Philosophy at the Margins: Exploring the Philosophy of Work of the Elderly People in some Remote Areas of Negros Oriental

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophy of work of the elderly people in Sitio Pinayun-an, a remote village in Barangay Bato, Mabinay, Negros Oriental, and explore some of the ways in which their rich cultural heritage confronts and resists globalization. This is inspired by the idea that the model of work presented by the local people, especially those who are located at the margins, can be an alternative to the destructive tendency of globalization. I will argue that the local communities in the periphery continue to practice "cooperative work", and that the championing of this indigenous work ethic would contribute greatly to human and social development. Indeed, as we can see, indigenous work ethic can be viewed as one of the rich sources of "social hope" in today's highly globalized society.

Keywords: Globalization, cooperative work, Marcuse, Marx

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The Problem: Why the Philosophy of Work?

It is worthwhile to mention at the outset what Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said about the nature of work and its role in human flourishing. This is because I believe that the philosophy of work that we know today is replete with Hegelian overtones. In fact, the young Marx who argued in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 that labor (work) is the essence of humanity was directly influenced by Hegel. According to Hegel, the fruits of one's work form an integral part of the realization of personhood. This is premised on the idea that the realization of "personhood" begins with one's desire for material comfort and safety. However, the fulfillment of this desire does not suffice. For Hegel, individuals also desire for recognition which, according to Steven Smith, is "the core of human desire, central to our sense of well-being, our sense of who and what we are".2 For Smith, as for Hegel, human beings are not just constituted by the desire for material comfort and safety, but also by the desire to be recognized as human beings by those around them.3 Thus, human beings cannot live well in common with each other unless they are afforded due recognition or treated with a sense of decency and respect. However, if the sense of who and what we are begins with the satisfaction of our desire for material comfort and safety. and inasmuch as the latter directly stems from creative human activities, then the centrality of work in the process of realizing true personhood needs to be acknowledged from the outset. As a matter of fact, the famous historical materialism of Karl Marx, according to Herbert Marcuse, is a history of the active individual making himself free through work. In Reason and Revolution, Marcuse writes: "Far from being mere economic activity..., work is the 'existential

 $^{^1}$ See Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, translated with an introduction and notes by J.B. Baillie (London: George Allen & UNWIN LTD, 1949).

² Steven B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 117.

³ Ibid

activity' of man, his 'free conscious activity' - not a means for maintaining his life...but for developing his 'universal nature".4

For Marcuse, as for Marx, therefore, work is the person's affirmation of her being because through work, she can produce and reproduce an external, material objective world.⁵ Through work, the person is able to transform and appropriate the material objects she encounters to satisfy her needs, a satisfaction necessary for the full realization of her potentialities and her becoming a truly free being. Put differently, work is the person's act of perfecting herself. In this sense, work is the essence of humanity; it defines human being as conscious being distinct from the other animals, who, in producing and reproducing the objective world to her advantage, creates a world in her own image and expresses and perfects her own capacities. It might be worthwhile quoting one of the longest extracts of Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. Marx writes:

> ...man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being, or treats himself as a species being. Admittedly, animals also produce. They build nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory, 2nd edition with supplementary chapter (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 275.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, "The Foundation of Historical Materialism", in The Essential Marcuse. Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critique Herbert Marcuse, eds. Andrew Feenberg and William Leis (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 83.

produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man produces the whole of nature. An animal's product belongs immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product. An animal forms things in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty.

It is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a *species being*. This production is his active species life. Through and because of this production, nature appears as *his* work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the *objectification of man's species life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore contemplates himself in a world that he has created.⁶

6 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscript, ed. with an Introduction by Dirk J. Struik, translated by Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 113-114. See also Kevin M. Brien, Marx, Reason, and the Art of Freedom, Second Edition (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2006), 9. In relative parlance, Sigmund Freud, the acclaimed founder of psychoanalysis, claims that "work" is one of the foundations (the other is Eros) of society. Freud puts it clearly in his seminal work Civilization and Its Discontents: "The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work which was created by external necessity (Ananke), and the power of love (Eros), which made the man unwilling to be deprived of his sexual object...." See Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, edited by M. Masud R. Khan, translated by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973),38. Emphasis added. Freud further says that human beings "come together", i.e., live in society, first

