

CONCEPT OF CIVIL OBEDIENCE AND DISOBEDIENCE: A COMPARISON OF THE WORK OF ETIENNE DE LA BOETIE AND SAYYID QUTB

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Abstract: This paper explores the concepts of obedience and disobedience as reactions to the control of the State based on the nonviolent civil disobedient ideology of Etienne de la Boetie (1530 – 1563) and the radical revivalist Islamic ideology of Sayyid Qutb (1906 – 1966). For Boetie, the main focus of political philosophy is why people consent to their own enslavement. In other words, why people support states that suppress them directly or indirectly. Why do people, always, in all places, obey and follow the commands of the governments which is made up of a small minority of the society. In his view, the central problem of political philosophy should be, understanding this mystery of civil obedience. Both Qutb and Boetie accept that states or governments are more vulnerable than people think. They can collapse in an instant particularly, when people withdraw their consent. Despite agreeing on the importance of the withdrawal of consent from the state and that this withdrawal of support can lead to the state collapsing, the means they suggest for how this should be done differ, vastly. Boetie advises in his writings that this should be done in a non-violent manner whereas Qutb encourages the use of radical violent means that he describes using the concepts; *jahiliyya*, *hakimiyyah*, and *jihad*. This article compares both of their arguments, their effectiveness, and their influence on contemporary politics of the Western and Islamic world.

Tags: (dis)obedience, fundamentalism, despotism, totalitarianism, *Jahiliyyah*, *Hakimiyyah*, *Jihad*, *Sharia*

Introduction

In today's political world the term disobedience has received much political attendance. Starting with anti-globalization protests in the US and Switzerland, continuing with the Occupy Wall Street Movement and the Arab Spring people have started to express their opposition against their governments' behaviour and decisions using different ways of civil disobedience. Bernard Harcourt explained civil disobedience based on reflection of the Occupy Wall Street movement as "accepted the legitimacy of political institutions, but resisted the moral authority of resulting laws...the very way in which we are governed: the structure of partisan politics, the demand for policy reforms, the call for party identification, and the very ideologies that dominated the post- War period" (Laudani & Sitze, 2013). Modern day disobedience challenges both law and politics.

When people engage in dissent against their governments or against its power, several different strategies are employed. These strategies can be captured using terms such as mass violent protests, terrorism, fundamentalism, violence and radicalism. This raises many questions about what are these strategies, on what ideologies are they based, who engages in these events, are these only ways in which people protest and why often only a minority of people get involved in these protests. Whether people like it or not the State or government holds much power and often this power maybe seen as oppressive to its people. This paper examines what might be the basis of reacting differently to this power and the different manners in which people work to overcome oppressive States using the philosophies of Etienne de la Boetie and Sayyid Qutb.

The term civil disobedience was coined by Henry David Thoreau, in his essay, *Resistance to Civil Government*, where he describes it as a way of resisting the power of the Government. He encouraged the refusal to pay the state poll tax implemented by the US government to prosecute a war in Mexico and to enforce the fugitive Slave Law (Thoreau, 1848). Later, it was formerly developed and defended by John Rawls. In the history of thoughts of nonviolent disobedience there are four most influential advocates, namely, Etienne de la Boetie, Henry David Thoreau, Mahatama Ghandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Nonviolent civil disobedience means engaging in behaviours that can be considered as dissent, to challenge a law of the government or social order without using violent or physical force (Oduor, 2011). Generally, the following techniques can be used as nonviolent civil disobedience; strikes, refusal to pay taxes, mass demonstrations, refusal to follow official orders such as curfew, and the formation of alternative institutions for political legitimacy and social organization (Zunes, 2003).

Etienne de la Boetie

The modern political thought on civil disobedience begins with French political philosopher Etienne de la Boetie. In his book, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* suggests that governments rely on the fearful obedience and submission of their people. He was influenced by Niccolo Machiavelli. But the difference between them is Machiavelli instructs the Prince to strengthen his rule whereas Boetie focuses on ways to overthrow the government and to secure the liberty of the individual.

