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*"WE LIVE IN A STATE OF SIEGE ":  
VIOLENCE, CRIME, AND GANGS IN POST-CONFLICT  
URBAN NICARAGUA*

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# **“WE LIVE IN A STATE OF SIEGE”: VIOLENCE, CRIME, AND GANGS IN POST-CONFLICT URBAN NICARAGUA<sup>1</sup>**

Dennis Rodgers<sup>2</sup>

*“I’ve fought in all the wars of the last twenty years here in Nicaragua, against Somoza’s dictatorship, against the Contras, and I tell you, war is a terrible thing. You see so much horror, so much death, you become like numb, almost as if you were dead yourself... War changes you, it changes everybody – your family, your friends, your neighbours, everybody... Even the whole country change... ‘Never again’, that’s what everybody says, ‘never again, the war is over in Nicaragua, we’re at peace now’... That’s what they say, but have you seen how we live? Look at what’s happening in this country, all this delinquency, all this crime... People are scared, everybody lives barricaded in their homes because it’s so dangerous... You can get killed for almost anything – money, jewellery, your watch, but also your clothes, your shoes, or even just looking at somebody the wrong way... It’s like this everywhere, in all the poor neighbourhoods... I tell you, this isn’t peace, it’s war, we’re living in the middle of a war again...”*

*- From an interview with Pablo Alvarez (March 1997)*

War has long been recognised as one of the most potent causes of human suffering and societal underdevelopment. Certainly, it is no accident that eleven of the fifteen countries with the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) in the United Nations Development Programme’s 2002 *Human Development Report* have been afflicted by civil wars in recent years, and over half of the fifty countries classified as “least developed” by the UN have experienced major armed conflicts in the past twenty years.<sup>3</sup> But whilst war is perhaps the most paradigmatic manifestation of violence, it is by no means the only one, and it is certainly not the only one to have critical implications for human well-being and societal development. As Pablo Alvarez calls to attention above, what might be termed more “prosaic” – because war, by any measure, has to be considered an extraordinary state of affairs – forms of violence such as crime and delinquency can also have devastating consequences, to the extent that from a teleological point of view they can sometimes be indistinguishable from war.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. UNDP (2002) and Stewart and FitzGerald (2001: 2).

This is perhaps especially apparent in contemporary Central America. A region which was once considered overwhelmingly violent, and marked historically by multiple instances of civil war, repressive dictatorship, and revolution, it is widely seen to have changed significantly during the past decade. The twin processes of demilitarisation and democratisation of recent years are commonly viewed as signs that a definitive break has been made with the past, and that a new era of peace and stability has begun. But while it is undeniable that there have been many positive developments during the past decade, in many ways this vision of things is excessively optimistic. As the British political scientist Jenny Pearce has underlined, “the idea that the region’s conflicts have been ‘resolved’ may be true at the formal level of peace accords between armies and insurgents, but is less so at the real level of people’s everyday lives, which remain overshadowed ...by violence, today of a more social and multifaceted kind than the polarized and political violence characteristic of the 1980s”.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the Dutch anthropologists Dirk Kruijt and Kees Koonings have perceptively remarked that rather than a reduction of violence, there has arguably occurred what they term a “democratisation” of brutality, whereby it has ceased to be “the resource of only the traditionally powerful or of the grim uniformed guardians of the nation... [and] increasingly appears as an option for a multitude of actors in pursuit of all kinds of goals”.<sup>5</sup> Although it is important not to underestimate the continuities between past and present forms of violence – crime and delinquency are not new features, political violence is by no means extinct, and the boundaries between the two phenomena are not always clear-cut – it is clear that in contrast to the generally organised nature of the political and ideological violence of the past, the new forms of violence which overshadow contemporary Central America are more diffuse and disordered.

