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Sociology, Basis for the Secondary-School Subject of Social Sciences

Abstract

This paper reformulates the question of 'sociology, who needs it' in two ways, The first question we address is that of the reason why the educational system itself did not come to sociology for help in their long quest for a clear-cut content of the subject. The second question is why sociology did not adopt the orphaned subject of social studies back in 1960.

The answer to the first question lies in the vulnerability of a subject that is dependent for its continued existence on the political leanings of the day. This led to a new goal for the subject almost every decade: from social education in the sixties and social and political education in the seventies, to a focus on citizenship education in the nineties. Although the objective was renamed on several occasions, the prescriptive viewpoint is recognizable in each. This perspective is difficult to reconcile with a social science content.

The answer to the second questions points towards Dutch social scientists with a strong focus on academic sociology and not for critical, policy or public sociology. This choice was also made in order to win the competition with psychologists and for the discipline to get rid of the poor image it had acquired in the 1960s. The new subject social sciences, with a strong focus on science made it possible for sociology to become the pillar of this new subject.

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Preface

The question this paper addresses is twofold. First, given the fact that sociology became the basis for social sciences¹, a new subject in secondary education, we wonder why the educational system did not come to sociology for help in their long quest for a clear-cut content of the subject. Secondly, we wonder why sociology did not adopt the subject earlier. This article provides an answer to these questions by characterising the role of sociology in the history of social studies², decade by decade.

1. History of social studies as a secondary school subject and the role of sociology in it³

In this section, based on a number of important milestones, we will describe the history of social studies as a subject taught in secondary schools in the Netherlands. We start in 1957, when the first requests were made to establish a subject like social studies. From here, we will sketch the subject's development in each of the following decades according to the objectives that prevailed during the respective periods and the role played by sociology and the sociologists – or sociological associations – at that time. As we will see, the goals pursued by social studies differ from one period to the next. Furthermore, those goals determine the role attributed to sociology in development of the subject's content, as this brief historical sketch shows.

1.1 The 1960s: modest role for sociology in the subject that had 'social education' as its goal

In 1957, for the first time a plea was made in the Dutch parliament to '*establish a proper and for these times*

1 *Social sciences* (plural) (Dutch: maatschappijwetenschappen): a secondary-school (elective) examination subject, a higher level of social studies.

2 *Social studies* (Dutch: maatschappijleer): a secondary-school compulsory subject, often comprising citizenship.

3 The focus of this article – in a special issue entitled *Sociology, who needs it?* – lies on the role of sociology in the history of social studies as a subject taught in secondary schools. We want to note that this focus on sociology does not mean that this discipline was the only one to have an impact on the content of social studies. More specifically, there was a large role for political science in the development of social studies. The discussion of the role of political science is, however, beyond the scope of this article. For literature concerning the role of political science in this process we refer to, for instance, Dekker (1983), Langeveld (1966), Patrick et al. (1977) and Vis (1988).



suitable means of citizenship education' (Dekker 1979)⁴. It took until 1962 – with the implementation of the 'Mammoetwet'⁵ – for this education to take shape, in the form of the secondary school subject of social studies. With this subject, the then minister for education, Cals⁶, hoped 'to impart a degree of knowledge and insight about human and group relations'⁷. To the question of whether the minister saw the subject as dealing with knowledge of social and cultural life or as sociology in a simple form, he responded: 'Of course the way this subject is taught will depend on the objectives of the school [...], but its essential objective should be to instil some insight into societal relations, without the pretence of becoming a kind of pocket-sized sociology'⁸. The further elaboration of the subject was initially left to schools and educational professionals. Teachers, subject-matter specialists, ministerial advisory commissions and various project groups tackled the job together, debating goals, content and methodology.

In this vacuum of a yet-to-materialise subject, arguments were made for sociology to make a small contribution to social studies. In the academic journal the *Sociological Guide (Sociologische Gids)*, Langeveld⁹ (1964) made a case for active involvement of sociologists in the shaping of social studies as a school subject. But then he commented that – given the goal of the subject was to be 'social education' by which influencing attitudes was to come first – students needed more than just to learn to think in sociological terms. Social studies, according to him, ought to be a subject with contributions from social psychology, political science, economics, jurisprudence and history. Such a broad interpretation of the subject of social studies stood in the way of a strict sociological set-up. A year later, the Dutch Sociological Association published a report with recommendations on the content of social studies as a secondary school subject. This commission too warned that social studies must not be reduced to 'a theoretical introduction to sociology'¹⁰. Social studies was not to be a 'theoretical subject' in the usual sense; the em-

phasis was to lie on providing practical insight, rather than on the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. The professional organization of sociologists viewed self-activation of the student as the main thing.

