

ŽARKO PAIĆ

NEOLIBERALISM, OLIGARCHY AND POLITICS OF THE EVENT: AT THE EDGE OF CHAOS

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Žarko Paić, a prolific Croatian political philosopher, author and editor, is a living proof of a paradoxical insight which might probably be found somewhere in the vast corpus of Adornian cultural critique. Paić himself likes to invoke the saying. The gist of it goes something like this: the relative peace of petty bourgeois existence is good for philosophy.¹ If not in the sense of challenges and ordeals thrown in the face of philosophy as a way of life of the singular living being in search of the true life, paradigmatically shown in Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, the adage certainly works for modernity where the paradigm of philosophy—or one of its paradigms at least—took a mature shape in the works of the great authors of German Idealism. When philosophy became writing, it arguably demanded peace of existence necessary for reading, steady reflection and writing. Indeed, Ivanić grad—Johannesburg, as it is called by at least some of its inhabitants with a hint of warm irony²—where the author of *Neoliberalism, Oligarchy and Politics of the Event: At the Edge of Chaos* abides in a detached house, is a small relatively peaceful place, counting about 15,000 human souls. Although the town had its portion of turbulent social transition in the 1990s and onwards, nothing especially chaotic is to be observed there. It is still a good place to indulge not only in transcendental critiques of knowledge but to exercise philosophical thought by contemplating the tectonic movements of the historical-political *Weltgeist*. In other words, Ivanić grad is Paić's Königsberg, even if he leaves its confines more frequently than Kant left his place of residence, since Paić's academic workplace is located in Zagreb, the nearby capital, where he teaches social studies at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Textile Technology.

¹ Adorno expressed nostalgia for many things, including the leisure of bourgeois walks. Associated with peripatetic ideal of philosophy or not, Adorno claimed that this fine practice—simply walking instead of running or driving—was “dying out along with the liberal epoch”. Cf. *Minima Moralia*, III/102.

² “Ivan” is Croatian variant of John (or Johannes), and “grad” means „city“.

Paić's latest book brings his political thought to the English speaking readers in an accessible format of six chapters spanning on a bit less than 250 pages, the index of names included. Chapters can be read separately as insightful self-standing essays but they make a mutually enriching coherent whole, developing important motives—by way of the structure of a fugue—up to the culmination in the last chapter. The book is a digest of Paić's thought at the latest stage of its development. It showcases an impressive command of what is sometimes called Continental political philosophy. To be sure, Paić paints a highly pessimistic picture where Schmittian geopolitical large spaces (*Grossräume*) combine with what Paić calls "the technosphere". This dark challenge per se brings nothing good or sublime to the notorious political animal diagnosed back then by Aristotle: "Neither God nor the machines of cognitive evolution promise unique happiness for man in the upcoming era" (3). However, all political hope is not lost. Like the later Habermas, Paić has still not abandoned writing political theory (for writing a Hellenistic diary of a singular human existence in the era of cultural decadence). He still searches for the political, including the contemplations of the possibilities of constitution of the political subject. He is no John Gray, exhibiting mystical skepticism à la George Santayana; he still thinks critiques of global capitalism and neoliberalism are worth writing and clings at least to bits of Walter Benjamin's political theology. To remind the reader, Benjamin famously quipped (and Paić invokes the motto) that hope is given for the sake of the hopeless.³

(1) The first chapter sets the stage for the world-historical battlefield of today "at the edge of chaos" on both political and epistemological level. Paić paints a bleak picture of contemporary world. Kant's projection of perpetual peace and its forces—one can find distant, less philosophically sophisticated and more ideologically ardent offspring of the Enlightenment optimism in the work of Steven Pinker—is replaced with a picture of global war and mobilization instead of a world community, an Aristotelian *philia politiké*. Theoretically speaking, it's a combination of Schmitt and Agamben on the surface ("ontic") level while Heideggerian analysis works on the deeper ontological level. "The nihilism of world history after 'total war' becomes a planetary destiny" (16) kind of sums up this pessimism, although, following Benjamin, as I have hinted above and will return to it at the very end, Paić's writing is not devoid of messianic hope. Already this introductory chapter shows that Heidegger is especially important for Paić's thought. Heidegger is, in my opinion, the most important thinker

