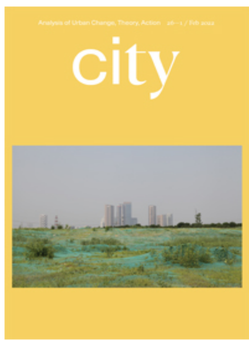

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Time and symbols in the contentious city

Vincenzo Ruggiero

The morphology of the urban habitat displays the outcomes of agonistic, competing interests. Often, conflicts focus on the symbols that in the city eulogise the prevailing groups and celebrate their achievements. Modifying the urban morphology, therefore, is among the ways ruling groups and their achievements can be contested, with the subaltern attacking signs, symbols and images that remind them of their subordination. This paper looks at mythic (or systemic) violence, and at signs and symbols embedded in the city, it then refers to the defacement and toppling of monuments (discussed in City, Volume 24, Numbers 3–4, June-August 2020) and concludes with an analysis of such recent actions as contentions around social time, struggles over memory and temporality.

Introduction

Urban settlements are shaped by collective action, as subjects break onto the scene, intermittently and convulsively, with the aim of appropriating space. Social groups, while acting with and/or against one another, forge the qualities and properties of the urban, fashioning layers of space (Lefebvre 2013). Such groups include merchants, intellectuals and politicians, who modelled the city, but also the industrialists who demolished it.

Keywords **mythic violence, symbols, ever-changing history, memory, time**
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In the Middle Ages, the initial aversion for merchants and usurers was triggered by their exploitation of time, as their earnings were valorised through deferral. This was a sacrilege: time belongs to God (Le Goff 1970). Later, the time of merchants and bankers took the upper hand over the time of the Church, while the Industrial Revolution marked the triumph of time, which became omnipresent and pervaded all aspects of life. 'The working class never had any space other than that of its expropriation, its deportation and segregation' (Le Goff 1970, 128). However, for Michel De Certeau (1984), the excluded are not destined to merely occupy the other place, the place of the other, as they may respond to the dominant economic order by 'deflecting' power. They produce the 'chorus of idle footsteps' that make up the city while attempting to change it. This tenuous metaphor alludes to a form of passive resistance and, in successive elaborations, is developed into proposals for concrete action.

The fulcrum of action is constituted by knowledge of the real, more precisely of historical reality, which can lead groups to rejoice in the past or to reject it by transforming it. Rejection and transformation, on the other hand, require the incorporation of the possible within the real.

> 'The possible is seen as abstract and vague, while the real is seen as thick and weighty, as "being" and "existing". But the possible enters the real. It appears there; it announces and invokes its presence within it, and then sets about destroying it and negating it'. (Lefebvre 2002, 195)

Mistrusting history becomes then a necessary premise for social change, although defenders of the past will always attempt to combine praise for their heroes with counterfactual speculation. For example, British schoolchildren learn that Britain abolished slavery before America did, but rarely about British responsibility for the slave trade. They do not learn that more people died while Britons brought Africans to the New World than were murdered at Auschwitz (Neiman 2019). Working off a country's criminal past entails the elaboration of narratives and the construction of symbols, as nationalists are permanently haunted by the fear that their past can be altered (or revealed). Events that should not have happened can be left unmentioned, denied, or modified through the display of symbols.

This is one of the modalities through which economic and political power asserts itself, this is also how authority claims a monopoly on reality. The latter possesses, however, a mythical nature because it is based on an artificial ontological basis that allows dominant groups to naturalise their position as fated and inevitable. The right of such groups to rule is self-proclaimed, and in order to perpetuate itself, turns violent when responding to contentious claims (Martel 2021). The mythical nature of reality, in turn, is defended with mythic violence, described by Benjamin (1996) as law-founding, namely authorised force that establishes systems and preserves them, along with their social inequities and racial biases. Law, in other words, is granted force thanks to the mystical foundation of authority (Derrida 1992).