A side effect of the unremitting debate about the content of the subject was the never quite satisfactorily answered question which teachers would be pronounced qualified to teach it. In the end, competent teachers were deemed those qualified to teach a related discipline¹¹.

The many topics covered in the various early textbooks reflect the lack of clarity that persisted as to the subject's content and show little evidence of any predominant contribution from sociology. In the foreword of the textbook *Life and Society*, Van Wakeren (1966) wrote that he considered the most important aspect of a social studies teaching method to be knowledge of and insight into human and group relations. In particular, he covered topics such as individuals and the ties that bind them, individuals and their group, the town, the city, and individuals in modern society. In the textbook *Social Orientation*, by Banning and Banning-Westmijer (1962), a wide range of issues were addressed in an encyclopaedic manner. Topics included aviation, the hospital, the cinema, postal services, defence, spiritual movements, home nursing services and emigration. Finally, the textbooks from this period show that social studies was used to present topics that were not covered or were insufficiently covered in other school subjects. Examples of these topics are the Delta Plan¹², nuclear power and population growth¹³.

1.2 The 1970s: discord about the role of sociology in the subject that had 'societal and political education' as its goal

While in the early seventies, the discussions concerning the content of the subject continued unabatedly, there was no longer a need to struggle for its legal establishment. The subject had secured a place in Dutch secondary education.

In 1971, the Ministry for Education and Science mandated the Commission for the Modernization of the Social Studies Curriculum to formulate an educational curriculum for social studies with the goal of '*not primarily the acquisition of knowledge, but the development of social awareness and social skills*'. Textbooks for the subject were to be aimed at teaching students to perceive social reality, to judge it for themselves and to learn to act on the basis of their own findings

4 Draft report of the Dutch Upper House regarding the 1957 budget for education, culture and science.

5 The 'Mammoetwet', also known as the Secondary Education Act (1963) aimed to enable all children to obtain a diploma in general and a vocational education. It changed the nature of Dutch secondary and tertiary education. An important characteristic feature of the Dutch system after the 'Mammoetwet' is that more routes became available to a given level of education.

6 He was a member of the Catholic People's Party

7 Memorandum of Reply to the submitted draft law on the structure of secondary education, Parliamentary Documents 5350, 1960-1961, no. 8.

8 Ibidem.

9 Langeveld studied both political and social science

10 Dicmap 15-17, (1972) Maatschappijleer p. 154-158. Report of the Social Studies Advisory Commission (1965) from the Dutch Sociological Association.

11 Art. 114, Secondary Education Transition Act, DGO 1217.

12 Deltaplan concerns measures and initiatives taken by the Dutch government to protect Dutch territory against the water and to protect regions that were frequently flooded when the water levels were high. The immediate cause of these measures was the flood disaster of 1953.

13 Knoppien & Meijs (2000), p. 15.



and judgements. In other words: sociological information was to play only an introductory role towards the ultimate goal of self-activation¹⁴.

In 1971, the Dutch Sociological Association once again presented a report with recommendations for a social studies curriculum¹⁵. This report argued that social studies ought to be an introduction to society and in that sense sociology's role was limited. Nonetheless, analytical and teaching aids from sociology could certainly provide valuable support. Thinking according to social science¹⁶ categories and perspectives ought to be the final phase of the learning process, not the start, according to the report.

In response to a discussion paper by the Commission for the Modernisation of the Social Studies Curriculum and the ensuing debate, dissent emerged about the role of the social science in developing the social studies curriculum¹⁷. Some felt that the substantive content of the subject as taught in secondary schools could be straightforwardly and deductively derived from the social science, while others spoke only of a supportive and limited role for the social science (see, for example, Athmer- van der Kallen & Klaassen 1979).

