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Disciplining the Discpline: International Relations as a Mature Science

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The discipline of International Relations seems to becoming increasingly plural. Current textbooks on theories of International Relations usually discuss eight (Viotti and Kauppi, 2009), nine (Dunne, et al. 2007) or even eleven different theories (Burchill, et al. 2009). The theoretical diversity within the International Relations discipline is no different from the plurality found in other social sciences. According to the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn, the social sciences are in a so called 'pre-mature' state (Kuhn, 1970). Whereas the natural sciences are dominated by one paradigm, one single framework for conducting science, Kuhn argued that the social sciences instead know various paradigms and frameworks (Kuhn, 1970). This account of the social sciences seems to stroke with the theoretical diversity found in the International Relations discipline and it is indeed how the discipline is often portrayed. Ever since the so called 'interparadigm debate' in the 1970s and 1980s, the discipline is perceived to be characterised by a multiple of paradigms (Kurki and Wight, 2007).

However, in this essay I argue that the discipline of International Relations is more 'mature' than is often believed. Instead of being composed by various paradigms, the field of International Relations is dominated and characterised by the positivist paradigm. First of all, whereas there may be eight to eleven theories of International Relations, it should not be overlooked that there is a distinct hierarchy among them. Ever since the end of the so-called 'First-Debate', the discipline has been dominated by (Neo-) Realism and, to a lesser extent, (Neo)-Liberalism. Second, instead of forming two distinct paradigms, it is argued in this essay that these two mainstream approaches are guided by one single paradigm; the paradigm of positivism. It is further argued in this essay that the dominance of positivism is likely to continue. Even though a range of post-positivist theories have sprung up, leading some scholars to proclaim the 'post-positivist era' (Lapid, 1989), positivism is likely to remain dominant. First of all, the positivist paradigm has no serious competitor. Even though the post-positivist theories seem to be gaining more influence, they do not form a paradigm themselves and thereby fail to offer the secure foundations that the positivist paradigm offers. Afraid to end up in a situation where 'anything goes' (Feyerabend, 1975), many IR scholars remain faithful to the positivist paradigm (Campbell, D. 2007). Second, both positivist as well as post-positivist theorists, either consciously or not, take part in activities through which the dominance of the positivist framework is reinforced. While the positivist theorists have been especially effective in setting the standards for what counts as 'proper' science, the post-positivist approaches, through their 'theorizing about theories', ironically reinforce the same framework that they want to crack open.

It is not my intention in this essay to argue for a more tolerant and open discipline. I merely intend to unravel the false belief that the discipline is guided by several competing paradigms. Even though my sympathies lie with the post-positivist school I realise that there are many good reasons for adopting a single paradigm. To deny however, that the discipline is in fact dominated by a single paradigm gives students of International Relations a false sense of choice. More importantly, it diverts the attention away from the debate over what type of science International Relations may be (Kurki and Wight, 2007).

This essay starts with a brief history of the theoretical debates that have taken place in the International Relations discipline. In the second and main section of this essay it is argued that the 'paradigms' of IR are not as incommensurable as often claimed. In the last section it is explained why positivism will remain the dominant

paradigm. The conclusion then summarizes the main points made in this essay.

Theoretical Plurality

It is common to describe the history of the International Relations discipline in terms of four great 'debates'. During the 1940s the first debate took place between Idealism and Realism, with Realism eventually taking precedence. The second debate, between behaviouralism and traditionalism, took place during the 1950s-1960s (Waever, 1996). Behaviouralist scholars such as David Singer and Morton Kaplan argued against the traditional, more interpretive approach stating that progress was only possible if the IR discipline modeled itself on the natural sciences. It was after this debate that a general commitment to a positivist epistemology was established (Kurki and Wight, 2007). In the 1970s the so-called 'interparadigm debate' (Banks, 1985) took place between Realism, Pluralism (Liberalism), and Structuralism (Marxism). There was the general belief that these theories saw different realities, that in large part these theories were incommensurable. This is where Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigms was borrowed (Waever, 1996).

