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**GENTRIFICATION IN THE GREEK CONTEXT: URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS AND LABOUR MARKETS AMID CRISIS**

**Gourzis KONSTANTINOS**, University of the Aegean

**Gialis STYLIANOS**, University of the Aegean

Contact: [geod15002@aegean.gr](mailto:geod15002@aegean.gr)

**Abstract**

This review paper aims at linking in a direct way labour markets' transformations with gentrification processes, in the Greek context. Departing from a thorough review of the relevant literature, spanning from the coining of the term in the 1960s up to recent research, it seeks to delineate our conceptualization of gentrification.

Gentrification is presented as a process triggered by capital switching that seeks opportunities opened by rent gaps, carried out by a multiplicity of public and private actors (from national governments, finance institutions and big realtors, to private owners/developers), which often have conflicting interests, and "consumed" by segments of the workforce that have come to the forefront due to shifting international divisions of labour. Despite the critique, the Greek context features documented and undocumented gentrification tendencies, that present many similarities and stark differences with international cases, as registered in the relevant literature.

**Keywords**

Gentrification, urban labour markets, Postfordism, urban renewal, tertiarization

## **Introduction**

Gentrification as a subject has produced a rich literature, extending over half a century, since it was first introduced in the 1960s. Initially a marginal process pertaining to the influx of middle and upper classes in working class neighborhoods, leading to the renovation or rehabilitation of *in situ* degraded housing stock and public spaces, it evolved to be a globalized process that transcends the confines of urban space. Regardless the approach, three elements are consistently highlighted as central: first, the upgrading of the economic base, second, the improvement of the physical environment, and third, the shift in the social character and culture of the gentrified neighborhoods.

The objectives of the paper at hand are two: the review of the literature and our positioning. The second task will be carried out by developing a conceptual framework for gentrification, drawing influences from the international environment, and specifically adapting them to the Greek context. The geographical scope focuses on the Athenian landscape, for two reasons: first, the paper is part of a wider research that addresses urban and labour transformations in Athens, and second, relevant literature for Thessaloniki and other urban agglomerations is notably limited. Our aim is to provide the reader a comprehensive and thorough view on gentrification, with care to demarcate its relationship with labour markets' transformations.

The structure of the paper goes as following. The first chapter addresses the literature from the first studies up to recent ones, and is divided in three subchapters: (i) the central approaches and the first debates, (ii) the stalling of discussion in the 1990s and the sugar-coating of the term gentrification, and (iii) the contemporary approaches, incorporating cases from all over the globe. The second chapter (i) begins with a general conceptualization that applies regardless the approach, and (ii) closes with a demarcation of the Greek gentrification context.

## **1. Literature Review**

### **1.1. Central Approaches and the passage to a complementary theory**

The coining of gentrification is attributed to Ruth Glass, who devised the term in her 1964 paper "Aspects of Change", while studying the transforming Islington neighborhood in London. The majority of relevant studies that followed the next few years, marked the back-to-the-city

movement of the 'new' middle classes (Pattison, 1977), their inclination for a historic preservation of highly aesthetic architecture (Fusch, 1978; Hamnett, 1973), and the policy implications for urban planners (Laska & Spain, 1979), as central aspects of gentrification. The geographic scope of those first studies regarded mainly case studies from London and a few other global cities (e.g. Boston and Washington DC). Moreover, most academics highlighted the marginality of gentrification: Whyte (1980) presented it as a relatively small-scale process taking place only in central areas of a few global cities, while others pointed out that there will be a time before any major impact is felt. Even until the next decade (1990s), its presence was deemed insignificant in older industrial cities (Hamnett, 1991).

In 1978 David Ley presented his paper "Inner city resurgence and its societal context" to the Association of American Geographers annual conference. His later theory on gentrification had its roots in this paper, and specifically the emergence of advanced capitalism as explained by Habermas, and the post-industrial society, as described by Daniel Bell. The transition between industrial to post-industrial capitalism stood pivotal for the birth of gentrification according to Ley (1986), as the market power of a white collar labour force increased. His approach addressed the consumption aspect of gentrification, and promoted four elements as central: demographic changes, bringing the "gentrification generation" to the forefront of economic and social life, housing market dynamics that facilitated this return of the middle classes' segments to the inner-city, urban amenities, attracting those groups downtown, and transitions in the economic base which created a demand for managerial and office labour in the Central Business District.

"Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People" by Neil Smith (1979) came the following year as a response mainly to neo-classical consumer sovereignty models, but also to the post-industrialism thesis. The author distanced himself from the approaches that put emphasis on the consumers of gentrification and their motives -conflict with the imagery of suburbia, a "civic duty" for historic preservation, and a desire to live in an artistic habitus-, and focused on the flows of capital comprising waves of investment and disinvestment. He introduced the notion of the *Rent Gap*, namely the gap between land values under current use and values under the optimal use. In relation to the demand side, Smith argued that crucial to the process was not the will of the "gentrifiers", but the economic viability of redevelopment and rehabilitation of inner-city housing. When this option became economically feasible, inner city areas started

redeveloping, and then the middle class -driven by economic and cultural motives- grasped the opportunity.

The influence of the Rent Gap Theory has been heavy and longstanding; a series of attempts to operationalize it was published throughout the following decades. The major problem researchers faced with this endeavor, was to divide land value into two components: capitalized land rent (the amount a landowner can charge for the use of his land) and house value (the value of any structures on the land). The most thorough effort was carried out by Clark (1988), but his method was overly time and labor intensive; therefore, such researches used very small samples (up to a few blocks), and were unable to cover a wider area. Porter (2010) used tax data for the whole metropolitan area of New York, avoiding the tedious data-coding of former researches, but his calculation of the capitalized land rent was inevitably less precise. The theory was validated in some cases (Clark, 1988; Porter, 2010), while critiqued in others (Bourassa, 1993).

The consumption side was born before Smith's input but the culmination of this 'movement' came during the following decades. The fermentation of 1970's approaches (Hamnett, 1973), Bourdieu's influence on the "aesthetic disposition", and Zukin's 1982 work on the factor of historic preservation, led to the articulation of the "emancipatory inner city" thesis by Caulfield (1989) and the "artistic urbane habitus" by Ley (1994). There, instead of historical materialist reasons, the root cause of gentrification is the desire, needs and rationale of its consumers; these classes leaving the obsolete suburban landscape for the emancipatory spaces of the inner city (Caulfield, 1989). Demographic, educational, and class influences conditioned the "aesthetic disposition" of the "new middle classes". This vein in the literature expressed the 1980s spreading of postmodernism and the "cultural turn" in urban studies (Slater, 2011); gentrification was studied vis-à-vis issues of gender, sexuality, and race.

Already in the same decade (1980s), voices emerged expressing that gentrification had to be understood under both production and consumption terms. Either way, both approaches had seeds of each other from the start; Smith accepted the partial transformation of the middle class, even though not in Marxian terms, and Ley placed class issues and wider economic forces at the epicenter of his articulation. Zukin (1982), who primarily influenced the consumption approach, sided herself with Smith, as she saw culture subservient to capital (also argued by Lees, 1994). Smith in later papers (1987) counted in the impact of individual's actions -albeit in collective social action terms-, arguing that these "new" middle class individuals, consumed gentrification in an attempt to

distinguish themselves from the “bourgeoisie above and the working class below”. His reasoning resonated Ley and Bourdieu’s articulations regarding the aesthetic disposition of those classes, a trait which nonetheless expresses class privilege.

By the end of the 1980s, the link between housing and labour markets was established. The consolidation of commercial activity in the Central Business District due to the tertiarization of the economy, increased demand for professional/managerial positions; this transitional period saw middle class office workers pouring in whereupon the working class resided for. Both central approaches pointed out that the nature of capitalism shifted throughout the postwar decades (Smith by Postfordism and Ley by Postindustrialism), bringing new spatial divisions of labour and the productive composition of modern cities at the forefront of gentrification research (Smith, 1987; Zukin, 1987; Ley, 1986). Marcuse (1989) clarified that it is housing markets that follow labour transitions, and not the opposite, as others supported.

