

ERICH FROMM'S IDEAS ON BUILDING A NEW SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Erich Fromm, a German-American psychoanalyst and social philosopher, developed a profound system of thought on constructing a new society based on humanistic socialism. The author delves into the fundamental distinction between two modes of existence: "having" and "being," thereby demonstrating that alienation in modern industrial society stems from social conditions that distance individuals from their own humanistic values. The paper also presents the conditions for personality change, outlines the portrait of the "new man," and outlines the model of a humanistic democratic society that Erich Fromm envisioned. Simultaneously, the author offers a critical assessment of the practicality of Erich Fromm's thought in relation to classical Marxism and the modern social context.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, society, new society, new man.

CONTENT

In 20th-century social philosophy, Erich Fromm served as a bridge between Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist social criticism. He not only analyzed the mental disorders of people in capitalist societies but also aimed to outline a "healthy society" where true happiness is built on "existence" through love and creative labor, rather than the accumulation of wealth or power. In a context dominated by consumerism and bureaucracy, people are increasingly alienated and disoriented. Therefore, studying Erich Fromm's ideas on building a new society not only clarifies core humanistic values but also provides an effective critical lens for the negative aspects of contemporary social order, thereby inspiring aspirations for a just, human-centered society.

1. The concepts of "ownership" and "existence" in Erich Fromm's thought on building a happy society.

Erich Fromm, like Karl Marx, started from a common observation: the unhappiness of modern man stems not primarily from individual flaws, but from the very way capitalist society is organized and operates. For both, human happiness cannot be achieved through individual psychological or moral adjustments, but first and foremost requires structural changes in society. On this foundation, Erich Fromm developed the idea of a happy society in which people are no longer governed by the logic of appropriation and accumulation, but live primarily in a way that reflects their "existence."

At the heart of Erich Fromm's analysis is the fundamental distinction between two modes of life: the mode of "possession" and the mode of "existence." According to him, in the so-called mode of "possession," people seek to hold onto things considered valuable by identifying them with their bodies, possessions, homes, or social status. Conversely, in the mode of "existence," people do not possess value in the sense of appropriation, but attain it through becoming a certain type of person; for example, we do not "possess" knowledge as an object, but live and act as a person with knowledge; similarly, experience or ability are not things to accumulate, but qualities formed in the process of existence.

Fromm argued that this difference is crucial to human life. In the state of "possession," what is valuable always exists outside the subject; it can be lost, taken away, or stolen, and the person does not actually become better simply by acquiring these things. Conversely, in the state of "being," values become an integral part of a person's character; they are not easily lost, and it is the process of living with those values that makes a person more mature and developed. In this way, Fromm shifts the focus of happiness from having more to living more deeply and meaningfully.

The contrast between these two modes of existence is vividly illustrated in Erich Fromm's analysis of communication and dialogue, particularly in his work *To Have or To Be?* (1976). He argues that in the state of "possession," when two people engage in an exchange of opinions, each person clings to their own viewpoint and views it as possession. The goal of the conversation is therefore not to seek truth or common understanding, but to "win" against the other party with arguments considered more effective. In this context, opinions become a form of property, and having to abandon or change one's viewpoint is seen as a loss or "impoverishment."

Conversely, in the state of "being," conversation follows a completely different logic. The two participants are not entrenched in fixed prejudices, but approach the dialogue openly, ready to listen and respond, in Erich Fromm's words, "naturally and effectively." Then, the focus of the conversation is no longer the ego or personal position, but the issue being discussed itself: *They generate new ideas because they possess nothing and therefore can produce and give. (...) Therefore, the conversation is no longer an exchange of goods (information, knowledge, status) and becomes a dialogue in which who is right is no longer important.*¹ Because they are not bound by the need to protect their views as property, dialogue partners are able to generate new ideas, because "they possess nothing and therefore can produce and give." According to Fromm, in this state, conversation is no longer an exchange of goods—whether information, knowledge, or status—but becomes a genuine dialogue in which who is right or wrong is no longer the central issue.

Through this analysis, Erich Fromm shows that the mode of "being" is not merely an individual way of life, but also encompasses a qualitatively different type of social relationship compared to a society based on "possession." It is from this fundamental shift in how people live, communicate, and interact with each other that Fromm envisions the possibility of forming a happier, more humane society than the modern society dominated by the logic of possession and competition.

