemed to speak directly to students and helped them understand Mexico's so-called inferiority complex.

By 1970, however, the situation in Mexico had changed. New generations of students had to face a Mexico much changed by Alemán's modernization. Perhaps because of the uneven and fragmentary pattern of the modernization process (begun by Porfirio Díaz, carried forward by Lázaro Cárdenas, and marshalled by Alemán), students had begun to realize that Paz's philosophy of history would not resolve problems of attaining a better standard of living for Mexico's masses. The university generation of the 1970s no longer constituted an intellectually-oriented elite. Rather, as I told Paz during his May 1973 visit to Los Angeles when he complained that *Posdata* had not had the impact in Mexico which he felt it deserved, students had come more and more to represent a critical mass of technically-oriented persons intent upon changing the complexion of Mexico. With a faith in their ability to control the forces of history, they did not want to hear Paz tell of the past and worry that the spirit of Mexico could not be changed. Paz continued to be read, especially by the Mexican literati, of course, but his major fame came from outside Mexico, especially from the United States. Because it takes ten to twenty years for an author to have a popular impact on the world at large, and because U.S. university professors of humanities could assign Paz's paperback translation of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1961) to their students, by the 1970s Paz's view of Mexico

reached new heights. Respected in Mexico, in the United States Paz was to be glorified, especially in an era of U.S. outpouring of self-guilt about how minorities and Third World countries had been treated historically. Invited to live in the United States as scholar in residence at many universities, Paz attained a fame which also meant that he would be invited to serve as the major interpreter of Mexico to the United States through his Washington Address at the Mexico Today Conference of 1978.

With deference to Paz, whose rewards in the United States are certainly justified, it can be argued that he does not tell us about Mexico today. Rather, he tells us about the intellectual preoccupations of some Mexicans yesterday. To accept Paz's pessimistic view of Mexico or to be led to believe that the issue for Mexico today and for Mexico's new university generation and intellectuals concerns psychology of self-identity is to misunderstand how Mexico has changed; it is this misunderstanding of Mexico's change that hampers the work of policy-makers, who often find themselves circumscribed by and fighting old clichés. If Paz's views are passé in the sense that they no longer address vital issues for the Mexico of today, they must be deeply respected as having given remarkable insight into thought about Mexico at one period in time.

To understand the dimensions of change that have occurred in Mexico since the 1930s and 1940s when Paz formulated his view of Mexico, let us examine two quantitative indices of social change that directly or indirectly have changed the worldview of the common Mexican. Even granted the fact that Paz has inveighed against the use of statistics because they lack the "passion" which allows us to probe Mexico's meaning (1972: 72–74), objective data still show the material framework in which Mexican life evolves.

The first set of data is given in the Poverty Index depicted in Table 1. Here we see that between 1910 and 1970 (the last year for which data are available) the social condition in Mexico changed quite dramatically. In the 1930s half of the population lived with poverty characteristics. By 1960 this total fell to one-third and by 1970 to one-quarter of the population. Among the seven items within the Poverty Index, illiteracy of persons age 6 and over declined from 77% in 1910 to near 60% by the 1930s and to 28% in 1970. This loss of social isolation was accompanied by several other important changes involving integration of the population into the Mexican nation. In 1910, 71% of Mexicans lived in rural communities too small to viably support a physician, dentist, pharmacist, secondary school, restaurant, movie theater, veterinarian, or lawyer; in the 1930s that percentage of population fell to 65% and by 1970 reached as low as 41%. In 1910, 13% of the population spoke only an Indian language, a share that declined to about 8% in the 1930s and 2% by 1970. Other items in the Index deal with proxies for diet, clothing, and sewage disposal. Of the seven items included in the Poverty Index, only sewage disposal exhibited a slow rate of change; by the end of the 1930s, 87% of the population lacked adequate waste facilities, a number that by 1970 had declined to 59%—these data help us to understand why Mexico failed to achieve more positive results in health-related indices.

