Gender aspects of terrorism in urban spaces

Keenan, Kevin

Gender Aspects of Terrorism in Urban Spaces

Kevin Keenan [*]

Abstract: *»Geschlecht und Terrorismus in städtischen Räumen«.* Theoretical development within gender studies and terrorism studies has occurred along the axes of identity, material and spatial power and inequality, and geography. Gender scholars have been concerned with the transformation of oppressive political structures, with increased inequality and understanding how gender structures limit women's opportunities, and with the role of separate geographical and social spheres in shaping outcomes. Terrorism scholars have conceptualized terror as a political process, the result largely of economic inequality and to some extent, gender structures, and they have articulated a role for urban space in conceptualizing interventionist policy to ameliorate the terrorist threat. This paper traces the development of these theoretical traditions, pointing out the thematic similarities, but also the dissimilar objects of inquiry. A review of the scholarship where gender informs terrorism studies points the way to future development of scholarship around (1) solving the global terrorism problem by further understanding gender structures for both men and women; (2) the role of urban and non-urban spaces as the backdrop for terrorist recruitment and formation processes; and (3) how gender is likely to affect actual survival for gendered urban populations when terrorism occurs.

Keywords: Terrorism, gender, urban space, hazards, United States.

1. Introduction

Identity, material and spatial inequality, and perceptions of place are important dimensions for understanding terrorism. So too are each of these dimensions important for understanding gender. Scholars of gender and of terrorism have organized their work around these themes (Brownlow 2005; Hanson 2010; Martin 2002; Hyndman 2007; Baxter and Catley 2000; Keenan and Gong 2011; Murphy 2003; Hoffman 2002; Graham 2008), exposing and developing how gendered identities and terrorist attacks are formed. The backdrop for this work has been decidedly urban, with gender theorists tracing the historical evolution of women's place in cities and the use of urban space often to reinvigorate traditional gender structures. Gender has become a decidedly urban concern in the developed world, both for understanding the past and thinking

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[*] Kevin Keenan, Department of Political Science, College of Charleston, South Carolina 29424, USA; KeenanK@cofc.edu.

about the present. In urban spaces, women's and men's work – a foundational condition of one's identity – was made decidedly visible and separate at the behest of advancing capitalist economies and associated cultures. At the same time, particularly in the U.S., scholarship on terrorism has been overwhelmingly urban-focused (Savitch 2008; Savitch 2003; Gray and Wyly 2007; Katz 2007; Mitchell 2003), with predictions that terrorism is likely to remain an urban phenomenon with attendant protections needed (Savitch and Ardashev 2001). However, just beneath the hegemonic, self-focused U.S. perspective that seeks to effect protection from an invisible foe, lies theory of terrorism that follows historic and global patterns of inequality, regionally and culturally reinforced networks of difference, and critical geographies of nationhood.

These two streams of social inquiry – of gender and of terrorism – have seldom overlapped, though the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. prompted cross-dialogue. Gender theorists sought to push back against an emergent and oppressive security state that sought new patterns of old forms of western masculinity and femininity, as well as to suggest alternative ways of responding to terrorism that did not involve military force. Some risk-hazards scholars – who have mostly studied environmental hazards and non-terrorism related technological hazards (such as risk perception for nuclear accidents) – also began to reorient their theoretical apparatuses to study terrorism (Mitchell 2003, 2005). The work of this group – which has been overwhelmingly focused on how people perceive and respond to risks – involved some consideration of gender as a dimension of social difference that could affect risk perception and possibly response as well. Gender was conceptualized as a rather meager lens through which one might understand differing risk perceptions and behaviors in light of these interpretations. Urban scholars called for more work on cities, as most people and most vulnerabilities to a hazard with sudden spectacular ability (e.g., destroying symbols of U.S. and western globalization power) lived in cities (Clarke, Pagano and Gaile 2002; Savitch 2003; Eisinger 2004; Mitchell 2003).

In this paper, I will trace the theoretical development within gender and terrorism studies along the axes of identity, material and spatial power and inequality, and geography, as I have mentioned above. I will point out where these axes come close to informing each other, speculate as to why they have not historically linked, and offer an outline for areas of possible fruitful future theoretical development. For both cases, I will highlight the city as an integrative setting in which diverse theories can join to inform future efforts at good public policy (i.e., anti-terrorism policy and response).