From his analysis of the opposing modes of existence, "possession" and "being," Erich Fromm not only criticized the possessive lifestyle that dominates modern society, but also raised a deeper issue about the subject of social transformation. According to him, changing social institutions or relationships will not yield sustainable results if individuals continue to be shaped by the "possession" mode in their thinking, emotions, and daily behavior. Therefore, Fromm's next central question is: what kind of person does the new society require, and is it possible for individuals to change themselves to become a subject suitable for that society? Based on this, Erich Fromm developed the concept of the "new man"—a personality model guided by the "being" mode, playing a crucial role in building a happy and humane society.

2. The strategy for building the "new type of person"

¹ Fromm, Erich (1976), *To Have or to Be?*, Jonathan Cape, <https://giuseppicapograssi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/erich-erich-fromm-to-have-or-to-be-1976.pdf>. Access date: November 11, 2025

For Erich Fromm, the construction of a new society is inseparable from the formation of a “new man.” Therefore, he raises the question of the possibility of building a new society, ultimately reducing it to a more fundamental issue: whether man can change himself, and under what conditions does such change occur?

2.1. The "New Man" and the Conditions for Social Transformation

In the final section of *To Have or To Be?*, Erich Fromm systematically develops his conception of the possibility of building a new society based on the mode of "being," in which social relationships are shaped by mature, conscious interaction and oriented towards human development. However, Fromm does not approach this project from the perspective of reforming political or economic institutions, but focuses on a more fundamental issue: the capacity for change within human beings themselves. According to him, any sustainable social transformation must inevitably begin with a transformation in the personality of human beings as social subjects.

Based on that approach, Erich Fromm identified four fundamental conditions under which change in human personality can occur:

1. We are suffering and we are aware that we are suffering.
2. We recognize the source of our suffering.
3. We realize that there is a way to overcome our illness.
4. We accept that in order to overcome illness, we must adhere to certain standards in life and change our current lifestyle.²

These conditions clearly reflect Erich Fromm's characteristic approach, combining psychoanalysis and social humanism. According to him, the path towards social healing is inseparable from the process of individuals critically recognizing their own suffering as well as the socio-psychological mechanisms that constitute it. Only when this awareness becomes complete and self-aware can individuals initiate a genuine process of self-transformation, thereby opening up the possibility of social change on a broader scale.

In Fromm's view, the new society built on the principle of "existence" will gradually abandon the goal of conquering and exploiting nature, which is characteristic of modern industrial society. He argued that evil, aggression, and the tendency to destroy are not inherent human attributes, but rather consequences of human beings being suppressed in the process of developing their full human capacities. According to this interpretation, Fromm linked aggression and destruction to a deep-seated fear of freedom within humans, a fear that drives them to seek "escape from freedom" through dependence on power structures and inhuman forms of social organization.

On that foundation, Erich Fromm put forward a unique conception of happiness. For him, happiness is not the result of accumulation or reaching a fixed state of fulfillment, but rather the process of life's continuous development. Living fully according to one's capabilities brings inner satisfaction, freeing individuals from the preoccupation of achieving or failing to achieve "maximum opportunities for development." This concept not only perfects the internal logic of Erich Fromm's "new society" project but also places him within a broader humanist tradition where the value of life is understood primarily as a continuous process of self-realization.

² Fromm, Erich (1976), *To Have or to Be?*, Jonathan Cape, <https://giuseppicapograssi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/erich-erich-fromm-to-have-or-to-be-1976.pdf>. Access date: November 11, 2025.

2.2. Characteristic features of the "new man"

According to Erich Fromm, the model of the “new man”—the subject of future humanistic society—possesses the following fundamental characteristics. First, it is a man willing to abandon a mode of existence based on possession in order to live fully in a mode of “being.” This abandonment is not only material in nature, but also represents the liberation of man from the attitude of possessing, controlling, and identifying himself with what he has.