Mainly focusing on the history of the natural sciences, Kuhn (1970) believed that a science went through two separate phases. In the first phase, the so-called 'pre-paradigmatic' phase, no consensus exists on the appropriate framework for conducting science. Different theoretical approaches operate alongside one another without any one theory significantly pervailing over the others. In such periods, no actual progress in accumulating knowledge can be made (Kurki and Wight, 2007). Once a single framework (a paradigm) is adopted by the scientific community of the relevant discipline, science enters the period of 'maturity'. Within such a paradigm 'normal science' can be done. The paradigm prescribes the methods to be used, the instruments, the techniques, etc. More importantly, a paradigm produces the puzzles and questions on which to focus (Chalmers, 1999). Because everyone in the scientific community agrees on the methods and techniques to be used, findings can be compared and progress can be made (Kurki and Wight, 2007). A science may go through different phases of paradigm shifts An example of such as paradigm shift is the transition between Ptolemaic and Copernican astronomy or the transition between Aristotelian and Newtonian dynamics (Kuhn, 1970, p10). Such a shift is not a mere adaption or addition to the previous paradigm however. Different paradigms are said to be incommensurable; those working within one paradigm are living in a different world from those that work within the other (Chalmers, 1999). "Practising in different worlds, the two group of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction" (Kuhn, 1970, p150). In the next section I elaborate a bit more on the issue of incommensurability, but for now it suffices to say the the incommensurability thesis is at the heart of the act of distinguishing between different paradigms.

Even though Kuhn's theory of paradigms was never really meant for the social sciences, the International Relations discipline gladly adopted its ideas. As said, the three approaches to International Relations of the 1970s, Realism, Pluralism, and Structuralism, were all believed to be incommensurable. It was therefore that they were, and still are, referred to as distinct 'paradigms'. In contrast to the first debate, after which Realism clearly preceded over Idealism, and the second debate, after which a behaviouralist approach was favoured against a more hermeneutic approach, the third debate was increasingly seen as a debate without a 'winner'. A plurality had emerged that the discipline simply had to deal with (Waever, 1996). Indeed, Kuhn seemed to have been correct when he stated that the social sciences would always be characterised by an inability to achieve paradigmatic consensus (Kuhn, 1970). In this essay however, it is argued that the discipline of International Relations, for better or worse, proved to be well capable of adopting a single paradigm. The main theories of International Relations had reached paradigmatic consensus after they had each adopted a positivist view of science. The behaviouralist strive for a discipline in which progress could be achieved effectively made way for the adoption of a common framework, a single paradigm. It is ironic therefore that it was actually during the 'interparadigm debate' that the discipline of International Relations was at its most 'mature'.

Important to note is that the broad consensus on positivist principles not only effectively established the new guiding rules for conducting science within the discipline of International Relations, it also ended the debate, at least for a while, on what type of science IR might be. In fact, such was the consensus that positivism came to be seen as synonymous with science (Kurki and Wight, 2007). It is not hard imagine that such a move has an important 'doorkeeping' function: every theory that is oriented by an 'interpretive', 'hermeneutic', or 'historical' approach is by

this definition outside of the realm of science. To define an academic theory as non-scientific in turn has important consequences. Science is held in high regard in both the academic world as well as in everyday life and non-scientific theories are taken significantly less serious than scientific ones (Chalmers, 1999).

Only in the mid-1980s, during the fourth debate (a debate which is actually still taking place), did the paradigmatic consensus come under pressure. By some described as a debate between positivists and post-positivists (Lapid, 1989), and by others as a debate between rationalism and reflectivism (Keohane, 1988), the fourth debate essentially brought back the discussion over the nature of the social sciences (Kurki and Wight, 2007). Post-positivist theories such as Post-structuralism, Critical Theory, Feminism, and Post-Colonialism challenged the mainstream on their positivist vision of science, arguing that the epistemologies and methodologies of the natural sciences are not equally applicable to the social sciences (Smith, 1996). They further challenged the mainstream position that the IR discipline needs to be oriented by positivist principles for it to be called a science. Indeed, their rejection of positivism did not costitute a rejection of science (Kurki and Wight, 2007). Even though Post-positivist theories seem to be gaining more influence they are still on the 'margins of the field' (Keohane, 1988, p392), and we do not seem to be near 'the next stage' in International Relations Theory (Linklater, 1992).

