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Source: *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, May 2001, Vol. 24, No. 1 (May 2001), pp. 1-12

Published by: American Anthropological Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24497910>

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The Paradox of Participation: Civil Society and Democracy in Chile

Civil Society

Civil society has become a cornerstone concept both for those managing transitions to democracy and those studying them. The term's recent revival has been attributed to the political and social transformations of countries in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 80s.¹ Opposition intellectuals and activists in Eastern Europe argued that because totalitarian regimes operated by crushing independent organizations and controlling the economy, creating a vibrant civil society outside the influence of the state was the essential task for moving from communism to democracy and a free market economy (Fedorowicz 1990). Later, the discourse circulated to places such as China, where "many...reformers and dissidents of the 1980s... saw themselves ... as building a civil society, a realm of social organization and activity not directly under state control" (Calhoun 1994:195). Similarly, amid dictatorships in Latin America—including Chile, the focus of this article—"the resurrection of civil society" (Oxhorn 1995:15) appeared to open the possibility of freeing citizens from state dominance, and possibly overthrowing military rule.

The celebratory cast of civil society in these political contexts is paralleled in academic debates, where scholars have made the analytic concept into a normative ideal. Maxwell Owusu, an anthropologist who has consulted for a government-appointed committee working to create Ghana's new constitution (1997:126), sees the "revival and proliferation of activist development oriented civic organizations and mutual-aid societies based on village, town, ethnic, family membership, and similar affiliations" (1995:158) as integral to a "grassroots participatory democracy" that could become a model for other African countries. In the United States and western Europe, civil society has been heralded as a key component of democracy by scholars who for the most part have lamented its decline (see, for example, Putnam 2000, who uses the term "social capital").

While ideals of "grassroots participatory democracy" and liberation from oppressive state rule have undeniable appeal, the concept of civil society as it is currently used merits far greater scrutiny. Connected to terms such as "good governance," "empowerment," "partnerships," and "participation," the idea of civil society has been integrated into the policies of international lending organizations. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), for example, sees itself as a "catalyst for civil society participation" and has developed a "State and Civil Society Division" that has "designed a program to strengthen civil society and mainstream CSOs (civil society organizations) into IDB development projects." A recent publication states:

Although the term "civil society" is relatively new to the Bank, the institution has pioneered in making loans, grants and technical assistance to the citizens' organizations which constitute civil or service institutions. Small projects, micro-enterprise activities, and more recently the Multilateral Investment Fund have

provided grants and seed money directly to civil society organizations (CSOs). To fulfill the 1994 Eighth Replenishment's mandate to reduce poverty, improve the accountability and effectiveness of governments, and preserve the natural environment, the Bank will find civil society to be an able partner.²

Two primary purposes appear to underlie this strategy. First, by soliciting citizens' and organizations' investment in policies, the programs reduce protest against structural adjustment policies. Verónica Schild (1998:104-5) has indicated that the purpose of social investment funds such as Chile's FOSIS (Solidarity and Social Investment Fund) is to

soften the extreme social effects of structural adjustment policies, and of the neoliberal development model more generally. The goal of these projects is to help the poor and marginalized access the market by financing small social and economic infrastructure programs. Hence they represent a sort of 'social adjustment' strategy that, as the World Bank readily admits, are politically motivated because they seek to guarantee political support for neoliberal economic reforms.

Such projects make the poor into entrepreneurs and thus invest them in capitalism by engaging them in micro-enterprises and other small business ventures.³

Coordinators of some civil society groups have themselves said that their organizations should lend support to transnational agencies and governmental policies. The director of Corporación PARTICIPA, a Chilean organization that promotes civic education about democracy, reflected on how civil society organizations could contribute to the international Summit of the Americas scheduled for April 1998. She suggested that "civil society can make constructive contributions to the governments participating in the ... Summit *so that the agreements made will have the backing of the citizenry and therefore guarantee social order and the maintenance of democracy*"⁴ (emphasis added). Although the term "civil society" is conventionally used to indicate that groups are outside the power of the state, the kinds of relationships generated when national governments and international lending agencies make community groups part of their strategies mean that organizations are more likely to facilitate than critique donors' and governments' practices.