Secondly, the “new man” establishes a sense of security, identity, and self-confidence not on the basis of power, possessions, or control over the external world, but on belief in himself, in his capacity to connect with, care for, love, and unite with the world around him. According to Fromm, it is the pursuit of security through ownership and control that makes people slaves to possessions, while the “existence” mode allows people to live more freely, both psychologically and morally.

Third, the “new man” consciously accepts the reality that no external individual or entity can bestow meaning upon life; meaning can only be constructed from one's own existence. However, this radical independence and inherent sense of meaninglessness, according to Fromm, does not necessarily lead to nihilism, but rather can become the condition for the fullest forms of human activity, especially caring for and sharing with others. From this, the “new man” is capable of fully being present in the moment, finding joy in sharing instead of accumulating and exploiting, while cultivating an attitude of respect for life and striving to limit greed, aggression, and self-centered illusions.

Specifically, Erich Fromm emphasizes that the capacity for true love is inseparable from the ability to think critically and a non-emotional attitude. This seems to contradict the popular romantic notions of love in mainstream culture, where love is often equated with intense emotion, idealization, and self-dissolution into the object of affection. In modern society, critical thinking and a sober attitude are often seen as characteristic of emotionally detached individuals. However, Fromm argues that it is the romanticization of love that weakens the capacity for responsible love.

According to him, if love is understood as a deep connection with another person and acceptance of their true self, then that love requires a discerning assessment of both oneself and the other, as well as a long-term commitment to acting in the true best interests of the beloved. Romanticizing the other person, on the other hand, only creates a fictional image to replace the real person, thereby undermining the foundation of a humane and responsible relationship. Therefore, the ideal of love in Erich Fromm's thought is not a fleeting emotional infatuation, but a mature form of commitment based on awareness, self-control, and moral responsibility.

3. Erich Fromm's ideas on building a new society

3.1. Building a humane and democratic society

The pinnacle of Erich Fromm's social and political philosophy is his book, *The Sane Society*. Published in 1955, his work argued in favor of humanistic and democratic socialism. Building primarily on the early works of Karl Marx, Erich Fromm sought to reaffirm the ideal of freedom, which was absent from most Soviet Marxism and often found in the works of liberal socialists and liberal theorists. Erich Fromm's socialism rejected both Western capitalism and Soviet communism, which he considered inhumane, leading to a near-universal alienation from modern society. He became one of the founders of social humanism, promoting the early works of Karl Marx and his humanist messages to the American and Western European public.

The renewed interest in Erich Fromm's ideas reflects two key aspects of 21st-century politics. First, there is the widespread and profound desire for an alternative to neoliberal capitalism, a desire initially expressed politically in the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization and in the subsequent development of the anti-capitalist movement. Slogans such as “the world is not for sale” and “there may be another world” reflect almost exactly the core elements of Erich Fromm's thought: first, his moral critique of materialism and consumerism, responsible for the “marketing” social character he saw as the dominant social figure of our time; second, his “prophetic messianism,” expressing a utopian yearning for a different, more just society.

However, Erich Fromm's ideas also align with another, more negative, characteristic of much of the current political left: namely, the abandonment of class politics and any notion that the working class can change the world. His work also lacks a conception of the working class as a collective agent capable of liberating itself and thereby liberating humanity. In this sense, Erich Fromm is actually closer to the utopian socialists of the early 19th century than to Karl Marx himself.

A third factor that may contribute to Erich Fromm's current popularity is the desire for a more important social psychology than the currently dominant “surface” approaches such as cognitive-behavioral psychology, approaches increasingly tainted by their implementation in workplace welfare programs.³ While this in itself is a positive development, whether Erich Fromm's concept of “social personality” is capable of providing that crucial alternative remains to be seen. As I have argued above, it risks concretizing the consciousness of the working class and becoming a substitute for a concrete analysis of the factors that shape human thought and feeling.