In the next setion it is explained why the consensus on a positivist vision of science among the main theories of International Relations constituted a paradigmatic consensus. It is also explained why the third debate should have been termed as an 'intra-paradigm debate' rather than as an 'interparadigm debate'. In contradiction to what Kuhn had said about the social sciences, the discipline of International Relations proved to be well capable of adopting a single paradigm.

Different but commensurable

Even if we agree that the discipline is characterised by multiple paradigms, it is hard to perceive of the IR discipline as being in a 'pre-mature' state in which different theoretical approaches operate alongside one another without any one theory significantly prevailing over the others. For all its theoretical diversity, the discipline is highly dominated by (Neo-) Realism and, to a lesser extent, (Neo-) Liberalism. Not for nothing are these two theories referred to as the mainstream. Already during the 'inter-paradigm debate' Marxism took a secondary position (Waever, 1996). Since the 1970s its influence further decreased and its role as a legitimate alternative to the two mainstream theories has largely been taken over by Constructivism (Smith, Baylis, and Owens, 2008). In the meanwhile, post-positivist theories such as Critical Theory, Feminism, and Post-Structuralism still remain on the 'margins of the field' (Keohane, 1998, p 392). Thus, even if we accept the 'multiple paradigm thesis', we have to conclude that the discipline is dominated by two (Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism), arguably three (Constructivism), or four (Marxism) different paradigms. However, in this section I intend to show that, perhaps with the exception of Constructivism, these theories all belong to the same paradigm. It is argued that the portrayal of the discipline of International Relations as being dominated by various incommensurable paradigms either rests on the misunderstanding that different ontological assumptions necessarily lead to incommensurable theories or on a mistaken view of the notion of incommensurability itself.

To see that these competing theories are anything but competing 'paradigms', but rather are part of the same single positivist paradigm, we need to refer back to the incommensurability thesis that is at the heart of the issue. The incommensurability thesis holds that among different paradigms there is no common measure (Wight, 1996). From the last section we saw that Neo-Realism, Neo-Liberalism, and Marxism were perceived to form different paradigms because of their incommesnurability; they each saw a different world. In this section it is argued that these theories are hardly as incommensurable as often believed. Every theory is underpinned by specific assumptions about ontology, epistemology and methodology. It is assumed that on the basis of such particular assumptions different theorists may see different worlds (Kurki and Wight, 2007). There is no general agreement on what makes two theories incommensurable however. For Steve Smith (1992) for instance, it is the different ontological assumptions that make different theories incommensurable. For R.D. McKinlay and Richard Little (1986, p15) on the other hand, it is the different epistemological assumptions that cause two incommensurable theories to see a different world. In this essay I side with the last position.

At first sight it would seem that the discipline has adopted the view of Steve Smith. The 'inter-paradigm debate' in the 1970s was mainly centered around questions surrounding ontology (Waever, 1996). Epistemological questions were largely 'resolved' through the second debate and "all parties to the interparadigm debate accepted the validity of a broadly conceived positivist account of science" (Kurki and Wight, 2007, p14). Instead, disagreement existed mainly over the key level of analysis, with Realism emphasising the nation-state as the main actor in the international system, Liberalism stressing the importance of transnational- and non-state actors (i.e. transnational institutions, NGO's, multinational coorperations, etc), and Marxism focusing on the system (Rosenau, 1982). According to some scholars (such as Steve Smith), such basic ontological assumptions lead these theories to operate in self-reaffirming conceptions. Smith, Baylis, and Owens (2008), assert that Realism, Liberalism, Marxism and Constructivism "are not so much different views of the same world, but are instead four views of different worlds" (Smith, Baylis, and Owens, 2008, p7) Even though I do not share this view, and I will elaborate on my reasons shortly, such conception is indeed coherent with the incommensurability thesis. Whether one agrees or not, there seems to be a cogent argument for viewing the discipline as being characterised by several incommensurable paradigms.

