Title: Social Space and Political Communities in crisis: Kinning Park Complex

Abstract:
‘Localism is back on the political agenda. It has (re)emerged as a defining political keyword of the current conjuncture with the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition in the UK making localism central to their political narrative’ (Featherstone et al, 2012:177)

This paper discusses the concept of ‘localism’ in its contrasting forms. Firstly, localism as a political strategy implemented during periods of economic crisis and characterised by state restructuring, roll back and public sector privatisation. Secondly, I set out an example of progressive localism through my case study; Kinning Park Complex, an independently-run community centre that came into existence following a 55 day occupation in 1996. KPC remains as an independent community centre today. I argue that Kinning Park Complex provides us with an example of how place-based political activity can challenge the associations of localism with political passivity. Furthermore, I set out how ‘everyday practises of localism’ at KPC can ‘challenge, rather than entrench, inequalities between and within places and regions’ (Featherstone et al, 2012:180). The community occupied KPC in 1996 and continue to run it independently today; which provides the concept of ‘progressive localism’ with a rare and concrete historic trajectory that challenges the contemporary, deracinate form of localism currently imbued by the state. Furthermore, this case study allows us to effectively interrogate the current urban crisis by framing it as part of a larger succession of crises that have come to characterise neo-liberalism in the UK. As an independently run community centre, Kinning Park Complex provides us with an example of grassroots form of localism that has continued to exist in, against and beyond these moments of crisis, providing an sustained interrogation of urban crisis in Glasgow since 1996.

Introduction:

KPC has been in a struggle with the City Council since 1996; this struggle emanates from both the historic opposition between state and community and the practical difficulties of facilitating services and maintaining community spaces without financial support from either local or central government. The following quote is taken from an interview with an individual involved in the occupation of the a community centre in 1996. She was a key actor in the occupation and worked closely with the organisation for a decade after the occupation ended.

‘so we had this strange situation at the end of the occupation the council were prepared to give us the lease of the building, but some of us maintained that we never won that occupation, at the end of the day we wanted to council to run that community centre, we wanted to keep a community centre for people with paid workers that would service the community, that’s what we occupied the building centre, so at the end of the occupation it was as if you could see the council, the penny dropping...why not give it to the community they’ll run it for flipping nothing, they’ll still be clubs in the community and you can just let them take the responsibility on for all the repairs and the rest of it’(Stasia)
KPC is located in Govan, in an area of ‘concentrated deprivation’ (Milne & Rankine, 2013). In the particularly challenged eastern part of Govan, 40% of working age adults are claiming key benefits (ibid:23). Govan is also an area that appears to be a hive of local activism and grass roots community projects which provide examples of multiple, progressive local practises. The long tradition of self help, as well as of community based political activism and organisation characterises the area. KPC is an organisation that has been forced to negotiate its way through a myriad of grants and partnerships in order to remain open. I argue that KPC plays an increasingly contradictory role; as an ongoing grassroots project that retains a space for radical community provision, but on an increasingly neoliberal political and economic landscape being shaped by the City Council. KPC on one hand, appears in-line with the current government plans to expand third sector projects in a context of austerity; while simultaneously striving to function as an independent, not-for profit space on its own terms. I focus on the paradoxical nature of KPC; as both an important symbolic and functional community space and a case study to demonstrate the complexities and contradictions of simultaneously struggling against and providing services autonomously from the state during austere times. The difficult relationship between the City Council and KPC’s committee since 1996, presents progressive localism at KPC as a struggle for autonomy and survival. I argue that this represents an ongoing interrogation of urban crises ‘rather than as an isolated crisis moment where neo-liberalism has suddenly become challenged’ (Featherstone et al, 2012:216). These are my initial findings and observations from the past year of ethnographic research as a volunteer at KPC.