The epitome of this new political economy of violence is undoubtedly criminal violence, which has soared dramatically throughout the region, and is now so predominant that levels of violence in contemporary Central America are comparable or even higher than during the war period.<sup>6</sup> In El Salvador, for example, the average number of violent deaths per year exceeded the average tally of the war years by over 40 percent throughout the mid-1990s,<sup>7</sup> while in Guatemala the economic costs of criminal violence were calculated in 1999 to be some US\$565 million,<sup>8</sup> compared to an estimated US\$575 million loss to the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a result of war between 1981 and 1985.<sup>9</sup> But the paradoxical juxtaposition of a less violent period of war and a more brutal peacetime is perhaps most obvious in contemporary urban Nicaragua. Although the notorious war against the Contras in the 1980s grabbed international headlines and was marked by numerous instances of a rare brutality, it was a “low intensity war”, with relatively restricted direct consequences which generally remained confined to the less-populated rural areas of highly urbanised Nicaragua.<sup>10</sup> As the Uruguayan sociologist Eduardo Galeano has pithily remarked, the contrast between the past and the present is consequently all

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<sup>4</sup> Pearce (1998: 589).

<sup>5</sup> Kruijt and Koonings (1999: 11).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Call (2000: 7-14), Moser and Winton (2002: 5-8), and Pearce (1998: 589-90).

<sup>7</sup> Calculated on the basis of Pearce (1998: 590).

<sup>8</sup> Moser and Winton (2002: 33).

<sup>9</sup> This latter figure expressed in constant 1995 US\$, and calculated on the basis of Ahrend (1999) and the World Bank Development Indicators online (<http://www.worldbank.org/data/online/onlinebases.htm>).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Spalding (1999). The war of course had extremely serious indirect social and economic repercussions for the country in general (cf. Lancaster, 1992, and Rodgers, 2000).

the more striking, for while peace reigned in the streets of the country's cities during the years of war, "since peace was declared the streets have become scenes of war, the battlegrounds of common criminals and youth gangs".<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, criminal violence has undergone a veritable explosion in Nicaragua since the end of the civil war. Crime levels have risen steadily by an average of ten percent every year since 1990, compared to an uneven average of just two percent during the years of war in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> A CID-Gallup survey conducted in April 1997 reported that one in six Nicaraguans claimed to have been attacked at least once in the previous four months – a proportion which increased to a staggering one in four in Managua, the capital city – and the number of violent crimes leading to injury increased by 135 percent between 1992 and 1998.<sup>13</sup> Although the official homicide rate stood at an average of just 16 deaths per 100,000 persons during the 1990s,<sup>14</sup> it is clearly an underestimation. During a year's fieldwork conducted in the poor Managua *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández<sup>15</sup> in 1996-97, I tallied in total nine crime-related deaths in the neighbourhood, which works out proportionally to a staggering 360 deaths per 100,000 for the same period. The *barrio* was not so atypical as to make it an exceptional case, and while such a calculation must of course be taken with a pinch of salt considering the small size and unsystematic nature of my sample, it is definitely suggestive that official statistics are wrong.

Indeed, it was obvious from my fieldwork in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández that crime was a predominant feature of everyday life, both during my stay in 1996-97, as well as in 2002, when I returned for a two months visit. Beyond personally experiencing and witnessing criminal acts, this was clearly reflected in the practices and the discourses of neighbourhood inhabitants. When I first arrived in the *barrio* in 1996, I had been immediately struck by the prevalent manifest fear of leaving the perceived safe haven of the home, its most obvious manifestation being the passing away of the quintessential Latin American habit of spending one's evenings sitting on the curb side outside one's house, chatting to neighbours and watching the world go by. By 2002, this had got worse, and even the shelter of the home now seemed precarious, as houses were barricaded up, almost becoming little forts (see photo below) from which occupants would emerge as little as possible, and when they did so, restricted themselves to a few fixed routes and destinations. "We are living in a state of siege", was how a member of the family I lived with called Adilia described the situation in 1997, and in 2002 she told me that "things are worse, people are scared to leave their homes, it's too dangerous". This feeling was echoed by her mother, *Doña* Yolanda, who confided that "there's so much delinquency, it's impossible to live... they'll kill you for a watch... they'll kill you for a pair of shoes... they'll kill you for your shirt ... they're everywhere, you've got to watch out... they could be your neighbour, even your friend, you can never be sure... you can't go out any more, you can't wear rings, bracelets, nice shoes, anything that makes us look a little better than we really are... how can we live? It's not possible..."