However, the consciousness of the working class is not fixed or static. As we have seen in recent years, from the Arab Spring revolutions to the major movements against austerity in Greece, Spain, and Scotland, people's ideas (as well as their deepest feelings) can change on a large scale, especially when the level of struggle is high. Despite 30 years of neoliberalism in Britain, the electoral successes of the Scottish National Party on broad social democratic platforms and the election of left-wing veteran Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader demonstrate how much Margaret Thatcher's dream of changing the “world” resonated with the “hearts and souls” of British workers has failed.⁴ And the failures or setbacks experienced by some of these movements recently are not the inevitable product of the participants' initial personal life experiences, but rather a present lack of confidence in their ability to change the world and a failure to fully assess what is necessary for revolution to succeed. Above all, however, it is precisely through participation in such mass struggles that change, both social and personal, can occur; in the words of the young C. Marx: “The coincidence of changing circumstances and the action of man or self-changing can only be conceived and understood rationally.” “as a revolutionary practice”⁵—a sentiment rarely acknowledged by Erich Fromm, though he frequently and sharply criticizes life under capitalism. So, let the final words go to a Paris Metro worker who participated in the spectacular (and successful) strikes of 1995 against the Juppe Plan aimed at cutting the public sector: Strikes completely change a man. People live in their own little corner. They go first, not bothering their neighbors. In strikes, individualism is completely broken. Completely! The chains are snapped. Spontaneously. Because we always discuss everything, we learn to get to know each other. We are

³ Friedli, Lynne and Robert Stern (2015) , “Positive Affect as Coercive Strategy: Conditionality, Activation and the Role of Psychology in UK Government Workfare Programs”, *Medical Humanities* Vol. 41 (1), pp. 48-54.

⁴ Economics is the Method: The Object is to Change the Soul”. Interview, *Sunday Times* , 3rd May 1981. <https://www.thecollector.com/what-is-thatcherism/> . Accessed on : 10/01/2026

⁵ Marx, Karl (1845), “Theses on Feuerbach”, in Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* , volume 4 (Progress).

at the company 24 hours a day. At work, we are very isolated and only meet during 10-minute breaks. Here we learn to live together.⁶

From the above analysis, it can be seen that Erich Fromm's humanistic and democratic social thought possesses both profound critical value against the inhuman forms of modern capitalism and bureaucratic communism, and reveals certain theoretical limitations when separating humanistic transformation from class analysis and the practical realities of social struggle.

3.2. The Ideology of Socialist Humanism

Erich Fromm's main period of political activity began in the late 1950s when he played a leading role in the socialist humanist movement that developed during these years following Nikita Khrushchev's secret speeches revealing Stalin's crimes, as well as the repression of Hungarian workers, the 1956 uprising. Chris Harman described socialist humanism as "an intellectual staging position for those retreating from Stalinism in 1956."⁷ Based primarily on the early works of C. Marx, it was an attempt to rescue the humanist core of Marxism from its brutal Stalinist caricature and develop a "third way" to replace the West's "free enterprise system" and the Soviet Union's and its allies' "communist management system." Its theoretical foundation is provided by radical humanism, whose essence (in Erich Fromm's words) is "in the simplest terms, a belief in the unity of humankind and the potential of human beings to perfect themselves through their own efforts"⁸.

The first point to emphasize is that, in crucial respects, Marxism is indeed a humanism. As Harman observed: It tells of how, in an effort to survive the harshness of nature, a certain species of animal – Homo sapiens – cooperates with other species of the same kind, creating societies that will then dominate the life of this species. In this way, various forms of economic and social organization arise – and beyond a certain point in history – classes and states.⁹

Marxism is also a humanism in the second sense. Its ultimate goal is not the authoritarian regime of a particular class, but the abolition of class society itself; only then, in the words of C. Marx, will the "prehistory" of humankind end and the true history of humankind begin. That said, as a political and theoretical tradition, socialist humanism differs significantly from classical Marxism in key respects.

First, to emphasize only the unity of humankind is to ignore what C. Marx and Engels identified as the defining characteristic of human history for at least the last 10,000 years, namely the division of society into antagonistic classes and the fact that since then "the history of all societies that have existed up to now has been the history of class struggle." Conversely, in the works of Erich Fromm, class rarely appears, except as a sociological category, and class struggle is even less so.

Secondly, related to his disregard for class is the tendency to replace broad generalizations and moral affirmations with any specific analysis of what was actually happening to the working class or global capitalism in the postwar period. He was not alone in this; similar criticisms were leveled

⁶ Wolfreys, Jim (1999), "Class Struggles in France", International Socialism 84 (autumn), www.C.Mácists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/1999/isj2-084/wolfreys.htm . Access date: October 6, 2025.