Emergent Spatial divisions of labour and expanding forms of gentrification created a mix of various theories, transcending the initial explanations, and rendering previous dualisms obsolete. Moreover, most of the divisions occurred over the years over the root causes, intensity, or forms of the process, could be simply addressed as different types and periods of gentrification (Lees, 2000). The introduction of a clearly defined periodization further contributed to this direction. Hackworth and Smith (2001), used the notion of *capital switching* of David Harvey to conceptualize the successive phases of gentrification; from the first sporadic, discrete and marginal process, taking place in central neighborhoods of global cities in the 50s and 60s to the anchoring phase after the fall of Fordism, and the generalized urban policy of the 90s and 00s.

Since the early 1990s, a growing number of scholars pointed out the expatiating nature of the process, what Hackworth and Smith (2001) meant by “generalized urban policy”. This expansion took multiple forms: in geographical terms, the phenomenon metastasized from downtown to peripheral areas of the city, from urban to non-urban space, and from global/large to smaller cities. Moreover, additional land uses were incorporated to the process (that is besides residential and recreation). Phillips (1993), observed the impact of class and labour on gentrification-related transformations in rural areas. Gotham (2005) indicated the intermingling of gentrification and tourism-related activities, and his study integrated issues of security, spectacle and the dominating influence of large entertainment firms in the built environment. Super-gentrification was a return of the process to already gentrified loci, in cities like London, San Francisco and New York, but in a

more intensified way. It signified the emergence of an upper-class comprising financiers, who, unlike previous types of “gentrifiers”, had little rooted relationship with their neighborhood (Lees, 2000).

### **1.2. The stalling of the debate and the sugar-coating of gentrification**

Intensified gentrification brought out emerging processes in the urban realm: securitization, “disneyfication” (to be reduced to a mere spectacle), and ultimate commodification of city life. Ley (2003) highlighted the importance of spectacle in the city, using the notion of aestheticisation, and Smith (1996) pinpointed the impact of class struggle and race in the securitization processes. Deriving from hegemonic class identities, gentrification became a levelling force, acquiring attributes more complex than mere urban renewal. However, the recession of the early 1990s made it seem like gentrification had “ran out of steam” (Bourne, 1993). The language of “de-gentrification” unfolded in two ways: a part of academia stated the process was reduced again to a marginal state, and another neglected its negative impacts. Indeed, the stalling of the process in London areas, as borrowers were stuck with mortgage liabilities exceeding the market value of their holdings, and the massive corporate lay-offs in US, hitting those professional middle classes that had facilitated gentrification for so long, constituted an almost too heavy blow (Lees, 2000).

From mid-1990s onwards, scholars and the media started treating gentrification differently (Slater, 2011). The profound gap in the approaches of Caulfield (1989) and Smith (1996), indicated that the debate had shifted over to the impact of gentrification. The consumer approach, through a series of “theoretical mutations”, ended up overlooking poverty and injustice caused by gentrification. City planners and realtors even avoided the use of the term gentrification itself, as it had taken a negative meaning, naming it urban renaissance, renewal, or “partial gentrification”. Britain’s Urban Task Force “Towards an Urban Renaissance” and US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s “The state of the cities” reports, both from 1999, promoted “rehabilitation” of the inner-city as a gateway to a “civilized city life” and attributed environmental sustainability to the process (Lees, 2000). Social mixing, social capital, civic culture, environmentalism, and liveability, were all terms introduced in that period to “sugar-coat” the effects of and justify gentrification (Uitermark, 2003). It was argued that improvements in employment prospects, public services, socioeconomic integration and built environment, benefited low-status households as much as the well-off. Interestingly, Vigdor (2002) argued that low-income residents were unwilling to pay for

upgraded services and dwellings, largely because they disapproved changes in “neighborhood character”, and not because they could not afford them.

The opposition then took a harder stance, stressing out once again the hardline class rhetoric accompanying the renovations, that signified a “revanchist” return of the middle classes in the inner city (Smith, 1996). The frailty of gentrification under crisis pressures was also doubted (Smith, *ibid*), and indeed, by the end of the 1990s, “post-recession gentrification” had already been studied and validated (Lees, 2000).

