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# **„Working in Southern Europe in Times of Crisis – Myths and Demons“**

(July 2011)

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## **Abstract**

Citizens of Southern Europe have been presented by the German media and politicians as lazy and work averse. First, it is checked whether and to what extent those characterizations do reflect reality, and then, in view of the Greek economic crisis, it is shown that crises and not laziness destroy jobs. The presentation of the political reactions against those myths is followed by an analysis of the effects of such a political-economic demonization of southern European countries.

## **I. The Demonization of Southern Europe and the Greeks**

Demon or Daemon: A Greek word. A really ancient one. Initially, the term „demon“ used to describe a protective spirit (Liddell/Scott, 1940), a divine being that is similar to the current concept of a „guardian angel“. Nowadays, however, the word „demon“ has a rather negative meaning. It simply depicts a malevolent spirit, an evil oddity, a fallen angel.

„2000 Years Downfall“ – This was the title of the main article concerning the Greek financial crisis published in February 2010 in the magazine *FOCUS*. The cover page read „Betrayers in the Euro-Family“<sup>1</sup>, and the question posed sounded like this: „Does Greece deprive us of our money – and what is going on with Spain, Portugal, Italy?“<sup>2</sup> But this is only how the downfall begins.

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\* I am indebted to Wanda Vrasti, PhD. Her seminar “Work in Neoliberal Times” at Humboldt University, Berlin was the main source of inspiration. All errors are mine.

<sup>1</sup> Betröger in der Euro-Familie.

<sup>2</sup> Bringt uns GRIECHENLAND um unser Geld – und was ist mit Spanien, Portugal, Italien?

About two months later, on April 25th, *Bild* - the best selling tabloid paper within Europe - hosted an article entitled „Broke-Greeks – Here they are partying their Finance-Shot“.<sup>3</sup> According to the article, a country was begging the European Union and the International Monetary Fund for help, but the people kept on partying. In the same manner, the *Bild's* June 11, 2010 article was entitled „Panic on the Titanic? As if! Greeks are partying“.<sup>4</sup>

Already in March 2010, the online version of the weekly news magazine *Stern* hosted an article with respect to proposals made by some members of the German Liberal (FDP) and the Christian Democratic (CDU) parties. Accordingly, Greece should sell state property in order to satisfy its debtors. Apart from state buildings and national companies, Greece could sell some of its inhabited islands. The article was correspondingly headed „Greece shall sell Islands“.<sup>5</sup> In a more categorical manner, the on-line version of the newspaper *Die Welt* was declaring that „Outraged Greeks do not Want to sell Islands“.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the downfall was about to continue.

Some months ago, in May 2011, German Chancellor *Angela Merkel* criticized the pension and holiday regimes in Southern Europe by claiming that „in countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal people should not retire earlier than in Germany“. Moreover, citizens of Southern European states had very long vacations. „We cannot have one currency, and one country has a lot of holiday but the other only a little of it“, she added (*Bild*, 19.5.2011).<sup>7</sup>

Taken together, according to the media and to the aforementioned political personalities Southern European citizens appear to be *inter alios* lazy, to have long vacations, to retire early, and to feature a guiltily cheerful attitude towards life. Do those characteristics reflect reality? How much do South Europeans work? How long are the holidays they are entitled to? When do they exit the labour market? What is the effect of such characterizations? Which demons shall we dispel?

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<sup>3</sup> PLEITE-GRIECHEN, Hier feiern sie ihre Finanz-Spritze.

<sup>4</sup> JEDEN TAG NEUE SCHOCK-NACHRICHTEN AUS ATHEN, Panik auf der Titanic? Von wegen! Die Griechen feiern!

<sup>5</sup> Ungebetener Rat aus Deutschland: Griechenland soll Inseln verkaufen, 4.3.2010.

<sup>6</sup> Empörte Griechen wollen Inseln nicht verkaufen, 4.3.2010.