Benjamin's notion of mythic violence contains elements of systemic (or structural) violence; it refers to the harm people suffer from the social structure and the institutions sustaining and reproducing it. Mythic violence, in other words, is caused by social, economic and political arrangements presented as

ineluctable outcomes of human interactions and historical processes (Ruggiero 2020). It may not consist of direct physical aggression, but produces suffering, disability and premature death, particularly among the most vulnerable groups. Engrained in social injustice, it affects people and groups differently (Galtung 1969). Being the outcome of the smooth functioning of economic and political systems, mythic violence can also be termed 'objective', as it appears not to require specific deliberations by individuals exerting it (Žižek 2008). It is non-behavioural, in the sense that cannot normally be ascribed to decisions made by individuals or groups, although it is among the pathologies of power that emerge in several spheres of life (Farmer 2004).

Signals, symbols and monuments

Mythic violence hides behind signals. Simple, obvious and direct hints that foster social stability, signals are utterances that depict the current system as the best possible one. In their turn, signals need protection from contestation or destruction launched by those who threaten stability. They belong to systems of meaning and contain information that is easily intelligible, devoid of ambiguity: ideally, symbols should shun uncertainty and dubious interpretations, so that the system in which they belong remains 'closed, saturated, coherent and rigorous' (Lefebvre 2002, 280).

While the strength of signals lies in their potential to attract a variety of individuals and groups, that of symbols thrives on specific divisive attributes. This is because symbols include and exclude, they attract more strongly certain specific groups, namely those who share the conception of the world that they imply. Symbols include flags and weapons, historical events, narratives and tales that reinforce identity boundaries. They may support autocracy, nativism, national pride, but also racism, providing motivations to act and generate harm. When shaped as narratives, symbols seduce, they transmit meanings that 'influence our behaviour in ways that others discursive forms do not' (Presser 2018, 10). Such narratives can be 'bounded', when based on specific texts, but more often they are 'notional', as they are not sustained by verifiable sources, do not address cognition, but emotion, aroused through shorthand: for instance, the American dream, being British.

Symbols are kept alive through rituals and ceremonies, offering opportunities for participation. They come in series, constituting configurations or constellations, they arouse obscure emotions by travelling back to ancient seasons and bygone eras: they activate 'a link between the present and the past' (Lefebvre 2002, 287).

While turning towards the past and rescuing it, however, symbols aspire to travel towards the future, reinforcing values and perpetuating or exacerbating the distastefulness of the present. The future is thus invented through the creative use of the past: repetition is achieved through the evocation of the absent and the resurrection of the dead.

Monuments do likewise, adding the memories they evoke to the signifiers of urban settings, their institutions and ideologies. Monuments intermingle with royal, imperial and presidential buildings, hinting at social relations. Ideally,

the stability of social order in the urban contest should be symbolised by the Ministry of the Interior being located on top of a hill, like a gigantic hovering cathedral (Lefebvre 1996). In this way, the metalanguage of power would be more intelligible: some are included some are not, some belong some do not. Monuments, in brief, write meaningful texts in support of institutional practices and prevailing political philosophies.

When narrating his Berlin childhood, Walter Benjamin (2006) recalls the festivities of Sedan Day, celebrating the German victory in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). The monument erected in commemoration of the decisive battle, the Victory Column, is depicted as an emblem of cruelty and barbarism. The Column, which is meant to mark the birth of imperial German civilisation, is at the same time 'a monument to the brutality of its founding violence' (Gilloch 1996, 74). Most monuments, however, depict the shining figure of Victory while omitting the inferno of the carnage perpetrated, they stand for military glory, yet they can symbolise vainglory, unveiling 'the metropolis as the locus of self-deception and folly, ignorance and inhumanity, myth and myopia' (Gilloch 1996, 75). Benjamin's essays on Berlin sound like celebrations of counter-monuments, that suggest impermanence and mortality while commemorating the forgotten dead. They also hint at an alternative version of history within the city, a vision of the past that dwells on the sorrowful, the fragile, the ephemeral, a vision that turns the past into a part of the present (Jameson 2020).

