

The British Empire Debate

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In the autumn of 2011 the near-simultaneous publication of a number of books on the British Empire promised to add fresh momentum to the debate, if debate is the word, on the memories – or lack of them – that the British people currently carry for their empire.⁽¹⁾ Jeremy Paxman, with *Empire: What Ruling the World Did to the British*, promised a robust, ‘clear-eyed’ look at the imperial past but fell for the most problematic premise of all – that there could be a single story that, delivered with enough incision and panache, could speak to the very imagined community (‘the British people’) that the narrative itself invokes.

The excerpt from the book reproduced for the back cover is itself instructive. 'If we accept,' it begins, ' – as any thoughtful Indian does – that the British Empire had a shaping influence on India, then where is the common sense in claiming that the same history has not had at least as important a role in Britain?'. This is to be an unflinching, unsentimental view, is the message, one that appeals to rational thought, with the proviso that the colonisers were as equally transformed by empire as the colonised suggesting an approach that can be nothing but even-handed.

Yet one cannot help but feel that there is something deliberately provocative about that opening line. *As any thoughtful Indian does*. What is it there that irks? Is it the stress on Indians' potential to be thoughtful, as though there is a distance deliberately being forced here between the author and his imperial – racist – heritage? Or is it the combination of that stress with the assumption that thoughtful Indians necessarily care very much today about the balance sheet of empire. 'Any thoughtful Indian' implies the kind of Indian who would enjoy talking to Paxman, on Newsnight perhaps, or maybe over lunch, weighing up the famines against the railways, the pros against the cons: all very suggestive of that unbiased, impartial spirit that implies the perceptiveness and magnanimity of those that enjoy it above all.

The central premise of Paxman's book is that whilst we know enough already about the ways in which Britain changed the world, we know very little about the ways in which the world, through the imperial encounter, changed Britain. On one level, this appears a welcome shift from the triumphalism of so much imperial historiography, from Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883) to Ferguson's *How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003).⁽²⁾ Yet the effect that empire had on Britain has been a major (if not the major) preoccupation for imperial historians for almost 30 years now, ever since John Mackenzie's *Propaganda and Empire* launched Manchester University Press's *Studies in Imperialism* series, soon to publish its 100th volume.⁽³⁾ This book is intended for a non-academic audience, to be sure, but it nevertheless seems strange for an author to make such grand claims for originality when so much scholarship – the same scholarship on which that author depends – suggests otherwise. If, on the other hand, Paxman's task was not to offer an original thesis of his own but, rather, to bridge the gap between academic and popular history, then the reader cannot help but be struck by the book's comprehensive failure to do what it says on the tin. This is a very good book but it tells us very little about the effects of empire on British society or, indeed, on what it means to be British.

In the introduction, Paxman surveys the legacies of empire. On elite spheres, he writes with confidence – the Foreign Office is supercilious; British prime ministers cannot help but lecture their foreign counterparts; the monarchy endures. On British society, Paxman sticks, perhaps wisely, to the surface: immigrants built Moss Bros, Marks and Spencers 'and supermarkets like Tesco'. New arrivals from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent 'changed the look of cities; writers and artists invigorated the 'native arts'; sportsmen and women raised standards of performance; cooks 'did the national cuisine a big favour' (p. 8). Regimental battle honours and memorials in churches recall imperial wars (p. 4). With all this stress on legacy, Paxman's principal point appears paradoxical. Residues of empire are everywhere yet the British themselves remain indifferent to them. For Paxman, that apathy is at the root of Britain's uncertain place in the world today. 'If only the British would bring a measure of clarity to what was done in their country's name', he concludes, 'they might find it easier to play a more useful and effective role in the world' (p. 286). Throughout what is, on the whole, comfortable, assertive prose, there is a feeling of frustrated disappointment: that the British don't care about this history. Their diversion by the empty fourth plinth from the imperial statues in Trafalgar Square is emblematic. Elsewhere Niall Ferguson has complained of the iPod generation – 'endlessly gaming, chatting or chilling' – and there is a similar sentiment here: we need the youth of today to heed the lessons of the past if we are not going to continue heading to the dogs.⁽⁴⁾

There is currently, of course, a very live discussion as what kind of history should be taught in British schools. The Conservatives envisage a national story as narrative spine: current syllabi lack cohesion, says Michael Gove; students don't learn the linkages that give order to what they know; they lack the skills to relate one event to another.⁽⁵⁾ As always, what is contentious is the question of what is to be the glue.⁽⁶⁾ It used to be the expansion of England. Is it now to be the decline? Notably, Bernard Porter sees *Empire* as quite apart from, and opposed to, the 'patriotic approach' associated with Ferguson and Gove.⁽⁷⁾ What they do

share, however, is the idea that, whatever imperial history is produced, it should equip Britons to act effectively in the world. The reason why memory of empire is controversial is because it inevitably gets implicated in the invention – or disavowal – of Britain today.