But as we can see, the realization of the goal of work is perverted or inverted in the capitalist organization of society. Under capitalism, all aspects of the work process, for example, what is to be produced, how and how much, how prices and wages are to be determined, and the like, all of this solely determined by the capitalist themselves. For Marx, the sole motive of the capitalist is nothing but the consideration of his own profit via the production and reproduction of commodities.⁷ The employment of capital is intended solely for the acquisition of more and more profits and not for the benefit of the whole society. For Marx, this is done through the exploitation of work, that is, the inversion of the meaning of production: production is done not for the sake of the satisfaction of needs, but merely for profit.8

The obstruction of the goal of work is captured more fully in the famous notion of "alienation of work". According to the young Marx, the anthropological formative role of work is nullified and indeed inverted under capitalism as the fruit of the individual's work is no longer her own but possessed and manipulated by the other, the capitalist. Marx explains that since in capitalism the worker produces not for herself but for the capitalists, the product of her work now becomes an independent object existing outside her, a

because they are forced to do so by economic necessity (Ananke) and second because they want to do so to acquire their sexual objects (Eros). In fact, for Freud, civilization is first of all progress in work—that is, work for the procurement and augmentation of the necessities (Ananke) of life. See Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud(Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 77.

⁷ For a recent presentation of Marx's classical analysis of capitalist production, see Jonathan Wolff, Why Read Marx Today? (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 66-81. For an emphasis of the philosophical underpinnings of that analysis, see also Tom Rockmore. Marx After Marxism. The Philosophy of Karl Marx (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 113-158.

⁸ Marx, Manuscripts, 82.

powerful object that confronts her.⁹ This is what Marx calls the alienation of the worker from herself as a result of being alienated from the fruits of her work.¹⁰ And because for Marx the alienation of work is accompanied by alienation of the other workers, alienation of work as a result sets individuals in society against each other.

Since Marx believed that work is an objectification of human potential, that is, species-life to use his own words, the alienation of that work will be translated as an attack on species-life itself. That means, on the one hand, alienation from each other; but also, on the other hand, alienation of individual life. As the individual works for the capitalist, and since this work has no other end but the accumulation of more profits, Marx argues that the poorer and the more miserable the individual becomes. This follows the law of inverse proportion in the accumulation of profit and the compensation of the workers: the more the capitalist maximizes profit, the more the wage of the worker is minimized. Alienation of work therefore necessarily implies pauperization. With this condition, the worker "does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind".11 The individual's work in a

⁹ See Ernst Fischer, *Marx in His Own Words*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Pelican Books, 1973), 37-51. Marx follows closely Adam Smith in this line. According to Smith, the value of any commodity is derived ultimately from the labor of the workers. Indeed, Smith's theory of value underpins Marx's claim that the profit of the capitalists is solely derived from labor. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of the Nations*, edited with and Introduction and Notes by Kathryn Sutherland (London: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ There has been a wealth of renewed interest in Marx notion of alienation in recent years. See Wolff, Why Read Marx, 28-37. See also Ernesto Screpanti, Libertarian Communism. Marx, Engels and Political Economy of Freedom (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 107-140; Matt Perry, Marxism and History (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 10; and Andrew Chitty, "Species-Being and Capital", in Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy, eds. Andrew Chitty and Martin McIvor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 131-135.

¹¹ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 110.

sense is not voluntary but coerced; it is indeed forced labor. And under capitalism, the worker is not free. She only "feels himself freely active in his animal function — eating, drinking, procreating, or at the most in his dwelling and in dressingup, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal."12

Now, what we can draw from Marx's notion of work is that work as a practical activity is not merely instrumental, i.e., as means to an end, as means to self-development and self-creation, but a reflective activity that enables the individuals to harness nature and transform it to their advantage. Work produces in the human person "insight", that is, an understanding of the historical and social situation, a real knowledge of the structure and operations of the entire social system. This "insight" makes the individual become disposed to radical action, and thus enables her to oppose and abolish social control and domination. Work therefore does not only make the individual truly human; it also makes her become politically and socially conscious.

However, what Marx observed during his time remains utterly true in our own time. Today's capitalist-driven globalization¹³ continues to ensnare the worker in the

¹² Ibid., 111.