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Galeano (1998: 322-4). Translation from Galeano (2000 [1998]: 314-6).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Granera Sacasa and Cuarezma Terán (1997), Serbin and Ferreyra (2000), *La Prensa*, 11 July & 5 September 2001, and <http://www.policia.gob.ni/Estadisticas1.htm> and <http://www.policia.gob.ni/deneoet.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. respectively *La Tribuna*, 2 May 1997, and Cuadra Lira (2000: 8).

<sup>14</sup> Serbin and Ferreyra (2000: 187) and PNUD (2000).

<sup>15</sup> A pseudonym, as are the names of all the inhabitants of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández mentioned.



This chronic insecurity has had dramatic consequences for local community life, as *Don Sergio* underlined during an interview in 1997: “nobody does anything for anybody anymore, nobody cares if their neighbour is robbed, nobody does anything for the common good. There’s a lack of trust, you don’t know whether somebody will return you your favours, or whether he won’t steal your belongings when your back is turned. It’s the law of the jungle here; we’re eating one another, as they say in the Bible...”. The situation in 2002 was no better, as *Doña Yolanda* made clear: “you never feel safe in the *barrio*, because of the lack of trust. There always has to be somebody in the house, because you can’t trust anybody to look out for you, for your things, to help you, nothing. People only look out for themselves – everyone, the rich, the poor, the middle class... Life is hard in Nicaragua, and you’ve just got to look out for yourself and try and survive by hook and by crook. It was the same as 5 years ago; nothing has changed, except that we’re now 5 years on, and the future didn’t get any better... What can you do? The only thing is to continue struggling on, but who knows what we’ll do further along...”

Even if they are by no means solely responsible for the widespread criminal violence in contemporary Nicaragua, the most visible criminal actors are the *pandillas*, or youth gangs, that roam the streets of Nicaraguan cities, robbing, beating, terrorising, and frequently killing. These are a ubiquitous feature of many urban *barrios* and without doubt significant contributors to the high levels of crime in post-1990 Nicaragua. Indeed, *pandillas* have to a large extent come to symbolically epitomize crime and delinquency in the contemporary Nicaraguan collective consciousness; whenever people talked to me of crime or delinquency, whether in 1997 or 2002, the word “*pandilla*” never failed to materialize in their discourses, to the extent that it was used very much interchangeably with more general terms such as “criminality” or “delinquency”. Understanding *pandilla* dynamics is therefore crucial to understanding the new criminal political economy of violence in Nicaragua, and as what follows will endeavour to describe, Pablo Alvarez was perhaps not completely wrong when he described the endemic criminal violence in contemporary urban Nicaragua in terms of being caught in the middle of a war again.

Although to a certain extent the term “*pandilla*” is used to mean many different things, ranging from more or less tame neighbourhood youth aggregations to organised criminal groups, the expression generally refers to very definite local social institutions. At their most basic, these generally consist of a variably sized group of overwhelmingly male youths aged between 7 and 25 years, who engage in illicit and violent behaviour – although not all gang activities are either illicit or violent – and have a particular dynamic. Most notably, *pandillas* are territorial and tend to be associated with a particular urban neighbourhood, although larger *barrios* frequently have more than one gang (moreover, not all *barrios* have a *pandilla*, for a variety of reasons including the level of social fragmentation, number of youths, economic factors – the richer the *barrio*, the less likely it is to have a gang – and also what sort of opportunities *barrio* youth might have). The Nicaraguan National Police estimated that in 1999 that there were some 110 *pandillas* in Managua alone – which is made up of some 600 *barrios* and spontaneous settlements – incorporating about 8,500 youths,<sup>16</sup> double the number three years previously. By all accounts, however, these figures probably err on the low side, and youth gangs are furthermore a growing social phenomenon in Nicaragua.<sup>17</sup> They are also a changing phenomenon, having mutated radically over the course of the past five years as the parameters of the urban conflict they symbolise have evolved.