The second set of data deals with relative gaps between Mexico and the United States for Health, Education, and Communication (HEC) standards. These data have been selected to represent primary social change that may enable persons to improve their secondary social position. Secondary aspects of the social situation include indicators for which individual preferences may

affect the standard desired or attained, as with housing, diet, and type and hours (or overtime hours) of employment—items for which no ideal level exists. In contrast, primary social change deals with aspects of life that may enable persons to make advances in the secondary sphere.

Table 1
POVERTY INDEX FOR MEXICO, 1910 – 1970*

Census Years	Average Percentage of Population With Poverty Characteristics
1910	56.9
1921	53.1
1930	50.0
1940	46.6
1950	39.4
1960	33.1
1970	24.8

*Average of seven items covering the persons actually stating in the population census that they (1) are illiterate, (2) speak only an Indian language, (3) live in a community with less than 2,500 persons, (4) go barefoot, (5) wear sandals, (6) regularly eat tortillas instead of wheat bread, and (7) are without sewage disposal.
Source: James W. Wilkie. *La Revolución Mexicana (1910–1976): Gasto Federal y Cambio Social* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978), pp. 268 and 374.

Primary items include the twelve indicators shown in Table 2; and in Table 3 we can see, for example, that the relative gap between U.S. and Mexican per capita circulation of newspapers narrowed markedly: in 1940, Mexico was 6.1 times worse off than the United States, that gap widening in 1950 to 6.7 times before narrowing in 1960 to 3.1 times and in 1970 to 1.8 times. If those figures do not suggest massive change in national communication, consider the indicator for per capita motor vehicles wherein the U.S.-Mexico difference went from 43.7 times to 12.5 times between 1940 and 1970. Among Communication indicators, only per capita telephones showed a widening gap between 1940 and 1970, although the figure for 1970 did show improvement compared to 1950 and 1960. Little relative gap remained between Mexico and the United States for literacy, primary school enrollment of school-age population 7–14, and life expectancy. However, the difference in secondary-school enrollment of students age 13–18 narrowed very impressively—Mexico was 21.3 times worse off than the United States in 1940 but only 3.7 times worse off in 1970. Mexico did not fare so well in per capita hospital beds and physicians. If the relative gap in infant mortality appears to have widened seriously, it is important to note that even there the absolute data for Mexico improved, although not as fast as in the United States. *In 1940, Mexico's infant mortality rate stood at 126 compared to the 1970 figure of 67.*

With regard to this HEC data, several clarifications need to be made. First, comparison is made to the United States not because the U.S. standard is the

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one to which Mexico should aspire but because so much of the Mexican populace has come, like Octavio Paz, to compare Mexico to the U.S. standard. Second, the HEC items are not perfect indicators, but they do reveal that in 9 out of 12 dimensions of primary social change Mexico narrowed the gap relative to the U.S. standing between 1940 and 1970. Obviously Mexico has far to go before attaining the U.S. level, as in the case of per capita motor vehicles, yet in advancing absolutely from 192 to 27 persons per bus, truck, and auto between 1940 and 1970, Mexico may already have reached the saturation point in auto use—at least in Mexico City where air quality is being harmed by the motor vehicle. (All the more reason that Mexico should expand per capita telephone service, thus easing the means of communication and need to move about.) Regardless of what positive or negative values are connoted by HEC items, they show the extent to which life has changed. *The fact that Mexican life expectancy at birth went absolutely from 39 in 1940 to 63 in 1970 tells us, as does the absolute improvement in infant mortality rate, that parents need no longer assume that their children may die at birth or early in life.*

Table 2

SUMMARY OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNICATION (HEC) INDICATORS
(Per Inhabitant Items and All Inhabitant Items)[i]

Health (H), 5 Items
- 1[a] Life expectancy at birth
- 2[a] Infant mortality rate (deaths under one year per 1,000 live births)
- 3 Persons per hospital bed
- 4 Population per physician
- 5 Persons per dentist