Civil society organizations serve as more than legitimating and demobilizing mechanisms for international lending institutions and governments; they are also used to deliver services that, before structural adjustment policies, were provided by the welfare state. In a thoughtful essay exploring why international aid organizations have recently focused so much attention on civil society, authors from the North-South Institute note that "the role of the state is being revised through the dismantling of state-provided services."⁵ The authors quote Bruce Schearer as saying "As government budgets, staff and foreign aid resources have shrunk or, in many cases, failed to materialize, NGOs have sprung up to fill the gap in supply of services, materials, technology, training, credit and communication with rural villagers and urban slum dweller." The authors continue,

Civil society organizations are seen not only as more effective, credible and equitable agents, they are also to become *replacement agents, filling in the ranks left by states and by donors alike*. Indeed, in certain countries, the explicit instal-

lation of an 'autonomous civil society' has been part of the donors' exit strategies⁶ (first emphasis in the original; second emphasis added).

This use of civil society organizations to substitute for lending institutions and national governments in providing services is echoed in the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) description of its 1995 "New Partnerships Initiative,"⁷ which it describes as "... strategic partnering and the *active engagement of civil society ... to bolster the ability of local communities to play a lead role in their own development*" (emphasis added).

USAID defines "local empowerment"—what in Chile in the early 1990s was often called "participation"—as "citizens working together to solve their own problems and build their own future." In this process, "there is growing interest in the 'privatization' of public functions at the local level in which a *reoriented public sector facilitates business and civil society provision of local services*" (emphasis added). The state, that is, coordinates local efforts by the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and grassroots community groups to provide social services. From USAID's perspective, these projects of "local community involvement" are aimed at "breaking the cycle of dependence on development assistance" and allowing donor agencies to create "exit strategies." In these instances, community groups' "participation" in providing services reduces expenditures of public funds.

In his introduction to *The Foucault Effect*, Colin Gordon (1991:45) considers the idea that the state might have a new role of redistributing tasks once performed by the welfare state. Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, he describes the state as "distributing the disciplines of the competitive world market throughout the interstices of the social body."⁸ The pressure of the global economy, which in neoliberal economics has privatized formerly public services, puts the onus on individuals and citizens' groups to fill the gap. Retreating from the provision of public services, the state does not cease all involvement. Rather, in its reinvented role, the state assigns the tasks and mediates disputes over expenditure. In Colin Gordon's words, "[t]he state presents itself as the referee in an ongoing transaction in which one partner strives to enhance the value of his or her life, while another endeavors to economize on the cost of that life" (ibid.).

When the state delegates formerly public sector functions to citizens' groups, the supposedly neat division between state and civil society breaks down (see also Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998:18). The contracting out of services to community groups calls into question the degree to which organizations can make claims on a purportedly separate state. If the responsibility for providing community services rests on civic groups themselves, then to whom might social movements direct demands?

For the Chilean community groups that are the subject of this article, the way participation was framed in the 1990s raised related questions. How could leaders hold the government accountable if they were providing services under its auspices? Why should people who for the most part lacked secure jobs offer their labor for free? And what would happen to urban social movements if they were organized not around local interests but around the budgetary and management needs of the government? In addition to those questions we might ask: how might participation simultaneously operate as a motivating force and a mode of control—a form of governmentality—characteristic of democracy amid neoliberal economics in countries

such as Chile? And what, if any, forms of resistance have developed to respond to this form of power?

The delegating of formerly public services to citizens' groups involves not only an economic component, but a cultural one as well. Here, in another role, states produce the narratives and cultural frameworks that motivate citizen activity. In the case described in this article, Chilean government officials offer citizens the opportunity to "participate" in democracy by cleaning up garbage dumps in their neighborhood. At first blush, participation—like the term "empowerment"—appears to be a fundamental component of democracy, and one of its most rewarding aspects. It has been touted as indicative of an active civil society and a manifestation of citizens' involvement in their world. More than polling or elections, which involve citizens in the political system but which may not generate personal satisfaction, participation in neighborhood activities allows citizens to reap meaning and a sense of gratification from knowing that they are helping their community through difficult times. After years of living under an authoritarian regime that repressed neighborhood groups, for example, many Chileans were pleased that the post-dictatorship elected government was encouraging citizens to be active in their communities. It is this double phenomenon—that participation offered a sense of meaning to citizens at the same time as it limited avenues through which they could act—that obliges us to examine the discourse with a critical eye. To use Foucauldian terminology, through the discourses and activities of participation and civil society, self-regulating subjects are created. These subjects will volunteer their time and energy in the name of democracy and citizenship but not challenge the state and its policies. Significantly, under the guise of supporting civil society, a democratic government may actually stifle a civil society and social movements that thrived more powerfully in the fight against authoritarian rule.