<sup>7</sup> The complete passages read as follows: „Es geht auch darum, dass man in Ländern wie Griechenland, Spanien, Portugal nicht früher in Rente gehen kann als in Deutschland, sondern dass alle sich auch ein wenig gleich anstrengen – das ist wichtig.“ [...] „Wir können nicht eine Währung haben, und der eine kriegt ganz viel Urlaub und der andere ganz wenig.“

## II. Reality Check

### A. Do They Work Less?

With respect to the claim concerning the laziness of Southern European citizens, the OECD statistical database reveals that since 2002, German workers work less than 1500 hours per year. For instance, in the years 2007, 2008 and 2009 the figure amounted to 1431, 1430 and 1390 annual hours worked per German worker, respectively. On the other hand, since 2002, Greek workers appear to work more than 2000 hours annually. In particular, in 2007, 2008 and 2009 the figures exceeded 2110 hours worked per year. In absolute terms, in 2009, Greek workers appear to have worked about 720 hours more than their German counterparts. The same holds true for Spain, Portugal and Italy, where in the last eight years the figures were above 1600, 1700 and about 1800 hours worked per year respectively.

**Average annual working time**  
Hours per worker

|                     | 2002   | 2003   | 2004   | 2005   | 2006   | 2007   | 2008   | 2009   |
|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Germany             | 1445.4 | 1438.9 | 1441.5 | 1434.1 | 1429.5 | 1431.0 | 1429.6 | 1389.7 |
| Greece              | 2108.9 | 2102.7 | 2082.2 | 2085.7 | 2147.8 | 2115.6 | 2116.1 | 2119.3 |
| Hungary             | 2019.2 | 1989.5 | 1994.0 | 1993.6 | 1989.5 | 1985.6 | 1986.3 | 1988.8 |
| Iceland             | 1812.0 | 1807.0 | 1810.0 | 1794.0 | 1795.0 | 1807.0 | 1807.0 | 1715.9 |
| Ireland             | 1698.0 | 1671.0 | 1668.0 | 1654.0 | 1642.0 | 1631.0 | 1601.0 | 1549.0 |
| Israel <sup>†</sup> | ..     | ..     | 1951.5 | 1942.2 | 1929.5 | 1945.4 | 1942.7 | ..     |
| Italy               | 1831.0 | 1825.6 | 1826.1 | 1818.7 | 1814.8 | 1816.4 | 1807.0 | 1773.4 |
| Portugal            | 1767.0 | 1742.0 | 1763.0 | 1752.0 | 1757.0 | 1727.0 | 1745.0 | 1719.0 |
| Slovak Republic     | 1733.4 | 1677.7 | 1733.0 | 1767.5 | 1754.6 | 1752.5 | 1769.3 | 1693.4 |
| Slovenia            | ..     | ..     | ..     | 1697.8 | 1669.1 | 1655.4 | 1687.3 | ..     |
| Spain               | 1720.9 | 1705.8 | 1689.6 | 1667.8 | 1655.5 | 1636.5 | 1647.2 | 1653.8 |

Source: Employment and labour markets: Key tables from OECD (2010) [Last updated: 3.1.2011].  
[http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/average-annual-working-time-2010\\_20752342-2010-table8](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/average-annual-working-time-2010_20752342-2010-table8)  
(last visited: 15. July. 2011).

In terms of hours worked per week, the OECD statistics reveal again that workers from Southern European countries are by no means less labour-loving than the German ones. In 2009, workers from Germany worked 35.7 hours per week, while those from Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy 42.5, 38.8, 38.9 and 38.0, respectively.<sup>8</sup> In regard to holidays, the statistical data of *Eurofund* for the year 2009 reveals that the annual leave entitlement “varies from 30 days in Denmark and Germany to 23 days in Greece [...], while the entitlement is 24 days in Malta, 22 in Portugal and Spain.”<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, the data do not confirm the working hypothesis with respect to the work-averse attitude of Southern European people. On the contrary, they confirm the analysis of *Rodriguez-*

<sup>8</sup> [http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=AVE\\_HRS](http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=AVE_HRS) (last visited: 15. July 2011).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/tn1004039s/tn1004039s.htm#hd5> (last visited: 15. July. 2011).