However, the irony is that this is actually not the view adopted by the discipline. In fact, it is Smith who realised that "the discipline has adopted a simplistic version of the incommensurability thesis, one that implies that the three paradigms each explain part of reality" (Smith, 1992, p493). This is the position Colin Wight for instance takes when he criticises those who perceive of two incommensurable theories as speaking in different languages. Whereas I agree with Wight that the three 'paradigms' are not actually speaking in different languages, I believe this is the case exactly because these 'paradigms' are not incommensurable (and can therefore not be termed as separete paradigms). According to Wight incommensurability becomes only interesting when two theories clash on a common referent (Wight, 1996). Such as statement inhibits a oxymoron however, as incommensurability signifies the absence of exactly such a common referent or common measure. I would go even further than Smith and suggest that the discipline has not adopted a simplistic version of incommensurability but rather a mistaken one. Incommensurability does not simply signify a dichotomy, a difference, or a disagreement between two theories, it signifies a lack of a common measure.

The fact is that Neo-Realism, Neo-Liberalism, and Marxism are all operating in the same world, all speak the same language, and can all be assessed and compared on the common measure of positivism. To understand why it is differences or similarities in epistemological assumptions that determine whether two theories are incommensurable or not we need to get back to what a positivist vision of science actually entails. Smith (1996) outlines four basic positivist assumptions. The first is the belief that the epistemologies and methodologies of the natural sciences equally apply to the social sciences. The second is the assumption that the theorist or observer is able to make a distinction between facts and values. Thirdly, positivists belief that there are regularities and patterns in both the natural as well as the social world. The fourth assumption includes the belief that the only legitimate source of knowledge is empiricism or sensory experience (Smith, 1996, pp 16-17). Following from these assumptions is the belief that our theories and hypotheses can be tested against a real, external world. If this is so, and if our three 'paradigms' are all positivist theories, we find that such theories can be evaluated and assessed on their degree of correspondence to the 'real' world, the real world being the common referent that Wight was referring to. It needs to be noted that not all Realists and Liberals believe in a world completely independent from the observer. However, all positivists adhere to the instrumental function of knowledge (Kurki and Wight, 2007). If it is not the 'external' world that we can asses our theories on then at least we can asses them on their 'usefulness' or their ability to solve the questions posed within the positivist paradigm. In fact, such a position is often taken by the mainstream theorists themselves with Keohane and Nye indeed trying to test Pluralism and Realism against one another (Waever, 1996). Incommensurability however refers to the inability to judge by the same standard. Differences in ontological assumptions lead to different theoretical perspectives but they do not necessarily lead two different theories not to be commensurable (unless, as wel will see, such ontological assumptions lead to different epistemological assumptions). Even though their differences in ontological assumption lead them to different conclusions, their conclusions can be assessed by the same standard.

Therefore, what really makes two theories incommensurable is differences in epistemological assumptions. This why the positivist theories are incommensurable with the post-positivist theories. Because of their different views with regards to the nature of social sciences their theories can not be measured agains the same standard (McKinlay and

Little, 1986). Whereas (Neo-) Realism and (Neo-) Liberalism believe in an external world independent of the observer, Post-Structuralists and Critical Theorists believe that there is no such thing as an external world and instead believe that the observer always influences the world. Post-positivist theories and positivist theories almost literally see different worlds. Because of their empiricist vision, positivist theories do not concern themselves with 'unobservables' such as language, ideas, ideology and discourse, the key units of analysis for post-positivist theories. Why is this any different from Realists not 'seeing' NGOs and other transnational actors or Marxists not 'seeing' the nation-state? The difference is that, whilst the three 'paradigms' stress different key units of analysis, it does not mean that they do not acknowledge the importance of the units of analysis stressed by the other 'paradigms'. Even though Marx believed that the systems of production should be the main units of analysis, Marx nevertheless acknowledged the importance of the nation-state (Linklater, 2009). Likewise, many Neo-Realists, whilst still maintaining the nation-state as the main unit of analysis, begin to acknowledge the importance of NGO's, MNC's and international institutions (Buzan, Held, and McGrew, 1998). With regards to the unobservables however, positivist theorists do not even recognize the importance of language, discourse and ideas.