Having covered the ‘what the empire did to us’ bit in the introduction, the rest of Paxman’s book comprises a thoroughly enjoyable imperial tour. It is a familiar route by now, from Liverpool to Lucknow, Salisbury to Shanghai, but it merges well the grand stage with the minor detail, personalities with events. In the spirit of impartiality, Paxman does not shy away from the violence of empire but he does retreat into a more basic register. On the Black Hole of Calcutta, he writes: ‘precise numbers were not the point. Clearly, far too many people were crammed into a horrible confined space’ (p. 76). Mau Mau was ‘vicious and ruthless with victims ... treated abominably’ (p. 270). On the other side of the ledger, the Atlantic slave trade is ‘one of the most disgraceful episodes in British history’ (p. 25). It is difficult not to find this kind of moralising headmasterly. More importantly, it diminishes the possibility for seeing violence and degradation as an integral part of the imperial equation. According to this logic, violence is, by definition, extreme – and certainly not something a thoughtful Indian would endorse. More problematic still, in registering his shock at British-perpetrated atrocities, Paxman unwittingly betrays the audience to whom he writes. ‘From the distance of the twenty-first century,’ he writes, ‘the baffling, troublesome anxiety about it – as about some other aspects of the imperial experience – is how it was that our own forebears could have behaved such as this’. Baffling? Really? It is really a surprise that British people have been, can be, are of course, as evil as anybody else? And what about those Britons who do not trace their heritage back to the statesmen, the generals and the slave-traders of the British Empire? The patriotic approach is very much here, not so much in the refusal to admit the ‘dark side’ of the empire but in the tendency to talk of it in such concessionary terms.

We do already, of course, have no shortage of intelligent yet accessible popular histories of the British Empire, from Jan Morris’s *Pax Britannica* trilogy (1968–78) to Piers Brendon’s *Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (2007).⁽⁸⁾ Paxman’s book is beautifully produced and soon to be embellished with an accompanying television series: one imagines him drafting his chapters after filming, on location. If this suggests something of the elegiac ‘wandering in the wake of empire’ that Hsu-Ming Teo has described, the extensive list of researchers, producers, directors and film crew that appear in the acknowledgements suggests a somewhat commissioned piece of work.⁽⁹⁾ The idea that this book will enable a clear-eyed look at the imperial past is somewhat diminished by the fact that this is a book so clearly to be *enjoyed*.

Significantly, one of the major contentions of those who have critiqued the cultural production – and consumption – of empire has been that it has served as the cultural arm of a neo-imperialism at work in the present.⁽¹⁰⁾ Historians are reluctant to apply the ‘imperial’ label to Britain’s recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan yet parallels remain. In November 2011, an American army squad commander, Staff Sergeant Calvin Gibbs, was convicted in an American military court of murder, conspiracy and assault. Gibbs, the court was told, had in early 2010 led a platoon of American soldiers, a self-titled ‘kill team’, that had murdered unarmed civilians, photographed their corpses and collected body parts as trophies. Notably, the American government was, throughout Gibbs’ trial, at pains to depict his platoon as a ‘rogue unit’, utterly unrepresentative of the U.S. army and its soldiers in Afghanistan. 90 years earlier, when a British military commander at Amritsar ordered troops to fire on an unarmed crowd, controversy focused on whether such violence was exceptional in relation to British imperialism or, rather, its inevitable result.⁽¹¹⁾ While Anglo-Indian planters rallied to the commander’s defence, others saw the value in his condemnation. Repudiating the massacre kept the honour of the empire intact. To the extent that the events at Amritsar were unjust, they were un-British as well. As in Afghanistan, violence had come to serve as a yard-stick by which morality, or its absence, was defined. When Indians condemned Amritsar, they condemned British imperialism by extension. When the British did so, the effect was, by contrast, to disassociate empire from the massacre – to decontaminate the brand. In doing so, they reiterated once again the implicit correlation between Britishness and moderation. Murdering civilians is not, after all, what *we* do.