Moreover, the '*engineered society*' became a key source of inspiration for social studies curriculum development in the seventies. Next to social education, political education was now also designated as an important goal of social studies. The subject was to instil political self-confidence in students and prepare them to take part in decision-making as up-and-coming citizens. Attitudes such as interest in political and societal dilemmas, democratic conviction, tolerance and defending one's own and others' rights were given a place of importance in the seventies. By the end of the decade, we see such attitudinal goals slowly falling out of favour. The pretension of turning the subject into "world improvement studies"¹⁸ began to fade.

The dissent in the seventies about the substance of the subject is reflected in the social studies textbooks from that period¹⁹. In 1968, sociologists Bouman and Derksen published *Social Studies, Concept and Practice: A First Introduction to Sociology*, a textbook that was labelled 'sociology in pocket form'. In later textbooks²⁰ more attention was given to topics like family, mass

media, work, development issues, and war and peace. The fundamental problems as defined by the sociologists were generally not central.

1.3 The 1980s: no explicit role for sociology in the examination subject that aimed to impart knowledge, insight and skills

In December 1979 the Dutch Parliament passed a motion to conduct a study of the conditions under which social studies could be established as an elective examination subject (one that students could apply towards their secondary school diploma). The key reason for this was that students had shown little interest in social studies, because it was not a subject in which they could take a final examination which would count towards their diploma. Most preferred to focus on subjects that they could count among their examination subjects.

In 1983, a project group on social studies as an examination subject tabled a recommendation to start a pilot study with a final examination in social studies²¹. In the recommendation the goal of social studies was described as 'political and social education'. Though the objectives distinguish between knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes, the project group proposed that the examination programme be oriented towards subject-specific objectives related only to knowledge, insight and skills. Attitudinal objectives were omitted from the central examination for reasons of practicality (not testable) and principle (deemed too dependent on individual views of humanity and society). It was also noted that shaping attitudes could not be considered unique to social studies, but in fact was part of education in its entirety.

The project group's vision was detailed further by the Social Studies Final Examination Structure Commission and finalized for the pilot study. In 1990, social studies became a standard (elective) examination subject in all tracks of Dutch secondary education. That meant that every Dutch secondary school decided for itself whether social studies would be offered in the upper classes as an examination subject. The number of schools that did in fact do so was limited²². The social studies examination programme was based on six thematic areas drawn up by the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO)²³: upbringing and education, home and living environment, work

14 Klaassen (1979), p. 23.

15 Dicmap p. 159-160. Report of the ad hoc Social Studies Curriculum Commission of the Dutch Sociological Association.

16 *Social science* (singular): the university studies, comprising any or all of a number of subjects, including: economics, history, political science, psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

17 Kerngroep Commissie Moderniserend Leerplan Maatschappijleer (1976).

18 Amsterdam-based sociologist Abram de Swaan – who obtained his PhD in political science – cited in Van Rossum (1999), p. 8.

19 Brochure for social studies teachers, p. 40-41.

20 A. Hooymayers and H. Vannisselroy, Themaboek maatschappijleer (1979) and H. Mulder, Wegwijzer, maatschappijleer voor 16+ (1979).

21 Towards a social studies final examination: recommendations of the project group on a Final Examination in Social Studies, established by the secretary of state for education and science (1983).

22 In 2007, 27 per cent of the university-preparatory secondary schools and 31 per cent of the higher general secondary schools offered civil sciences as an elective examination subject (Tweede Fase Adviespunt, 2007).

23 Project maatschappijleer (1983), p. 27 e.v.



and leisure time, technology and society, state and society, and international relations.

An analysis of textbooks from this period for social studies as a compulsory subject²⁴ does show some influence of social scientists on the information covered. This is evident in the way information is organized or categorized and in the thought processes that questions evoke or trigger for analysis. However, the number of textbooks that work with concepts from the social science was limited.