As the discourse and practices of civil society and participation signify new forms of power at the intersection of global capitalism and political democracy, social movements and community groups have begun to develop forms of resistance, while at the same time being challenged by a variety of actors in their own neighborhoods. Some organizations in the Santiago *población* (shantytown) La Bandera where fieldwork for this essay was done, for example, sought to reclaim the word "participation" for their own purposes. They insisted that participation meant involvement in decision making as well as implementing programs, and that it meant holding the government accountable for public services more than providing services for themselves. These groups were contested by other residents who agreed with public officials that in a time of limited resources, when government "could only do so much," citizens should take direct action to improve conditions in the *población*.

The next section of this article details struggles over garbage dumps as they played out in the early 1990s in the Santiago *población* La Bandera. Specifically, it analyzes the debates about citizen responsibility, participation, and democracy that emerged at a public assembly (*precabildo*) in July of 1991, just after the transition to political democracy. The article concludes by linking the Chilean case back to international discourses and proposes a critical analysis of the uses of the concept "civil society" amid contemporary free market democracies.

Participation in Chile

In 1990, Chile underwent a formal transition from a military dictatorship that had lasted for seventeen years to a political democracy in which a president was chosen through elections. The national Congress, which had been closed by the military government, was reopened. One

of the most striking effects of this regime change was the demobilization of social movements. While there had been active protests against the dictatorship, in the first years of political democracy many community organizations shut down and citizens were said to have “returned to their houses.” This decline in organized activity was especially notable in the Santiago *población* La Bandera, which had a history of and a reputation for collective action.

In this context of immediate post-dictatorship political democracy, a pair of public assemblies were held in July of 1991 in San Ramón, the municipality in which La Bandera is located. Organized by the Unión Comunal, the coordinating body of local neighborhood councils in the district, the purported purpose of the assemblies was to identify problems and work toward solutions. The first meeting, a *precabildo*, was designed as a forum in which community groups could place a set of issues on the agenda. In addition to responses from public officials at that assembly, further consideration of the themes would occur at the subsequent meeting, the *cabildo*. To achieve these goals, community groups were asked to identify problems, and public officials, including cabinet members, municipal officers, and elected representatives, were asked to attend and respond.

One of the topics raised at the *precabildo* was the existence of garbage dumps in the *población*. Located on sites that were officially public land, fields of trash had become a focus of heightened concern in 1991 due to the potential spread of cholera in Chile, following outbreaks in other Latin American countries including neighboring Peru. At the assembly, speakers from one community organization, a grassroots health group named Llaretta, acknowledged that the national government had distributed educational material explaining how individuals and families could avoid contracting cholera by carefully preserving their personal hygiene. But, the group insisted, despite the best efforts of individuals, the disease could still be spread through accumulated trash. Citing legislation indicating that cleanliness of public property was the responsibility of the municipal government, and, failing that, of the Ministry of Health, Llaretta’s members held that government offices should take responsibility for cleaning up littered fields.

In response to these and other demands at the assembly, which implied that officials were not providing adequate public services in the district, the congressional representative from the area, a member of the ruling Christian Democrat party, spoke. He defended the government’s progress, saying that in its short time in office it had improved health, education, and housing systems left in ruins by the military regime. In this regard, he was affirming that the state had a role, however limited, in providing public services, and used the elected government’s record to contrast democracy with military rule.

