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The Irish Nationalist and Unionist Philosophy at the Beginning of the 20th Century: a Historiographical Approach

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С Акта на обединение от 1800 г. се създава нова държава Обединено кралство на Великобритания и Ирландия, в което се включват Англия, Уелс, Шотландия и Ирландия. Последната губи правото да има свой национален парламент за сметка на възможността да избира и изпраща свои представители директно в централизирания имперски парламент в Уестминстър. За по-голямата част от ирландците този акт е неприемлив и накърняващ националното им достойнство, и в крайна сметка се оказва първопричина за зараждането на ирландския национализъм и съответно на ирландския национален въпрос. За другата, по-малка част от тях пък, Съюзният акт поставя началото на един желан и особено полезен Съюз, защитата на който ще се превърне в основен приоритет. Това вътрешно ирландско противопоставяне между противниците- националистите (в голямото си мнозинство католици) и защитниците-юнионистите (преобладаващо протестанти) на Обединено кралство на Великобритания и Ирландия се трансформира в отчетлива разделителна линия, която бележи и определя ирландската национална съдба не само през XIX, но и през целия XX век, та до ден днешен. В този смисъл може да се обобщи, че на ирландската историческа сцена ясно се открояват две враждуващи и същевременно допълващи си концепции – национализъм и юнионизъм. Противопоставянето между тях е обусловено от сложен набор от религиозни, социални, икономически и политически причини и се превръща в определящ и неизменен фактор за съдбата на ирландската нация.

Настоящото изследване цели да даде обща представа за това как тези две философии са анализирани от историографска гледна точка и дали и до каква степен е изследвана взаимовръзката между тях. То изгражда пълна картина на многообразието от интерпретации и тяхната еволюция във времето и ясно очертава ключовите им характеристики и особености.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, two hostile, and yet at the same time two complementary, concepts – Nationalism and Unionism – were clearly outlined in Ireland. The opposition between them has been conditioned by a complex set of religious, social, economic and political causes and turned into a

decisive factor for the fate of the Irish nation. This internal Irish contradiction between the Nationalists (predominately Catholics) and the Unionists (predominately Protestants) divided the country into two distinct sides, marked and determined the Irish national fate from that time onward until the present day.

The current survey aims to give a general notion of how these philosophies have been interpreted from a historiographical point of view and whether, and to what extent, the interaction between them has been analysed and explored.

In a great number of countries, the founders of professional historical science have been the leaders of the national revival. This renders the histories they construct subject to a large extent to mythical features and national idealism. In this context, Ireland is no exception in that Prof. Eoin MacNeill, the 'father' of modern Irish historiography, was a Vice President of the Gaelic League, President of the Irish Volunteers and the first Minister of Education of the independent Irish state. As a result, historiographical interpretations until the 1930s were dominated by the *Nationalist* trend. The key concept for the representatives of this idea was the presentation of Irish history as a continuous struggle between the fledgling Irish nation and the 'tyrannical imperialism' of the English. In those early studies, the role of individuals was explored along with their contribution to the period.

According to the traditional Nationalist concept, a separate Irish nation, based on the *Gaelic* language and culture, existed even before the first English invasion in the 12th century. From that moment the Irish people were systematically deprived of their historical rights while the English interests were always guaranteed. That is why the Irish people had a moral right to fight for its political, economic, social and cultural independence. The Nationalist historiography subordinates the historical truth to the interests and needs of the nation, basing itself on historical myths and mythology, mixing fact and fiction in a non-scientific approach¹.

The use of these methods by Nationalist historians was responsible for the appearance at the end of 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s of the first doubts about the objectivity of the orthodox Nationalist interpreters, and concern about the way they presented their own Irish national history. The school of the *Revisionists* was established. T.W. Moody², D.B. Quinn, R. Dudley Edwards (people with varying religious backgrounds, but representatives of the academic communities of Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, respectively) set themselves the task of revealing the real Irish past, clearing away the myths and writing in a purer and more scholarly way. They were united in their purpose in the academic periodical *Irish Historical Studies* which represented a joint publication of two academic and seminar-like forums – the *Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies* and the *Irish Historical Society*³, the result of which was the revision of the details and facts of the national heroes and national movements of Irish history, and their representation in a revolutionary way with respect to aims, methods and style.