2.   Theorizing Gender *and* Theorizing Terrorism

My goal in this section of the paper is to provide a cursory outline of the major theoretical trends within gender and terrorism studies, with a particular eye

towards developing strands of theory that can later be combined for possible further productive development in gender and terrorism studies. Given the space limitations of the current paper and the extensiveness of both sets of literature, I am necessarily going to be brief. I am not offering a comprehensive outline, but rather a very general overview.

While scholars of gender have been concerned, primarily, about material and social inequality, they have also developed a robust understanding of how identity is formed, maintained, and changed in ways that support the divergent outcomes for men and women (McDowell 1993a; McDowell 1993b). They have also leveraged powerful critiques upon the production of knowledge in the sciences and humanities (Lorde 2003; Harding 1991).

In the U.S. context, the earliest analyses of gender focused on women's relative disempowerment in the political sphere, particularly as evidenced by the denial of the vote. Such analyses are often categorized as first wave feminism, which eventually gave way to studies of identity and its role in relative disempowerment and consequential social experiences. These ideas are most celebrated (in the popular imagination) in *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1997 [1963]). With the emergence of American suburbia in tandem with postmodern theory, scholars increasingly recognized that categories of identity were elicited and reinforced in ways that empowered and disempowered subjects, and that urban spaces were often integral to this process. In the case of Betty Friedan, her work was the most impactful articulation of these themes in the popular press because she articulated a growing unease among suburban women who faced disempowerment, albeit of a radically new sort that was hard to identify. No longer denied the vote, women were essentially denied lives outside of their roles as homemaker, housewife, mother, and chauffeur. These roles were embedded in a form of societal mysticism that posited the superhuman female who was happily and willingly able to do limitless and uncompensated domestic work.

It was literally the spatial isolation in identical suburban environments that caused women to start to see gender as a structure leading to their own dissatisfaction, but as they did so they experienced collective guilt around being *bad mothers and bad wives*. (Friedan (1997 [1963]) called this "the problem that has no name.") This cognitive dissonance – feeling cheated as well as guilty at the same time for feeling that way – fueled a latent radicalism that was shared among many American women. It was not necessarily the conditions of their work that caused this radicalism, but rather the mysticism that posited they should be happy while doing it. When they were not, women often felt deviant or wrong for wanting something more than cleaning and caretaking. The backdrop of a bland suburbia only served to underscore their discontent, and it facilitated the exchange of ideas and experiences amongst women via long hours in nearly completely gender-homophilous social networks while their husbands worked in the central city. Reflecting her own position within white,

middle-class America, Friedan's story was informed by a relatively privileged and exclusive experience for a select group of American women. Nevertheless, her story was a reaction against an aspirational cultural model of domesticity that had widespread circulation in America because it was promoted by the highest and most visible levels of the U.S. Government. The detached, single-family, suburban home was promoted with images by a White House panel of experts as the ideal environment for families with children (Nicolaides and Wiese 2005). These images were then recirculated by newsletters and magazines specifically aimed at women. Friedan's ideas were thus primed to resonate with many women, even those not themselves in these suburban roles. For the first time the oppression that many women felt—including those who were non-white but still exposed to popular press and power structures—was connected with hegemonic and visible manifestations in a particular place that each one of them knew well: the home. This was second-wave feminism.

The attention to the role of urban space in shaping gendered outcomes – particularly for women – is a line of inquiry that still exists today within gender studies. For example, Hanson and Pratt (1991) showed that urban labor markets were segmented by gender, and that women's networks were usually spatially structured in such a way as to reproduce certain types of jobs for them. Hanson and Pratt also showed that even in cities, patterns of circumscribed geographies that mirrored suburban patterns of an earlier era occurred. Women often sought jobs close to home so that they could continue to manage the multitude of responsibilities tied to the home (Hanson and Pratt 1995). More than a decade later, Kern (2009) reinterpreted urban renewal efforts in Toronto, Canada to show how new-build gentrification in the urban core resurrected historic ideas of gender (e.g., women are more responsible than men) while simultaneously positing them as weak (e.g., women need security in the form of gated, gentrified apartment complexes and buildings).