But after outlining the government’s successes to date, he proceeded to speak about the meaning of participation and the role of citizens in the new political system. “What is lacking here is knowledge of how to operate in democracy,” he told the audience. “It is not the state [that is responsible for solving these problems]. ... Everyone should participate. When it comes to garbage, and pavement, you are the ones who are going to propose the solutions and establish the projects. It is the very *poblador* organizations that are going to execute them.” In contrast to the practice of making demands and stating grievances, he was saying, residents grouped into social organizations should be developing and implementing solutions.

The type of organization the congressman advocated was rooted in the preoccupations of Chile's Concertación government in the early 1990s. At the time, it was somewhat ironic that the Concertación supported the ongoing existence of social organizations at all, given that grassroots mobilization had been central to the protests against the military regime. For the sake of stability, governability, and consensus—all stated interests of the elected government—the decline of militant social organizations in the first years of democracy could be considered an advantageous state of affairs.

Nonetheless, during the first years of political democracy, there was also an effort by government officials to convert grassroots community groups into permanent fixtures of the economy. In their new incarnation, popular organizations would play two primary roles. First, the groups could become profit-generating enterprises. This was key to an economic development strategy that sought to diminish poverty by creating small businesses in poor neighborhoods so that families could increase their incomes by producing and selling goods. In this framework, popular craft workshops would put their art up for sale, social organizations would become micro-enterprises, and collective kitchens would become for-profit restaurants. In an age of limited income transfers to poor families, the cultivation of local businesses was expected to cut the levels of poverty.

The conversion of social organizations into micro-enterprises had political implications as well. Grassroots groups that had once mobilized against the regime would now be dedicated to generating income, not expressing protest. The training they received would focus on developing technical skills, not building political consciousness. The changes in organizational purpose also had cultural ramifications that further diminished local organizing. Micro-enterprises would inculcate an entrepreneurial spirit appropriate to a neoliberal economy. While some saw this as a positive outcome, others worried that an individualist and competitive culture would replace the ethic of solidarity cultivated during the anti-dictatorship struggle (see, e.g., Leiva 1998). As people worked to increase their own income rather than benefit their community at large, they would begin to envision their neighbors not as a support network with a common set of interests and a shared identity, but as competitors in the market place. Finally, micro-enterprises presented logistical obstacles to collective action: women and men who put long hours into small businesses would have little time to attend community meetings. As grassroots organizations became micro-enterprises in a free market system, their capacity to exert pressure on the state could be expected to decline.

The second role that Concertación politicians envisioned for community organizations was as extensions of government services. In a time of government downsizing, this was an important cost-cutting measure for the state. If volunteers and community organizations became auxiliaries of the health clinics, the state could maintain or even expand service without raising payrolls. When the health clinics were short on staff, for example, health groups could fulfill functions like providing child care, distributing subsidized milk, or reminding residents to go for preventive health checkups. Grassroots groups that had been created for survival amid the poverty generated by neoliberalism, and community organizations that had been networked in a struggle against the dictatorship, could become permanent vehicles for delivering social services at a time when the state claimed it could “only do so much” because of limited public resources.

It was this second role for social organizations that the congressman referred to when he suggested that neighborhood organizations coordinate paving the roads and cleaning the garbage dumps. Rather than call upon the state to solve problems, he was saying, community groups should do it themselves. What was most notable about his speech was that the focus was not on economics. Although it was mainly to cut costs that the organizations would be encouraged to operate, he framed the issue in the much more meaningful and attractive terms of “democracy” and “participation” when he told those assembled at the *precabildo* that the government could not be expected to solve the people’s problems *in democracy*. In this context, the reduced role of the state was framed as integral to the democratic political system itself. And democracy was, of course, something residents of La Bandera would want to support, not undermine. Similarly, by invoking the term “participation,” the congressman was referencing an idea dear to those who considered the deepening of democracy to involve an increase in citizens’ involvement. After a decade and a half in which social organizations had been repressed, the prospect of a government official welcoming citizens to participate sounded, to some, like a very appealing idea.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its appeal, this use of the term “participation” presented community groups who were critical of the status quo with a dilemma in the post-dictatorship period. Survival issues such as hunger and inadequate housing were still very prominent in La Bandera of the 1990s. For this reason, leaders wanted to preserve and reactivate popular organizations. Yet the government’s welcoming attitude toward organizations created new dangers. Rather than repression, the groups risked absorption by a state that was asking them to conform to its own objectives and organizational structure. Some health groups saw these invitations to “participate” as an attempt by the government to appropriate popular economic organizations for its own ends. They became acutely aware that in delivering health services, they would be providing free labor, thereby enabling the state to continue refusing to meet its obligations for financing health care. They held that in a time when many residents were unemployed, the state should hire paid workers at the clinics rather than rely on volunteers. The role of social organizations, in their view, was to hold the government accountable for assuring that their rights to health were met. For this reason, action needed to be directed not only to daily survival, but toward keeping social organizations autonomous and toward pressuring the state to meet social demands. The use of social organizations by the state became one of the central issues that some of La Bandera’s community groups dedicated themselves to analyzing and resisting in the new political period.