3 Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben. One of latest of Paić's books is about political thought of Walter Benjamin. It is called *The Angel of History and the Messiah of Event*. Cf. Paić, Žarko. 2018. *Andeo povijesti i mesija događaja: Umjetnost-politika-tehnika u djelu Waltera Benjamina*, Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije.

that exercised influence on Paić, especially on his concept of the technosphere, which comes as no surprise since Paić is a pupil of Vanja Sutlić (1925–1989), a longtime philosophy teacher based at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb, and an influential interpret of Heidegger in the former Yugoslavia. To remind the reader of the basics once again: “Heidegger notoriously treats the rise of modern epistemological standpoint as a stage in the development of a stance of domination to the world, which culminates in contemporary technological society.”⁴

This seems to say that epistemology is not politically or ecologically innocent and that new technology has its logic impairing our thinking. We need not fully subscribe to Agamben’s pessimism about the demise of the very idea and the tradition of the university, which is to be replaced with suspicious outposts of a telematic dictatorship of video conferences in the latest bizarre developments associated with counter-epidemic measures concerning the global spread of the corona virus, but we can see in it a gloomy confirmation of the easily changeable and non-authentic “the They” (*das Man*) associated with the modern techniques of “enframing” (*Gestell*) (21, 23). Paić writes, further developing Sutlić’s thought:

When the metaphysical notion of the world disappears on the horizon in the whole assemblage of Being-God-World-Man and becomes replaced by the techno-politics of “total mobilization”, then this situation can no longer be comprehended by the concept of the *intermezzo* of worlds, as Croatian philosopher Vanja Sutlić proposed in his search for an exit from metaphysics after Heidegger on his path of “historical thinking” (Sutlić 1988). It is the reign of frenzy between Being and event ... the prosperity of freedom in the upcoming era does not seem possible from the uncompromising uncertainty of the future ... we are faced with the construction of an absolute event as the emergence of something that cannot be taken in a causal-teleological way (22).

The old metaphysics is dead, we live in the new era. But is that only a pessimistic diagnosis or a call for the new politics? Politics replacing what exactly? The remaining chapters of Paić’s treatise discuss the political meaning of the diagnosis above. Second and third chapter deal with Rancière’s politics of disagreement pitted against the policed order of

4 We are a part of “the knower-known complex”, which, for Heidegger, constitutes “the fact that anything can *appear* or come to light at all”. This is famously developed in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, embedding the thinking subject back in history. These three quotes—one in the main text in two in this note—are taken from the essay of the interpret of the Continental philosophy that rendered these and other essential points about Heidegger and others with praiseworthy clarity. Cf. Taylor, Charles. 1995. “Overcoming Epistemology”. In: *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press: 1-19, pp. 8-9. All the other quotes in this review essay are taken from Paić’s book.

partage du sensible—policy is authorized choice, as we more mundane political scientists tend to say—and with Badiou’s politics of the event which arguably—with its quasi negative-theological framing of various political eruptions associated with the changes of order, new identities and names that are produced—goes a step further in its world-historical ambition of post-Hegelian political philosophy. Fourth chapter deals with the political and economic dimensions of the global governance, analyzing corporations, oligarchy and populism. The last two chapters discuss the technosphere associated with cognitive capitalism and the spectacle of politics of resistance and subversion. In the rest of this essay, I will give these chapters a brief interpretive overview (2-5) and then conclude with appraising the importance of the book as a whole.

(2) Paić offers a close reading of Rancière and contrasts him to Lyotard and Badiou. Rancière sees politics as disagreement (*mésentente*). Against an erected order, a regime type as a form, associated with the world “police” in its wider cameral sense, politics is at its core associated with struggle: “The principle of democracy cannot be governed here, but instead it concerns that which is completely opposed to it” (38). Politics is thus not an object of political science or political sociology, and even less of political philosophy in the sense of preconceived theories of subjectivation from Plato to Kant and onwards. It refers to the process of contingent struggle for emancipation. This brings forth the old revolutionary question troubling the political thinkers in the post-Marxist world who over and over again display some serious problems with the (re)discovery of the political (*Erfindung des Politischen*):