Activists and iconoclasts

An alternative version of history also emerged when the statue of 17th century slave trader Edward Colston was pulled down and drowned in a Bristol canal. This event showed how the mythic violence hidden behind statues and monuments can be unveiled. Regarded by some as acts of vandalism, the effacement and destruction of monuments, instead, can 'trigger radical debates about the entanglement of the past and present in urban space' (Frank and Ristic 2020, 552). Iconoclasm, however, is enacted by a variety of political entities, including emerging powers that establish their rule while erasing the symbols of incumbent authorities (Freedberg 2021). Deposed emperors and kings have often been dishonoured through the removal of the traces they left in the urban space, likewise the names of pharaohs have been erased, temples of competing faiths have been raised to the ground. These forms of iconoclasm are meant to 'kill the memory', purify the territory from which the new rulers intend to extirpate all signs of their predecessors. The Nazis, for instance, melted down seventy-five Parisian statues, many of which celebrated enlightened thinkers and the Republic arising from the Revolution (Hall 2021). After occupying Norway, they transformed the architecture of the country by building highly fortified constructions, while 'purifying' the urban landscape with new homes destined for unwed mothers who had procreated after mating with German soldiers (Stratigakos 2020). 'Hitler's interest in Norway stemmed from his obsession with its people's supposed racial purity' (Filler 2021, 46).

The effacement and destruction of monuments we are concerned with here are not carried out by victorious powers killing memory, but by the descendants

of the victims of those powers and activists who attempt to revise and question memories. One example is the covering of the Cecil Rhodes statue by university students in Cape Town (Shepherd 2000). Another is the removal, in 2020, of the statue of Lord Nelson, located in the shamefully named 'National Heroes Square' in Bridgetown, Barbados. The removal was described as a step towards the healing of the country, the establishment of an independent republic and the promotion of national identity. In 2021, Barbadians also 'deposed' Queen Elizabeth as their head of state, announcing amendments to their constitution and designating a Barbadian Head of State, symbol of the maturity of their democracy. Campaigners claimed reparation for the harm suffered by their ancestors, calling on the British royal family to pay reparations (Reuters 2021). Barbados received 600,000 enslaved Africans between 1627 and 1833, and calls for reparations have often targeted specific individuals. For example, Richard Drax, a Conservative member of the British Government, owns a large property in Barbados, Drax Hall Estate, where his ancestors began cultivating sugar cane—using slave labour—from around 1640. Groups in Britain and Barbados have called on Drax to donate the property to Barbadians. He has refused.

In the UK, between 2020 and 2021, several tributes to slave traders, colonialists and racists have been taken down by activists or removed by authorities. Schools, universities, churches and pubs have been scrutinised for the contentious landmarks they may display. Names of streets and squares have been changed, while the motto of Imperial College London associating knowledge, glory and empire has been ditched. One wonders why the very adjective Imperial has been left in the name of the college. Rather than erasure, these cases mark an attempt at deepening and broadening the collective understanding of Britain's past (Mohdin and Storer 2021, 25). Significant toppling of statues outside the UK include those of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II in Canada after the discovery of unmarked graves belonging to Indigenous children. Ten churches were also vandalised, daubed with paint and the number 215, referred to the number of the remains of the children found in the graves of the residential schools meant to assimilate indigenous youth (Cecco 2021; BBC News 2021).

These episodes are responses to invented traditions, attempts to abolish icons and the values associated with them, action aimed at contesting the past and subverting the present. The events and figures attacked may long be gone, but their 'consequences or legacy are still persistent—slavery, colonialism, fascism, occupation and totalitarianism' (Frank and Ristic 2020, 556). The creative appropriation and modification of urban space are part of what Lefebvre (1996, 113–114) lists as the utterances that speak of death, joy and sorrow, the result of urban inhabitants using space for their encounters. Places of communication and information, cities elicit desire and unpredictable play, including explosions of latent violence. However, they also inspire counter-narratives, underdog stories and action. The Stolpersteine project, for instance, is the largest decentralised memorial of the Holocaust, consisting of 80,000 stones scattered in twenty-six countries and two continents. This 'guerilla' art project has laid ten-centimetre concrete cubes bearing a brass plate inscribed with the name and life dates of victims: Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, disabled people, political antagonists, people killed for the colour of their skin, and all those deemed 'asocial' individuals (www.stolpersteine.eu).