In his view, tyranny depends on popular acceptance and tyrants have power that is given by people and they are agreed to their own subjection. If it is not the case no tyranny could last. To Boetie, the main mystery of politics was obedience to rulers. Why do we agree to be oppressed by governments? Rothbard (2011) introduces Boetie as “one of the seminal political philosophers” and the “first theorist of the strategy of mass, non-violent civil disobedience,” and credits him with originating “fundamental insight... that every tyranny must necessarily be grounded upon general popular acceptance.” (Rothbard, 2002)

Sayyid Qutb

On the contrary, modern Islamic philosopher Sayyid Qutb is vastly credited with creating a fundamental radical turning point in modern Islamic political philosophy. He proposed a radical and violent interpretation of *Jihad* as a means of civil disobedience against the state. Qutb is the main developer of doctrine of the violent *jihad* in modern times, particularly, legitimizing violent Muslim resistance to states that are considered Muslim states but where implementation of Islamic principles is judged as imperfect. *Al-Qaida* and their Islamic *Jihadist* vision were mostly influenced by Qutb’s thoughts in justifying their goal for the world and the violence they promote. Further, some scholars describe him as John Locke of the Islamic world as he promoted freedom and advocated rebellion against tyrannical or totalitarian states.

Qutb ideas spread outside the Middle East and his thoughts are studied and interpreted in many ways. For example, religious laws were implemented based on Qutb’s thoughts in Afghanistan. Though, Qutb was a Sunni Muslim, his thoughts of a politicized Islam was influenced by *Shiite* ruler Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. During the trip to America Qutb was exposed to what he considered the West’s spiritual and moral bankruptcy, though he admired their scientific and economic achievements. Qutb’s rejection of west led him to embrace the Islamic Brotherhood agenda. Both had similarity in their anti-west attitude and both called for return to Islam. Qutb’s Most popular work *Milestones* outlines his political philosophy which is based on the concept that all earthly sovereignty belongs to God alone. He called Muslims to challenge Western ideology and become liberated from the West and its values. The following words explain the basis for his vision and ideology;

“Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice..... because humanity is devoid of those vital values for its healthy development and real progress” (Qutb, 1990).

Methods and Materials

The researcher uses content and comparative analysis in examining civil (dis)obedience in the view of Boeti and Qutb. Their thoughts of political philosophy are critically analysed. In addition to the content and comparative analysis the researcher uses historical method in writing this paper. Upon using the historical method the researcher will reinterpret information gathered through the following materials; books, journals and magazines, autobiographies, and various websites. Further, as for the primary resources in tracing Boeti’s and Qutb’s thoughts on political philosophy, the researcher will refer their original works; Boeti works of *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1975), Sayyid Qutb works; *Social Justice in Islam* (2000), *The Religion of the Future* (2007), *Milestones* (1990), etc.

Analysis

Boetie’s views of tyranny and civil disobedience

Boetie analyses deeply the nature of tyranny and state rule and emphasized that popular acceptance is compulsory to the existence of tyranny. Popular support is used by tyranny to suppress its people and state power is used to influence every aspect of people. Tyranny consists of a small number of people though elected by majority where the majority accept to follow its commands. If tyranny does not have general support and people do not agree to submission his tyranny, no tyranny and no government rule will last. Therefore, the

central problem for Boetie is, in his political philosophy is, “*why in the world do people consent to their own enslavement?*”? He said,

“I should merely to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him,” (as cited in Newman, 2007).

Boetie emphasized the submission of people is related to consent rather to fear. He opposes tyranny and the consent and submission people have to their own enslavement. This opposition is based on the theory of natural law and natural right to be free. In his view, every individual has equal liberty. Therefore, nature gives us the common gift of voice and speech. Accordingly, Boetie calls for civil disobedience, mass non-violent resistance, with the goal of overthrowing tyranny; to show the power of the masses and the great value of natural liberty. Since tyranny relies on the consent of people, it can be overthrown by the withdrawal of the consent. Therefore, non-violent disobedience is in the way to recapture liberty. He says, “obviously, there is no need of fighting to overcome this single tyrant, for he his automatically defeated if the country refuses consent to its own enslavement,” (De la Boetie, 1975).