### **1.3. Contemporary approaches under a “glocal” scope**

In the previous subchapters, we witnessed how debates in the field of gentrification research shifted over time. During the first decades, the main source of disagreements was about root causes and the role of consumers, in addition to the real magnitude of the phenomenon (Maloutas, 2011). During the mid-1990s, the debate was about the frailty of the process amid recession, and its impact upon non-privileged households. Today, the dualisms between consumption and production approaches have been called obsolete (Lees, 2000), and gentrification’s magnitude and expansion in the cities of the Global North is unarguable. The debate has steered towards content and contextual relevance. With gentrification becoming a commonly implemented urban strategy, it is questionable whether its hitherto theoretical conceptualization can be applied to contexts whereupon this terminology is novel: cities of the global periphery, peripheral/smaller cities, or older, traditional industrial cities etc. Relevant literature presented for some years a hesitation to engage with those new contexts, even though master plans and official documents have had an implicit “gentrification vocabulary”.

Parts of the academia doubt the actual geographical expansion of gentrification *per se*, and moreover, argue that its theoretical framework cannot be applied on contexts and cases that it does not really fit. For that end, concepts and descriptions have emerged, that either focus on specific aspects of the process, or serve to clarify distinctions between gentrification and other forms of urban renewal. This cohort in academia rightly so pinpoints that the term gentrification should not get confused with other similar urban transformations, as this broad use of the term actually deducts meaning and analytical clarity from the term itself (Maloutas, 2011). Other voices, coming from postcolonial theory, express further concerns about “westernizing” Global South

academia through the act of “theory travelling” (Robinson, 2011); their goal is a particularized and “highly contextualized” theoretical framework (Lopez-Morales, 2015). The research of urban transformations also has to count in urban models where “public land ownership, mixed tenure, and economic informality” endure (Ghertner, 2015).

Hence, this side alternatively proposes a more focused terminology, highlighting already-in-use terms, such as ‘super-gentrification’, ‘residentialization’, ‘studentification’, ‘reurbanization’, ‘embourgeoisement’, ‘greentrification’, and ‘rural-gentrification’ (Maloutas, 2011). Some of the above are more appropriate than others, but most of them are commonly used in the academia for more than a decade; however, it must be noted that this over-focusing steers the attention away from critical issues of the urban renewal processes, such as displacement and social polarization, discarding generations of critical inquiry for the sake of a definitional purity (Wyly, 2015).

Regardless of the critique, gentrification literature has grown and incorporated a multiplicity of concepts into various theoretical approaches; the main reason for that is exactly the expansion of its geographical scope. The first studies addressed marginal cases in neighborhoods of global cities (of the Global North) such as London, New York, Boston and Toronto. Subsequently, the research included other cities of Britain, Australia, the US, and Canada; soon, the literature comprised cases from Northern Europe, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries. With the dismantling of the Soviet Union, scholars started noticing gentrifying signs in the cities of ex-socialist countries that were under immense privatization pressures (Sykora, 1996). Lees (2000), Smith (2002) and others noticed that gentrification as an urban strategy had conquered previously uncharted territories, and their remarks initiated a renewed ‘homecoming’ to the geography of gentrification, after a decline of half a decade.

Gentrification now has been scrutinized in conjunction with gated communities and rapid urbanization in Chinese cities- “citadel gentrification” as has been called- (Atkinson & Blandy, 2005), the strange mix of cosmopolitanism and favelas in Brazil (Rubino, 2005), medieval and Renaissance architecture in South Europe (Petsimeris, 2005), mass entertainment and tourism in Southeast Asia or insular Spain (Gibson, 2009), neo-colonialism and religion in Morocco (Esher & Petermann, 2000), or oil-driven economy in Ghana (Eduful & Hooper, 2015). Postcolonial theory has sparked the debate of whether concepts of the Global North can ‘dictate’ the discourse of urban affairs globally, but has also put into play the notion of colonialism in its literal sense (not as class-colonization that Neil Smith had often used). Urban strategies have been “migrating” from the



Global North to other contexts under the force of transnationally embedded neoliberalism, with the help of global EXPO and athletic events -such as the Olympic Games; Barcelona and Beijing are prominent examples for that (Smith, 2011). Gentrification also has returned to the neighborhoods of the global cities it first occurred, to take a fast-spinning form, pushing the boundaries of the process itself (see super-gentrification). The opponents of the “skeptical side” that doubts the actual expansion of gentrification, point out that its geographical sprawl is tangible, and its presence in its initial loci is growing stronger (Wyly, 2015; Lopez-Morales, 2015; Lees, 2003).

