

# Valerie Bryson, “Production and reproduction”

## “Production and Reproduction”

Valerie Bryson

### Chapter Eight, *Marx and Other Four-Letter Words* (2005)

My starting point in this chapter is the classic Marxist theory of historical materialism: the idea that the basis of human society, the key to understanding its history and future potential, lies in the production and reproduction of material life. While accepting the value of this approach, I also use feminist theory to argue that ‘malestream’ theorists have interpreted production and reproduction in unhelpfully narrow ways to produce an analysis which is not only male based but also male biased. I argue in favour of an expanded notion of (re)production that includes the socially necessary work disproportionately performed by women; I conclude that without such an expansion we can neither understand existing society nor

develop effective strategies for changing it. **BACK TO BASICS**  
According to the classic Marxist position, the first cooperative act of production formed the basis of the earliest primitive society and the beginnings of human history: ‘life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself’ (Marx and Engels 1982:48). Unlike the instinctive activity of animals, such production is conscious and planned, and it changes over time, setting in motion the complex processes of economic, social, political and ideological development that constitute human history. The extent to which Marx’s materialist conception of history implies a particular anthropological view of man and a theory of technological or economic determinism was and is a matter of intense political and scholarly debate. However, at a general level, it seems clear that Marx believed that social and political analysis must start by looking at how people produce rather than at their laws or beliefs – an approach which Tom Rockmore has recently summarised as: ‘It’s the economy, stupid’ (Rockmore 2002:116). This materialist perspective also means that any possibility of changing society is always limited by existing socio-economic conditions, so that radicals cannot always change society as they would like: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by them selves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx and Engels 1968:97).

As long as this perspective is not accepted too rigidly or simplistically, it seems to provide a sensible starting point for understanding how societies have evolved and how they might develop in the future. However, its potential insights have been limited by a very narrow

understanding of what we mean by the production and reproduction of material life. Marxists have largely ignored the ways in which biological reproduction, domestic work, sexuality and caring activities have been organised, treating these either as 'natural' and outside of human history, or as by-products of productive activity which have no dynamic of their own. This means that mainstream Marxism has told only half the story of human development, and that it has effectively replicated the public/private distinction of liberal thought, with its exclusion or marginalisation of activities predominantly associated with women. As a result, its understanding of human history and potential has been seriously flawed. This chapter argues that the Marxist concepts of production and reproduction should be extended to allow for a more comprehensive analysis.

### TERMINOLOGY

An initial problem stems from the range of ways in which both Marx and later Marxist writers have used the terms production and reproduction. 'Production' is sometimes treated quite loosely, to refer to any purposeful activity which contributes to the satisfaction of human needs. However, this has not normally been interpreted to include the work involved in reproducing the species:

All the labour that goes into the production of life, including the labour of giving birth to a child, is not seen as the conscious interaction of a human being with nature, that is, a truly human activity, but rather as an activity of nature, which produces plants and animals unconsciously and has no control over this process. (Mies 1998:45)

### Production and Reproduction

The exclusion from analysis of much 'women's work' is reinforced when 'production' is given a more precise economic meaning. Marxist economic theory argues that, under the historically specific conditions of capitalism, the only form of work that is technically 'productive' is paid work exchanged in the labour market for money and from which surplus value<sup>1</sup> is extracted. From this perspective, unpaid work done in the home is not productive and it does not have a value (see Himmelweit 1991; Jackson 1999; Grant 1993). This does not mean that such work is unimportant, for the 'productive' label is not inherent in the activity, only in its relationship to the money economy. Although in principle Marxist economic analysis makes this clear, there may be a subconscious equation of 'productive' with 'important' and of monetary value with human value; certainly, mainstream Marxists have shown little interest in analysing the changing nature of the unpaid work that is largely done by women or its complex relationship with the money economy.