A similar project focused on the photos lying in archives relating to the arrival of the allies in Berlin in 1945. Those photos show destruction, the desolate debris left by bombs, the rubble of collapsed buildings, but not the German women raped by the victorious allies (Gebhardt 2016). Ariella Azoulay (2021) retrieved the few pages published on the issue and used the brief accounts of the rapes as captions underneath blank squares: these were the 'untaken photographs' that completed the picture of triumphant democracy and devastation. In a similar vein, considering the difficulties historians have in recording the stories of enslaved people, several artists have produced portraits of these people neglected by history, including imagined portraits of characters such as Sally Hemings, the enslaved woman who gave birth to at least six children fathered by US President Thomas Jefferson (Araujo 2021).

Alternative symbols include counter-monuments that expose enslavement and massacres, detected also in museums, the site of art par excellence. Museums do not predate plunder, they were set up by it, they were not there waiting to receive objects from Africa, Asia, the Americas or Australia (Azoulay 2019). The new exhibits were subject to a form of temporal violence: described as welcome aliens in the space of museums, they were regarded as testimonies to past eras, the simple, gullible creations of primitive peoples (Evans and Parr 2021). This patronising attitude underscores the relationship between violence against people and violence against their history: plunder and massacres enabled each other. Both formed the violence of organised forgetting. This leads us to considerations around memory and time, two key dimensions of contentious cities.

History as reparation

There are innumerable 'memory sites' that contain traces and aspects of national identities. Such sites hold images of real or improbable heroes, accounts of battles that may or may not deserve to be remembered, chronicles of celebrations and festivals, mythic characters and novels. They form what Nora (1996) describes as a history of the mentality of a country. Rejecting the linearity of previous narratives, Nora's work is 'history of the second degree', told by multiple voices, a history less concerned with events than in their use and misuse (Ho Tai 2001). Archives, monuments and celebrations are symbols that provide the foundations of memory, they are emblems of identity. Sites of memory may be figures such as Joan D'Arc or Descartes, a flag or a language, all revealing the multiple meanings we attribute to events, ideas and acts that constitute what we believe is our history and unity.

In a critical appraisal of Nora's work, it is argued that unified national histories are better conveyed by theme parks, while the search for counter-hegemonic memories has to be conducted from the margin and from below, and this procedure will lead to an unstable sense of nationality (Ho Tai 2001). The shaping of anti-hegemonic memories, therefore, requires disenchantment with nationalism and nationalist projects.

Doing history can be seen as a constant revisiting and recasting of events over time. The 'ever-changing past' can be reviewed when revision is transformative, namely it is based less on the discovery of fresh evidence

than on new imaginings of the logic of past events and the use of alternative concepts for their interpretation (Banner 2021). This type of revision should not be hampered by some sort of 'statute of limitations' that prohibits addressing harmful acts after a certain period of time.

However, memories are both lies and truths, as they are reconstructions of the past based on current understandings. Memories change, fluctuate, they are filtered (Boyd and Zimbardo 2010). They are infected by the 'oblivion disease', particularly among those who control the present, who are forced to also control the past. Oblivion is required to forge nations, which are based on a covenant, a silent agreement that alters or stops memory, because history may become a threat (Renan 2018). Memory, in brief, never reaches a definitive form and, being progressively altered, 'is inherently revisionist' (Samuel 1994, x). For this reason, the defeated can inscribe their own experience in the history of their past.

In this respect, history incorporates a notion of resurrection, as it gives a voice to the voiceless and speaks to the dead. 'History [is] a gigantic act of reparation, rescuing the defeated from the enormous condescension of posterity' (Samuel 1994, viii).

In brief, we constantly reinterpret the past in the light of the present and our vision is always contemporary, irrespective of the remoteness of the events we observe. We may be accused of being 'forgers', but so was Caesar, who in *De Bello Gallico* puts words in the mouth of Vercingetorix. 'History, under this optic, was an exercise in rhetoric [...] it was also regarded as a branch of literature' (Samuel 1994, 431).

Time and narrative

Contesting temporalities implies an appreciation of time as plastic, variously representable like space, an object of collective representation. Time provides a set of reference points enabling the positioning of events. As we have seen, however, events are often forgotten, effaced or deformed, texts are rewritten as if on a palimpsest, until what remains is a satisfactory self-serving history.

Time as theorised by Kant (2007) is a form of inner ability to process chains of events, rather than a real or objective entity. For Kant, we possess such ability among other faculties that equip our intellect. This ability requires imagination, as knowledge is found in the 'knowing subject' not in the 'known object'. Time is pure intuition, an *a priori*, independent from experience. Without intuition and imagination, thought would be hollow (Eco 2015).