## **2. Discussion: Towards a conceptualization of gentrification**

In this chapter, we will demarcate our conceptualization of gentrification, starting with remarks for the international environment, and consequently specifically for the Greek context of the capital city of Athens; increased focus will be put on urban labour market transformations and wider shifts in contemporary capitalism.

### **2.1. Definitions, underlying processes and functions of gentrification**

It has been already highlighted that gentrification, in order to be distinguished as such, must bear three features (Smith, 2011): the upgrading of the economic base, the improvement of physical environment, and the shift in the social character and culture of the neighborhood.

Gentrification functions as the force that shapes urban space, so that will serve the needs of a post-fordist economy; it follows the tertiarization of the economy and the consequent urban labour markets' transformations. Before these shifts however, wider processes must operate and allow gentrification to come about. Switching from the primary (industrial and manufacturing production) to the secondary (land, real estate, housing, and the built environment) circuit has historically occurred after overaccumulation of capital in the former; it represents not only a *post hoc* response to recessive pressures, but a conscious strategy to exploit opportunities in the built environment caused by rent gaps (Gotham, 2009). Gentrification constitutes one form of spatial fixes, which take shape from capital flows' crystallizations. When spatial fixes accumulate, they lead to fragmented and polarized landscapes (Harvey, 2001); the outcome may refer to an opportunity for further capital accumulation, based on the exploitation of the formed rent gaps, or bound and distort the

flows of capital, creating the conditions for another wave of recession. The above summarize the “knife-edged path” nature of spatial fixes: a counter-measure, and a generator of economic crises. Gentrification, as seen above, is interdependent to labour markets: diminishing low-skilled labour positions in the inner-city and rising demand for high-skilled labour, bring the latter in the living areas of the former, effectively causing displacement (Marcuse, 1989). Additionally, gentrification not only shapes the living spaces of the new middle classes, but also their fields of consumption; the nature of the process brings residential and commercial/recreational uses together, signifying the aestheticization of inner city landscapes (Ley, 2003). Activities that deviate from the aesthetical paradigm are displaced; this is evident when it comes to inner city manufacturing, which follows the involuntary relocation of the blue-collar workforce (Curran, 2004). In this way, gentrification relates to labour flexibilization; the nature of this link is dual. On the one hand, “traditional” employment is pushed out of the inner-city, and the remaining working class engage with petty, residual tasks in the tertiary sector, such as maintenance, minor fixes etc. (Curran, *ibid*). On the other, the inpouring middle classes, are keen on flexible and atypical arrangements that abound in tertiarized “creative” economy activities. These classes have been conditioned by post-fordist pressures, to have low job expectations and be flexible on job tasks and work schedules (Zukin, 1995). The outcome in gentrifying landscapes, is a mix of marginal and atypical arrangements - among the working class-, and flexible arrangements -among the new middle classes.

## **2.2. Remarks on the Greek context**

In the remaining chapter below, we will engage with the basic positions in the Greek literature, present the main elements differentiating the Greek context from the prominent ones, and scrutinize the impact of crisis on gentrification tendencies.

Avdikos (2015) is highlighting the artistic aspects of gentrification in Athens, pointing out that independent artists and small events are eventually appropriated by larger firms for commercial reasons, in a process that extracts monopoly rent out of uniqueness of local culture. Two recent online articles by BBC (Sooke, 2017) and the New York Times (Brownell-Mitic, 2017) indicate the latter; there, Athens is presented as the potential new arts capital of Europe.

Alexandri (2015) has tracked down and identified the main forms of gentrification in the capital, pointing out that in districts such as Gazi and Keramikos, the process has advanced enough to

incorporate marginal gentrifiers and independent artists alongside more affluent professionals. This coexistence refers to a second phase of gentrification; “urban pioneers” -alongside pauperized and elderly people- are already feeling the pressure of displacement caused by rent rises. Additionally, the influx of refugees and undocumented immigrants perplexes the situation, creating on the one hand “opportunities for disinvestment”, but on the other preventing the establishment of secure environments for entrepreneurship and investments. For that reason, gentrification in Athens has been justified by a discourse of *purification and fear*, deriving from the feelings of insecurity dominating the middle-class dwellers already living there (Alexandri, 2015). Overall, these processes in Athens remain fragmented and unfinished; raising doubts among researchers, as to whether they constitute actual cases of gentrification or not.