At the same time, a burgeoning scholarship that was made possible by both ideas of postmodernism and by feminism critiqued the prevalent notions of a shared ideal of womanhood and even of a common understanding of women's oppression. Rather, it was argued that there are many different experiences for women that are based on race, class, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, and geography (Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Lorde 2003; Pratt 1998). This occurred against the backdrop of third-wave feminism, which was most clearly articulated by feminist theorizers seeking to expand the possibilities of scholarship by recognizing how both theory and method were informed by the relatively privileged positions of men. This in turn led to knowledge that supported existing power structures, regardless of stated intention. These scholars sought to reveal both how such knowledge was produced, and how it might be transformed to empower those who were disempowered (Harding 1987, 1991).

Gender theory has progressed from concerns about political and material deprivation to questions of identity, with this focus on identity also opening up

a recent line of inquiry focused on studying men as well as women (Connell 2002; Connell 2005; Brownlow 2005). Gender theory also recently has critiqued the production of knowledge, seeking a reorientation to the study of the disadvantaged. The concerns that have informed theories of gender are not unlike those that have informed theories of terrorism, though not in the same chronological order. In the next section of the paper, I will outline how theories of terrorism have focused on political and social deprivation, spatial isolation, and questions of power and disempowerment in various urban and non-urban spaces.

First, the earliest understandings of terrorism have associated this phenomenon with the failure of the state to promote and achieve social and material equity. As was the case with feminism, the first *terrorists* sought a particular kind of revolt against government structures that denied political participation and seemed to promote inequality. Hoffman (1998) explains how terrorism was popularized after the Reign of Terror (1793-4) in France, and that it was initially viewed positively in some quarters as a way to ensure the goals of revolution (greater equality and participation in governance) were delivered. Of course, the tactics used by feminists and the contexts within which those tactics were deployed were quite different from the tactics and contexts of Revolutionary France. Nevertheless, the revolutionaries in France viewed the use of violence to overthrow the government and oppressive social structures as a positive, needed activity; this view was widely shared amongst an identifiable class of citizens. A similar set of conditions is observed with first-wave feminists, though violence was not advocated nor was the complete overthrow of the government (rather, feminists sought to change certain laws and policies within the existing governments).

Second, more recent analyses of terrorism have revealed the structural conditions that presumably garner terrorism around the world. Flint (2003) argues that the uneven distribution of material resources under advanced capitalism, and the penetration of globalization into nearly all corners of the world, has created a structure that elicits the 9/11-style variety of attack aimed at the West. On the one hand, there has been an incredible amassing of wealth in the west, coupled with media sources that make visual this wealth to the rest of the world. On the other hand, within territories experiencing contemporary globalization, there is societal instability. Of particular concern in this line of thinking is the transformation of both economies and identities (usually related to religious and economic identities). As capitalism encroaches, traditional ways of making a living and organizing society via religion change; in the ensuing vacuum, terrorism can be promoted as a way to regain power against an invading west. Again, the spatial differentiation of such patterns, at a global scale, is argued to create the conditions for particular types of terrorism. Even at the micro-scale, space emerges as important for understanding how a terrorist identity is actually created (Murphy 2003). Space emerges as an important

variable for studying terrorism, which was also the case for studying gender (i.e., suburban vs. urban space).

Third, recent theory in terrorism, often being written post-9/11, has largely focused on understanding vulnerability and resilience (Mitchell 2003) as well as the implications of a growing security state (Graham 2008). This theoretical tradition mirrors the gender theory mentioned above which, as I outlined, seeks theory that empowers those who have been disempowered. While the goal of terrorism scholars is not exactly the same, the critical vein of recent terrorism theory is very much concerned with illuminating how the fear of terrorism can be a potent political element. Fear of terrorism can be harnessed to generate certain political outcomes – often outcomes that support neoliberal regimes (Wekerle and Jackson 2005; Gray and Wyly 2007; Graham 2008). Further, 9/11 has prompted a rethinking of the embedded role of violence, aggression, and fear in the very ways we build cities, even when responding to terrorism is not stated as a goal (Graham 2004). This mirrors some of the same concerns of gender theorists: the threat of violence often works to reinforce gender structure, often without explicit realization (Brownlow 2005; Pain 2001; Valentine 1989, 1992). Scholars in this vein often want to shift the power dynamic away from benefiting a political elite and a war stance to a more balanced, democratic process that may be more successful in undermining global conditions that perpetuate terrorism and oppression. In this section, I have provided a very general overview of major themes in gender theory and in terrorism theory. In so doing, I have drawn parallels between these two theoretical canons along three axes: political interactions and identities, spatial separation, and empowerment vs. disempowerment. In the next section, I will outline the ways that gender has informed theories of terrorism.