It is very much against that – rehabilitative – image of the British Empire that Richard Gott’s book, *Britain’s Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt*, is conceived. For Gott, the point is that the massacres

were *not* exceptional. Violence was perennial; the rogue was the norm. Over 66 chapters and almost 500 pages, Gott sets out to document the brutality of the British Empire. In so doing, he provides, for the first time, a sense of the sheer extent of the injury suffered by colonised people as the British Empire expanded from a largely coastal phenomenon in the mid 18th century to the global behemoth that it had become midway through the next.

In analytical terms, Gott does not go further than this central – essential – claim. His purpose is not to explain but to chronicle imperial violence. How better to make the point that empire was violent, after all, than by documenting its every violent moment? The effect is relentless, perhaps necessarily so. Chapters are short – varying between three and a dozen or so pages; each recounts an episode in which, invariably, imperial expansion provoked a militant response. Resistance provoked repression; that stoked further resistance and further repression in turn. Indeed, Gott’s title aptly conveys the contents of his book: resistance, repression, revolt – and repeat. What the book does not provide is any analytical account as to when (and why) the tipping point arrived at which the British were able to bring the superiority of their material power to bear. Because the book moves so quickly from one locale to another, moreover, the reader lacks the context necessary to gain any kind of analytical or imaginative purchase on what is particular about each case. The stage is set, the protagonists are introduced – but only with the minimum of detail needed for the conflict to begin. Afterwards, with the battle done and the still-warm corpses littering the ground, the (increasingly exhausted) reader can only survey the now-familiar scene and move on – to the next chapter, the next unsettled frontier and a cast of characters still unaware of what their inevitable fate will be.

This is not to underplay the importance of Gott’s book. Academic historians may be frustrated by its analytical limitations but it may well be that the book’s real value is, in any case, to a non-specialist audience. Paul Gilroy has memorably argued that until Britons come to terms with the shame of their imperial past, they will continue to perpetuate an exclusionary, sterile patriotism.⁽¹²⁾ The need to emphasise the violence of empire, in other words, is because it was enacted under the guise of the same virtue and civility claimed by Britishness today. To decolonise the nation now, we need to look unblinking at the brutality of its past.

From this perspective, it may well be that a chronicle, and not a theory, of imperial violence is exactly what we need. From Gilroy’s perspective, it is citizens, not scholars alone, who need to reappraise the heritage of empire. That the point of the book is the violence itself and not the thesis by which it is framed, allows the reader to take away his or her own lesson, impression or emotional response. There is much to be had in the story unadorned.

Take the following instalment, for example. In May 1836, a British war-ship engaged three large *prahus*, or sailing boats, in the straits of Malacca. The prahus were sailed by ‘sea-gypsies’, people who had inhabited these waters for centuries and who lived off the taxes that they collected from passing ships. Yet one man’s sea gypsy is another man’s pirate and to the British, for whom unfettered control of the seas was the vital prerequisite for their rapidly expanding empire, the people of the prahus were legitimate game. Since it was difficult to know for sure whether a particular prahu was indeed a pirate ship, however, the usual practice was not to board the boats but to force their inhabitants into the water where they could be effectively dispatched. In a letter to his wife, Lieutenant Colin Mackenzie, a sailor aboard the British warship, recalled the scene:

The whole crew, having in their desperation jumped into the sea, the work of slaughter began, with muskets, pikes, pistols and cutlasses. I sickened at the sight but it was dire necessity. They asked for no quarter and received none; but the expression of despair on their faces, as, exhausted with diving and swimming, they turned them up towards us merely to receive the death shot or thrust, froze my blood. (pp. 285–6)

In writing to his wife, it may well be that Mackenzie self-censored but there is notably none of the delight in

death here that characterised the American kill team in Afghanistan. Indeed, it was precisely the idea that imperial violence was an unfortunate necessity that provided massacres such as these with their moral component. It was dirty work – ‘unpleasant for all concerned’ – but unquestionably correct when British interests were at stake.

While the act of killing may have sickened Mackenzie, the bodies of the dead prompted no such remorse. After another pirate encounter further down the coast Mackenzie had himself rowed out to the vanquished prahu where he obtained the captain’s head – ‘a splendid young fellow, symmetry itself’ – which he had packaged up and sent to a friend. Just the previous year, when Hintsu, the paramount chief of the Xhosa, was killed, British soldiers were quick to claim their trophies: one took his bracelets, beads and brass, another cut off his ears, a third dug out his teeth. Ten years earlier, after a massacre of Aboriginal people at Bathurst, New South Wales, no death-toll was taken but 45 skulls were boiled down and shipped back to England as souvenirs.