At first sight, the concept of reproduction, which also has origins in original Marxism, seems more fruitful. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels included biological reproduction as part of the material basis of society, referring to 'The production of life, both of one's own

in labour and of fresh life in procreation' (Marx and Engels 1982:50). Although Marx never explored the implications of this, Engels did so in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*: According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social institutions under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live are conditioned by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other. (Engels 1978:4)

This implies that the way in which biological reproduction is organised may be independent of production in the wider sense, and indeed Engels argued that in the earliest stages of human society sexual relationships had evolved from unregulated promiscuity to the egalitarian 'pairing family'. However, he believed that the independent evolution of the family ceased at this early stage, when it became entirely dependent on conditions of production, narrowly understood. More specifically, he argued that in Europe the introduction of private property gave men a motive to dominate women (because they wanted to pass property to their known heirs), and that this 'world historical defeat of the female sex' would only be overcome in a future socialist society, as sexual relationships would then be free from notions of ownership and domestic work would be collectivised. From this perspective, conditions of reproduction had no independent dynamic, the oppression of women was a byproduct of class society that would disappear with it, working women had no separate interests, and they should therefore join with men in the struggle against capitalism. Indeed, Engels argued that, unlike bourgeois women, working-class women were no longer oppressed as women, as they were in paid employment and their marriage did not involve property ownership. This left no way of recognising, let alone contesting, women's sex-specific exploitation in the workplace and the exploitation of their labour in the home, while Engels dismissed the problem of domestic violence in half a sentence as a 'left-over' from the introduction of monogamy (Engels 1978:65, 83).

Such an analysis is clearly inadequate. As with the concept of 'production', problems also arise from the confusing range of ways in which 'reproduction' is used in Marxist theory. Although sometimes equated with the biological processes of procreation, the term is also used by Marxists to refer to the broader reproduction of the labour force on a daily as well as a generational basis, by meeting a range of material and emotional needs (Mandel 1983). It is also used of the processes through which the economy 'reproduces itself', yielding inputs for future production and consumption. Social relations too

have to be 'reproduced'. Such shifting meanings make it difficult to maintain a distinction between production and reproduction, and there is a danger that different levels of analysis become conflated and confused (see Jackson 1999 and Elster 1986).

In this chapter, I will attempt to bypass such confusions by using the term '(re)production' to refer to the work (physical and emotional) which is more or less directly linked to the generational reproduction and maintenance of the population and the care of those unable to look after themselves. Such work includes biological reproduction but is not confined to it; it is very disproportionately performed by women. Treating this (re)production as part of the material basis of society allows us to see it as part of economic life and human history rather than as simply 'natural' or a by-product of production. We can then see that particular conditions of (re)production may facilitate or restrict opportunities for creating a more equitable society; they may also be sites of economic, political and ideological struggle. This does not mean that we can make a universal and clear distinction between productive and (re)productive labour; rather, the shifting boundaries between productive and (re)productive work is one variable to explore. Other variables include developments in contraception and reproductive technology, the availability of labour-saving devices, the extent to which (re)productive work is shared with men, and whether it is provided collectively or by private individuals. Such an expanded notion of the material basis of society is important if we are to understand how society functions and how to develop effective strategies for change.

#### (RE)PRODUCTION AND EARLY MARXIST THOUGHT

As discussed above, Marx and Engels failed to acknowledge the importance of (re)productive work and oppression in the home. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, influential European Marxists such as August Bebel and Clara Zetkin in Germany and Lenin and Trotsky in Russia were writing about oppression in personal life and the 'double burden' of paid and domestic work experienced by many women. However, their orthodox Marxist approach provided no scope for analysing rather than documenting women's situation; they assumed that oppression would be ended in a socialist society and failed to explore the possibility that it might have its own dynamic, based in conditions of (re)productive life.

Ideas about the importance of the family and personal relationships were developed considerably further by Alexandra Kollontai, a leading Bolshevik and member of Lenin's first cabinet (Holt 1977; Stites 1981). Kollontai insisted that the transformation of family and personal life was central to creating both equality between the sexes and the preconditions for socialism. She argued that the collectivisation of domestic work and childcare and the liberation of sexuality from ideas of ownership facilitated the development of the kind of collectivist morality needed for a socialist economy to

flourish. As such, they were an integral part of the process of creating good socialist men and women, involving both real, material changes and ideological transformation: 'The new morality is created by a new economy, but we will not build a new economy without the support of a new morality' (quoted in Holt 1977:270).