1.4 The 1990s: the content of the subject is established, limited role for sociology

In the Dutch secondary school curriculum of the nineties, two social studies subjects appeared: one was a compulsory subject for all students and the other was an (elective) examination subject. For the latter, the content was defined in the official examination programme, but for the compulsory social studies subject, the content still had not yet been established. In 1988, the ministry commissioned the development of a core syllabus²⁵ which, though non-obligatory, made recommendations on how teachers might give substance to a 2-hour weekly programme lasting one school year – this was the magnitude of the subject. From the perspectives of three social science disciplines (sociology, political science and cultural anthropology), the choice was made to provide students with a cognitive foundation for attitudes. The syllabus consisted of three basic themes: (i) culture and cultural transfer, (ii) social structure and social differences, and (iii) political views and political decision-making. Thus, the core syllabus did not constitute an introduction to the social science, though it did use core concepts from the social science in a systematic manner²⁶. The implementation of the core syllabus in secondary schools, however, progressed with difficulty. The freedom that social studies teachers had for years enjoyed to develop lessons at their own discretion rebounded. Teachers did take up parts of the syllabus, but few worked through it systematically. A 1993 study by the Inspectorate of Education found that in only half of Dutch secondary schools could one speak of social studies as being a fully fledged subject. This was not true for thirty per cent of the schools, and for twenty per cent it was only partially true²⁷.

When, in the early nineties, a reform began of the upper classes of the Dutch secondary school system²⁸, new content was defined for all school subjects, in-

cluding social studies. For social studies, the debate as to content burst out anew, if only because of the new requirement that all social studies subjects had to demonstrate more mutual coherence and that more emphasis had been placed on the teaching of skills²⁹. The largest change for social studies brought about by implementation of the new structure (the so-called 'second phase') was the fact that social studies as a compulsory subject was now given the status of examination subject. The final grade in the subject was now to be included in the calculations determining whether a student qualified for graduation, thus bringing an end to the weak position of the subject in the overall secondary school offerings. Nonetheless, the content of the required class was still not definitively established.

An attempt followed to design a combination social studies/history subject, that would be required for all students attending an upper track Dutch secondary school, but the combination class idea was met with little enthusiasm. In 1996, social scientists signed a petition in support of the preservation of social studies as a separate subject, for fear that it would disappear permanently if the combination subject was implemented. This petition heralded in a period of active involvement of social scientists in the position of and later, also with the substance of, social studies as taught in secondary schools.

1.5 The new century: separation between education and knowledge creates new opportunities for sociology

After many years of lobbying, the Dutch Association of Social Studies Teachers (NVLM) saw its efforts rewarded: the combination social studies/history subject was taken off the table for good and social studies retained its position as a compulsory subject for all students and with a prescribed examination programme. Both internationally and nationally, the importance of 'civil society' rose to the fore, and this led to a renewed interest in citizenship³⁰. Social studies was deemed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to be the most appropriate platform for providing the citizenship education now considered so urgently required. The objectives of the subject were to trace back the rights and duties of Dutch residents to the constitution; to learn how the Netherlands developed towards a constitutional state, parliamentary democracy, welfare state and pluralistic society; and to examine the degree to which these ideals were realized in practice³¹.

24 Aarts & Gerritsen (1989), p. 12 e.v.

25 Gerritsen & Klaassen (1992).

26 Klaassen (1993), p. 7.

27 Brouwer (1993), p. 14.

28 The so-called 'second phase' secondary school reform implemented an independent study centre didactic in the upper classes of Dutch secondary schools by which students were obliged to be more autonomous in dealing with the lesson materials.

29 Among others, the independent acquisition of information, the carrying out of simple research and the argumentation of a viewpoint about social issues.

30 Vis & Veldhuis (2008), p. 371-372.

31 Commissie historische en maatschappelijke vorming (2001), p.



Outside the compulsory subject of social studies, with its emphasis on citizenship education, social studies as an (elective) examination subject was renamed ‘social sciences’. In 2005, a commission led by sociologist Schnabel designed a new syllabus for this subject. The starting point was that the name ‘social sciences’ (plural) would imply that the subject sought linkages, in particular with the social science line of disciplines³². In this, sociology and political science formed the basis.

This choice meant that for the first time in the history of social studies as a secondary school subject a distinction was made between two types of social studies: one type that was geared towards citizenship education and as such had a socialization and prescriptive character. That subject retained the name ‘social studies’. The second type (social sciences) aimed to give students an impression of the fields of inquiry, methods and theories typical of social science.

This separation of social studies into two variants with different goals and substance appears to have paved the way for allowing sociology to take a leading role in filling in the content of the social sciences as taught in Dutch secondary schools. The next section will go further into this.