Therefore, this political thinking also denotes methodically anarchic and systematic assemblages in its playful combination of new concepts. What and who is the subject of Rancière’s politics of emancipation? Is it the demos in the meaning of a modern political nation as citizenship in existing political areas, or perhaps an emancipated class of unrecognizable people who ask for that which belongs to the contingency that becomes the universal necessity of the historical survival of mankind—equality? If it is the former, then why does Rancière not take into account its real qualities and defects but postulates the subject of a mystical rebellion against the “police order” of modern technology and its form of oligarchic rule with the rationality, competence and expertise of the meritocracy? If the latter might be right, how can this abstract totality of struggle for the particular recognition of the “class” of the sans-part truly be established without the simultaneous transformation of the Other, beyond the class-social hierarchy of society in the age of global capitalism? (43)

The abstract character of Rancière’s writing surely opens lots of venues of interpretation and makes him interesting for the attempts of anar-

chic subverting of neoliberalism and it's up to readers to decide its ultimate merit which Paić's careful reading makes easier. Anyhow, it is not Plato's cave with its forms, and ideal of community with its almost organic hierarchy that is the ideal of politics, and that's an interesting concurrence of political thought with Popper, a classical liberal. Instead of the truth of the good that leads the philosopher with its light, it is the truth of politics as discord that subverts an given division of the sensible as a static particularity. If there is an antagonistic shortcut to define both of these thinkers, it's to say they are "an anti-Strauss", one in the liberal agnostic division of forces, the other offering a *carte blanche* affirmation of discord, a hatred of democracy against elitist scorn for its pandering to desire.

(3) Another line of attack against various myths of political order comes from Badiou's mysticism of the event and his conception of metapolitics. Along with some hints of Lacan which sound a bit like Leonard Cohen song—"a crack in the 'real'"—Paić offers a Heideggerian reading of the political mystique of *l'événement*, highlighting "its singularity and unpredictability as a creative-destructive Nothing in Being itself." He continues, placing this scandal in the context of history of ideas: "The abyss is not something *in-between* Being. Rather, it is the space for the realization of something that is the opposite of the classical metaphysical category of possibility from Aristotle to Hegel" (70). This means we are once again, as in the case of Rancière, facing a charge on the categories of political philosophy in the tradition of Kant and Arendt. Paić associates this with Heidegger's chief problem, namely the "issue of overcoming metaphysics (*Überwindung der Metaphysik*) as the technical destiny of the Western history of Being" (77). Politics itself is an anti-philosophical event. This is a parallel to Rancière, but it has a decidedly stronger timbre of political theology, since its mysteries precede the Hegelian wise owl and its grayish palette: "In other words, science as a generic production of truth begins only after pre-existing things and matters, which means that it belongs to the mystery of the *post-event*." (85)

Basically, it seems that Badiou offers us a sort of vague political theology appealing to the Left in its long genealogy from the French Revolution to this day. The difference to Christianity, although its eschatological connotations are kept (Russell's reading of Marx echoes here), is that meta-historical event of salvation through Christ's love and sacrifice is replaced with an atheistic political event. However, Paić, against the likes of John Gray once again, sees more to Badiou's political thinking than transferring religious hopes to secular deified humanity. He finds Badiou important for the critical thinking about the technosphere: "Instead of faith in scientific-technical progress, or, in Marx's term, 'productive forces', Badiou neutralized the faith in the mission of *technosphere*. He did this by returning

to the political dimension of the relationship between science, technology, and society” (88). The technosphere, a bit similar to the Ken Kesey’s machinist ensemble called the Combine, reflects Heidegger’s concept of absolute power as described in the 1938 piece *Besinnung* (*Mindfulness*), written after his political debacle with the Nazis. To put it in a lengthy syntagm, it is a dynamic imperial planetary rational totality neutralizing all opponents (94, 176). Badiou, with his politics of the event, plays the same role for Paić as Hölderlin and Nietzsche did for Heidegger: if Deleuze helps him to diagnose what the technosphere is—to identify its “ontology” (95)—Badiou’s (meta)politics⁵ of the event promise “paths of anti-philosophy in search of the salvific exit from the one-way street of modernity” (94). Ultimately, Paić’s appraisal puts Badiou in the shadow of Heidegger’s challenge to modernity:

Within the thought of Badiou, Žižek and Agamben, as well as within their search for traces of upcoming community from the spirit of the politics of truth, do we not encounter just another spin within the same assumptions with which contemporary philosophy after Heidegger finds itself in the wilderness? We are consequently left with only two paths to the same impossible point. One is marked by the signs of politics, and the other by aesthetic attempts. But both paths should be determined as colossal failures of thinking. It is precisely from the inability to calculate the “Being” of that technical framework which is so uncanny and yet so simple—and, precisely because of that, also impenetrable—that all these violent radicalisms of philosophy, politics, and democracy come. Anyway, the right to miss is still and only the right of those who think a great deal. Badiou is certainly one of them (99).

5 The concept of metapolitics (*métapolitique*), with its long and interesting history that cannot be unpacked here, is another reason of the dialogue between Rancière and Badiou opened on the pages of Paić’s treatise. What does it mean? Paić renders Rancière’s tripartite distinction archipolitics-parapolitics-metapolitics, which discards class differentiated communities of conservative thought and liberal-democratic constitutionalism of only formal equality. Yet another *partage du sensible*, a cynic might object, goes like this: archipolitics and its nomos of the community preserve the hierarchy in the function of the organic whole, while its metaphysical justification isn’t the true light of the good but a contingent politics of the ruling class. Parapolitics tames egalitarian anarchy of the people into the constitutional order of democracy. Its promise of real equality is not fulfilled and it lives on the exclusions. Metapolitics, a term which Badiou uses to oppose the tradition of political philosophy, condemns the first and claims to go beyond the second i.e. “the parapolitical view of equality in the form of constitutional-legal norms or ideologies of the ruling class” (110). I surmise this combination of strong normative demand and not-so-clear content, if we would set ourselves on the search for precision, could be translated in some of the Lenin’s formulas concerning state and revolution, seeing bourgeois political liberties as an ideological smokescreen associated with capitalist slavery, but the idea of the repetition of history as tragedy and then as farce fortunately cuts both ways, so this does not seem as a promising start, at least as a blueprint for political practice with a concrete referent.

Badiou tried and failed but it was a worthy attempt in Paić's opinion. And the political subject? It is, as with Rancière, not quite clear. It should be militant, worthy of a secular mysticism of the event, but it "must be contingent. It is always a product of a specific event (95).

(3) In the third chapter the analysis becomes more faceted. To be sure, it remains philosophical, but it also turns from the genre of political philosophy to political sociology. One could, alongside with the leftist neo-Schmittian voices of Laclau and Mouffe, read parts of it as a critique of Giddens' and Beck's view of the late modernity. In any case, we get a clearer empirical picture of new political structures associated with the challenge of Heidegger's philosophy and the political ideas of Rancière and Badiou rebelling against the tradition of political philosophy. Paić's critique of contemporary capitalist global world order and its oligarchy corresponds roughly to the following picture. In its semi-sphere, politics becomes marketing. Although it uses the same name, it is not politics in the Greek sense as interpreted e.g. by Arendt. Furthermore, neither Althusser's ideological apparatuses nor the power mechanisms of Foucault's disciplinary society are not the eminent danger for political freedom. Instead, it's something Paić, following Deleuze's line of thought, calls a "bio-cybernetical code" which is "reflected in all the levels of the relationship between man and the environment in the capitalist drive of total mobilization" (105). On the ontological level, it's Heidegger's critique of machination (*Machenschaft*) and enframing (*Gestell*) that sets the picture of this machine-the knower-known complex, as Taylor puts it, of contemporary world. On the level of political philosophy, Paić profits much from his careful reading of Foucault's late 1970s lectures about liberalism. He concludes: "But as Foucault demonstrated by reinterpreting Marx's critique of the political reduction is carried out by acquiring an ideological character of knowledge/power on the processes of production of life. It means only one thing: the economy occupies the life-world in the same way as necessity occupies freedom" (121). Instead of liberal division between politics and economy governmental techniques of "management-marketing" permeate the whole social body and *voilà* the new subjectivity of the cognitive capitalism of the technosphere where the "[a]uto-reflection of the rationalization process takes place at all levels" (121), while happiness is nowhere to be found in the "mass society without a real subject" where political choice is substituted by the "psychopolitics of the oligarchy" (126).