The idea that changes in the material conditions of (re)production are a precondition for building socialism had clear implications for political practice and priorities, and Kollontai had a remarkable degree of success in forcing the party to take them seriously during her brief period in political office, when she attempted to mobilise and consult 'ordinary' women and to treat (re)productive work as a collective responsibility. However, in 1923 her ideas on the family were officially declared erroneous. Some of her ideas survived in a distorted form throughout the years of Stalinist dictatorship, as labour shortages meant that women were needed both as producers and reproducers, and were enabled to combine these roles through (poor quality) state childcare provision. However, women still faced tremendous burdens in combining paid and domestic work in a society in which even a tap in the kitchen was a luxury and men still refused to accept domestic responsibilities. By the 1980s, official policy increasingly stressed women's 'natural' role in the home and the need to liberate them from paid employment, and the collapse of communism saw a full-scale retreat from any notion of collective support for (re)productive work (Buckley 1989; Rosenberg 1989). Kollontai's loose form of Marxism was very different from the simplistic determinism that dominated Marxist politics for the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, debates around women's oppression also surfaced in the small American Communist Party during the 1930s, producing some sophisticated analyses of the politics of personal life and the role of domestic labour in the capitalist economy (Weigland 2001; Shaffer 1979). However, as with the contributions of Kollontai, this analysis had little impact on mainstream Marxist thought, and it is only recently that such radical ideas have been rediscovered. This meant that when the women's liberation movement erupted in the west in the 1960s, women who wanted to use Marxist theory to understand their own situation could find little guidance.

## DEVELOPMENTS AND DEBATES SINCE THE 1960s

### The impact of radical feminism

Although the writers discussed in the previous section differed in their priorities, they generally agreed that the achievement of both a socialist society and equality between the sexes would require changes in what I have called the social relations of (re)production. However, they did not question the sexual division of labour that underlay these relations, and seemed to have assumed that collectivised childcare and housework would still be the responsibility of women. Nor did they explore in any detail the implications of changes in medical and contraceptive knowledge, or in the technology of housework, which

could potentially change the conditions of biological reproduction and domestic labour.

These Marxist writers were attempting to extend man-made theory to the understanding of women's situation. As such, their approach was very different from the radical feminist theory which developed from the 1960s, partly in response to women's bad experiences in leftwing organisations, in which men's idea of an equitable division of labour was all too often 'you make the tea while I make the revolution', and in which 'women's issues' were treated as at best trivial and at worst a bourgeois distraction, designed to divide the working class. Radical feminists claimed that women's own experiences should be the starting point for theory, that these experiences showed that the fundamental power structure in society was the oppression of women by men, and that this oppression was not confined to economic or political life. Many such feminists claimed that male power both stemmed from and was maintained by 'private' family and sexual relationships, and by the ever-present threat of sexual violence and men's control over women's reproductive capacities. The radical feminist concept of patriarchy became central to such analysis. This claimed that men's patriarchal power over women is so universal, so complete and so all-pervasive that it is accepted as 'natural'. However, once it is labelled, we can see its recurrent and patterned nature, and the ways in which its apparently unrelated manifestations in public and private life are in fact interconnected, reinforcing each other to produce a cumulative and ubiquitous system of domination and oppression (for the classic discussion of this concept, see Millett 1985, first published 1970).

#### Marxist feminist responses

Although some Marxist women have been very critical of the concept of patriarchy and the sometimes inflated and simplistic claims that have been made in its name, radical feminism was clearly putting new issues on the agenda which many women felt to be important, but which had not been seriously addressed by Marxist theory. For many such women, the task was therefore to 'ask the feminist questions, but try to come up with some Marxist answers' (Mitchell 1971:99), and the last 30 years have seen the growth of a rich and rapidly evolving body of thought that has attempted to blend Marxist and feminist methods and concerns. However, few male Marxists have participated in these debates or considered the implications for their own theory.