**Austerity Localism**

A common response to the sovereign debt crisis that affects much of the first world has emerged; a new ‘politics of austerity’ (Kitson et al., 2011:292). In a climate of pronounced austerity, the Conservative-led Coalition government has began a programme to ‘dramatically curtail government spending’ (Featherstone et al., 2012:177). Alongside the British government’s austerity package, comprised of welfare reform and public sector cut-backs, there has also been a return to ‘localism’. The Localism Act 2010 proposes: ‘a huge cultural change . . . where people don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face’, by developing active and sustainable communities’ (Cameron, 2010). Simultaneously, today’s austere times also generate demand for social provision, as the benefit system and local authority budgets are subject to spending cuts and restructuring from central government. According to the Coalition, the six key aims of the decentralisation are; ‘to empower communities, lift the burden of bureaucracy, increase local control of public finance, diversify the supply of public services, open up government to public scrutiny and strengthen accountability to local people’ (HM Government, 2010). The Localism Bill is applicable to England and Wales. Scotland is able to take a modified, but not entirely divergent course of action; however, funding cuts have also been imposed, essentially creating a situation where political power has been devolved but financial power remains centralised. I would argue that the Welfare Reforms and the Localism Bill indirectly enforce a form of austerity localism on the Scottish Government. It is clear that welfare states are increasingly seen as ‘costly, overburdened, inefficient incapable of eliminating poverty’ (Jessop, 2002:465).

I argue that the ideological drivers for a version of localism imposed from above require critical enquiry; firstly, because austerity localism has regressive social outcomes that entrench inequality and secondly, because the inherent assumptions surrounding ‘community’, empowerment’ and ‘participation’ are problematic and arguably working alongside a neo-liberal desire to reduce costs.
through dumping responsibility at the local level. ‘Localism’ can be used as facilitator of state rollback, and such arrangements are being instituted ‘to encourage family, neighbourhood, informal or market-based and market sustaining solutions to the problems of social reproduction’ (Jessop, 2002:465). Neo-liberal apologists routinely justify such ‘offloading’ by arguing that it augments local control and is therefore more democratic (Purcell, 2006:1926). The local scale is frequently represented as site at which ‘the apparent opposites of enterprise and community, of efficiency and welfare, of economic means and local ends’ might be reconciled (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993:11). Purcell (2006:1921) reminds us that these local spatial scales ‘are not independent entities with pre-given characteristics’, but are instead ‘socially constructed strategies to achieve particular ends’. For example, current localist strategies articulate ‘responsibilisation’ at the local level; i.e. for communities and individuals (O’Malley, 2010). The ‘responsible’ or ‘active’ citizen agenda; intrinsically empowered, fixed in her local, unitary area and embedded in ‘community’, dovetails with an active localism agenda. Indeed, the ethos of localism has become ‘deeply entangled with an ideology of citizen-driven government’ (Newman, 2013:5). David Cameron’s notion of the Big Society clearly begins with the assumption that central government presents a barrier to community participation at the local scale, thus justifying the scaling back of centrally funded services. New Labour also championed ‘localism’; and similarly utilised the discourse around community empowerment, community engagement and implemented multi-scalar partnership, but with some centralised regulation of these activities (see Pratchett et al 2009). Furthermore, this was prior to the current economic crisis which has become both catalyst and ideological justification for the austerity driven welfare cuts we see at the current political conjuncture. As Stoker (2011) notes, we are currently being offered ‘an anti-state vision of localism, a particular ideological brand rather than an expression of a consensual commitment to decentralisation’, a form of ‘austerity localism’ (Featherstone et al, 2012) that presents a cause for concern.

The recent welfare reforms will hit hardest in the places where welfare claimants are concentrated, which in turn tend to be the poorest areas with the highest rates of worklessness (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013:13). The economic landscape of Britain is looking increasingly uneven as a result of removing the ‘residual state role of redistribution, stabilization and management of the national economic space’ (Pike and Tomaney, 2009:30). Populations in economically disadvantaged areas expected to be ‘resilient’ to neo-liberal restructuring. It is clearly expressed in both the English and Welsh Localism Bill and Scottish Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill that national spending cuts will be countered through local resilience. Moreover, responsibility for this resilience is placed at the local community scale. The imposition of this expectation implies that local agency is simply a reaction to an all powerful neo-liberalism; in turn, this endorses an apolitical conception of community action that is mediated by public–private partnerships, appointed competitiveness councils and quasi-public agencies. There is a clear expectation in this local imaginary that ‘localities should be able to withstand the shocks of neoliberal crisis, restructuring and rebuke’ (MacKinnon and Driscoll-Derickson, 2013). It works on the assumption that ‘where the market and state fail, ‘extra’ economic values such as kindness, generosity or decency will come into play, and thus this abandonment produces its own social strengthening rewards’ (Gilmore, 2007:44). Social capital is thus gained, where economic capital is lacking. Even in leftist community development literature, ‘the great irony of the preference for the local scale is that it plays into the hands of the neo-liberal agenda’ (Purcell, 2006:1926).
However, even in an age of neoliberal dominance, cities remain crucially important arenas for struggles in the name of social justice, radical democracy, popular empowerment, and the politics of difference (Brenner and Theodore, 2002:346). Spaces like KPC allow us to see that important aspects of social reproduction are already carried out in the community, and exemplify the ‘diverse and socially heterogeneous political constituencies that can be active in shaping localisms from below’ (Featherstone, 2012:179). KPC is an organisation that is negotiating its place in, against and beyond Neoliberalism involving diverse actors and networks that relate beyond the local. However, they only function in reality through the tangible and often unpaid labour of individuals, who are essential within their communities to replace service provision no longer funded by the state and I intend to present a realistic rather than romanticised picture of KPC.