“We have before us two main tasks – the one constructive, the other instrumental”, declared the Revisionist programme of Moody and Edwards. They offered a neutral and thorough history, free from extreme emotions and historical interpretation, and setting aside partiality to the Nationalist viewpoint and the production of myths: “History is a matter of facing the facts of the Irish past, however painful some of them may be; mythology is a way of refusing to face the historical facts”⁴. According to the Revisionists, one cannot argue with a myth, but historians can argue with one another and only in this way can knowledge be extended and understanding deepened. At the same time they admit that the mental war of liberation from servitude to the myth is a very hard and almost endless process.

There are two main myths, which proved to be destructive with respect to the interpretation of Irish history. The first – the separatist myth - is associated with the Ulster Unionists, and the second – the Nationalist myth – is characteristic of their opponents, the Republicans. The spread of these myths concerning Ireland’s past undermines its present and makes its future vulnerable.

With regard to the myths in the analyses of modern Irish history at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, some of the leading revisionists (Moody, O’Hegarty) gave as the best example, that of the *‘predestined nation’*. At its foundation lies the understanding that the Irish nation had successfully survived through an eight century epic struggle with England, coming out of its underground period and discovering every aspect of its national life subjected to the will and interests of the British. According to them, this wide-spread myth sounds unreasonable, bearing in mind that Irish history was not wholly a history of conflict and opposition. Nationalist politics had not generally been dominated by the concept of continual war with Britain until the complete separation between the two nations was achieved. In practice, the leading factor in Nationalist life during these years was the moderate and constitutional home rule movement rather than the extreme one of achieving absolute independence through physical force. It was not until the eve of the First World War and especially in 1916 (The Easter Rising), when the real transfer from parliamentary to radical revolutionary Nationalism started to change the character of Irish politics.

The revisionists encourage the research of unused sources and unexplored topics. The preferred mode of writing is the historical monograph, based on thorough archival research, critical analysis, careful contextualisation and rigorous documentation of sources⁵. A very specific characteristic of the new historic approach from the late 1930s has been the ambition to widen the academic readership of Irish history and to provoke greater international interest through the organisation of a series of international conferences.

The Revisionist school entered a new period of its development from the beginning of the 1970s with the outburst of violence in the Northern Ireland. Though some historians consider that the conflict after 1969 simply coincided with this new phase, while the real impulse for its emergence is the partial opening of the official Irish archives

and a growth of interest in social and economic history, undoubtedly the events in the Northern Ireland established a totally new environment for the researchers. The Ulster conflict gave additional motivation to those ‘revising’ the Nationalist approach as it created a sense that Irish people desperately needs liberation from the mythology, which according to them caused the eruption of troubles at the end of 1960s and 1970s. This explains why nationalist heroes and movements came under “even more aggressive, critical scrutiny”⁶.

In this new political context the revisionists writings turned into an important factor in the public and political debate in the country, especially concerning the issue of Anglo-Irish relations and Northern Ireland. In this connection it is intriguing to quote Ronan Fanning, one of the most prominent revisionists from the period, citing Bernard Lewis in his turn:

Those who are in power control to a very large extent the presentation of the past and seek to make sure that it is presented in such a way to buttress and legitimize their own authority, and to affirm the rights and merits of the group which they lead.

And on this Fanning comments:

One could scarcely find a more succinct statement of what motivated the Irish political establishment after 1969 to adopt the interpretation of Modern Irish history, commonly described as “revisionist”⁷.

Prof. Fanning proved himself as one of the most energetic and strict revisionists, defending his colleagues’ efforts to write in accordance with the rules of the academic history, overbearing the settled myths and legends both of Irish Nationalism and Unionism, regarding without exceptions the available historical evidence. This trend was categorically supported during the 1980s by respected historians as Michael Laffan, John Murphy and Tom Dunne, through the columns of the intellectual journals as *The Crane Bag* and *The Irish Review*.