A pioneering and influential attempt at using Marxist theory to address feminist concerns was made by Juliet Mitchell (Mitchell 1966, 1971, 1974). Rejecting crude economic determinism, she drew on developments in western Marxism which stressed the 'relative autonomy' of political and ideological struggle; she also built on attempts by writers such as Herbert Marcuse to synthesise Marxism and psychoanalysis, and to explore the role of sexuality and the

workings of the unconscious in understanding social processes and change. Mitchell argued that women's situation was determined by four structures: not only the structure of production, traditionally analysed by Marxist theory, but also the interconnected and familybased structures of reproduction, sexuality and the socialisation of children. Although she said that these were ultimately determined by production, she argued that they also had a degree of independence. This meant that they could be addressed directly, and that each might at times play a leading political role. Mitchell therefore advocated autonomous women's organisations, as there would be no automatic dissolution of patriarchy without feminist struggle.

A problem with Mitchell's approach is that it seems to be based on an artificial distinction between economic and ideological struggles, so that the family and (re)productive work are not fully part of a materialist analysis (Wilson 1980). Similar problems arise from the related arguments about the importance of ideology that were developed by Michelle Barrett (Barrett [1980] 1988; Barrett and McIntosh 1982).

While the above analyses effectively counterposed economics and the family, other writers attempted to use orthodox Marxist economic concepts to analyse the importance of women's domestic work. The ensuing 'domestic labour debate' usefully drew attention to the economic importance of women's work in the home; it also helped show that other forms of unpaid work, particularly by Third World peasants and homeworkers, are an integral part of the international economy, central to the processes of capital accumulation (Mies 1998; for recent overviews of the debate, see Gardiner 1997 and Bubeck 1995). However, in seeking to reduce women's oppression to the needs of the capitalist economy the debate failed to ask why it is that domestic labour is overwhelmingly performed by women, or to consider whether men as well as capitalism might benefit from the unequal division of domestic labour. For some feminists, Marxism seemed to be setting the terms of the debate in a form that failed to address the issue of male power, and many therefore agreed with Heidi Hartmann's assessment of the 'unhappy marriage' of Marxism and feminism that 'either we need a healthier marriage or we need a divorce' (Hartmann 1986:2).

Hartmann argued that, far from all social arrangements being a product of class struggle and relations of production, there are two dynamic forces in history, which must be understood in terms of patriarchy as well as class. She claimed that, because men benefit from traditional arrangements, which provide them with 'a higher standard of living than women in terms of luxury consumption, leisure time and personalised services', men of all classes have at least a short-term material interest in maintaining women's oppression (Hartmann 1986:9). This interest predates capitalism and, although it is often reinforced by capitalism, it can sometimes also come into

conflict with it, as men's interests lie in keeping women in the home but capitalism at times needs them in the workplace. This means that patriarchy cannot be reduced to the needs of capitalist class society, and that it could continue beyond it.

A problem with this 'dual systems' approach is that, although Hartmann claimed to have discovered the material basis of women's oppression in men's control over their labour power, this does not make patriarchy a system in the same sense as capitalism, as it does not have its equivalent of the drive to profit (see Pollert 1996). This means that, while it is logically necessary for capitalists to exploit their workforce (if they do not, they will go out of business), it is in principle at least possible for relationships between women and men to be non-oppressive. Iris Young has, however, argued that this possibility cannot be realised in capitalist society which, she says, is based upon an oppressive gender division of labour. From this perspective, patriarchy is built into the whole system of production, so that what we have is not two separate systems, but a unified system of capitalist patriarchy. Young does concede that it is logically possible for capitalism to function without patriarchy. However, she argued that if we treat the gender division of labour as part of the material basis of society, and analyse its changing nature in relation to production, we can see that '... a patriarchal capitalism in which women function as a secondary labour force is the only historical possibility' (Young 1986:62).