There are Kantian echoes in Ricoeur's theory of 'reading', as it suggests that we read the past through our 'productive imagination', in the sense that we appropriate it and find a new way of being in the world (Gerhart 1989). Reading leads to new meaning, as past events undergo a process of 'refiguration'. Ricoeur connects 'reading' and 'refiguration' with memory, which can be abused or obliterated:

> 'I continue to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory – and of forgetting. The idea of a policy of the just allotment of memory is one of my avowed civic themes'. (Ricoeur 2004, xv)

As remembering the past implies remembering oneself, memory provides temporal continuity, namely the ability to move back and forth between past events and current realities. This involves not only individuals but also groups and communities, as recollection needs shared memories: 'to remember we need others' (Ricoeur 2004, 120).

Reinterpretation of events can extend to the distant past if temporality is linked with narrative. And in Ricoeur, 'the narrative schemata of the productive imagination becomes the key to the comprehension of time itself' (Osborne 1995, 47). Humans, he argues, organise time as narrative, and narrative, in turn, is organised in a way that portrays temporal experience (Ricoeur 1984).

When personal stories intermingle with those of others, *narrative identities* are said to develop that propound ideas of justice (Ricoeur 1984). Narratives, therefore, possess temporal mobility, as they preserve traces of the past but, at the same time, determine the trajectory of the future.

History and memory continue to rely on narrative styles and understandings thanks to quasi-plots, quasi-characters and quasi-events, while the heritage industry dilutes contents and weakens the perception of the harm caused by past injustices (Clark 2010). Counter-memory, therefore, has to counter the 'forgetting' of the uncomfortable truths of oppression and exploitation, take responsibility for the story of the other, turn imagination into sympathy and 'forgive' only if there is no 'forgetting', 'so that the debt and the burden of indebtedness remains' (Clark 2010, 4). Ideas of justice, therefore, can be constructed through policies characterised by 'non-forgetful forgiveness' (Ricoeur 2004).

Ideas of justice, however, need to be constructed through a dialogue engaging interlocutors with different identities, different memories and often conflicting interests. Optimistically, according to Ricoeur, such differences could be smoothed out through an 'exchange of memories' and a 'translation ethos' that facilitate the communication among distant parties. Ideally, participants in this exchange give hospitality, through their imagination and sympathy, to the story of the other, which they soon realise is entangled with their own. 'Oneself as another' is the phrase used by Ricoeur to describe the effect of 'exchange of memories', 'translation ethos' and 'non-forgetful forgiveness', the dialogical devices that would encourage the identification of collective principles of justice. This communicative project brings Ricoeur's proposals close to the systems of thought revolving around 'emotional empathy' (Lévinas 1987) and 'communicative action' (Habermas 1987).

As we shall see below, other conceptions of time describe less consensual processes or, one could argue, more contentious forms of communication, including forceful action that alludes to principles of justice.

Contested temporalities

Mythic violence, hidden by symbols, is also exercised through the imposition of productive rhythms and the coercive scanning of collective life. Work discipline imposed by industrialisation, studied by Thompson (1967), is immersed in social time: clocks, calendars, shared time zones, all of these became necessary technical tools to make productive coordination possible. Such tools dictate the

rhythm and scan the duration and intensity of work, establishing an artificial time separated from the time of rest and leisure. There is a long tradition rooted in disputes over the length of the working day, against temporal measurements of productive labour, to the point that industrial disputes can be viewed as a succession of collective action relating to the prism of time.

In successive elaborations, we find time as the result of processes of psychogenesis, by which the mental structures of underlying behaviour take shape (Elias 1993). Such processes, typically, involve the gradual suppression of drives and affections enacted through external pressure that induces self-control. In Elias, state formation is simultaneous with the changes occurring in affective and instinctive life, therefore, time strengthens self-control while strengthening sovereign authority.