2. Social sciences: new opportunities for sociology

In designing the examination programme for the social sciences, the commission charged with this task chose the ‘concept-context approach’. This starting point was also chosen by other reform commissions in the Netherlands, for example, for the subjects physics, chemistry, biology and economics. The concept-context approach is characterized by the organization of a subject’s body of knowledge into a framework of concepts. The framework limits the subject, preventing it from becoming overloaded, while countering the content fragmentation and arbitrariness that was increasingly evident in examination subjects. The contexts create ‘bridges’ between reality and the concepts. They also provide links among the concepts themselves. The idea behind the concept-context approach is that the emphasis on core concepts and skills in a subject area provides teachers an opportunity to cover the lesson materials based on contexts that are meaningful and motivating to students.³³ In the social sciences examination, students must be able to apply the conceptual framework independently to new content.

The framework contains four main concepts (bonds, education, relations, change), under which both sociological and political science core concepts can be

classified. Brought together under the title ‘social sciences’, sociology and political science are classified according to the type of bonds that tie individuals to one another; the way individuals, in the framework of these bonds, alone and together acquire an identity; the social and political relations that develop between people; and the changes demonstrated in these bonds, education and relations.³⁴ Figure 1 shows these core concepts.

Figure 1: Concepts in social sciences as derived from sociology and political science³⁵

Main Concepts	Sociology	Political science
	Society/community	politics/management/government
	<i>CORE CONCEPTS</i>	<i>CORE CONCEPTS</i>
Bonds	social cohesion institutions group formation culture	political institutions representation
Education	socialization/ acculturation identity	political socialization ideology
Relations	social equality / social inequality	power/authority conflict/ cooperation
Change	modernization individualization institutionalization	democratization globalization state formation

The social sciences naturally possesses an unending supply of social contexts. The commission made a selection from among these using the criterion that a chosen context must lend itself to illuminating concepts and to clarifying cross-linkages among them. The commission chose four contexts, each of which starts from one of the main concepts *bonds*, *education*, *change* and *relations*. Each context is further elaborated, starting from one of the main concepts, based on core concepts from both sociology and political science.

The context *Safety*, for example, starting from the main concept *bonds*, is elaborated in relation to social cohesion, socialization and political institutions. In addition, cross-linkages are made to other main concepts. Thus there is the cross-linkage with the main concept *relations* – when we speak of social inequality in safety –, analogous to the main concept *change*, when trends in safety are coupled with processes like modernization.

As such, in the overall examination programme containing four contexts, all four of the main concepts

140-141.

32 Commissie Maatschappijwetenschappen (2007), p. 12-13.

33 Ibidem, p. 19.

34 Ibidem, p. 22-23

35 Ibidem, p. 28.



are covered (in multiple contexts), and they are also investigated in more detail in terms of the sociological and political science core concepts that belong with the main concepts.

The new secondary school subject of social sciences, with its substance derived from core concepts from sociology and political science, thus gives students an impression early on of the areas of inquiry, theories and methods that are characteristic of sociology and political science.

2.1 More science, less doctrine

In order to indicate the way the new subject of social sciences is distinguished from social studies we take a brief look at one of the chosen contexts, 'Forms of Community'. This context used to be covered as a theme in social studies. In social studies, teachers discussed issues such as living together without being married, homosexuality, generation conflicts and divorce. The prescriptive and socialization nature of social studies was clearly evident in this: often the discussion of such themes provided occasion for debates among students in which the students' own opinions and experiences were central issues.

In the new situation, starting from the concept-context approach, the set-up is more scientific. Not only is it more theoretical, it is more empirical as well. In part, social sciences as taught in secondary schools covers the characteristics of the social and political map of the Netherlands in modern times and in the setting relevant to the country.³⁶ But social sciences goes one level deeper as well, offering insight into the structures and processes that form society and human interactions.

In the context 'Forms of Community' the choice was made to start from the main concept *education*. In the new syllabus, students must learn to describe the process of socialization based on the concept *education* and to recognize examples of socialization. In this case, they will learn theories about socialization, and are introduced to empirical data about, say, divorce rates, and also to hypothesise trends, such as changes in the transfer of values and standards expected as a result of the empirical data on divorce.