Young's analysis followed orthodox Marxism in seeing relations of production as the sources of women's oppression, but reconceptualised these to include the gender division of labour, which she insisted was central to the understanding of any economic system and hence basic to the whole of society. This approach informs Maria Mies' more recent analysis of 'capitalist-patriarchy' as 'an intrinsically interconnected system' in which the gender division of labour and exploitation of women's labour are central to the never-ending, worldwide process of capital accumulation (Mies 1998:38). Both she and Young identify pre-capitalist forms of patriarchy but, rather than seeing patriarchy as unchanging and autonomous, they see it as evolving with changes in production and class relations. Anna Pollert similarly argues that there is a 'fused system of gender and class relations' which can be analysed through the development of a feminist historical materialism, although she dislikes any use of the term 'patriarchy', which she says implies inappropriate theoretical claims (Pollert 1996:647; for related arguments see Ebert 1996). The ideas discussed in this section represent important steps towards recognising both that 'women's work' is economically important and that women's oppression is central to the maintenance of capitalism, rather than a by-product of class society, as most earlier Marxists had concluded. From this reformulated perspective, the analysis of gender inequalities must understand that these are bound up with the economic system, and feminist politics cannot be separated from

anti-capitalist struggle. At the same time, any economic analysis that ignores gender issues will be partial and flawed. For some writers, this means that we must look much more closely at conditions of (re)productive life.

The analysis of (re)production

An important early contribution in this area was made by Lise Vogel, who argued that the key to women's oppression lay in what she termed 'social reproduction', by which she understood the generational reproduction of the workforce and the way in which this was organised. She argued that capitalism had resolved the potential conflict between its drive to extract the maximum profit from women's labour and its need for a continuing supply of healthy workers by institutionalising women's financial dependency on men. This oppressive dependency would, she said, only be resolved in a socialist society in which, because production would be for use rather than profit, the imperative to exploit women's labour would no longer be operative and childcare and domestic labour would be socialised (Vogel 1983).

A problem with this analysis is that women's oppression is again seen as a simple product of class society, and the possibility that it might also benefit men is ignored. The conventional Marxist framework which Vogel attempted to develop can also be criticised for seeing the biological processes of reproduction as an unchanging, natural, animal-like activity. In contrast, some recent writers have argued both that reproduction has a history and that this must be central to our understanding of human society.

Most notoriously, Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* ([1970] 1979) claimed to have rewritten Marx's materialist conception of history by substituting 'reproduction' for 'production', so that the 'sexual-reproductive organisation of society' was the key to economic, legal and political institutions and dominant belief systems. She also claimed both that women's oppression was rooted in their childbearing role and that modern reproductive technology had the potential to liberate them from this, by allowing babies to be grown to term outside of the womb. Firestone's analysis was clearly simplistic, and has found little support from either Marxists or feminists. A more sophisticated attempt to conceptualise human reproduction as a social process related to human consciousness was provided by Mary O'Brien, who argued that two key moments of human history were the first early discovery of paternity, and the development of modern contraceptive technology (O'Brien 1981).

Accepting the importance of such developments need not mean that wider social changes can be simply 'read off' from developments in reproductive knowledge and technology, for the impact of these is mediated in complex ways by their wider economic context and dominant beliefs (including religious beliefs), and also by existing

inequalities between women and men. However, recent rapid developments in reproductive technology (such as the now well-established use of in-vitro fertilisation, developments in genetics which make it possible to select the characteristics of an unborn child, and the increasingly likely possibility of human cloning) throw into stark relief the importance of reproductive issues not only for the situation of women and the nature of family life, but for the very meaning of what it is to be human. Although they have not been explored by mainstream Marxists, these developments must be a central part of any materialist analysis of society.

Biological reproduction is, however, only one part of the socially necessary domestic and caring work that I have labelled '(re)production' but which some other writers refer to as 'social reproduction'. Here, Johanna Brenner has done some important work in extending Marxist methods to explore the complex and historically specific ways in which such work has been organised. For example, she argues that the nineteenth-century 'breadwinner settlement', through which working men were widely expected to be financially responsible for maintaining their wives at home, cannot be understood simply as a response to the needs of either capitalism or patriarchy. Rather, it represented a response to the practical needs of working people at a time when the physical maintenance of a family involved ceaseless toil. As such, it was both fought for by many male trade unionists and welcomed by many working-class women. Since then, changes in the material conditions of domestic work in the west have made it much easier for women to combine (re)productive work in the home with at least some paid employment. This means that the material basis for the settlement is no longer relevant, and fewer women are totally economically dependent on their husbands. However, as Brenner also says, the full and equal participation of women in the workplace would require a degree of capital outlay on parental leave and childcare provision that is unlikely to be forthcoming. She therefore argues both that social reproduction should become a more collective responsibility and that, because this would require a 'serious redistribution of wealth', we will only achieve this as part of a more general anti-capitalist struggle (Brenner 2000:309).