The history of struggle at Kinning Park Complex

In Glasgow sustainable urban regeneration has been a constant struggle given Glasgow’s exceptional size within Scotland and the unique intensity of its socio-economic problems (Pacione, 1995). Today, of the 15% most deprived areas in Scotland, 42% of them are based in Glasgow (Scottish Government website, 2013). In Glasgow experimental forms of local governance have become the means through which regeneration, economic and social, are being mediated (Paddison, 2003:19). Notions of ‘community participation’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘partnership’ have been present in state rhetoric since the 1970s; acting as important mobilising and legitimising tools for both Labour and the Conservative parties (Johnston and McWilliams, 2005). Area-based policies have and continued to create a certain spatialisation of poverty in Glasgow; ‘as policy discourse and programmes are guided by particular ways of imagining space’ (Dikeç, 2007:23). Which often have negative implications for place-making and subsequently lead to pathologisation of poverty in certain areas of the city; for Glasgow’s hard reputation often precedes it (Damer, 1990).

During the 1980s and 1990s successive Conservative governments carried out a similar scale of local government reform as we can observe today, and this began the process of giving civil society a higher profile in Glasgow. They used legislation to enable a process of substituting collective public service provision by the private and voluntary sector at the local level (Fyfe, 2005:546). More broadly, the early 1990s saw huge local government restructuring all over the UK. Before the Thatcher government, local governments were largely protected from the poverty of their local economies through grants from central government, thus the pressure of responding to local economic decline is diverted at least partially to central government (Pickvance, 1986: 266). However, during the 1980s in the UK, ‘the biggest contribution to fiscal stress (at the local level) was the decrease in grants under the Thatcher governments’ (Mouritzen, 1992:48-50). Thus the relationship between central and local government has become increasingly more important. Where the British government system used to be highly centralised, decentralisation has been dramatically enforced since the 1970s. In economic terms, this means that national fiscal crises are felt more acutely than ever at the local level. ‘As a rule of thumb, the more decentralised the system of local government, the more dependent are its individual authorities on the fortunes of their local economy’ (Midwinter, 1999:87). So the economic recession in the 1970s created fiscal stress by constraining revenues, reflecting the tighter fiscal policies in national budgets, and the erosion of municipal tax bases - particularly in cities - through population decline, company closures and reductions in central government grants (Bahl, 1978). Under the Margret Thatcher government many local government powers also disappeared, for examples in England municipal authorities
were scrapped. In Scotland we can observe this trend to reorganise local authority boundaries and reduce local power continuing into the 1990s, this was felt heavily in Glasgow, a city already facing post-industrial decline in employment, health and population.