3. Looking back on fifty years of social studies

Looking back on the fifty-year history of social studies in Dutch secondary schools, two questions can be answered. The first question is that of the reason why the educational system itself did not come to sociology for help in their long quest for a clear-cut content of the subject. The second question is why sociology did not adopt the orphaned subject of social studies back in 1960.

The answer to the first question lies in the vulnerability of a subject that is dependent for its continued existence on the political leanings of the day³⁷. This led to a new goal for the subject almost every decade: from social education in the sixties and social and political education in the seventies, to a focus on citizenship education in the nineties. Although the objective was renamed on several occasions, the prescriptive viewpoint is recognizable in each. This perspective is difficult to reconcile with a social science content.

Next to the shifting goals, even the position of social studies as a secondary school subject remained shaky up until 2007: there was no prescribed content and until 1997, the compulsory subject did not count towards the official graduation requirements. As a result, it was turned into a plaything for continually changing political desires and new educational developments, and social studies teachers chose instruction methods such as debates, role playing and guest instructors to motivate students to remain interested in a subject with a low status. The fear was that abstract introductions with high information density would be unable to gain a foothold. Statements like 'social studies is not a theoretical subject in the usual sense' and 'influencing attitudes is the main thing'³⁸ demonstrate the obstacles that existed in the field of education, even to employ sociology as a frame of reference in the further development of the subject.

The lack of clarity about the position and content of the subject also meant that for a long time there was no separate qualification for teaching the subject. Teachers qualified in a related discipline (in many cases the history teacher) were allowed to teach the subject. It wasn't until 1981 that an accreditation scheme was devised for teachers of social studies. The fact that for a long time there were few social studies teachers with a sociology background also explains why the influence of sociology was limited in the development of social studies as a secondary school subject.

The answer to the second question is provided by the sociologist Engbersen³⁹. In the struggle for sociology to earn the label 'science', the choice was generally made in the Netherlands for academic sociology and not for critical, policy or public sociology. This choice was also made in order to win the competition with psychologists and for the discipline to get rid of the poor image it had acquired in the 1960s. With a few exceptions, sociologists have, for decades, hardly troubled themselves with the subject of social studies. The Dutch Sociological Association did, however, make repeated attempts to contribute and advise on

37 Abram de Swaan, as cited in Van Rossum (1999), p. 8.

38 Dicmap 15-17, (1972) Maatschappijleer p. 154-158. Report of the Social Studies Advisory Commission (1965) of the Dutch Sociological Association.

39 Meijs (2008), p. 11-13.

36 Ibidem, p. 15.



the way the subject of social studies could be shaped in Dutch secondary schools, but the Society too had doubts about how the science could be translated into an attractive subject for 16 to 18-year-olds. At the start of the twentieth century, it appears that the conditions were in place to give sociology a more prominent role. Next to social studies, the 'social sciences' emerged with a clear goal in terms of knowledge and understanding. In this subject there is a need for a firm framework. With the concept-context approach, the choice was made for a sociological perspective, which is applied to social themes that have been part of the subject for a longer period. With a theoretical sociological foundation, students are taught to apply this perspective in other contexts as well. Thus, sociology provides an important foundation for social sciences.

4. Looking ahead: opportunities and threats

It will certainly take until 2013-2015 before the new social sciences examination programme is implemented in the Dutch secondary school system. In past years it has become a good custom in the Netherlands to first test disciplinary innovations for a few years in

school-level pilot studies. In this way, bottlenecks can be spotted and adjustments can still be made in the examination programme or in the manner of testing.

For the social sciences programme, a key goal of the pilot period will be to look at the degree to which the concept-context approach is feasible in practical terms in the lessons and whether the students prove able in an examination situation to apply the sociological body of knowledge to other societal dilemmas. Herein lies an opportunity to investigate in greater depth this means of combining science with contexts that are recognizable to students. For sociology, a longstanding connection to the subject social sciences is in the offing. Sociologists – like political scientists – are the most likely candidates to contribute to the development of the examination programme. They are also needed to provide the necessary training for the teachers of the subject. The main threat is presented by the fact that teachers will have to be given the time and resources to educate themselves on the new content; also, they must be given the chance to integrate the new approach into their everyday teaching practices.

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