Education (E), 4 Items
- 6[a] Literacy percentage for population age 15 and over
- 7[a] Percentage of school-age population 7–14 enrolled in primary school
- 8[a] Students enrolled in secondary school as a percentage of school-age population 13–18
- 9[a] College enrollment[ii] as percentage of primary school enrollment

Communication (C), 3 Items
- 10 Newspaper circulation, copies per 1,000 persons
- 11 Number of telephones per 100 persons
- 12 Number of persons per motor vehicle (autos, buses, trucks) in use

Total (HEC), 12 Items

i. Per-inhabitant (PI) items do not necessarily affect all individuals in a country but indicate opportunity for each person's access to Health, Education, and Communication.

All-inhabitant (AI) items show the extent to which each person in relevant population is actually affected.

ii. Includes professional, technical, and vocational enrollments.

a. AI items.

In Paz's view, formed in the 1930s and 1940s, Mexico has been fascinated with death. Paz's analysis and the statistical data we have just seen are mutually reinforcing, but only up to a point. The data suggest what Paz does not, that with absolute advances in health standards, Mexicans may no longer have to rationalize and justify death as in the past because modern medicine increasingly offers hope to all. Too, with the widening relative gap in infant mortality many Mexican parents may be frustrated by the fact that the U.S. standard has not been met in Mexico. Perhaps not aware of the exact statistics, Mexicans tend to know that lower infant mortality levels are possible.

Failure to have fully understood the psychological meaning of this statistical trend in expanded life span, to give but one example, marks a major point where analysis by Octavio Paz has gone awry. Where Paz would see Mexico's preoccupation with death as rooted in religion—the human sacrifice of Aztecs and the Catholicism of Spain—the very prevalence of "natural" death may have been equally important.

Even more significantly, massive and pervasive primary changes in the standard of living for Mexico's masses have, I submit, since 1940 raised the possibility—too often unmet—for improvement in secondary social standards. This gap in aspirations in turn has contributed to the growing migration of

Table 3

UNITED STATES–MEXICO RELATIVE GAPS IN HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNICATION, 1940–1970
(0 = U.S.-Mexico Equality)

Year	Life	Infant	Beds	Doctors	Dentists
1940	.624	1.681	5.383	1.617	8.006
1950	.388	2.275	7.733	2.670	11.946
1960	.186	1.731	10.084	1.730	10.696
1970	.127	2.350	5.079	1.526	3.472

Year	Literate	Primary	Secondary	College
1940	.980	.620	21.273	10.889
1950	.732	.961	26.667	7.583
1960	.581	.515	11.857	5.875
1970	.356	.222	3.650	8.182

Year	News	Telephone	Motor
1940	6.130	16.667	43.651
1950	6.696	23.917	27.333
1960	3.127	25.667	21.000
1970	1.755	17.935	12.500

Source: James W. Wilkie, *The Narrowing Gap: Primary Social Change and National Equality in the Americas Since 1940* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, forthcoming).

innovative peoples within Mexico from rural to urban areas and from Mexico to the United States. That Paz does not address this issue in his analysis of Mexico today is illustrative of the fact that he is trapped in his own history, in a moment past, a moment when he first gained fame as the interpreter of Mexico.

To infer, as does Paz, that most Mexicans disdain manual labor, is to mislead those who wish to understand the nature of Mexico past or present. On the one hand, the masses who were unhealthy, illiterate, and immobile generally were incapable of sustained hard work. On the other hand, concurrently with the advances in primary social conditions, as María Herrera-Sobek has shown in her *The Bracero Experience: Elitelore Versus Folklore*, Mexican migrants to the United States have proved that they want work and will do any work if they are well and there is an opportunity to get ahead in life.