3. Theorizing Gender *in* Terrorism

The role of gender *in* terrorism has been theorized in the following areas: (1) gender structures interact with other structures, such as globalization and capitalism, to foster terrorism as a political statement and weapon; (2) urban space is the primary background for the operation of terrorist networks and the construction of terror subjects that purport a variety of implications; and (3) gender is known to produce different interpretations of risk and this is used to achieve certain forms of disempowerment in contemporary society. As I will argue, the theory of gender in terrorism reflects the nexus of the strands of theory I outlined above.

First, theory of gender in terrorism studies has sought to explain how gender as a social structure interacts with other structures, such as capitalism, globalization, and religion, to form the terrorist as political statement and subject. These scholars have theorized 'broken' or 'reactionary' gender structures in the

developing world that in turn nurture the creation of terrorists. These structures, which are largely in the process of transformation in response to the inroads being made by capitalism (Kimmel 2005), fail to support individual male empowerment via masculinity. Men are bereft of sources of income, skills, or other claims to identities of empowerment over women – in societies radically changing in the onslaught of globalization (Friedan 1997 [1963]; Watts 2007) – and so they are susceptible to messages of empowerment via violence in the name of cultural preservation and terrorism (Ericson 2007; Bremer and Kasarda 2002; Laqueur 1996).

Theorization of the intersection between gender and social structures has not been limited to the non-western world. Hyndman (2003), for example, seeks to avoid frames of reference that posit the non-western terrorist as somehow *othered* in a system unrelated to western power structures. Bakker (2003) highlights this point as well by arguing that it is the capitalist market system that reorients subjects in the current age of insecurity, both in the west and in other places affected by capitalism. These strands of theory have implicated the role of political economy and the state both as an oppositional force that engenders resistance based around gender, and as a proactive force that shapes and supports those very gender structures.

Second, urban spaces have been theorized as integral to understanding terrorism in two ways: first, they are recognized as the backdrop within which terrorists themselves are recruited if not formed, and second these spaces are the primary sites within which popular understandings in western societies of what terrorism means are forged (i.e., a grave threat that must be resisted at all costs) (Graham 2008). The recruitment and formation of terrorists requires the operation of social networks, and these networks are densest in western cities where attacks are often aimed (Savitch 2008). Indeed, Savitch argued that the density and way of life found in cities allows terrorist cells to operate undetected. But urban spaces in other parts of the world have also been theorized as the primary recruiting grounds and resource sites for clandestine terrorist networks (Simone 2008), though the actual training of terrorists may occur in more remote locales (Murphy 2003). There is an absence of research on gendered spaces and the recruitment and formation of terrorists, presumably because by design such spaces are not evident to public safety officials (or to researchers for that matter). This signals one area of scholarship for possible future development.

Urban space has also been used to theorize how western populations develop an understanding of the terrorist other as well as fear that he will attack. This work has included gender as a specific variable. Grey and Wyly (2007) theorized urbanity itself as the target of terrorism. They argued that the constant belief that terrorism will occur in cities has been an effective tool in converting some American voters to support conservative political regimes. Wekerle and Jackson (2005) theorized similarly, positing that discourses about terrorist threats become attached to uniquely urban spaces or features (such as a

train station) thereby serving as a potent political prop. Katz (2007) argued that terrorism became so pervasive in urban space that people began to fear its absence rather than what its presence actually meant. She also theorized how this process enabled the mobilization of gendered identities. Security equipment caused marketers to seek strategic niches for their products. They began to target women, specifically, as *good wives and mothers* who needed to protect their families (Katz 2008). In so doing, they not only built a market, but they reactivated particular ideals of what it meant to be a woman. In the popular press, Susan Faludi (2007) articulated a similar theme: the post-9/11 context in the United States was characterized by a reassertion of historic gender ideas (i.e., men as protectors and women as needing protection) and cities served as the backdrop for this story to be told.