¹³ I take the term globalization along the lines of Anthony Giddens's thoughts. Giddens defines globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social relations linking distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many thousands of miles away and vice versa". See Anthony Giddens, Sociology (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), 64. Yet Giddens in his work Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives claims that the meaning of globalization is not always clear. What is clear, according to him, is that we now live in one world. See Anthony Giddens, Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives (New York: Profile Books, 1999), 7. Giddens argues that it is a mistake to take globalization purely in terms of the economic. Globalization for him is a complex notion, so that it encompasses not only the economic but the political, cultural, and technological as well. (Ibid., 10). When I use the term "globalization" in this study, I specifically mean

endless web of repressive labor market. As we can see, the workers of today have to work long and hard just to make ends meet. The old dream of reducing the working hours to the minimum so that the worker may work less and enjoy more, thereby allowing her to actualize her potentialities, remains a dream. Indeed, work has failed to materialize its promise of fully humanizing the animal man. It has remained the primary means of social control and domination. But if the same notion of work serves as the ultimate form of selfrealization, as it was originally conceived by Hegel, then work has to be purged from its manipulative cloak. And one way of doing this is to look for those sectors of the contemporary society whose economic practices embody the true nature of work as emancipatory. It is for this reason that this paper aims to examine the philosophy of work of the elderly people¹⁴ in some remote villages of Negros Oriental, Philippines and explore some of the ways in which their work attitude, consumption habit included, confronts and resists some of the work-related global problems that we are facing today. This inspired by the idea that the model of work attitude presented by an elderly people in the periphery can be an alternative to the destructive tendency of globalization as can be seen in the growing socio-economic inequalities in contemporary societies, as well as the destruction of the environment and the displacement of culture in the periphery. In fact, the privilege of the elderly people located "at the margins" of the global system is that as soon as their practices, specifically their work attitude and consumption habit. are linked to neocolonial domination.

"economic globalization" and follow closely Giddens's contention that it (economic globalization) undermines local subsistence economies and that it has caused familial and cultural distortions. (Ibid., 17). Giddens's notion of economic globalization indeed provides a theoretical basis of this study.

¹⁴ In this study, the term "elderly" refers to those people in their mid-40s and above. I argue that an elderly person doesn't have to be too old, inasmuch as an "elder" (in a society/community) is understood as someone who has seen better days and therefore is able draw wise judgments from her experience, one which may greatly contribute in the development of the community.

immediately point to a possible "outside" of the system: first, it highlights "from the outside" the destructive potential of the system, a destructive potential that has become invisible "at the center"; and second, it also embodies other ways of living and organizing society, one that promotes social solidarity and a sustainable method to preserve the environment.

In what follows, I will present briefly the philosophy of work of the elderly people in some remote villages of Negros Oriental, Philippines and highlight some of the ways in which, as already said, their work attitude and consumption habit confront and resist some of the work-related global problems that we are facing today. The privilege of the elderly people in remote localities is that because they have seen better days, they are therefore in the best position to assess how the notion of cooperative work contributed greatly to human flourishing and community development. It must be noted, however, that my project "Philosophy at the Margins" is a huge project which ambitiously aims to understand the philosophy of work of the elderly people in many remote villages and indigenous communities in the Philippines. At this stage, the study deals with the elderly people in Sitio Pinayuna-an, a mountainous part of Barangay Bato, Mabinay, Negros Oriental.

According to the actual house inventory conducted two years ago by a group of anthropologists from Silliman University, which was led by Prof. Rev Gimena, there are between 20 and 25 households within 1 kilometer radius from Sitio Pinayun-an Elementary School as the center. According to Prof. Gimena, each household has an average of 4 family members. Up to now, Sitio Pinayun-an cannot be accessed by any modes of transportation. The only possible means to reach the Sitio's center is by foot. In fact, it took the researcher more or less 2-hours uphill walk from the barangay center to reach the place. For many years, Sitio Pinanyun-an has only a pre-school housed in a cottage with a roof made out of coconut leaves. Just recently, with the help

of Project Agape of Prof. Fred Cadeliña of Silliman University, in cooperation with the Department of Education, an elementary school was put up and housed in a semi-concrete building. This means that students no longer walk down and up for about 4 hours each day to go to the lowland just to get to school. Also, the community does not have access to electricity and water system. The people simply relied on a spring that traverses the crevices of the mountains for their water supply.

Modes of Inquiry

Throughout the project, I employed textual analysis and ethnophilosophy as my research methodologies. To the first, I relied mostly on a number of critical scholarships on the philosophy of work. These include Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's The Phenomenology of Spirit, Karl Marx's Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, and Sigmund Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents. While I found these seminal works extremely important when considering my topic, I think they need to be developed further as they do not highlight the capacity of indigenous cultures countervailing the destructive tendency of globalization. To the second, I conducted an ethnographic study on the philosophy of work of the elderly people in Sitio Pinayunaan, Barangay Bato, Mabibany, Negros Oriental. Here, I employed participant observation by spending ample time living in this remote area which allowed me to acquire firsthand knowledge of the practices relative to the notion of work by the local folks. I visited the place thrice, that is, one day in August 2012, another one in November 2014, and three days in April 2015. In my first two visits, I only spent few hours talking casually to the people in the community in the hope of establishing rapport with them as well as observed the way in which they relate to each other and organize community work. It was in my third visit that I formally conducted key informant interviews with some of elders in the community. In these interviews, I highlighted the informants' view on work and the way in

which it impacts on their lives and the community. The interviews were guided by the following questions:

- 1) Please talk briefly about your life and how do you earn a living?
- 2) What do you think is the importance of work in your life? Do you think you find satisfaction in your present work?
- 3) How do people in your community organize work? Can you say that people in your community work cooperatively for the common good?
- 4) Do you think that work has contributed development of your significantly in the community?