If readers are shocked by details such as this, what is only suggested at here is the ideology that redeemed it – and that is surely the connecting thread linking Mallaca to New South Wales, the Cape to Kandhar. ‘The kaffir,’ wrote Benjamin D’Urban, Governor of Cape Colony at the time of Hintsu’s death, ‘is the worst specimen of the human race with whom I have ever had to deal’. ‘The Xhosa’, noted the man who ran Hintsu to ground, were ‘a nation of indomitable savages’ (p. 300). The sea gypsies of the Malacca straits were a ‘rude and semi-civilised people’ (p. 373). Members of the kill team in Afghanistan, one cannot fail to note, referred to Afghans as ‘savages’. Constructing the native ‘other’, then as now, not only enabled epistemic control but – when resistance was forthcoming – annihilation as well.

We see this relation most forcefully in the settler colonies where the interests of European immigrants were so irreconcilably at odds with those of indigenous peoples. As the settler colonies pulled away from the British imperial orbit, however, they took their histories with them. The ‘history wars’ are a feature of Australian, not British, historiography; it was always a luxury for the British that the violence and dispossession went on well away from domestic public life.⁽¹³⁾ On the frontier, it was not merely the acquiescence of ‘native’ peoples that was wanted but their comprehensive elimination.⁽¹⁴⁾ As the settler presence expanded, so resistance to it seemed to evidence the native’s racial shortcoming. After the Iroquois sacked a British fort in Pennsylvania in 1778, the British embarked on a scorched-earth campaign in retribution. 40 Iroquois villages were destroyed; thousands starved (p. 69). In 1852, after 60 years of intermittent Xhosa-settler conflict, British commanders on the Cape were demanding nothing less than the extermination of ‘these most barbarous and treacherous savages’ (p. 406). Settler militias burned huts and levelled crops; half starving, the Xhosa lost the capacity to resist. As one colonial volunteer later remembered:

They made no stand and offered no resistance, neither did they beg for mercy or show any fear, but kept on at a steady pace while our people rode up to them and shot them down (p. 407).

That the Xhosa were judged not merely savage but treacherous as well is no minor point. British colonists were at their most violent when acting in reprisal. The humiliation of rebellion demanded a response that was nothing less than overwhelming. In the West Indies, isolated planter communities harboured collective memories of slave rebellion, fantasising lurid scenarios of their own destruction (p. 153). The killing of white women and children by aboriginal peoples was the ultimate violation: revenge was pursued with a passion that transcended even settlers’ passion for land (p. 432).

If the British appear powerful here and their victims as well, victims, it is hardly surprising that, alongside his intention to depict British injustice, Gott is equally keen to portray those who fought it in unashamedly heroic terms. Make no mistake, this book is partisan. But it is pioneering as well and it points up a whole raft of possibilities for new research. On a fairly basic level, the significance of the book is in its corrective value: as a compendium of imperial violence, it provides an ample resource for anyone wanting to take up

the argument with Ferguson et al. Its greater significance, however, may well be its contribution towards a more gradual rethinking of what any undertaking to write imperial history might involve.

If Jeremy Paxman is right to suggest that people in Britain today are ignorant of Britain's imperial past, it is notable that in autumn 2011, when his book was published, a rash of television series appeared, all focused on British soldiers recently serving in Afghanistan.⁽¹⁵⁾ One does not need to subscribe to any 'neo-imperialist' framing to recognise the highly partial account that these films provided. Nor is it necessary to overlook the differences between imperial and post-imperial Britain to recognise the recurrence of classic imperial tropes. Afghanistan is 'medieval'; Taliban fighters are cowards; British troops bring unalloyed advance. Mid-way between a royal wedding and a diamond jubilee was an unfavourable time to publish what Richard Drayton has termed 'post-patriotic' histories of the British Empire.⁽¹⁶⁾ But the need was all the greater when opportunities for emphasising the violence enacted in the name of freedom were so severely constrained. With an army wives choir taking the Christmas number one for a song composed in tribute to their absent husbands and the repatriation of Britain's war dead evolved into an elaborate piece of patriotic theatre, honouring Britain's forces in Afghanistan had become a national recreation. Far less popular attention, perhaps predictably, was paid to the five elderly Kikuyu attempting to prosecute the British government for torture suffered during the Mau Mau emergency in 1950s Kenya. Yet the imminent release of a vast archive of previously 'migrated' files pertaining to Britain's withdrawal from empire promises a dramatic rethinking of the exceptionality or otherwise of brutality enacted in the course of British imperial expansion – and decline.⁽¹⁷⁾ Gott's *Britain's Empire* is hardly without its problems but it is significant nonetheless for auguring a new course, away from well-worn narratives. *Empire*, by contrast, is only too familiar. For readers wishing an entertainment in imperialism they can do no better than Paxman. One may well wonder, however, if at this present juncture an entertainment in imperialism is really what we need.