Susan Faludi and Cindi Katz have both recognized that gender structures are being mobilized to support different aspects of conservative security states, but they are also linking their scholarship to a well-developed body of knowledge regarding how men and women interpret risk differently. Though there is little work done explicitly on gendered terrorism risk perception and even less on how places themselves (such as urban environments) affect these perceptions, there is a wealth of knowledge that men and women think differently about the experience of a hazard and also respond differently to risk perceptions. For example, women are more likely to fear and dread certain risks, while men are more likely to die from a hazard (such as a heat wave) because they have fewer, and less well-connected social contacts (Klineberg 2002). The overall lack of density of men's networks leads to less information, less preparation, and less ability to respond than is the case for women. Some recent evidence has emerged that place itself can also affect how people interpret risk (Keenan and Hanson 2013). Because gender has historically accorded men and women preponderance in different places and women and men are socialized to think differently within these places and about the possibilities of the places themselves, the affect of place also varies by gender.

Drabek (1969) showed that men and women acquire information about hazards – and in his study, evacuation from an impending hazard – from different sources, while Conger et al. (1993) showed that men and women respond to different types of crises. Cutter et al. (2006) showed that gender can predict how men and women are likely to predict the severity of a hazard differently. (Women are more likely to say a risk is going to be catastrophic than are men.) The creation and promotion of fear of terrorism – whether for political purposes or for marketing – is a spatialized and decidedly urban process. The production of particular types of knowledge by both researchers/academics and by people in their everyday lives (e.g., risk interpretations) is one outcome of this process that must be critically examined.

In this section, I have reviewed how gender is theorized in terrorism studies. These theories have explored how gender structures interact with other societal

structures to produce terrorists. They have looked at how urban space supports the creation of a terrorist in both western and non-western contexts, but also how urban space is the backdrop in processes that generate fearful, conservative voting constituents. Finally, gender theory in terrorism has shown that gender structures create particular types of knowledge for men and women around how they interpret hazards, with this knowledge traced to the differential gendered subjects that are re-instated post-9/11.

4. Areas of Further Theoretical Development in Urban Studies, Gender, and Terrorism Studies

There are three themes that I have developed around gender and terrorism studies: political interactions and identity construction, the role of space, and questions of power and disempowerment. Theorization in each of these areas has largely been more robust in gender and feminist studies than it has been in terrorist studies, thus pointing the way to additional areas of possible development.

First, gender studies and terrorism studies mostly have parity regarding theorization of the role of political structures and institutions. Gender studies, which were pioneered by feminists, largely placed political structures front and center as an object of inquiry, particularly because initially these structures were the most visible aspects of gender-based oppression. For a subset of scholars of terrorism – those who are interested in long-range policy that may disrupt the structures that garner terrorism – political structures and institutions were also front and center. These scholars were particularly interested in political economy, and in transforming global capitalism in such a way that its most oppressive aspects would not continue to destabilize world regions and generate a backlash from populations in those regions. Further, some scholars also took a more micro-geographical perspective, and argued that political structures were localized to create conservative voting blocs.

The goals of both of these areas of scholarship would advance by further collaboration around understanding gender structures in developing contexts, particularly in North Africa and Southwest Asia. The political goals of feminists in liberating women and curtailing oppression are relevant to other contexts, as some of the basic forms of oppression that were challenged in the west still operate elsewhere to a much greater extent. Understanding these conditions, raising awareness, and generating some activism will not only advance women's and men's lives in those regions, but such results will also diminish the prospects of terrorism elsewhere. Societies with advanced women's rights are often less violent and more economically stable. There have been tremendous gains in gender work in these areas; combining with terrorism scholars will allow greater understanding of and intervention in the production of terrorist violence by men, and increasingly by women as well. It is important to

realize that one of the main causes of terrorism is the transformation of economic systems simultaneously with indigenous attempts to keep historic gender structures in place.