The critique of the government’s use of the concept of participation was articulated by *poblador* community leaders at a forum in 1994. One leader from a grassroots health group outside of La Bandera recounted her organization’s experience when members were asked to participate in a Ministry of Health campaign to encourage women to get PAP smears. The group was asked to invite women to have the exam, to identify a place where the exam could be done, and to make lunch for the staff performing the exams. The health promoter contrasted her group’s concept of participation with the idea of participation implicit in these requests, saying “This is not the participation that we want. What we want is to participate in all aspects of the campaign: in developing the campaign, the evaluation, and not only be[ing] the implementors of the campaign.” For her, participation meant not just executing decisions made by professionals, but rather setting priorities, outlining strategies, and evaluating outcomes.

On the surface, the health promoter's definition of participation sounded similar to the congressman's agenda at the *precabildo*. He had called on popular organizations to be involved in all aspects of a campaign. "You are the ones who are going to propose the solutions and establish the projects," he said, implying that community groups would do the thought work involved in designing campaigns. "It is the very *poblador* organizations that are going to execute them." But community leaders, reflecting on their own experience with government-initiated campaigns in the 1990s, held that the roles they were asked to play were in practice much more constrained. They were asked only to implement—that is, to do the daily labor of—projects designed by experts and officials.

In the perspective of a community leader from another neighborhood in Santiago, such a use of social organizations constituted not participation, but rather "non-participation." At the 1994 meeting he stated:

Today there is less participation, less organization, less mobilization. ... The system functions precisely by way of this. They offer us work on issues defined from outside. From the state, from the municipality, from the health clinics. Already designed. Therefore, we are ... executors of the policy made on our backs. But this clearly is not participation. If we want to be subjects [i.e. have agency], that implies having participation in the elaboration of these policies and not only in executing them, and making the cost of labor cheaper.

The concept of participation that these leaders laid out, in which they envisioned their role as one of analyzing situations, prioritizing issues, and making decisions about public policy, was consistent with their many years of engaging in political analysis, setting agendas in their communities, and giving and receiving education. These experiences had occurred as part of urban social movements and through popular education provided by non-governmental organizations.

In contrast, by rejecting popular efforts to hold public officials accountable for enforcing laws and protecting people's rights, the congressional representative was advancing a notion of participation that fit a limited and pacted democracy in a neoliberal era. Because they conceptualized the Concertación government as a popular victory over authoritarianism, and because they had been elected into office, Chilean politicians in the early 1990s considered their actions to be by definition democratic and viewed themselves as authentically representing the Chilean people. In this framework, the role of community groups and citizens was to support the government, lest in contesting it they destabilize democracy and risk the return of military rule.

And, indeed, the congressman's position on garbage dumps made sense to some residents and organized groups in La Bandera. For example, on weekends boy scouts and girl scouts could be seen picking up garbage piece by piece from the field next to an elementary school. Implicit in their actions was an acceptance of the idea that citizens should not contest the government, but rather should support it, and should solve public problems themselves in the *población*.