Findings

In the course of my study on the philosophy of work of the elderly people in Sitio Pinanyun-an, Barangay Bato, Mabinay, Negros Oriental, I found out that the people in this remote community continue to practice dagyawan, their term for "cooperative work", which allowed them to live in common with each other. This is evidenced by the practice of "mutual cooperation" these people displayed in organizing community work. For example, in my casual conversation with the people in the community and the school teachers, I learned that when an elementary school was built in the community, the entire labor force was mobilized to work without pay. Of course, the people here are already familiar with wage labor; in fact, many of them had gone to the urban centers to work, for example, as house helpers. But what is interesting here is that when it comes to community work. the people in Sitio Pinayun-an do not hesitate to work voluntarily for the common good. As a matter of fact, the this community voluntarily carried construction materials from the lowland to the center of the community. Indeed, one can only imagine how extremely difficult it is to carry those materials while walking uphill for

about 2 hours. Moreover, the whole community also helped flatten manually the site where the school was constructed. Thus, as we can see in the way the people in Sitio Pinayun-an organize community work, we can rightly claim that the notion of "cooperative work" plays a central role in the development of the said community. Antero Anadon, one of the elders that I interviewed, claims that any progress in their community directly stems from the people's practice of dagyawan. Antero further said that he could not imagine himself living without the support of the entire community. While it is true that they work individually in their own farms and hire once in a while individuals in the community for some paid work, most especially in transporting agricultural products to the lowland, Antero clearly pointed out that when the community needs them, they would not think twice to come together and work for the common good. This is precisely a concrete instantiation of Freud's contention that progress in civilization depends on the rechanneling of the libidinal energies into productive work because direct libidinal fulfilment comes in the way of efficient work. For Freud, as we may already know, human beings "come together", i.e., live in society and work cooperatively, first because they are forced to do so by economic necessity and second because they want to do so to acquire their sexual objects. Freud puts it clearly in his seminal work Civilization and Its Discontents: "The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work which was created by external necessity, and the power of love, which made the man unwilling to be deprived of his sexual object...."15 The strong proviso that I want to add to what Freud claims is that the need to rechannel libidinal energies into productive work should clearly pronounce the centrality of cooperation. Unless cooperation is factored in in the equation, as we can see in the way in which the people in Sitio Pinayun-an organized community work, progress in civilization is hardly attained.

¹⁵ See Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, 38.

I also found out that for the elderly people in the remote village of Sitio Pinayun-an, the notion of work plays a decisive role in the formation of their selfhood as it serves as the primary means for the satisfaction of their basic needs. Needless to say, work in this remote community is difficult because it is mostly manual work, but the elderly people believe that's the way it is. They have to work in order for them to become economically independent and promote the common good. In fact, Joel Carreon, one of the important elders in the community, said that if one does not work hard. she has nothing to eat and, therefore, she will not survive. He also said that any progress in the community depends largely on cooperation. When asked a follow up question as to how the notion of work contributed in their development as human beings, Joel said, "Dili man ta pareha ug manok na igo ra mosuroy para makakaon. Ang tao dapat maghago, unya kun makakaon pinaagi sa paghago, makabaton siya ug katagbawan." (We are not like chickens that simply roam around to feed themselves. The individual should labor hard, and if she is able to feed herself through hard labor, she attains self-satisfaction.) Joel adds, "Garbo usab kanimo na napakaon nimo imong pamilya sa matarong na paagi." (One feels proud that she is able to feed her family through a morally good and lawful means.)

Magdela Amper, another elder in the community, echoes Joel's view on work. Magdela said that (hard) work is important, especially in their community where food is not readily available. She said, "Kakugi gyud ang sekreto para mabuhi. Pinaagi sa kakugi, dunay kami magasto sa matag Domingo." (Hard work is the secret to survival. Through hard work, we have something to spend every Sunday.) It is important to note here that the people in Sitio Pinayun-an usually go down to the municipal center to sell their farm products and in turn purchase goods that are not available in the mountain on a weekly basis, especially during Sundays. Magdela's case indeed shows that women in the community contribute significantly to familial and community development as they do not only attend to household chores but also work with their husbands in their *baol* or their (traditional) farm.