*Pose/Tselios* (2011), which finds that people from countries with the weakest welfare systems, particularly those from Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, appear to have stronger incentives to work and get an education.<sup>10</sup>

### **B. Do They Leave the Labour Market Earlier?**

To date, the official age of retirement in Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain is 65 years for men.<sup>11</sup> The corresponding figure for women is 65, 60, 60, 65 and 65 years, respectively. The majority of workers in OECD countries, however, leave the labour market before the official pension eligibility age (OECD, *Pensions at Glance*, 2011, 41). What counts here is when people effectively leave the labour market.

In regard to the effective age of retirement for men, first place is occupied by Portugal with 67.0 years. Greece follows with 61.9 years. Workers from Spain and Germany appear to effectively leave the labour market at the same age of 61.8. Finally, Italian male workers exit the labour market at 61.1. The first place with regard to the age of labour market exit for women is occupied by Portugal and Spain with 63.6 and 63.4 years. The Iberian countries are then followed by Germany, Greece and Italy with 60.5, 59.6 and 58.7 years, respectively.

Average effective age of labour-market exit and normal pensionable age

|               | Men/Hommes  |             | Women/Femmes |             |             |             |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|               | Effective   | Official    | Effective    | Official    |             |             |
|               | Effectif    | Officiel    | Effectif     | Officiel    |             |             |
| Portugal      | 67,0        | 65          | 63,6         | 65          | 25,5        | Portugal    |
| United States | 65,5        | 66          | 64,8         | 66          | 22,5        | Etats-Unis  |
| <b>OECD</b>   | <b>63,6</b> | <b>64,4</b> | <b>62,4</b>  | <b>63,1</b> | <b>17,5</b> | <b>OCDE</b> |
| Greece        | 61,9        | 65          | 59,6         | 60          | 11,5        | Grèce       |
| Germany       | 61,8        | 65          | 60,5         | 65          | 9,5         | Allemagne   |
| Spain         | 61,8        | 65          | 63,4         | 65          | 8,5         | Espagne     |
| Italy         | 61,1        | 65          | 58,7         | 60          | 6,5         | Italie      |

Source: *Pensions at a Glance 2011: Retirement-income Systems in OECD and G20 Countries* [Last updated: 28.1.2011]. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932370341> (last visited: 15. July. 2011).

The OECD data clearly shows that the South does by no means exit the labour market earlier.

### **C. Result: The Mythos of the Lazy South**

To summarize, it appears that the profile of the lazy, holiday-addicted and early pensioned Southern Europeans as presented in the media has little to do with reality (See also Faigle,

<sup>10</sup> *Rodriguez-Pose/Tselios* (2011), 2.

<sup>11</sup> For Germany, the figure is about to rise steadily to 67 years.

19.5.2011, Beller, 19.5.2011, Kaufmann, 2011, 5-6). Portuguese workers leave the labour market later than the rest of European workers; their annual leave entitlement together with that of the Spanish workers is the shortest and the Greeks appear to work the most. *Bild's* assertion vis-a-vis Greece that „Germany does have large debts – but we can also pay them. It is because we wake up pretty early in the morning and we work the whole day“<sup>12</sup> proves to be empty. But let us restate the aforementioned assertion in another way. Could Greeks work more or longer in order to stop the crisis? Or, to put it differently, what are the effects of the financial crisis on the Greek employment?