In 1996, most *pandilla* violence involved low-level petty delinquency, such as mugging, pick pocketing, or shoplifting, although a significant proportion did also involve much more violent acts, including armed robbery, assault, rape, and murder. However, perhaps the most frequent form of gang violence at the time were the regular conflicts between gangs which transformed parts of Managua into quasi-war zones, as gang members fought each other with weaponry ranging from sticks, stones, and knives to AK-47s, fragmentation grenades, and mortars, with often obviously dramatic consequences both for gang members and for the local population. During the year of my stay in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, for example, no less than fourteen distinct gang wars affected the neighbourhood, leaving three gang members and at least two *barrio* inhabitants dead. While at first glance these gang wars seemed chaotic, they were in fact highly organised and had definite motives.

Paradoxically, considering the consequences, the fundamental motivation for gang warfare was the gang members’ “love” for their *barrio*. In an eerie echo of the discourse of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra,<sup>18</sup> the gang members of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández justified their fighting other gangs as representing an “act of love” for the neighbourhood; as one of them called Julio put it, “you show the *barrio* that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other *pandillas*... You look after the *barrio*, you help them, you keep them safe...” Although the triggers for gang wars ranged from assaults on individuals to territorial encroachment by other gangs, they always revolved around either attacking or protecting a neighbourhood, with much of the fighting specifically focused either on harming or limiting damage to both *barrio* infrastructure and inhabitants. The *pandillas* organized themselves into “companies”, which operated strategically, expertly covering each other whenever advancing or retreating. There was generally a “reserve force”, and although weapons were an individual’s

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Policía Nacional de Nicaragua (2000).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rodgers (1997, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b), Rocha (1999, 2000a, 2000b), and Sosa Meléndez and Rocha (2001).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Nietzsche (1963 [1883-85]).



own property, each gang member was distributed amongst the different “companies” in order to balance out fire-power, except when a high powered “attack commando” was needed for a specific tactical purpose.

At the same time, however, the conflicts were highly regulated and indeed ritualised. For example, the first battle of a *pandilla* war typically involved fighting with stones and bare hands, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks and staffs, then to knives and broken bottles, then mortars, and eventually to guns, AK-47s, and fragmentation grenades. Although the rate of escalation could vary, its sequence never did – i.e. *pandillas* did not begin their wars immediately with mortars, guns, or AK-47. The ritualised nature of *pandilla* warfare can be conceived as a kind of restraining mechanism. Escalation is a positive constitutive process, in which each stage calls for a greater intensity of action, and is always seen therefore as under the actors’ control. At the same time, the escalation process also provided local *barrio* inhabitants with a framework through which to organize their lives, acting as an “early warning system”. As such, *pandilla* wars can be seen as constituting “scripted performances”,<sup>19</sup> which provided a means of circumscribing what Hannah Arendt calls the “all-pervading unpredictability” of violence.<sup>20</sup> Although *pandilla* wars clearly had deleterious effects for the local population of urban *barrios*, these were indirect, as gangs never directly victimised the local population of their own neighbourhood, in fact protecting them instead. The threat to local neighbourhood populations stemmed from *other* gangs, whom the local gang would engage with in a prescribed manner in order to limit the scope of violence in its own neighbourhood, thereby creating a “safe haven” for local inhabitants.