Further, Boetie indicates if individual gives more power to tyranny the stronger and mightier it will be. The power of tyranny is given by people but it is used to destroy and spy on people. He asks;

“How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had not cooperated from you? What could he do to you if you yourselves did not connive with the thief who plunders you, if you were not accomplices of the murderer who kills you, if you were not traitors to your selves? ” (as cited in Jensen and Draffin, 2004)

As it is mentioned earlier, force is not the hypothetical way to change the regime. Those regimes should be deprived from public supply of fund and resources. Therefore, people do not need to shed their blood but he advocates non-violent resistance and mass civil disobedience. He says;

“You sow your crops in order that he may ravage them, you install and furnish your homes to give goods to pillage; you rear daughters that he may gratify his lust; you bring up your children in order that he may confer upon them the greatest privilege he knows- to be led into his battles, to be delivered to butchery, to be made the servants of his greed and the instruments of his vengeance; you yield your bodies unto hard labour in order that he may indulge in his delights and wallow in his filthy pleasures; you weaken yourselves in order to make him the stronger and the mightier to hold you in check. From all these indignities, such as the very beasts of the field would not endure, you can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free. Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break in pieces,” (De la Boetie, 1975).

In Boetie’s view there are three types of tyrants (De la Boetie, 1975). Some get position through elections by masses, others by power of arms, and others through inheritance. According to Boetie, Conquerors rule the country as if they conquered the country and some other’s as if the land is inherited. Though, elected authorities are more tolerable, they can also change into a hereditary despotism. If there is mass consent to any of those three rules, they are silently consented to be subjugated, dominated, and terrorized and loss of their liberty. Basically, Boetie emphasises all rulers are tyrants though they come in different forms. They behave in the same way. They view the country or state as their properties. He says;

“Still the method of ruling is practically the same; those who are elected act as if they were breaking in bullocks; those who are conquerors make the people their prey; those who are heirs plan to treat them as if they were their natural slaves” (De la Boetie, 1975).

Why do the people tolerate the servitude and misery? How does one ruler mistreat a great number of people? According to Boetie, it is the fault of people that they suffer and are enslaved under the government. People tolerate the voluntary servitude because of custom and habit. People have mind-sets that they have been enslavement, that is, their fathers had the same life. Therefore, they are also obliged to have the same life and

will be persuaded by copying others' life. In this view, Boeti suggests social engineering is the key element to awake in people their right to engage in revolution. People should be guided and ruled by reasoning not by power.

Consent of people is encouraged and motivated by the states or ruler. Rulers use various techniques in order to earn this consent and they divert people's attention away from truly important problems affecting their lives. One of these techniques is circuses with entertaining distractions such as plays, gladiators, farces, medals, pictures, spectacles and other such opiates (De la Boetie, 1975). Further, rulers follows the motto "divide and conquer". The ruler distracts and divides people by income, race, ethnicity, religion, and political party affiliations. He explains;

“ Thus the despot subdues his subjects, some of them by means of others, and thus is he protected by those from whom, if they were decent men, he would have to guard himself; just as, in order to split wood, one has to use a wedge of the wood itself” (De la Boetie, 1975)

Another technique of motivating consent is related to ideological brainwashing; let people believe that the ruler is wise, just, and benevolent. In this view, Boetie points out modern rulers use this technique in more sophisticated way; For example by making charming political speeches relating to public welfare and common good. Further, rulers would use religion for their own protection and to strengthen their evil ways. They use symbols of religions and mythical meaning to create the impression that they were chosen by God to rule the country. Therefore, they are not like everyone else. He points out;

“It has always happened that tyrants, in order to strengthen their power, have made every effort to train their people not only in obedience and servility toward themselves, but also in *adoration*” (De la Boetie, 1975).