An important exception is 'coventional' Constructivism which is said to occupy the middle ground between the mainstream and the post-positivist theories. Both 'critical' as well as 'coventional' Constructivists stress the importance of ideas, norms, identity, ideology and other 'unobservables', but whilst the critical Constructivists have adopted a social/post-positivist epistemology the conventional Constructivists are wedded to a positivist tradition (Fierke, 2007). In other words, conventional Constructivists 'see' the same things as the post-positivist theories but make use of the epistemology used by the mainstream. Apparently different epistemological stances do not *necessarily* lead to different world views. I wish to contradict this view however. In my view it is impossible, or rather inconsistent, for a theory to have a social ontology on the one hand and have a positivist epistemology on the other; the two are mutually exclusive (Fierke, 2007). 'Conventional' Constructivists falsely imply that epistemology can be separated from ontology. First of all, an empiricist view of science, one of the most important features of positivism, excludes the key units of analysis of Constructivism. Second, and perhaps more important, a social ontology, rejecting the unity of the natural and social worlds, is in outright contrast with the naturalism of positivism. As Smith notes; "Just as epistemology is important in determining what can be accepted ontologically, so ontology affects what we accept epistemologically" (Smith, 1996, p18). Because of their social ontology therefore, Constructivists are not really part of the positivist paradigm. This does not mean however that 'conventional' Constructivism forms a different paradigm by itself, nor does it undermine the dominance of the positivist paradigm. The fact that conventional Constructivism gains relatively more attention than its more 'consistent' counterpart is in fact prove of the dominance of the positivist paradigm. By adopting a positivist epistemology, 'conventional' Constructivism has been 'accepted' by the mainstream and has gained more legitimacy (Fierke, 2007).

In this section it was argued that, perhaps with the exception of Constructivism, the mainstream theories of International Relations all belong to the same positivist paradigm. Differences in ontological assumptions lead to different theoretical perspectives but, contrary to what many scholars suggest, they do not necessarily lead two different theories to be incommensurable (unless, as we saw with Constructivism, such ontological assumptions (must) lead to different epistemological assumptions). In the next section of this essay it is explained why positivism is likely to remain the dominant paradigm in the academic discipline of International Relations. While the post-positivist theories have slowly increased their importance within the discipline, a paradigm shift from positivism to post-positivism is very unlikely.

Disciplining the discipline

It is not very likely that the discipline of International Relations will fall into a pre- or, perhaps more appropriate, a post-paradigmatic state in the near future. A 'post-positivist era' is, in contrast to what some may have predicted, indeed not in sight and the dominance of the positivist paradigm in the discipline of International Relations is very likely to continue.

Partly this has to do with the fact that the positivist paradigm has no serious competitor. Even though the post-positivist theories are actively seeking to undermine the positivist paradigm, they do not make up a paradigm themselves. In fact, the post-positivist theories can largely be seen as anti-paradigmatic. Rather than working within

a given framework, post-positivist theorists seek to "problemize answers, make strange what has become familiar, and reverse the process of construction in order to reveal how problematic are the taken-for-granted structures" (Lapid, Y. 1989, p242). According to post-structural scholar Richard Ashley (1981), scholars must not limit themselves to the questions posed within the paradigm, they must not limit themselves to simple instrumental usefulness (Ashley, R. 1981). The fact is however that working with a single paradigm has important advantages. Most importantly, the adoption of a single paradigm provides for a common measure. The consensus on a common framework establishes a means of assessing the validity of different theoretical conclusions. Without such common measure, one cannot distinguish between fact and opinion, between true and false. Post-positivism therefore not only threatens the validity of positivism, it threatens the secure foundations on which the IR discipline is based (Campbell, D. 2007). Afraid to end up in a situation where 'anything goes' (Feyerabend, 1975), many IR scholars remain faithful to the positivist paradigm (Campbell, D. 2007).

Another important reason for why the discipline of IR is likely to remain dominated by the positivist paradigm lies in the fact that academic disciplines fulfill very important 'doorkeeping' functions (Bleiker, 1997). As Cyntia Enloe (1996) well remarks, the discipline is in a constant process of "maintaining the margin where it currently is and the centre where it now is" (Enloe, 1996, p186). Academic disciplines are defined and given shape by, among others, university departments, academic journals, academics, and students. As long as journal criteria, university exams, and basic textbooks remain predisposed towards the mainstream theories in International Relations, the dominance of the positivist paradigm is strengthened (Bleiker, 1997). However, in the end it are the theorists themselves that play the most crucial role in defining the discipline. Ironically, it are not only the post-positivist theorists that tend to take part, either consciously or not, in the activity of a 'disciplining of the discipline' (Smith, 1992, p 491), an activity through which the original framework for conducting science in IR (i.e. the positivist framework) is reinforced. While the positivist theorists have been especially effective in fulfilling their doorkeeping role, the post-positivist approaches, through their 'theorizing about theories', ironically reinforce the same framework that they want to crack open.