Notes

1. Aside from the books reviewed here, see also Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford, 2011); Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Imperial Endgame: Britain's Dirty Wars and the End of Empire* (London, 2011); Kwasi Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire: Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* (London, 2011); and *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Andrew Thompson (Oxford, 2011). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883); Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, 2003). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1985). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Niall Ferguson, 'Empire falls', *Vanity Fair*, October 2006. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Laurie Penny, 'Michael Gove and the imperialists', *New Statesman*, 1 June 2010; Charlotte Higgins, 'Historians say Michael Gove risks turning history lessons into propaganda classes', *The Guardian*, 17 August 2011 < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/aug/17/academics-reject-gove-history-lessons> [3]> [accessed 13 February 2012]. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Shula Marks, 'History, the nation and empire: sniping from the periphery', *History Workshop Journal*, 29, 1 (1990). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Bernard Porter, 'Empire: what ruling the world did to the British by Jeremy Paxman – review', *The Guardian*, 3 October 2011 < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/05/empire-ruling-world-paxman-review> [4]> [accessed 12 February 2012]. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Jan Morris, *Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire* (London, 1968); *Heaven's Command: An Imperial Progress* (London, 1973); *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat* (London, 1978); Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (London, 1994); Dennis Judd: *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present* (London, 1996); P. J. Marshall, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1996); Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (London, 2007). For approachable, single-volume academic histories, see L. J. Butler, *Britain and Empire: Adjusting to a Post-Imperial World* (London, 2001); Dane Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880–1945*

(Harlow, 2002); Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (Harlow, 2007) – and the perennial: Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism* (4th ed., Harlow, 2004).[Back to \(8\)](#)

9. Hsu-Ming Teo, 'Wandering in the wake of empire: British travel and tourism in the post-imperial world', in *British Culture and the End of Empire*, ed. by Stuart Ward (Manchester, 2003).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Salman Rushdie, 'Outside the whale', *Granta*, 11 (Spring 1984); Jon Wilson, 'Niall Ferguson's imperial passion', *History Workshop Journal*, 56, 1 (2003).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. D. Sayer, 'British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre, 1919–20', *Past and Present*, 131 (1991).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London, 2004).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Stuart Macintyre, *The History Wars* (Revised ed., Melbourne, 2004). On South Africa, see Mohamed Adhikari, *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide: The Extermination of the Cape San Peoples* (Cape Town, 2010).[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, 4, (2006).[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. *Our War* (BBC1); *Fighting on the Frontline* (Channel 4); *Young Soldiers* (BBC); *Royal Marines: Mission to Afghanistan* (Channel 5).[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Richard Drayton, 'Where does the world historian write from? Objectivity, moral conscience and the past and present of imperialism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46, 3 (2011).[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. See David M. Anderson, 'Mau Mau in the High Court and the 'Lost' British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39, 5 (2011).[Back to \(17\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/05/empire-ruling-world-paxman-review> [4]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/empire-what-ruling-the-world-did-to-the-british-by-jeremy-paxman-6261276.html> [5]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8801370/Jeremy-Paxman-what-empire-did-for-Britain.html> [6]

Spectator

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/7307783/not-lions-but-ostriches.shtml> [7]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/3b56dac0-f992-11e0-bf8f-00144feab49a.html> [8]

Observer

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/23/paxman-british-empire-review-kwarteng> [9]

Guardian (Gott)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/dec/07/britains-empire-richard-gott-review> [10]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/britains-empire-resistance-repression-and-revolt-by-richard-gottbr-empire-what-ruling-the-world-did-to-the-british-by-jeremy-paxman-2369976.html> [11]

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[4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/05/empire-ruling-world-paxman-review>

- [5] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/empire-what-ruling-the-world-did-to-the-british-by-jeremy-paxman-6261276.html>
- [6] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8801370/Jeremy-Paxman-what-empire-did-for-Britain.html>
- [7] <http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/7307783/not-lions-but-ostriches.thtml>
- [8] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/3b56dac0-f992-11e0-bf8f-00144feab49a.html#axzz1nrO4Axwe>
- [9] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/23/paxman-british-empire-review-kwarteng>
- [10] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/dec/07/britains-empire-richard-gott-review>
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