Further, rulers use another technique to get support and consent of people by purchasing material benefits bread and circuses. Giving of largest aid in the name of free health care, food stamp, and creating welfare systems for the masses does not come from pure intention but to make them to feel they really receive benefit from the rulers. Literally, the people receive a small part of the wealth and they themselves ultimately pay for it;

“Tyrants would distribute largesse, a bushel of wheat, a gallon of wine, and a sesterce: and then everybody would shamelessly cry, “Long live the King!” The fools did not realise that they were merely recovering a portion of their own property, and that their ruler could not have given them what they were receiving without having first taken it from them... the mob has always behaved in this way-eagerly open to bribes that cannot be honourably accepted” (Rothbard, 2002).

How can people escape this voluntary servitude? When people are squeezed by rulers, misery of people increases. Is violent necessary to get rid of tyranny? Boetie, realises that if violent actions were required then most (wo)men would not participate because they do not want to lose what little they have. Boetie concludes that not only is violent action not needed; no action is neither required – only non-action through non-cooperation is required. The power of tyrants comes from what the masses give them. If we want to defeat the tyrants, we give them nothing, and thus “the chains of servitude are wrecked” through the refusal to serve. He says;

“Obviously there is no need of fighting to overcome this single tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses consent to its own enslavement: it is not necessary to deprive him anything, but simply to give him nothing; there is no need that the country make an effort to do anything for itself provided it does nothing against itself. It is therefore the inhabitants themselves who permit, or, rather, being about, their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude.... Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break in pieces” (De la Boeti, 2005).

He calls for non-cooperation disobedience in the form of not paying taxes, fees, fines, not renewing licence, parking tickets, etc. If everyone follows no action it would make great change. In summary, he insists to stop supplying the government with the instrument of their own oppression.

Qutb's views of tyranny and civil disobedience

Qutb's political philosophy is summarised in three steps which are fundamental to his ideas; first, he criticizes the current world and state as *jahiliyya* (ignorance) and calls for the reversal of the state and world order. Second, the conflict between good (Islam) and evil (*jahiliyya*) is the motivating force behind human history. Third, the way to fight prevailing *jahiliyyah* is *jihad* (struggle).

Qutb identifies states including Islamic states that do not follow God or Divine commands as being in a state of *jahiliyyah*. In other words, Qutb used the term *jahiliyyah* to criticize all systems of life that were non-Islamic. In addition, Qutb refers to the ignorance of divine guidance and includes this in his criticism towards the western world and governments that do not follow Islamic law. So, in his view, there are Islamic societies and *Jahiliyyah* societies. These *jahiliyyah* societies ignore God's guidance and follows man-made laws and life. Further, he identified some states that identify themselves as Muslim states as being in *jahiliyyah*. This is because they are corrupted and westernised states. Those should also be resisted and overthrown. Thus, Qutb gives a highly political interpretation to the term of *jahiliyya* ;

“If we look at the sources and foundation of the modern modes of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in *jahiliyya*...This *jahiliyya* is based on rebellion against the sovereignty of [God] on earth. It attempts to transfer to man one of the greatest attributes of [God], namely sovereignty, by making some men lord over others” (Qutb, 1990).

In his view obedience to man-made governments and its orders is equal to the worship of the same men who created it. Qutb identifies this behaviour as *shirk* which means associating false Gods to Allah which is a symptom of *jahiliyyah* society. Therefore, a true Muslim should reject man-made governments by submitting himself to God. In this sense, Qutb identifies the false Gods as the Western governments including their leaders, parliaments, and their constitutions and Non-Islamic rulers. A Muslim cannot follow God only if he or she accepts commands of these authorities. Qutb does not therefore; agree with the western idea of the separation of God and State. If it is separated then Divine law or *Sharia* law cannot be implemented and a Muslim cannot publicly live according to his faith. Living in a non-Islamic government is equal to slavery and those governments cannot provide liberty to people because they are *jahiliyyah* societies (Loboda, 2004).

Qutb describes how such governments affect individual and society, negatively. The government modifies behaviours, values of individuals, and the social order, completely. In other words, the government is the most influential factor in people life instead of divine law. Qutb explained the power of government using the ideas of Mawlana Mawdudi;

“The whole question of human well-being depends entirely on who exercises control over human affairs. A train runs only to the destination determined by its driver. All passengers can travel only to the same destination, whether they like it or not. In the same way, the train of human civilization travels where those who exercise power dictate” (Pasha, 2013).