An example of how the mainstream theorists have sought to ward off 'radical' influences is through their unwillingness to engage in a discussion with their post-positivist colleagues. Even though the 'fourth debate' is referred to as a debate, it is rather post-positivists criticising the mainstream theories. Besides labelling the critical approaches as 'meta-babble' (Wallace, 1996) or 'philosophical idealism' (Mearsheimer, 1994/1995), the mainstream theorists have not been particularly enthusiastic to reply to the criticism offered by Post-Structuralists, Feminists and Critical Theorists (Campbell, 2007). Another important manner in which the mainstream theorists have sought to protect the dominance of positivism is through actively encouraging the critical approaches to adopt a positivist or empirical research framework. Robert Keohane (1998) for instance called on the 'reflectivist school' to develop a clear empirical research program. Without such a research program the reflective approaches would remain invisible to the mainstream and the extent of contribution would remain marginal. The fact that *conventional* Constructivism has been 'accepted' by the mainstream theorists, and is thereby also better represented in the journals and basic IR textbooks than its more critical counterpart, reveals that such claims not only reflect an important reality but can prove to be quite influential.

It is not only the mainstream excluding the 'radical' theories however. The post-positivist theories themselves, unwillingly, contribute to the dominance of a single positivist paradigm. By limiting their efforts to critiquing the mainstream theories, post-positivist approaches ironically reinforce the same framework that they seek to challenge. Even though post-positivists may seek to 'make strange what has become familiar', with their focus and critique on the positivist paradigm, they are to a large extent guided by what happens within that positivist paradigm. For example, Ashley's (1988) double reading of the 'anarchy problematique', whilst providing us with alternative ways of thinking about the problem (if at all a problem), at the same time acknowledges and reinforces the importance of the problem for the discipline of International Relations. As Roland Bleiker well puts it: "By articulating critique in relation to arguments advanced by orthodox IR theory, the impact of critical voices remains confined within the larger discursive boundaries that were established through the initial framing of debates" (Bleiker, 1997, p58).

Conclusion

In this essay it was argued that the discipline of International Relations is more 'mature' than is often believed. The portrayal of the discipline of International Relations as being dominated by various incommensurable paradigms either rests on the misunderstanding that different ontological assumptions necessarily lead to incommensurable theories or on a mistaken view of the notion of incommensurability itself. In this essay it was shown that instead of being composed of various paradigms, the field of International Relations is dominated and characterised by the positivist paradigm. It was explained that whilst different ontological assumptions may lead to different theoretical conclusions, they do not necessarily lead two different theories to be incommensurable. Different epistemological assumptions on the other hand do lead two different theories to be incommensurable. That is why the postivist and post-positivist theories are incommensurable; they are incomparable and lack a common measure. It was also explained why positivism is likely to remain the dominant paradigm in the discipline of IR. First of all, the positivist paradigm has no serious competitor and only few scholars seem to look forward to a discipline without a paradigm. Second, both positivist as well as post-positivist theorists, either consciously or not, take part in activities through which the dominance of the positivist paradigm is reinforced The positivist theorists have been especially effective in warding off 'radical' influences, while the post-positivist approaches, by limiting their activities to critiquing the mainstream, ironically strengthen the same framework that they want to challenge.

The important question that remains is whether mainstream scholars are truly convinced of the positivist vision of science or are merely afraid to end up in a situation where 'anything goes'. If it turns out to be the latter, a discussion over whether a positivist vision of the social sciences is still valid can prove to be rather futile. IR scholars should first have a discussion over what kind of science they want the study of International Relations to be. There are many good reasons for holding on to a single paradigm and as K.J. Holsti (1985) remarked: "There is no automatic virtue in paradigmatic pluralism, as there might be in political faiths" (Holsti, 1985, pviii). To deny however, that the discipline is in fact dominated by a single paradigm gives students of International Relations a false sense of choice. In contradiction to what Kuhn had said about the social sciences, the discipline of International Relations proved to be well capable of adopting a single paradigm. The question is however, whether this was for better or for worse.

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