### III. Why They do not Work More or Even Longer?

*Paul Krugman's* prediction that Greece was going to face a painful period with high unemployment rates accompanied by economic recession came, not unexpectedly, true (Krugman, 2010). The overall unemployment rate has risen sharply from 9.5% in 2009 to 12.5% in 2010 (Matsaganis/Leventi, 2011, 4). And this was only the beginning. According to the *Hellenic Statistical Service*, the jobless rate rose to 15.9 percent in the first quarter of 2011.<sup>13</sup> In particular, it skyrocketed from 14.2 percent in the fourth quarter of 2010 to 15.9 percent in the spring of 2011 (Bensasson/Petrakis, June 2011). Almost half of the unemployed have been without work for a year or more. Currently, unemployment is at 19.5 percent for women, and 13.3 percent for men. With respect to males and females aged 15 to 29, the total unemployment rate was 30.9 percent (Bensasson/Petrakis, June 2011). In fact, these figures did not come out of the blue. They are the result of the austerity measures imposed by the Hellenic government upon recommendation of the International Monetary Fund, European Commission and European Central Bank, e.g. the „Troika“, consisting of tax increases, reductions in public spending and privatization of public services. *Tullia Bucco*, an economist at Unicredit Global Research in Milan, stated in this context:

„Increasing job insecurity amid rising unemployment will certainly heighten discontent. New austerity measures targeting cuts in the number of employed at state-owned enterprises or privatization of these same entities are going to make the situation worse“ (Bensasson/Petrakis, June 2011).

In addition, an unknown number of small businesses have closed as a result of the economic recession, while some larger businesses relocated to other Balkan countries where taxes and labour costs are lower (Matsaganis/Leventi, 2011, 4; see also Guardian, Editorial, 23.6.2011).

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<sup>12</sup> The original passage of 5.3.2010 as cited in Kaufmann 2011, 5 reads as follows: „Deutschland hat zwar auch hohe Schulden – aber wir können sie auch begleichen. Weil wir morgens ziemlich früh aufstehen und den ganzen Tag arbeiten.“

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.statistics.gr/portal/page/portal/ESYE> (last visited: 15. July 2011).

*Peter Prontzos*, a political science professor at Langara College in British Columbia, characterized the harsh measures taken as a sort of collective punishment imposed on farmers, workers and small business owners for a crisis that they did not create (Prontzos, June 2011). A comment of *Costas Douzinas*, Professor at Birckbeck, University of London, and *Petros Papaconstantinou*, columnist, was published in the *Guardian* on June 27, 2011. This very comment had recourse to a more categorical language when criticizing the unsustainability of the austerity measures as well as the role of the media in creating the image of the „lazy“ Greek. In particular, the introductory paragraph reads as follows:

„After months of attacks on the supposedly feckless Greeks, the western media, intellectuals such Amartya Sen and Jürgen Habermas and the United Nations have finally woken up to the fact that the catastrophic austerity imposed on Greece is unsustainable. It was about time. This is an unprecedented and morally odious type of collective punishment imposed on a majority of Greeks, who did not see a penny from the profligacy of their rulers and who live close to the poverty line.“

In his comment in the *Guardian* entitled „Greece: bond slave to Europe“, *Mark Weisbrot*, co-director of the Centre for Economic Policy Research in Washington, D.C., characterized the austerity measures as collective punishment imposed on the people of Greece, and casted doubt on their workability and underlined their disastrous effects on employment. The relevant excerpts read as follows:

„What makes the Greek public even angrier is that their collective punishment is being meted out by foreign powers – the European Commission the European Central Bank and the IMF. This highlights perhaps the biggest problem of unaccountable, rightwing, supranational institutions.“

[...]

„This [the deployment of an economic stimulus] is going to happen even under the European authorities, but first, they are putting the country through years of unnecessary suffering. And they are taking advantage of the situation to privatise public assets at fire sale prices and restructure the Greek state and economy, so that it is more to their liking.“

[...]

„The IMF's latest review of its agreement with Greece suggests that the Euro, for the Greek economy, is still 20-34% overvalued. This makes a recovery through "internal devaluation" – that is, keeping unemployment extremely high and therefore lowering wages to make the economy more internationally competitive – an even more remote possibility than it would otherwise be.“

Once we have disproved the claim concerning the inclination of Southern Europe, especially that of the Greeks, towards laziness, we can also come to the conclusion that Greeks do not even have the choice to work more, to become more productive, in order to fight the crisis. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The measures lead to unemployment. The „laziness“ does not make crises; rather the crises destroy jobs (Kaufmann, 2011, 5).