Qutb shows the importance of religion as it should determine the social order. Religion should create a working contact between mankind and the Devine that would lead to harmony not conflict, between belief and practice (Qutb, 2007). Qutb emphasizes that if people live under a government that is formed based on the Quran then it would create Islamic social order and harmony. This aspect differentiates government of West that consider religion should be separated from the state from the Islamic states envisioned by Qutb. He criticises capitalist states as in his view God is the only owner of any object or property.

In Qutb's view, a forceful struggle can weaken tyranny. He says;

“When they have no such freedom, then it becomes incumbent upon Muslims to launch a struggle through individual preaching as well as by initiating an activist movement to restore their freedom, and to strike hard at all those political powers, that force people to bow to their will and authority, defying the commandments of God, and denying people the freedom of Islam to the message of Islam, and to accept it even when they wish to do so” (Qutb, 1990).

Qutb redefined the Islamic political concept of *jihad*. He interpreted *jihad* as not only a struggle but a violent one that can be not only an offensive war against non-Muslims but also one that can be waged against internal enemies, the state, and social systems. Though, there are different stages in *jihad* Qutb prioritises the third stage in *jihad*. In his words;

“After the Prophet, peace be on him, only the final stages of the movement of *jihad* are to be followed; the initial or middle stages not applicable” (Qutb, 1990).

Further, he said;

“There are many practical obstacles in establishing the rule of Allah on earth, such as the power of the secular state, elitist social systems and traditions, and, in general, the overall conditions prevalent in a society. Islam uses force only to remove these obstacles so that no barrier remains between Islam and individual human beings; Islam releases them from these material constraints and addresses their hearts and minds, while giving them freedom of choice to accept or reject its call” (Qutb, 1990).

For Qutb, the goal of *jihad* is to create God’s authority which secures complete freedom for every individual... by releasing him from servitude to other human beings. So, he would serve his God (Qutb, 1990).

Further, *jahiliyya* can be got rid of through *jihad*. It should be understood in religious view not in terms of territorial terms. He points out;

“The soil of the homeland has in itself no value or weight, from the Islamic point of view. The homeland is worthy of defense only when on that soil God’s authority is established and God’s guidance is followed” (as cited in Rubenstein, 2010) It shows that the real freedom can be reached only in a state governed by *Sharia*; divine law.

In Qutb’s view, *jihad* has the following elements; first, serious realism in which he rejects the traditional meaning of *jihad*. Second, as active realism of *jihad* it needs lots of preparation. Third, *jihad* is a continuous effort; it does not have a set of forms or rules. Fourth, it sets out rules for relationships between the Islamic and non-Islamic societies. Further, *jihad* would bring divine laws that would lead to international peace as it abolishes man-made laws of tyranny, liberates individual, and allows for the realization of actual humanity within the Islamic society. Qutb’s following words describe the importance of *jihad* in providing freedom of choice of people;

“Islam does not force people to accept its belief, but it wants to provide a free environment in which they will have a choice of belief. What it wants is to abolish all oppressive political systems under which people are prevented from expressing their freedom to decide whether they will accept Islam or not” (Qutb, 1990).

The main goal of Muslims is to establish divine laws that will end suffering, suppression, and sin. Qutb explains this status through term of *hakimiyyah*. It has two elements; *sharia* law and the rule of social justice. *Sharia* law establishes social and political system based on the Quran. Social justice is related to economics. In this view, Qutb criticises capitalism which exploits people and communism which emphasizes materialism. So, Qutb proposes Islam or Islamic state as an alternative solution for social justice. Because Islam does not allow oppression but emphasizes equality (Moussalli, 1993). Qutb, in *Milestones*, talks about the emergence of vanguard who leads the Muslim community into *jihad* or struggle for Islam and he is going to restore the *shariah* - divine laws as the legal system for all.