One of those is Maloutas (2011), who argues against the presence of gentrification tendencies in the Greek context. Instead, he highlights other processes at work, specifically for Athens: suburbanization, and vertical social differentiation (where households of lower income live at lower floors, and of higher income at the top floors). He pinpoints the importance of homeownership, which has led to reduced mobility, and the consolidation of existing social forms (Leontidou, 1990). However, homeownership is receding, and vertical social differentiation has nothing to do with the eviction and rebuilding of previously derelict areas, such as Metaxourgio and Keramikos. Additionally, suburbanization is a process that can take place simultaneously with gentrification, as is the case in many other parts of the globe. Athens, from our point of view, present classic gentrification tendencies, which moreover derive from three central factors: first, the city is required to function in a highly competing international environment, second, a flow of global capital is witnessed in its built environment, and third, purification and “rationalization” of inner-city spaces are part of the political vocabulary.

For a city like Athens, gentrification signifies attractiveness and effectiveness, in both the economic and the administrative level; it can provide secure spaces for investment (Avdikos, 2015) and entrepreneurship (Alexandri, 2015). However, any research on Greek gentrification must count in the undoubtable impact of the ongoing economic crisis. Smith (2011) notes that the systemic attributes of European gentrification, on the one hand lead to larger projects, but on the other weaken its resilience against recessive pressures and downturns of economic cycles. In the case of Athens, the economic crisis has a stagnating effect, without stalling existing transformations completely (Alexandri, 2015).

The wave of privatizations of public property, an urban planning “unrest” with several projects in motion (ReThink Athens is one prominent example), and several existing inner-city loci of gentrification, are conditions that could facilitate further transformations. Moreover, the declining performance of domestic manufacturing activity has driven capital to the secondary circuit and the built environment. On the other hand, the collapse and flexibilization of constructions indicate a profound crisis in the sector, stalling projects and changing the way spatial fixes consolidate (Gourzis & Gialis, 2017).

The key to understand the unravelling of such processes in the Athenian landscape, is labour markets’ transformations. Increased need for high-skilled labour will fuel the relevant housing market, and the simultaneous precarization of lower-skilled workforce will render it unable to withstand displacement pressures. Indications of the above can be traced in the port of Piraeus, which presents rising activity and attracts an international workforce; the mass privatization of the port on the other hand, has aggravated working conditions for technical and unskilled labour. These shifts are reflected on the surrounding neighborhoods, such as Troumpa, which turned from derelict loci with dilapidated building stock, to hubs of urban regeneration, that attracts a “colorful mosaic of yuppies, hipsters, and ship-owners” (Grammeli, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

This paper served as a review of the most important parts of a literature spanning for more than half a century, and a presentation of our interpretation. We approached the essence of gentrification making use of three prominent notions: (a) capital switching, which turns gentrification into a spatial fix, (b) rent gaps, which constitute particularized opportunities for capital investment in the built environment, and (c), the tertiarization of the economy, which creates the need for higher quality housing stock and amenities in the inner-city.

Gentrification, as a spatial fix, presents a twofold, contradicting nature: it is an outlet for over-accumulated capital in the primary circuit, and at the same time, bounds capital locally, turning it rigid and immobile, thus creating the conditions for future recessions. Additionally, the systemic turn of gentrification has rendered it more vulnerable to crisis pressures; however, the impact of recession is still unclear. Experience from the early 1990s US crisis validates the fast recuperation of gentrification, but the highly varied European context makes an assessment more difficult.

The rent gaps emerging during this period of rearrangements, indicate that urban space fermentations will produce gentrifying tendencies in the Athenian landscape, with several loci already identified. Additionally, housing market values in gentrified areas indicate an increased resilience. The outcome of the attempts to establish Athens and its port Piraeus as a significant link in the chain of international flows of capital, will largely determine the further unfolding of regeneration tendencies. The ongoing crisis however, strips the city of its economic base, which is in a downfall for more than seven consecutive years; will the recession truncate the attempts for further urban transformations, or will it widen existing rent gaps, and render uneven development geographies directly exploitable? Since gentrification is a contingent result of multiple factors, we will leave this prediction as a subject for future research.

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