In a wider context of chronic violence and insecurity, this function of the *pandillas* is a positive one, albeit not always 100 percent effective. But despite bystanders frequently being injured and even killed in the crossfire of *pandilla* warfare, the local *barrio* inhabitants very much recognized it as such. As *Don Sergio*, put it, “the *pandilla* looks after the *barrio* and screws others, it protects us and allows us to feel a little bit safer, to live our lives a little bit more easily”, and as a result members of the local community did not call the Police during gang wars, and nor would they denounce gang members. In many ways, the local *pandilla* in fact arguably did more than simply provide the neighbourhood population with a certain sense of security, but also constituted itself as a symbolic index of community, as its “care” for the neighbourhood stood in sharp contrast with the wider context of fragmentation and breakdown. But it did so in a reduced manner, restricted to the local neighbourhood. As such, what the gangs arguably represented was a desperate form of social structuration, attempting to constitute a local collective social order through violent means in the face a wider societal process of social breakdown in the face of chronic violence and insecurity.

Ultimately, though, this local social order was never going to be viable, and indeed, when I returned to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 2002, both the neighbourhood and the local gang dynamics had changed radically. Although there exist definite linkages between the gang today and the gang in 1996-97 – the most obvious being that today’s *pandilla* is made up of individuals who five years ago were all young members of the old gang – it has declined in size, and its illicit and violent activities have evolved or been replaced by new ones. In particular, *pandilla* wars

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Linger (1992).

<sup>20</sup> Arendt (1969: 5).

have come to an end, individual delinquency has increased, and levels of brutality have gone up. Most dramatically, perhaps, the communitarian ethos of “loving the *barrio*” has disappeared, with gang members no longer caring about the community and in fact now actively preying on the local neighbourhood population. As gang member called Roger put it: “if people in the *barrio* get attacked, if they are robbed, if they have a problem, who cares? We don’t lift a finger to help them nowadays... We just laugh instead... Who cares what happens to them?”

A variety of factors have contributed to the change in *pandilla* dynamics, but probably the most important is the emergence of hard drugs, and more specifically crack cocaine. Although modest quantities of hard drugs such as crack could be obtained in Nicaragua in 1996-97, they were not prevalent. Marijuana was the most widespread drug at the time, along with glue, but both was domestically produced and sold on a relatively small scale. Crack began to supplant marijuana and glue as drug of choice from around mid-1999, however, rapidly spreading to such an extent that today it is omnipresent. The reasons behind this trend are both international and national. Internationally, the late 1990s saw a diversification of drug trafficking routes from Colombia to the USA as a result of the improvement of law enforcement efforts in the Caribbean. Flows along what is known as the Mexican-Central American corridor increased tremendously, and due to its proximity to the Colombian island of San Andrés, Nicaragua is geographically a natural first trans-shipment point within transit zone. Nationally, in late 1998 Nicaragua was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, suffering major infrastructural damage and resource drainage, which have had highly negative consequences on the already limited capabilities of local law enforcement institutions, making trafficking easier than in the past.

The *pandillas*’ relationship to crack is dual, as sites of consumption but also as dealing institutions. With regards to former, levels of drugs use among the gang members have increased tremendously compared to five years ago. Although consuming drugs was an important element of gang identity in 1996-97, less was consumed than today, and moreover, the main drug consumed then was marijuana, which has very different effects to crack. As one *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández drug user called Hugo put it: “crack puts you crazy, like you’re flying, and then when you come down, it’ll make you do anything to get another fix, even rob your neighbours, your friends, your own family even... it’s not like marijuana, which just makes you feel at ease with everybody...” It makes the user more aggressive, as a gang member called Chucki emphasised: “this drug, crack, it makes you really violent, I tell you... when I smoke up and somebody insults me, I immediately want to kill them, to get a machete and do them in, to defend myself... I don’t stop and think, talk to them, ask them why or whatever... all I want to do is kill them... it’s the drug, I tell you, that’s where the violence comes from...”