Because of the attractiveness of this philosophy to some residents, what was at stake for community leaders who were critical of government policy in the early 1990s was the meaning

of the term “participation” that would stick in public discourse. They sought to advance a concept of participation that allowed community organizations to pressure the state and that positioned *pobladores* as central to setting agendas and designing programs rather than implementing campaigns designed by professionals. The use of the single term “participation” in two very different political ideologies constituted one of the most slippery symbolic puzzles in Chile in the early 1990s. Reframing the issue and asserting a different role for community organizations than the one envisioned by the state was one of the key challenges to community leaders in the post-dictatorship period.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by leaders of community organizations in La Bandera in the first years of an elected national government highlight the contradictions in the term “participation” and its counterpart “civil society” as they are used in contemporary free market democracies. In the historical context of struggles against totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and other parts of the world in the 1970s and 1980s, the term “civil society” suggested autonomy from and leverage against an oppressive state, and a degree of agency on the part of social movements fighting for democracy. In the 1990s, however, “civil society” and terms like “empowerment,” “partnerships,” and “participation” have taken on a quite different significance. Deployed by governments and international financial institutions as tools for governing, the use of such terms allows states to manage citizen action in ways that fit governmental agendas and undermine social movement activity, while supporting structural adjustment programs and furthering privatization. As shown in this article, the term “participation” retained a positive meaning for community groups with a critical perspective in Chile, but only where the term meant that social movements and community organizations determined the conditions of their own action; took a lead role in analyzing, prioritizing, and making policy decisions; and were able to hold the state accountable to collective demands. Where the government and lending institutions try to initiate and manage the activity of social organizations, the term “participation” has a very different meaning. Seen as a governing strategy, it became something that community groups sought to resist.

In light of the ways in which ideas such as empowerment, community involvement, and in the case of Chile, participation, have been used by governments and international financial institutions with the goal of supporting neoliberal economic reforms and reducing citizen protest against public policy, the celebratory cast to the concept in academic literature and activist circles needs to be critically reconsidered. This needs to be done as part of a more comprehensive anthropological and ethnographic examination of the practices, discourses, and power dynamics of contemporary democracies.

Notes

This article is based on research conducted in Santiago, Chile, in 1990–92, as well as in subsequent visits throughout the 1990s. I thank the editors of *PoLAR*, Susan Hirsch and Susan Coutin, and an anonymous reviewer, for their comments. Susan Hyatt and Fernando Armstrong were helpful in clarifying various ideas for this article; Laura Grindstaff, Ayako Kano, and Gordon Whitman provided very useful commentary and advice. My greatest appreciation goes to the staff of Educación Popular en Salud (EPES) and the members of Grupo de

Salud Poblacional Llaretá, with whom I did research. Funding for the overall research project came from a Jacob Javits Fellowship, a Mellon Foundation Dissertation Completion Fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Grant, various grants from Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania Research Foundation, and the Trustees' Council of Penn Women. Arguments considered here are developed at greater length in my book *Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-Dictatorship Chile* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

1. For historical overviews of the use of the term "civil society," see Ehrenberg 1999, Ferguson 1995 [1767], Keane 1998, Cohen and Arato 1997, Hall 1995; for a critical view of the way the history of the concept has been told, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; for ethnography of its contemporary uses, see Hann and Dunn 1996, Comaroff and Comaroff, eds. 1999, and the special issue of *PoLAR*, 20(1), 1997.
2. "The IDB as a Catalyst for Civil Society Participation." <http://apu.rcp.net.pe/test/iadb/s-socciv.txt:1>.
3. For an analysis of social investment funds, see Stahl 1996. For an account of Chile's "Growth with Equity" strategy specifically, see Vergara 1996.
4. <http://americas.fiu.edu/Chile/semminar/semminar.html:2>.
5. Draft working paper by the North-South Institute entitled "Civil Society: The Development Solution?" <http://www.nsi-ins.ca/civil/csdp01.html>.
6. <http://www.nsi-ins.ca/civvil/csdp01b.html>.
7. "USAID's New Partnerships Initiative (NPI) was launched by Vice President Albert Gore in March 1995 at the World Summit for Social Development." The quotes are from the document "NPI Resource Guide, New Partnerships Initiative: A Strategic Approach to Development Partnering, NPI Executive Summary," found in 1998 on the world wide web.
8. For other scholars who use the concept of governmentality as a spring board for analyzing power effects enacted through the discourse of civil society, see Cruikshank 1999, Hyatt 1997, Rose 1996, Slater 1998, and Yúdice 1998.

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