Paić uses Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* to illustrate the cultural paradigm of anxiety and depression, psychologically accompanying this bleak political sociology, while references to Bernard Stiegler's "mafiaization" serve to show how the usual term corruption is not adequate anymore

since the thing has been quite public for a long time now: “Godfathers and close relatives are no longer in the underworld. They are networked in the power structure of the global order” (130). This oligarchy of neoliberal capitalism seem to be worse than its Sicilian underground predecessors: “The speculative realism of neoliberal capitalism occurs everywhere that we can see architectonic towers, the urban monsters of a corporate architecture that rise to fascinating heights not because there is no longer a space for horizontal expansion, but because power is always a matter of vertical hierarchy, whether it is real or symbolic” (130). In this chapter, Paić also tackles some specific political themes, be it the immigrants with the help of Agamben, the democratic deficit of the European Union lacking the political demos, or the ever important case of China:

The Confucian ethos of loyalty to the state as a corporation and the neoliberal strategy of conquering the markets around the world carry within themselves the possibilities of transformation into one another and vice versa. China has no dialectics of history. But does it have a history of dialectical jumps and transgressive cultures as a tradition left behind by the cult of origin and the enticement of authenticity? (139)

(4) The fourth chapter deals with the corporation as sort of the basic organizational cell of the global capitalism. In Paić’s discourse, this political-economic order appears not as a simple combination of a Marxist base with its ideological superstructure, but as a more faceted assemblage of life, economics, politics and culture. It includes both the biosphere with its questions of cybernetic ecosystem, human and animal life; the mediasphere with its constructed cave-like reality observed already by Lipmann in his skeptical treatment of public opinion about hundred years ago, meanwhile mutating into telematic societies diagnosed by Latour (153); and the already mentioned Paić’s pet concept of technosphere as the “assemblage of inputs”, including “technoscience, information and communication technologies, and new media” (145).

While the corporation, if I read Paić correctly, serves as a sort of a virus, spreading a specific economic logic form the system to the environment, the technoscience serves as a “new productive force” of this assemblage (151). In this chapter, Paić is skeptical to some authors I still find instructive. Bourdieu’s distinctions between the forms of capital seems to be antiquated in the world of digital ontology and dematerialized cryptocurrencies, simulacra and the new professions “of this is the new (political) economy of the productive consumption of neuro-cognitive capital in a state of the total mobilization of *attention*” (166). This chapters offers intriguing Paić’s reading of both Hegel and Spinoza on freedom and Marx and Heidegger on world change. While the former chapter ended a bit mystically, affirming the political freedom of action – “An alternative exists. It is

in the event of the upcoming community of the absolute politics of equality as a system of universal freedom and justice. To it belongs our confidence and our struggle for the fulfilment of the meaning of life” (144) – the latest dialectical moment of Paić’s developing fugue, makes things more demanding since the technosphere seems to colonize the very human soul, concept important both for theology and Foucauldian analyses of the genealogy of Western morality. With the following definition of marketing and a pop-cultural reference, the stage is for the final analysis of the spectacle “at the edge of chaos”:

Where is the essence of marketing? In selling a product or in something that a product as a contingent object desires in itself has as a mystery? The answer to that question lies in the gap between the object and the desublimated experience of the objectification of the desire itself. Marketing does not sell goods/objects. It is a strategy of appropriating-expropriating the soul of the Other by turning it into a subject of free choice. Fashion designer Ralf Lauren made that clear: “I do not just sell clothes. I offer to the world the philosophy of life” (184).

(5) The final essay brings the elements of the analyses together. It develops the ideas in the realm of political sociology and political economy into a fuller picture of the technosphere. It provides it with now completed philosophical underpinning reached via Heidegger, but also Deleuze, probably the second most important thinker for Paić in his thoughts about the technosphere. The chapter also returns to the more political motives of the first two chapters dealing with Rancière and Badiou, by further discussing the idea of political revolution. Finally, it delves into the realm of political eschatology, inspired with Derrida and Benjamin, appropriately to this genre, ending with seven theses.