But while there is no doubt that crack consumption has caused a notable rise in spontaneous acts of violence in the *barrio*, in many ways it is the broader sense of increased insecurity and uncertainty that it has generated which is more significant. As Adilia put it, “now, anybody could be a potential danger, if they’ve smoked some crack, any time... you can’t know what they’re going to do... with this drug, people become more violent, more aggressive, they don’t care about anything, you don’t know what they’re thinking or even if they are thinking... they could just kill you, like that, without a thought...” This contrasts starkly with the ritualised gang wars of the past, which by following set patterns circumscribed violence in such a way that local neighbourhood inhabitants could predict potential outbreaks and organise their lives around them, as well as lessening the extent of random criminal activity in the neighbourhood. Gang wars have



now completely disappeared, and the gang no longer acts as a bulwark against wider criminality, in fact regularly preying themselves on local inhabitants and threatening anybody who would dare denounce them with retribution.

While this new pattern of behaviour is clearly linked to drug consumption, it is also the result of the *pandilla* having become a drug dealing institution. The drug trafficking route in Nicaragua passes through Managua and other urban centres, where those facilitating transport take a cut of the shipments in order to make money distributing it locally. As a result, a veritable drug economy has sprung up in Nicaragua during the past few years, with the gangs buying wholesale from big time drug traffickers in order to sell on a small scale on street corners. The revenue generated for the gang members by this crack dealing is substantial – upwards of 5000 *córdobas* (US\$350) per month, which is over three times the average wage in Nicaragua. This is in striking contrast with the past; in 1996-97, a gang member's average revenue from delinquency was approximately US\$50. Although much of this new income is spent on items associated with “conspicuous consumption” behaviour patterns,<sup>21</sup> gang members use a substantial proportion to improve their material conditions of life and those of their families, and to this extent, the drugs trade has significantly changed everyday life in the *barrio*, having essentially created the conditions for the rise of a local entrepreneurial elite.

Not surprisingly perhaps, although drug dealing transactions are carried out on an individual basis by gang members, the gang as a whole can now be said to constitute a loose interest group which acts cooperatively to ensure the proper functioning and protection of the local *barrio* drug economy which it dominates. It generally does so through extremely brutal means, more so than five years ago. Towards the beginning of 2001, for example, gang members from a neighbouring *barrio* spatially occupied one of the entrances to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in order to intercept the neighbourhood gang member's crack clients. Contrarily to the gang wars of the past, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang simply fell on the rival gang with their guns and shot two dead. In many ways, though, the decline in the gang warfare of the past was almost inevitable in view of the transformation of *pandillas* from socially to economically oriented institutions. The gang wars of the past were a way of regulating violence which attempted to convert neighbourhoods into safe areas for local inhabitants by making them no-go zones for outsiders. As drug dealers, gang members now have little interest in engaging in any such activity which might discourage potential clients from coming into their neighbourhood.

In the final analysis, although the understanding of a social phenomenon can rarely be reduced to a single factor, it is perhaps this transformation from having a social to an economic focus which is most fundamental to comprehending the new *pandilla* dynamics in contemporary urban Nicaragua. The story of the evolution of Nicaraguan youth gangs during the past decade is essentially a story of two halves, the first involving a desperate attempt to mitigate the fragmenting condition of Nicaraguan social life through the creation of a restricted and ultimately unviable form of local collective social order, and the second about the grasping of a new opportunity for an improved way of life which has emerged in the form of the drugs trade. In some ways, the latter is a natural continuation of the former, with the big picture being one of a continuing attempt to establish some kind of sustainable way of life in the poor *barrios* of contemporary urban Nicaragua, on a sociological basis which has shrunk in scope, from the level

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Veblen (1902).

of the *barrio*, to the gang group, and finally to the individual... At the same time, however, this is arguably a story which has already been told. Borrowing from Karl Marx,<sup>22</sup> one could say that the gangs have gone from constituting a form of “primitive socialism” to becoming vehicles for “primitive accumulation”.<sup>23</sup> For Marx, this was an inevitable and necessary process for the material development of societies, and it may well be that the *pandillas* are reproducing this developmental evolution at the local level in Nicaragua. If this is the case, though, it does not bode well for the country’s future, for according to the further development of Marx’s analysis, in doing so the *pandillas* are also sowing the seeds of new and future conflicts.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Marx (1976 [1867], especially chapter 26).

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Jo Beall for drawing my attention to this analogy.

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