Before 1994, Kinning Park Neighbourhood Centre, as it was then known; was designated in the region of Strathclyde, the district of Glasgow. These boundaries were set up in 1973 under the Local Government Scotland Act. In 1994 another act of parliament of the United Kingdom saw the establishment of the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act which replaced the two tier structure of regions and districts and created the current local government structure of 32 unitary authorities covering Scotland. This came into effect in 1995 as part of the Scottish local elections. The ‘City of Glasgow’ became one of the unitary authorities, but the boundaries of this area were redrawn from how they had previously existed within the Strathclyde region/district set-up. A renamed ‘Glasgow City’ became one of the newly created single tier local authorities in 1996, with parts of the Cambuslang and Halfway and Rutherglen and Fernhill areas removed from the newly established city council area, they became part of new South Lanarkshire council area. The economic implications for re-drawing these local boundaries were detrimental for the newly established Glasgow City Council, as some of the areas which were removed from within the city boundaries were wealthy suburbs that provided important tax revenue for the council. As a result of this, between 1996-7 the council made £23 million worth of ‘savings’ (i.e. cuts), to balance its budget having lost these wealthy suburbs (Carmichael and Midwinter, 1999). Furthermore the inner city continued to experience a declining population, with urban degradation and unemployment also on the rise; thus the demand for services and benefits were high. This resulted in a fiscal crisis for the city council in 1995-6. Urban policy took a new approach that saw the state contract, largely through closures of community services and instigation of a culture of competition for state resources between areas of the city. This climate of austerity, uncertainly and competition is evident in the wording of the Kinning Park community newsletter, which plainly expresses the scarcity of resources and the competitive context orchestrated by the council in this period of fiscal crisis; the closure of the Kinning Park Neighbourhood centre was just another saving for the City Council.

‘Believe me once these facilities have gone. They will never return. Councillors here have been threatening for years to close down to take KP out of the area of priority, which means
no longer will Kinning park be eligible for Urban Aid funding and Community Projects. However, you can sit back and watch your neighbours enjoy projects galore while you help to pay for them. One area of priority is Gorbals. Govan is another. What category do you think Kinning Park comes under?’ (Kinning Park Community Newspaper, 1996)

This quote expresses uncertainty surrounding state responsibilities and the funding of urban policies. However, I would argue that it articulates the neo-liberalisation of the welfare state in Glasgow as more than just the implementation of an economic system, but a form of ‘political-economic governance’ (Larner, 2000:5). There are two ways in which this extract describes how the state is actively producing the neo-liberal city - through altering city boundaries within Glasgow and through competition based area resource allocation. This quote really expresses an expectation for state welfare; there is a clear notion that the state has a duty of care for citizens and that this expectation is something that is being challenged and dismantled as the local government reduces spending. The community awareness of this process is evident. The battle for the centre to remain open and ran by the council was the main aim in 1996, which is why after the events some expressed that they hadn’t won the occupation, as they didn’t intend to run a community centre, they just wanted a public service. Today we can see how the process of reducing the welfare services such as community centres has continued and in the second half I discuss KPC in the context of the current economic crisis.

After the occupation by activists, community members and building users in 1996, the council agreed a peppercorn rent of £1 per year between the Council and an existing local voluntary association (Scotland in Europe) on behalf of the community. The community group was responsible for the running costs and for the maintenance and management of what is a very large, Victorian schoolhouse, with a provision that they could rent out space in the centre to raise income. KPC has been run by individuals from the local area as a not-for-profit space ever since 1996; initially by Helen Kyle 1996-2008 and since 2009 a Paisley man, Lindsay Keenan, has taken over the running of the building and reformed it as ‘Kinning Park Complex’, registered as a community interest company with a reinvigorated committee.