Now, what we can draw from this indigenous notion of work is that work, as we learned from Hegel and Marx, remains the very instrument for the development of selfhood and progress in civilization. As we can observe, the elderly people in Sitio Pinayun-an cannot afford, in the Freudian sense, to grant immediate satisfaction to their sexual desires and be unmindful of its social implications. In other words. they cannot afford not to work for the good of their families and the development of the community. Sitio Pinayun-an may not be as progressive as other communities in Negros Oriental, in fact it remains a backward community when viewed from the vantage point of Western civilization, but at least with the kind of work attitude and consumption habit that the people in Sitio Pinayun-an displayed, we can rightly say that they have attained a kind of progress that is specific to their own community.

What we can also observe in the way the elderly people in Sitio Pinayun-an organize work is that they did not display a type of work attitude that is reminiscent of capitalist values, that is, a work attitude tied to consumerism. My contention is that because they work mainly for the satisfaction of their basic needs, their consumption habit is directly antithetical to the capitalist-driven consumerism. As a matter of fact, the people in Sitio Pinayun-an consume only what is necessary and harvest what is enough. This is indeed one of the good aspects of the consumption habit that the people in this remote community display. As Antero said, "Dili gyud mopalit ug dili kinahanglan kai iasa man na. Kun mopalit ta ana, dugang lang na siya sa kahago". (We should not buy unnecessary things because they are worthless. If we buy those things, they will only add to our toil.) This means that for the elderly people in this remote village, if consumption is geared toward unnecessary (thus false) things, work loses its liberating nature, as the primary means

to the realization of selfhood-work now becomes a commodity which only perpetuates and propels the capitalist agenda.

This is all the more interesting when we think of how this practice directly impacts on the environment in terms of the principle of conservation and preservation. Because what is taken from the environment amounts to nothing but a very insignificant amount compared to the entire resources the environment offers, this practice puts only little strain on the environment, thus allowing the latter to rejuvenate itself in a perfectly natural way. Indeed, I know nothing in the history of civilization a more sustainable way of preserving and conserving the environment than the indigenous way of doing it. The forest resources in Sitio Pinayun-an may not be as rich as the ones found in other localities, but what I observed is that the ecosystem in this community remains intact. Again, I argue that the work attitude and consumption habit of the people in this community have contributed significantly to the preservation and conservation of their environment.

Conclusion

What this brief presentation of the philosophy of work (and consumption habit) of the elderly people in Sitio Pinayun-an has shown to us is that there is another way of organizing work, of behaving and consuming, one that does not necessarily depend on a kind of system that promotes destruction in the name of progress. It also has shown to us that this way of living promotes peace, solidarity, and being one with nature, a way of living that is structurally inconceivable at the center of the global system. Their attitude toward work and their consumption habit which continue to be informed by the cooperative values of the precolonial and pre-capitalist Philippine society, show that they are capable of demonstrating liberating tendencies within the established society. If given the chance, they could be one of those social groups who can enlighten other portions of the population. Indeed, as we can see, this traditional, indigenous work ethic can be viewed as one of the rich sources of "social hope" as it challenges the modern idea of work promoted under the aegis of capitalist-driven globalization.

However, one may surmise that the penetration of the forces of globalization, such as consumerism, into Sitio Pinayun-an may have sounded the death knell for this old culture and wisdom. In fact, we can observe the gradual vet incessant formalization and commodification of work in the community. For example, in my casual conversation with some of the youth in the community, I learned that they began to entertain the idea of joining the labor market. Poverty could have been the main reason for this, but it could not be denied that they have been enticed by what the consumer society offers, e.g., the possibility of owning a cellphone and other gadgets. Of course, there are benefits of globalization and they should be accessible to all on an equitable basis. Only, the risk that we could foresee here is the possibility of the displacement of such old culture and wisdom by the ones that the capitalist-driven globalization harbors. But this is only so if the people in Sitio Pinayun-an sacrifice their old culture and wisdom in the name of "progress" promoted under the aegis of capitalist-driven globalization. The least that the people in Sitio Pinayun-an can do is preserve their cultural practices, especially the cooperative nature of their work. In this way, they may continue to labor together voluntarily and live responsibly and peacefully in common with each other while at the same time welcoming the positive promises of globalization.

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