The physical and emotional care of others is another aspect of (re)productive work which is usually unrecognised by economists. Like housework, this is frequently provided without a wage by women in the home, although 'emotional housekeeping' often performs an important function in the workplace, and carework can be paid for as part of the money economy. Unlike housework, much of this work can never be automated, for it is inherently dependent on social interaction. As Diemut Bubeck has argued, this raises problems for Marx's vision of communism as a society of abundance, in which necessary work will be kept to a minimum (Bubeck 1995). If we are to set realistic goals for a society in which

human needs are met, we must therefore include an assessment of how caring work is to be organised.

## CONCLUSION

In 1903, Clara Zetkin wrote: '[Marx's] materialist concept of history has not supplied us with any ready-made formulas concerning the women's question, yet it has done something much more important: it has given us the correct unerring method to comprehend that question' (quoted in Foner 1984:93). To the extent that Marxism sees women's oppression as the historically specific product of particular societies rather than a necessary or natural feature of human society, she was indeed correct. However, as I have argued throughout this chapter, Marx's materialist method needs to be extended to include the (re)productive work that is overwhelmingly performed by women. Such an extension does not offer a simple solution or explanation for oppression, but it is a necessary starting point for analysis.

As many feminists have argued, there is a danger that the use of man-made categories will channel us away from women's experiences and into a framework in which our concerns cannot be expressed. I therefore think that the concept of 'patriarchy', used in a descriptive rather than explanatory sense, should be retained to inform materialist analysis; without this concept the ubiquitous and patterned nature of male power becomes invisible and male priorities continue to be the unquestioned norm (see Bryson 1999).

There remains an ongoing debate between those (including Mary Davis in this volume) who argue that sex oppression is functionally necessary for capitalism, and those, such as Ellen Meiksins Wood, who argue that although it may be very useful it is not strictly necessary (Wood 1995). However, even if it is logically possible to imagine a capitalist society in which men and women are equal, this is highly unlikely. Not only does women's oppression conveniently divide the working class, as Davis argues, but an analysis of women's (re)productive work indicates that the material preconditions for equality would have to include either payment for the domestic and caring work that is currently undertaken without financial reward or the provision of good, affordable childcare and the kind of employment conditions that would allow women and men to combine paid employment with (re)productive work. Such preconditions are unlikely to be met in a society based on the pursuit of profit rather than the satisfaction of human needs.

This does not mean that women's oppression can only be addressed when we have achieved socialism. On the contrary, it means that struggles over conditions of (re)production can be seen as central to more general economic change. If, therefore, women campaign for free access to safe, affordable abortion, or against sexual exploitation, or if they insist that men do their share of the housework, these can be seen as basic material demands as well as political and ideological struggles, for sexuality, reproduction and the family are all part of

the real material conditions in which we produce and reproduce. At the same time, the analysis of (re)productive work shows that this is vitally important to the health and survival of any society, and that changing conditions of (re)production can both constitute limitations and create possibilities for its future development. Giving weight to these areas of human experience and activity is not simply a matter of justice for women, 'something for the girls' to be added after the important issues have been dealt with, but an essential prerequisite for effective political analysis and action.

#### GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

For more detailed discussion of developments in Marxist feminism from the nineteenth century to the present day, see Bryson (2003), and for an expanded version of arguments in this chapter see Bryson (2004). On the concepts of 'production' and 'reproduction' in Marxist thought, see Marx's 'Introduction' to his *Grundrisse*, and the entries by Fine and Himmelweit in Bottomore (1991). Sargent (1986) provides a now classic collection on the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. Stevi Jackson (1999) provides a good discussion of the relationship between Marxism and feminism from the early 1970s, which unpicks the question of terminology well. I have found the collection of articles by Brenner (2000) particularly insightful.

#### NOTE

1. In simple terms, surplus value is created when workers produce more than they need to maintain themselves. Under capitalism, this surplus is appropriated as profit by the owners of the means of production.

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