KPC is a potential example of ‘progressive localism’ (MacKinnon et al, 2011 and Featherstone et al, 2012). It is a socially and economically valuable space for the diverse local community in terms of affordable facilities for socially and politically progressive activities. KPC provides studio space for artists, hall space for political groups, asylum seeker groups, children’s birthday parties, dance, yoga, taekwondo classes, rehearsal space for musicians and theatre companies and office space for a benefits advice centre. I would argue that the diversity of actors who use the building helps spaces such as KPC to ‘reconfigure existing communities around emergent agendas for social justice, participation and tolerance’ (Featherstone, 2012:179). The local scale is and has historically been romanticized in government discourse; as a site of democracy and empowerment through a strong territorial imaginary. However, I would argue that KPC functions as a relational entity and as the product of disparate social, economic and political connections (Massey, 2005, Amin, 2004). My initial findings at KPC suggest that there is a wide mix of people who use this space from political groups, asylum seeker groups, Asian women’s group, children and parents, musicians and theatre companies and people receiving benefits from the advice drop in centre. All groups have overlapping identities and KPC provides a potential space for encounters between socially, economically and politically disparate groups as ‘different micro worlds find themselves on the same proximate turf’
This common ground can foster a unique sense of place that is organic rather than imposed, tangible rather than rhetorical. The term ‘community’ appears mandatory in government discourse and has become a consensus-building scalar strategy for politicians. My initial findings at KPC challenge this imposed, homogenous notion of community, so far as this has revealed a complex picture, laden with power relations. Places like KPC are not idealized spaces where people interact easily but a place where people can have the freedom potentially to foster connections in a more creative way; through negotiating ‘intersecting trajectories’ (Massey, 2005:154). Through this approach, we can envision local political spaces like as KPC as arenas of ‘claims and counter-claims, agreements and coalitions that are always temporary and fragile, always the product of negotiation and changing intersectional dynamics, always spreading out to wherever a claim on turf or on proximate strangers is made or to where novelty is generated by juxtaposition’ (Amin 2004:39). Such natural and chaotic social processes then expose the networks of power relations that make that place what it is; ‘necessarily challenging vested interests in pursuit of improvements in life’ (Wills, 2012:145). However, I intend to examine the nuances of the social and political relationships that people have with KPC, since self organization can be empowering but can also be fraught with conflicts. This reflects the large amount of pressure imposed on individuals to maintain and run a large, busy building like this with few economic resources, support or accountability. The unpaid, mundane and emotional labour that is required to sustain KPC has become highly evident and is something I intend to explore in forthcoming work.

The current crisis

Since the current economic crisis, the City Council had come under increased financial pressure once again and has once again enforced austerity upon local organisations. In a bid to raise much needed income in 2010 a new ‘Concessionary Rents Policy’ was passed by Glasgow City Council’s Executive Committee. This is a decision to end concessionary rents for voluntary organizations deemed to be ‘commercial properties’. These properties were also transferred to a private company called City Property (Glasgow) LLP; ‘evolved from the property services previously provided by Glasgow City Council’ (City Property website, 2013). This company has appointed the estate agent, Ryden, as external property agents to support the management of this portfolio:

‘The impact of the current recession is that the capital receipts targets set by the Council are unlikely to be achieved. The disposal of the commercial investment portfolio is perhaps the only short term which is open to the Council to generate very significant capital payments over a very short space of time’.

(Glasgow City Council Executive Committee, 27th November 2009)

KPC was one of the organisations affected by this new policy. As a result, KPC’s peppercorn rent of £1 per year was increased to £6000, after adding large administrative costs to draw up the new lease. Despite this rent increase, KPC will continue to receive no economic funding for building maintenance and repairs from Glasgow City Council. There are only two full time paid employees at KPC: Lindsay is the building manager and the other paid position is split between two cleaners and a treasurer. They are paid solely from profits raised from public events and hall and studio hire.

Following this development, KPC were unhappy about signing the new lease with the Council, partly due to the large financial pressure it would cause and partly due to the rejection of market rationale behind being asked to pay increased rent for nothing other than to prevent eviction. KPC continued
to go about daily business and began applying for grants from the national lottery to maintain control of the building. As a result of refusing to sign the new lease KPC were recently handed a Notice of Removal on 15th April 2013, due to be enforced on the 27th of May. This letter stated that ‘because KPC were unsuccessful in obtaining Lottery and other funding’, this ‘may have an impact on the terms and conditions agreed with City Property for the long lease of this property’ (letter from City Property, 15th April, 2013). Thus KPC would be unable to sign the new lease in any case. As a response, the committee and volunteers set out to begin a new campaign to gather support from the community building users and supporters of KPC. He sent out a letter to all on the mailing list:

‘For the last 15 months we have tried to talk to the Council / City Property, funders, other agencies and councillors about how we all might work together to secure the long term future of Kinning Park Complex as a community facility. We now have to deal with City Property on behalf of Glasgow City Council. Recently those talks have broken down. Last week, without notice, City Property sent us a Notice of Removal telling us to be out of the building by 27 May

...This City Property letter reminds us that despite the huge efforts made by many in the community to keep this building open and in daily use there is still a long way to go to secure our long-term future and fund the major repairs needed.’ (Email to all building users, Apr 26, 2013)