Paić uses the term “posthuman condition” in association with the techno-scientific capital and the claim that “man is reduced to biogenetic code” and that “[a]ll sciences have now become technoscience” (189-190): “The shift from technology to the *technosphere* means the transition from the analogue to the digital paradigm of the historical development of thinking and Being”. Not only artificial intelligence, but artificial life as well, “thanks to the relationship between nanotechnology and the cognitive machines, have become the creators of life from the uncanny power of immateriality”. Life is no longer a gift and a destiny, a biological given but something deeply immersed into a cognitive model of capitalism. This constellation of modern technology and life brings us beyond Marx’ critique of political economy and even Heidegger’s conception of enframing. We thus arrive at Deleuze’s ideas on the other side of the “metaphysics of the subject”, i.e. “on the plane of immanence and creative utopia” (206).

On the political level, Paić claims that all revolutions are unfinished (204) and evokes Heidegger's idea that "no 'revolution' is 'revolutionary' enough" (29, 217). Paić develops the idea of revolution as follows: "Revolution, therefore, does not belong to either Being or time in the traditional meaning of stability, immutability, and eternity. The word refers to the unpredictability and the contingency of *events*" (206). In other words, it is not something that can be foreseen within any philosophical discourse, so the reader that expected a more specific call to political arms, will be left wanting. On the eschatological level, however, following Derrida and the idea of messianic without God, presented in Benjaminian format of theses (the one Benjamin shares both with Luther and Marx, among others), and with some philosophical hints of Deleuze, the finale of the seven points concluding the book is the following: (1) capital without form replaced the old distinctions between the types of capital; (2) oligarchies and corporations of the societies of control reduce identitarian differences to ethno-cultural folklore; (3) revolutionary thinking must leave the paradigm of technoscientific thinking of progress ("Thinking cannot be 'revolutionary' because it is not preceded by the unpredictability of the event."); (4) true dignity of humanity must turn over the very essence of the technosphere (Paić refers to Sutlić here: "The beginning of historical thinking takes place in the technical constellation of nihilism"); (5) since we live "at the edge of chaos" ("This is our destiny and salvation from the total control of the acceleration of what remains of society"), and (6) accelerating artificial time, together with artificial life, leads to the loss of substance ("Capital in its form of cognitive networks of neurons is determined qualitatively by becoming the subject without substance, the machine for the accumulation of space as well as a time machine of 'bad infinity'), it is once again time to invoke "the upcoming community" (7): "The time remaining may still be sufficient for the experiment of absolute freedom. It is only just that is left to the joyful adventure of thinking and living together" (219).

As usual, the time will tell. Popper's critique of historicism still serves as a convenient logical trump of any political fortune telling, especially in the case of world-historical eschatologies of various contingent and local political projects, as John Gray, a postliberal mystical skeptic turning his attention to ancient atheisms, has labeled liberalism, for him just an evangelical political face of failed Enlightenment. Paić attempts to leave this paradigm and he has not abandoned political hope which is, unlike science, a non-falsifiable currency. As for myself, I am happy that he has put together his political philosophy (in the wider sense of the word), and made it available to the English speaking community. Since I am writing this review in the times of the worldwide coronavirus crisis with constant media induced fears of new pandemic waves and the policies of tests, masks, quarantine

and distancing, locally intermingled with specific political and economic rationales in ever unfolding global state of exception, Paić thoughts come as timely. This concrete crisis might subside, and we, the members of the new-normal academia, where the Foucauldian anonymity stunt of the masked philosopher acquires a new ironical meaning, might return to the old normal, peripatetic or sedentary, it is of less importance. However, even if Agamben is wrong on diagnosing the new level of the state of exception, telematic dictatorship and the end of universitas as real interaction of teachers and students, the biopolitical rationale associated with the oligarchies, corporations and the logics of enframing, seems to enable such shifts of normality all too easily. It induces strange but in retrospect perfectly “normal” patterns of politics. It may also, when one thinks of political ethics, call not for a revolution as an event of real abrupt change, but, as MacIntyre hoped, some sort of new Benedict-like figure, patiently building political virtue from below. Once again, two thousand and three hundred years after Aristotle, we might be facing a problem of *phronesis*, political prudence as a practical translation of hope against all odds and a concrete step of freedom in the realm of unfolding global political eschatologies.

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