⁷ Harman, Chris (1983), "Philosophy and Revolution", International Socialism 21 (autumn), www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1983/xx/phil-rev.html. Access date: October 6, 2025.

⁸ Fromm, Erich (ed), *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium* (Doubleday), [www.marxists.org/archive/Erich Fromm/works/1965/introduction.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/Erich%20Fromm/works/1965/introduction.htm), p.ix. Access date: October 6, 2025

⁹ Harman, Chris (1983), "Philosophy and Revolution", International Socialism 21 (autumn), www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1983/xx/phil-rev.html. Access date: October 6, 2025.

against Marcuse and the tradition of Western Marxism in general. ¹⁰However, as Friedman notes, Erich Fromm was particularly prone to making generalizations based on very little empirical evidence, often leading to extremely superficial and politically erroneous conclusions. For example, this is his description of the situation of the American working class in the mid-1950s: Speaking of the most economically advanced nation, the United States, economic exploitation of the masses had disappeared to such an extent that in Marx's time it might have sounded bizarre. The working class, instead of lagging behind in the overall economic development of society, is increasingly acquiring a larger share of national wealth, and it is a perfectly reasonable assumption that, barring any major catastrophe, within one or two generations there will be no more pronounced poverty in the United States.¹¹

Third, the socialist humanism's emphasis on universal humanity has in fact led to a specific type of populist front politics in which class differences and antagonism are consciously downplayed or suppressed, often to the detriment of the working class's interests. For example, in a discussion of work and politics at EP Thompson, Alex Callinicos observed:

Marxist approach naturally focuses on the classes formed within specific relations of production and on the struggle between them created by the forms of exploitation associated with these relations. It is here that the most distinctive element of historical materialism tends to be lost in the humanist versions of Marxism ... Thompson's populism is the logical consequence of humanist Marxism, moving directly from conceptions of human nature to direct historical and political questions without going through the necessary stage of analyzing the forces and relations of production that constitute the formation of society.¹²

Similar criticisms could be leveled against Erich Fromm. On the one hand, as Friedman shows, he devoted considerable time to persuading world leaders (including John F. Kennedy) to change their course; on the other hand, he advocated for lowering the specific demands of the working class so as not to alienate the venerable views of the middle class, stating: To gain power, social democratic parties needed to win the votes of many members of the middle class, and to achieve this goal, socialist parties had to reduce their program from a socialist vision to a program solely of liberal reform. On the other hand, by identifying the working class as the lever of humanistic change, socialism necessarily alienated members of all other classes, who felt that their property and privileges would be taken away by the workers.

Socialism, Erich Fromm reassured, “does not threaten to take away anyone's property, and in terms of income, it will raise the living standards of the poor. The high salaries of senior leaders do not need to be reduced, but if the system works well, they will not want to become symbols of a bygone era.”¹³

¹⁰ McIntyre, Alasdair (1970), Herbert Marcuse, Fontana – Collins Press; Anderson, Perry, 1976, Considerations on Western Marxism (Verso), <https://archive.org/details/perry-anderson-considerations-on-western-marxism-1976>. Access date: November 11, 2025.

¹¹ Erich Fromm, Erich, (19 55) , The Sane Society, New York: Rinehart and Winston, 2nd edition (Routledge), p98.

¹² Callinicos, Alex (1983), “Marxism and Philosophy: A Reply to Peter Binns”, International Socialism 19 (spring), www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/callinicos/1983/xx/binns.html. Access date: December 8, 2025.

¹³ Fromm, Erich (1976), To Have or to Be?, Jonathan Cape, <https://giuseppicapogrossi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/erich-Erich-Fromm-to-have-or-to-be-1976.pdf>. Access date: November 11, 2025.

The danger of such an approach for organizations like SANE (the National Committee on Nuclear Policy of SANE), of which Erich Fromm was a founding member, is the risk of instilling the illusion in “radical” Democratic politicians of ending the war instead of building a movement to renounce war, particularly by linking the struggle against both nuclear war and the Vietnam War to working-class concerns surrounding poverty, welfare, and military service. The problem, for Erich Fromm, is that such a movement, if effective, would precisely involve threatening the wealth and property of the rich.