Second, there is similarity in the ways that gender scholars have utilized the concept of space and place to inform their work and in the ways that scholars of terrorism have done so. Feminists and other gender scholars have pioneered both a robust understanding of how space itself results in differential outcomes for men and women, but they also have used concepts of geography (such as core and periphery) to help theorize and challenge dominant understandings and organizations of space. In terrorism research, scholars have also drawn on space to both theorize ways that terrorists are created and to obstruct this process. However, gender scholars have been more engaged in using urban space as a variable to understand the actual perception of gendered identities and other areas of social difference, and what this means practically for a person's life outcomes. For example, Pratt (1998) showed how movement through space and across boundaries can generate awareness of social structures amongst people, and then these people in turn might question why these structures exist and how they affect that person him or herself.

Scholars of terrorism have not utilized space as a concept in a similar way, thus suggesting another venue through which gender studies can inform terrorism studies. This type of work has proven useful, as evidenced by Keenan and Hanson (2013). Keenan and Hanson showed that there is some evidence that people will interpret their vulnerability through both gender and place, largely because a person's conversation partners and social contacts are segmented by location *and* gender. While there is a robust literature on the social amplification of risk generated within the environmental risk-hazards tradition, and this tradition provides a theoretical framework for terrorism studies, that work has focused primarily on the role of the media (Kasperson 1988). Drawing from geographical concepts, however, modifies this framework to consider amplification and attenuation of risk through place and not just the media (Masuda and Garvin 2006; Keenan and Gong 2011). When combining this perspective on the role of urban space with gender analyses it is further revealed how gender structures affect the ways that men and women might survive an actual terrorist attack should one occur today (Coaffee, Wood and Rogers 2009). Such findings have implications for emergency management policies in cities.

Gender has been mobilized to get people to do things that reduce their vulnerability. In the contexts of the U.S., gender was a cultural underpinning to the construction of white femininity and masculinity as a 'natural' condition/state via the suburbanization trends of the 1950s and 60s. While not a desirable outcome given contemporary efforts towards sustainability, this low-density sprawling landscape was initially part of a defense strategy to minimize impact and loss in the event of a nuclear attack on a city by the former Soviet Union. After the 9/11 attacks, the suburbs were commonly framed as 'safe spaces'

(Kern 2009; Bagli 2001, 2002). In this way, the production of a particular kind of space, which was informed by gender, reduced vulnerability. Further, gender structures were mobilized throughout crisis periods in western history, most recently to posit good moms as the keepers of security kits. This 'big mother' strategy, while creating and reinforcing a particular political identity, also reduced vulnerability as at least the family unit was increasingly likely to have some preparation completed. Moving forward, it will be important to maintain a critical lens on the way that security is implemented and used for political purposes, particularly around gender. But, it is equally important to recognize and continue to research the positive benefits that these processes have had vis-à-vis actually improving emergency preparations.

5.   Conclusion

In this paper, I have briefly traced the development of gender studies and terrorism studies in western contexts along three main axes: political structures, spatial differentiation, and knowledge critiques and production. These two areas of scholarship have informed each other, though the direction of the impact when it has occurred has largely been gender theories informing research on hazards and terrorism and not the other way around. Gender theorists have not borrowed concepts from terrorism studies to reorient the political project of gender studies, but some terrorist scholars have bridged gender concepts with terrorism studies to redirect that research. Katz's (2008) work on the huge marketing opportunities that have emerged around security, and how these opportunities have been used to redeploy and reassert traditional gender ideals, is a case in point.

There are areas for future work suggested by this review. First, solving the global terrorism problem will require gender analyses, both vis-à-vis women's empowerment as well as understanding of masculinity. Studying men, and the incentive structures that they are responding to when they become terrorists, must be part of future research. This research will also necessarily involve attention to economic systems, particularly capitalism and its local articulations. Understanding the search and use for power around gender will also contribute to women's empowerment, particularly as they are suppressed by both men and economic systems. The conditions of capitalism both transform gender, but also lead to societal reactions that reassert oppressive gender structures. Second, urban space must continue to be studied, primarily because it is in these spaces that terrorists are recruited and supported. It is also within these spaces that they act. Understanding how women's and men's social networks, which are often segmented by gender and location, facilitate terrorism will be integral to this process. Finally, the future of gender in terrorism studies must continue to build on its history of understanding how knowledge production

that is informed by gendered realities results in differential outcomes for men and women as they face this hazard. Understanding what these outcomes are, how they come about, and how to intervene to correct them are important venues for future research. The validity of our findings, however, is something that I hope will never be tested in the urban realities beyond theory.

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