#### **IV. Political Reactions against the Myths**

Of course, there have been reactions to the characterizations already presented. The chairman of the German *Social Democratic Party* (SPD), *Sigmar Gabriel*, stated that the claims of the Federal Chancellor concerning the laziness of the South were a cheap populism (Beller, 19.5.2011). *Manuel Carvalho da Silva*, President of the trade union General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers claimed that those statements constituted a pure colonialism (Bild, 19.5.2011). These assertions did not even find any sort of approval by the president of the liberal-oriented Portuguese Social Democratic Party (PSD), *Pedro Passos Coelho* (Bild, 19.5.2011).<sup>14</sup> In the same respect, there have been reactions to the proposals of selling Greek islands. *Lothar Bisky*, co-chairman of the Left party in Germany, stated in a critical tone that „the gentlemen of the CDU and FDP have perhaps forgotten who last attempted to conquer Greek islands. Such a proposal from Germany reminds many Greek people of terrible memories“ (Weltonline, 4.3.2010).<sup>15</sup> Such a suggestion has been also rejected by the Chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag *Volker Kauder*. The question, however, is what the effects of such statements are. How are they to be interpreted? What is the function of such myth-making and demonizing?

#### **V. Effects of the Myths: Divide and Rule Revised**

One way to understand the „laziness-statements“ is to argue that they encapsulate the demand for further reforms and changes by southern European countries. While the measures taken have already had catastrophic consequences for the middle and low class income families in Greece, it appears that these sort of statements set the groundwork for further and harsher measures. „He who gives the money, defines the course“ has been pointed out vividly in this context (Faigle, 19.5.2011). In fact, it is no coincidence that almost at the same time the IMF sent a warning to Athens expressing the need for higher saving efforts in order to be on track

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<sup>14</sup> On 21st June 2011, *Pedro Passos Coelho* became Prime Minister of Portugal.

<sup>15</sup> „Die Herren von Union und FDP haben wohl vergessen, wer zuletzt den Versuch gemacht hat, griechische Inseln zu erobern. So ein Vorschlag aus Deutschland ruft bei vielen Menschen in Griechenland entsetzliche Erinnerungen auf.“



to save the economy (Bild, 19.5.2011). Sovereignty – a legal or rather political term for international lawyers of the old generation. In reality, it is a mere economic one.

At the same time, there is another more political strategic perspective associated with these defamations provided by German media and politicians. By creating popular negative-images and by drawing the attention of the German citizens to the South, German citizens get distracted from problems within their own country, e.g. Germany. In addition, one could also identify a hidden disciplinary function of those messages. The order could sound like this: „Work! Look what happened to the lazy Southern Europeans. In contrast to their leaders, we are working for your own good, so keep’ on working.“ Viewed from this perspective, labour, public sector employees, etc. get subtly reinstructed and disciplined.<sup>16</sup>

By creating negative images about a country or a population, you can, under particular circumstances, punish the relevant country in question. It goes without saying, for instance, that the last citadel and hope of the Greek economy is the tourism sector. To use the words of *Paul Krugman*, the country offers among others „a spectacular archipelago, in a wonderful climate“ (Krugman, 8.7.2011). However, as the following excerpt from the *New York Times* shows, the promotion of antithetic attitudes by the media influences the relationship among peoples and, consequently, can have additional negative effects on the Greek economy:

„Jenny Wiblishauser, 33, a single mother in the southern town of Memmingen, said Germany’s financial prudence — and its willingness to ignore foreign criticism — made her proud. “Before, the Greeks would call us Nazis, and we would act vulnerable,” she said. “Now one says, ‘Well, I’m not driving there for vacation’“ (Kulish, 13.8.2010).