This situation at KPC is ongoing and represents both the power of local and central governments, but also the power of a community to shape localism from below. KPC has existed since 1996, prior to the current political conjuncture and it exists as more than a reaction to changing economic climates or a co-opted version of ‘localism’. The dynamism demonstrated by groups such as KPC is distinct from state-endorsed forms of community ‘resilience’ that arguably support neoliberal efforts to roll back spending for local governments. Rather, I would argue that KPC subverts this by providing an alternative space on the neoliberal landscape of Glasgow. Instead, I apply the term ‘resourcefulness’ as an alternative concept to characterise the politics and activism at KPC, which ‘seek to transform social relations in more progressive, anti-capitalist and socially just ways’ (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012:255), and promote a progressive localism that should aim to ‘strengthen local institutions and communities as part of a wider political project grounded in principles such as social and spatial justice, equity, democracy and solidarity’ (Mackinnon et al, 2010:11). Furthermore, I present the resourcefulness (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012) of KPC in contrast to the resilience intrinsic to top-down accounts of local action.

Conclusion

Spaces like KPC have been embedded in an ongoing contestation and negotiation to retain their control, and their experience shows that economic independence is difficult to achieve and maintain. Furthermore, this has not strengthened their relations with the state but muddled them. KPC’s experience through time since 1996 has seen it survive two crises, during this period we have can also see multiple localisms at work, from those imposed by national and local government, to those enacted independently by the community. This takes forward the debates on localism by asking us to consider the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of this concept. Reminding us that Localism need not be either progressive or regressive; instead, the ‘wider social relations and political strategies are what shape specific forms of spatial politics’ (MacKinnon et al, 2012:11). A
'radical topological notion of politics', as suggested by Allen and Cochrane (2010), allows us to bring to light the ways in which the state exerts power indirectly through its 'reach' into dispersed localities and through ‘drawing within close reach those that that are able to broker and influence decisions’ (ibid:1076). Furthermore, this relational approach to power allows us to convey the complexities of the connections and dependencies between a plethora of actors representing and moving between the three, increasingly integrated sectors of the state, private sphere and realm of civil society. I would argue that these spheres are becoming increasingly interwoven into, especially during times of crisis and require a critical analysis.

This case study also celebrates the agency of communities during times of crisis in a grounded way; which acknowledges the inherent contradictions as well as radical potential of such struggles. The complicated relationship between the council and KPC through time paints a realistic picture of the contradictory nature of local politics, as well as the sustained ingenuity shown by those involved in the project. MacKinnon and Derickson’s notion of ‘resourcefulness’ is useful here in acknowledging the ‘material and enduring challenges that marginalized communities face, without overshadowing the exciting activism and politics that occurs in these spaces and their potential to ‘facilitate transformative change’ (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012:265). This calls for a nuanced critique of terms like ‘community’ ‘empowerment’, ‘resilience’ and ‘sustainability’ and the ways they are invoked in localist discourse.

Finally, the City Council’s battle with KPC is that; a battle. Thus far, there is no clear winner or loser here and instead I would suggest that spaces such as KPC help instigate those moments of conflict which disrupt static and omnipotent notions of Neoliberalism as all powerful in three ways. Firstly through highlighting the plurality and political power of a community; this distinguishes itself from the passive notion of local resilience by the responsible citizen. Secondly, the direct conflict with the council stresses the essential role of local government in implementing neo -liberal ideology; as they of course retain some ability to resist and should not be seen as passive recipients of central ideology, even if they are financially. Thirdly, and most importantly, spaces like KPC remain physically present on the urban landscape. Landscapes of antagonism are formed (and reformed) through the discursive constitution of new subjects and the orchestration of new lines of antagonism, resistance and alignment (Newman, 2013:9). Their existence and struggle allow us to deconstruct and observe what may appear to be a complex assemblage of power from above. The day to day confrontations which hinder the day to practices of providing a community centre actually provide concrete evidence for the power of progressive localism as KPC has remained since 1996. Finally, the ongoing struggle at KPC from 1996-present allows us to observe urban crises more broadly and over time as important moments where the fragile and contradictory nature of neoliberalism becomes exposed to unsettle hegemonic practises and ideologies and allow progressive alternative spaces to emerge and remain.

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