Different readings on Qutb emphasize that he is a philosopher of freedom and justice not a philosopher of terror. In this view, he insisted freedom and justice for people under the state and does not desire to look for violence or hate. As Shepard (1987) indicates “he fights for freedom, human actualization, and development of people in spiritualistic view”. But, “Qutb is widely considered the guiding intellectual of radical Islam, with connecting him to Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri was influenced by his thoughts. In this view, he is considered as “*the Philosopher of Islamic Terror*”” (Berman, 2003). In this sense, Qutb emphasizes the importance of struggle or *jihad*. Qutb influenced young Muslims in his radical Islamic ways and has left a deep mark in the history of fundamental Islamic philosophy.

Conclusion

This study reveals the importance of disobedience in the thoughts of Boetie and Qutb. Both question why the masses are submissive to States. Boetie explains this through the custom of people by which they become habituated to servitude, through manufactured consent, and retainers. In this view, he advises people to stop believing in governments. The power of government is based on only on the rejection of people’s power. In this sense, he is the first philosopher to emphasize the importance of consent and show the technique to topple the governments through withdrawing the consent in mass non-violent civil disobedience. It is difficult to say the practicality of this technique since it is rarely used as a mass activity in the contemporary world. Historically, Gandhi, similar to Boeti, described exploitation and oppression is related to the cooperation of the people. People can decide not to cooperate for their own oppression. Further, Similar thoughts influenced Martin Luther

King Jr. who insisted that non-cooperation can bow the government and system. But all of this was conceptualised within a secular non - religious state. For Boetie religion was one of those mechanisms of subjugation.

For Qutb on the other hand religion provides the tool to overcome submission. Many writings of Qutb influenced many Islamic (violent) movements. His ideas about *jahiliyyah*, *hakimiyyah*, and *jihad* focus on the creation of the ideal Muslim state. If there are Non or un-Islamic governments then they deserve to be changed by rebelling against them and creating Islamic states based on *Sharia* or divine laws. It does not go with the western concept of democracy, capitalism, or communism. Basically, his analysis of politics of disobedience is theological with cultural influences. He expressed his ideas based on the Quran and Prophet, completely suitable for Muslims or the Islamic world. However, within his views there is no room for pluralism even within the Muslim world. Life or state without the reference of God is unacceptable. It leads to belief that the western liberalism is not acceptable, too. He provides radical, hard-line, and revolutionary ideas that no doubt has left a mark of the world. *Boko Haram*, the militant organization in Nigeria, kidnapped 276 school girls to stop their progress in education. Though, Qutb did not emphasize stopping women progress, there are some similarities Qutb's concept of *jahiliyya* and *Boko Haram*'s ideas that being instructed in western education is a sin because it corrupts Muslim minds.

But, there are different opinions whether Qutb calls for revolutionary violence or not. Though, he points out that the main elements of Islamic faith emphasizes practice of patience, forbearance, and peace, he did not reject the idea of waging violent battles or *jihad* against *jahiliyyah*. He promotes a different form of *jihad* where he prioritizes violence. In his view, violence can be justified when the ruler behaves unjustly which is un-Islamic.

It should be accepted that both Boetie and Qutb were influenced by their environment. Boetie emphasizes civil disobedience through non-violent manners influenced by what he saw after the French revolution whereas Qutb was influenced by the prevailing conditions of conservative Egypt. Qutb emphasized regime change through the influence of religious teaching in a radical, violent manner. Boetie suggests civil disobedience as a means to overthrow the state to secure individual freedom. Qutb's final goal is to use *jihad* to secure divine and Islamic law in the state. Further, Boetie opposes tyranny and to the peoples' consent to their own enslavement and this opposition is based on theory of natural law and the natural right to be free. Qutb calls for regime change of non-Islamic states into Islamic states prioritizing divine laws. Finally, Boetie rests power on the consent of people and shows the importance of popular power whereas Qutb rests power with religion and shows the importance of violent uprisings. Therefore though on the surface though they both look like political philosophers who are interested in the freedom of the masses a detailed analysis of their writings show that there is little agreement between them about the meaning of this freedom and the means of how to achieve this freedom.

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