Perhaps Paz has understood the contradictions in his own thinking because after having defined in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* the Mexican as a unique being, by the end of that volume he turns to a discussion of Mexico's involvement in universal matters, problems, and values. He must have realized that the United States was born with the violence of conquest over the Indian and that Mexico's twentieth-century history is less violent than that of most Latin American countries. Had Paz gone in 1944 to reside in Guatemala or Bolivia instead of Los Angeles, one can see him developing quite a different view of Mexico and certainly one more optimistic: from north of the Mexican border Mexico may have seemed troubled, but from the vantage point south of its border it has seemed a relatively tranquil country, a home for guerrillas and revolutionaries exiled from dictatorship in Latin America. In short, Paz seems to know that the Mexican labyrinth he has described does not well explain Mexico.

Have I been unfair to Paz? In several ways, yes. If we treat Paz's view as attempting to reflect the thought of his formative time (the 1930s and 1940s), then Paz has given us a brilliant record of intellectual influences of that bygone era. Once we realize that the value of Paz's view is not to reveal Mexico so much as what is thought about Mexico, it is hard to criticize his view. What is more, granted that Paz does not tell us about Mexico today, we must recognize that he is doing exactly what he thinks Mexican intellectuals should do: criticize where Mexico is headed in light of its past. Where Paz does not explain convincingly the spirit of Mexico (and who could?), he does shed needed light on the reasons why Mexico's process of modernization was stunted for so long. Too, his important role is not that of interpreter of Mexico but that of intellectual goad who asks: Where is Mexico going and how can it retain its identity in the on-rush to "modernize"?

If the role of the policy-maker is to plan for the future, then the role of Paz as humanist is to question different futures. If the former embodies the myth of what the Mexican present may ideally become, the latter embodies the myth of what could become of the past. If Paz's questions about Mexico's future need to be asked again and again, they also need to be recast. At present, questions from Paz cannot help the policy-maker because they tend to forget that the historical process is an additive one—new present times continually influence and indeed change the course of history. This expanding past is not the immutable past viewed by Paz as stemming from Mexico's origins; instead, it is one that conditions and interacts with major new events through time.

In my view, one important "use of history" is to examine trends and stages depicted in statistics. Statistical data do not, however, speak for themselves.

Instead of applying Paz's questions directly to them, they require that the focus be changed: To what extent, for example, does the expansion of life opportunities for the masses (and revealed in data on primary social change) have impact on the psychological outlook and changing goals of the Mexican masses? How has the Mexican view of death changed with an increased life expectancy? In what ways have the increasing ability to work without incapacitating ill-health changed outlooks on life? How is "modernization" changing the spirit of Mexico? If the increase of literacy and greater school enrollments mean that the horizons of people have changed much and will change more, how can "the Mexican" be redefined to typify his concerns in very different epochs?

In summary, Paz cannot much help us to understand Mexico today. He speaks for Mexico's past—specifically the 1930s and 1940s—and he questions Mexico's future. He at once recognizes change as exemplified by the Revolution, but he subordinates it to his emphasis on Mexico's birth. He does not see that Samuel Ramos' prediction would come true, that the intellectual and university social classes would move beyond preoccupation with psychological self-definition of the spirit of Mexico. Further, I suggest that Mexico's so-called inferiority complex may have been a myth lived mainly by highly educated persons who themselves had the luxury to choose to live in the solitude necessary for contemplation of the "meaning of Mexico." To call for the policy-maker to communicate with Paz is to fail to realize that each has a different orientation based in time. Thus, Paz and those who make policy (as well as others who speculate about history) seem to be destined to speak past each other. If we do not realize that the problem of Paz's view is also the problem of the policy-makers, then we will continue to devote energy to issues that are no longer relevant in the way they once were.

Those who would resolve matters facing our own day must realize that the present is only partly the "immutable" past. Rather than asking policy-makers to consider the Paz view, let us ask Paz and all who think about the present and future to consider more carefully the changes that need to be made in the structure of Mexican society, changes that are revealed in time-series statistical data and which we need to consider in order to develop new questions on the meaning of Mexico.

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