Time is theorised as a tool of orientation, a compass with which people establish reference points, identify a social continuum and an intelligible sequence of political and social phases (Tabboni 2001). In brief, time owns a qualitative nature that stimulates our ability to synthesise and arrange events chronologically. And again, it is not by chance that legendary struggles in the urban setting target time: the Communards shot at clocks as a symbolic critique of the temporalities underlying an oppressive system. The disruption of imposed temporalities is vital to any effort to rethink social relations, as shown by Benjamin (2015), who recalls the insurgents who shot at bell towers during the Parisian rebellions of 1830.

The organisation of time is stratified, partitioned according to social role and class, determining differentiated periods of stress and moments of release. Such partition is naturalised but contested by social movements pursuing a redistribution of time and the institution of alternative rhythms (Rancière 2017). Protest itself, however, exemplifies temporal subversion, as demonstrators appropriate time, subtracting it from alienating work. Looking at contemporary precarious work, a highly fragmented temporality can be detected, whereby multiple employment, inactivity, retraining, part-time and overtime coexist in a 'new war on temporal partition' (Verhagen 2021, 98).

But how does exploitation, which requires theft of time, relate to the toppling of monuments and the rewriting of history? The partition of temporalities not only affects the physical dimension of work, it also imposes boundaries, constraining the capacity of seeing, thinking and speaking. Cadences, schedules and deadlines establish hierarchies, locking people up in roles, reducing their temporal sensitivity to a minimum. Lack of time, in brief, disables our perception of temporal continuity, the appreciation of how past suffering can reverberate in the present, and how responses may bring change in the future while helping rewrite the past. The denial of time obscures causal relations, so that narrative linearity is lost. Struggles in the city over temporality are reactions to the conception of time as a fixed resource, carried out by individuals and groups who have only a finite amount of it. Lack of time segregates, it impedes interactions with others, including others distant in time.

Attacking urban symbols and images is part of a programme that Ariella Azoulay (2019) terms 'unlearning imperialism', namely contesting history as a powerful reproductive mechanism that reinforces current social arrangements. This reproductive mechanism prevents the formation of counter-hegemonic

memory and the sharing of feelings and desires between generations. The difficulties this process encounters amount to hurdles created by the constraining power of the present, the quotidian urges and tribulations that limit our temporal experience. In this way, the past becomes ever more distant, while the links between present conditions and future expectations are severed: the future ceases to exist. In other words, those who are totally absorbed in solving day-to-day problems of reproduction and survival are denied the awareness of how their present is linked to the past, let alone the possibility of changing their condition in future.

Conclusion

Urban space has always been an arena for competing interests, but also for antagonistic aesthetics, where symbols and images connect present socio-political arrangements with historical events that shaped them. The celebration of the status quo thrives on the undertakings of the heroes who modelled it and, indirectly, designated the current elite as deserving of such an appellation. The mythical nature of a reality thus created is protected by mythic violence, namely a law-founding, authorised force that establishes systems and preserves them, along with their social inequities and racial biases.

The analysis proposed in this paper has focused on how the mythic violence hidden behind signs and symbols of power are contested through struggles around temporality. Time as narrative has been elucidated, while memory has been discussed from the perspective of history as an ever-changing past and in relation to the oblivion disease. This approach portrays history not as the riverbed of a process of development, but as a whirlpool of events, the garbage-heap of the past (Jameson 2020).

Contention in the city may take the form of deflecting power by producing a chorus of idle footsteps (de Certau); it may incorporate the possible within the real or appropriate and modify the urban space (Lefebvre); it may also consist of communication guided by non-forgetful forgiveness (Ricoeur). The urban struggles over temporality discussed above, in turn, may elicit fear or hope, but the fact that they require people's efforts to act together in the first place alludes to a principle of popular sovereignty. Such struggles are forms of assembly that are significant whether or not they formulate demands, whether or not they display hostility: they are expressions of direct democracy.

Images, statues and monuments encourage responses, they make ideologies comprehensible by shaping them in attracting form (Freedberg 2021). Reducing such attractiveness may not neutralise the ideology they incorporate but may remove the tool through which the ideology spreads.

Power includes the capacity to draw calendars, rename months and seasons, as the revolutionaries of 1789 knew only too well. Some of the actions described in the pages above attack that capacity, it is action that aims to unlearn the official past and overcome the separation between past, present and future. Finally, let us remind ourselves that the melting clock marvellously painted by Salvador Dalì was named The Persistence of Memory.

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