Apart from that, another interesting aspect here is the new dimension of such a punishment. As a rule, upon recommendation or even based on a decision of an international body, a government adopts the respective measures. In legal terms, you need a national act executing the international one. And even in the case that such acts do not need any further national implementation, e.g. they enjoy a direct effect just as the „supranational“ EC regulations, there is always the vertical dimension that comes into play. This means that the measures are imposed from an authority from above. The aforementioned claims of „collective punishment“<sup>17</sup> are, indeed, based on this very vertical-dimensioned scheme. On the other hand, as the passage cited above indicates, if private decisions of people are intended to

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<sup>16</sup> I am making this conclusion by drawing heavily on the interview of David Harvey, Greece should call Europe’s bluff, *The Real News*, 3.7.2011, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-FQ4zCoygs&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-FQ4zCoygs&feature=player_embedded) (last visited: 15 July 2011).

<sup>17</sup> See *supra* p. 5-6.

punish other people, the punishment is transferred from the level of verticality to that of horizontality.

It should also be recalled that Southern Europe is often linked with romantic and idyllic moments and images. Now, the lazy-profile aims at de-romanticizing and de-idyllizing those countries by transforming them from southern countries into sinner countries.<sup>18</sup> One could recall *Hardt/Negri's* term of biopower in this context (Hardt/Negri, 2000, 23-24, 26-27). By virtually demanding the imposition of a brand new disciplined life-culture and work attitude, one practically demands the hegemonic imposition of a new „correct“ bios, e.g. the Greek term for life, to the „undisciplined“ citizens of the South.

Moreover, one could indeed go as far as to claim that the images as promoted by the media in question pursue a form of cultural expropriation, since by spreading the sense of difference among nations/peoples you can nullify the probability of a cooperation and, in particular, of a common struggle. The dividing line here is not the class, but the different work-ethic or the different attitude towards leisure-time as presented by the media. To use the terminology of *Hardt/Negri*, capital expropriates the national resources of a country, thus featuring a neo-colonial dimension (Hardt/Negri, 2009, 137-138). In the case of Greece, the aforementioned neoliberal measures taken to „fight“ the economic crisis simply confirm this. The most important aspect, however, is the next level of expropriation concerning the social relationships. As *Hardt/Negri* maintain, the latter aspect of expropriation is more dynamic, since it does not lend itself to a logic of scarcity as natural resources do. Its central element is the expropriation of cooperation (Hardt/Negri, 2009, 140-141), and this appears to be what the images presented by the media intend to do. In line with the *Hardt/Negri* approach, one could, hence, conclude that such a dynamic expropriation leads to cultural isolation. Under the principle „divide and rule“, biopower as instrumentalized by those controlling the media, aims at proving that there is nothing „common“ left. This becomes even more tragic if we take into account the cooperation in the sense of interconnection with other common struggles, e.g. the so-called „circulation of the common“ is deemed to be perhaps the most effective response to such an expropriation (de Peuter/Dyer-Witthof, 2010, 32 and esp. 47-48).

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<sup>18</sup> In German one could play with the words saying: „von Südländern zu Sündeländern“.

## **VI. Summary**

Southern Europe and especially Greece have been demonized by the German media by way of creating the image of a lazy and work-averse free lancer as opposed to that of the work-obsessive German citizen. A review of the OECD statistical database, however, shows that citizens of the countries in question, e.g. Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, do not work less, do not enjoy longer holidays and also do not effectively leave the labour market earlier than their German counterparts. In other words, the images as presented by the media and some political personalities do not reflect the reality. In short, the „laziness“ does not make crises; rather the crises destroy jobs. In fact, the effects of such malevolent images created by the media constitute the real demons which need to be dispelled. The effects of this stereotyping can be summarized as follows:

1. Alarm and prepare the citizens of Southern Europe for further austerity measures, since „he who gives the money, defines the course“.
2. Exercise pressure on the governments of Southern Europe to intensify their reform programs.
3. Distract German citizens from problems within their own country.
4. Discipline and reinstruct the German workers and public sector employees to keep on working.
5. De-romanticize and de-idyllize Southern Europe by transforming southern countries into sinner countries.
6. Hegemonically impose a new bios, e.g. life, to the undisciplined South.
7. Expropriate the possibility of a common struggle by virtue of the principle „divide and rule“, thus imposing a cultural isolation.

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