It can be asserted that Erich Fromm's socialist humanism made a significant contribution to the critique of Stalinism and the restoration of the humanist dimension in Marxist thought. However, by focusing on moral and psychological transformation and universal humanity, this approach downplayed the role of class struggle and the analysis of specific social structures, thereby limiting its ability to transform practice. This reveals Erich Fromm's unique position: a thinker who profoundly criticized human nature and alienation, but who did not achieve the radicalism of revolutionary theory in the Marxist sense.

4. Barriers and challenges in building a new society

Erich Fromm argues that the path toward a new, humane society is not a smooth or easy process, but inevitably faces a series of structural obstacles. One of the central problems is how to maintain the modern mode of industrial production without an extreme concentration of power and capital. This problem was already pointed out by Karl Marx when analyzing capitalism, according to which the increasing accumulation of capital in the hands of a minority not only increases economic inequality but also leads to profound alienation in the material and spiritual lives of the working class.

However, Erich Fromm did not advocate abolishing industrial society as a radical solution. He approached the issue with a pragmatic attitude, acknowledging that the achievements of industrial civilization had become essential conditions of modern life. Despite his profound criticism of capitalism, Fromm recognized that people could not – and did not want to – abandon basic living conditions such as electricity, the internet, affordable mass-produced clothing, safe housing, a stable food supply, and advances in agriculture and healthcare. Therefore, the issue was not about denying industrial society entirely, but about restructuring its organization and objectives.

In that perspective, Erich Fromm proposed that the new society needs to “combine master planning with a high degree of decentralization,” while abandoning the “free market economy” model, which, according to him, has in fact become a fiction. Another crucial shift is abandoning the ideal of unlimited economic growth – a model whose negative consequences, such as environmental crises and resource depletion, are now far more apparent than when Fromm first warned in the 1970s. Instead, the new society needs to move towards a form of “selective growth,” focusing on the truly essential needs for a good and fulfilling life, and building a “common spirit” in which human motivations are no longer based primarily on material gain, but on other spiritual and humanistic values.

According to Erich Fromm, these transformations can only be achieved in a society capable of controlling and directing scientific progress, in order to prevent science and technology from "becoming a danger to humanity due to its practical applications." A humane society should not encourage people to pursue material wealth or short-term pleasures, but must create the conditions for genuine happiness and joy. At the same time, that society needs to ensure individuals a basic level of security, without turning them into passive subjects dependent on bureaucracy for survival.

If these demands seem too high or unrealistic, that, in Fromm's spirit, is unavoidable, since utopian projects inherently set demands beyond existing reality. Fromm himself acknowledged his limitations in not attempting to construct a detailed economic operating model for future society, as he was not an economist but a psychoanalyst and social critic. However, what Fromm considered crucial was not whether his model could be fully realized, but rather the attitude people choose to adopt in confronting reality.

Accordingly, Fromm did not call for people to continue nurturing unrealistic dreams of a perfect world, but rather encouraged a sober, unsentimental, critical, and practical attitude. Identifying the distortions of the current world, and then through concrete actions – whether through work, speech, knowledge, or voting – gradually intervening and correcting inhuman structures, that is the path Erich Fromm envisioned for humanity to move closer to a more humane society than the one in which they were born.

CONCLUDE

Erich Fromm's ideas on building a new society are not merely theoretical. Through exposing the subtle forms of human alienation in modern consumer society and emphasizing "being" over "having," Erich Fromm opened up a profound humanistic vision of true human happiness. Although his approach still has certain limitations in analyzing class dynamics and proposing practical measures to reform the structure of social power, the enduring value of Erich Fromm's intellectual legacy lies in his tireless critique of all forms of inhumanity. The new society he envisioned is one in which people are no longer slaves to materialism or indifferent bureaucracy, but live in creative freedom, love, and human connection. In the context of a turbulent modern society, Erich Fromm's message remains highly relevant: sustainable world transformation is only possible when it is accompanied by the self-transformation of each individual. It is a long journey, requiring vigilance, courage, and a steadfast critical attitude, so that humanity can gradually correct reality and move towards a more humane future for all mankind.

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