In the 1970s, having succeeded in their enterprise to subvert the Nationalist approach, the revisionists faced the challenge of contributing to the writing of a new, general, voluminous synthetic history of Ireland. In actuality, this had happened at the very end of the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s when T.W. Moody⁸ and F.S.L. Lyons⁹ had each tried to reach a wider audience. However, the culmination and new synthesis built on the achievements of the revisionist historiographical approach was made by Roy Foster with his popular and provocative *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972*¹⁰. What was so characteristic about this survey was its author’s style – lucid, highly polished and full of self-confident judgments and explanations. It became the standard history of the period from about 1600 onwards and, although this book is most often represented as the “the consolidation of the current phase of Revisionist historiography”, combining all its virtues and vices¹¹, its publication provoked a new phase in the historians’ debate about the history and nature of Irish identity. In fact, the appearance of Roy Foster’s work established the demarcation line between Revisionism and its opponent school – anti-Revisionism.

Almost simultaneously with the appearance of *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972*, at the end of the 1980s, this already-established approach was severely criticized by Brendan Bradshaw in an article published, by an irony of fate, in the revisionist publication *Irish Historical Studies*¹². This particularly intensified the controversy among historiographical circles in Ireland, and marked the beginning of a new and more profound discussion concerning the ways in which the Irish past has been interpreted.

The main variance emphasized by Bradshaw was connected with the application by the revisionists of the 'value free' approach, expressed in their interpretation of some of the key developments of the Irish historical experience, and especially in the march of national self-expression. They were accused of writing a history disconnected from the popular historical consciousness and of neglecting the social task and mission of the historian. The attack was levelled at the neglect of the human suffering in the tragic past of the country, which in turn led to the creation of a false historical reconstruction. According to Bradshaw, that was the reason why one of the main tasks of the historian should be to reconstruct the past with empathy. He alluded to the well-known historian and philosopher R.G. Collingwood and particularly to his theory of 're-enactment of the past':

This re-enactment... is not a passive surrender to the spell of another's mind... The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgment of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it¹³.

In fact, according to the anti-revisionists, a pro-British and loyalist approach was hidden behind the pretension for objectivity and the neutral pursuit of demythologising. One of the main accusations of the anti-revisionist school was connected with servitude to the political establishment. According to them, the way the past was presented proves to be decisive in legitimising the authority of those in power. In this context, Desmond Fennell, one of the Bradshaw's most energetic followers, describes how the revisionists interpret some of the key understandings in the history of Ireland:

A retelling of Irish history which seeks to show the British rule of Ireland was not, as we have believed a *bad* thing, but a mixture of necessity, good intentions and bungling; and that the Irish resistance to it was not as we have believed a *good* thing, but a mixture of wrong-headed idealism and unnecessary, often cruel violence. The underlying message is that in our relations with Britain on the Irish question, the Irish have been much at fault. This is the popular image of historical Revisionism¹⁴.

The anti-revisionists were not opposed in general to the research techniques and methodology of their colleagues. Nor were they opposed to the discovery of new historical facts and the revision of some tenets of traditional Irish Nationalism. However, they definitely stood against the 'new moral interpretation' and the 're-allocation' of the major facts concerning the Irish Nationalist tradition and British rule. The anti-revisionists criticize the neglect of women's history and the tendentious disregard of the Irish language sources. According to Desmond Fennell, the revisionists applied a threefold approach when discrediting the Nationalist tradition. Firstly, they attacked the key Nationalist interpretation that the British rule of Ireland was 'morally wrong' and that the

Irish resistance to it was 'morally right'; secondly, they sought to discredit the 'Republican' wing rather than the genuine Nationalist one, because of its ultimate aim of the establishment of a nation-state; and thirdly, they undermined the main achievement of that republican tradition – the Irish Revolution itself⁵.

Despite the above, a definition of a common standard and a coherent categorization of the anti-revisionist school of thought are hardly feasible. This is because of the existence of some divergences in defining a single standard for the representatives of this school, as for example between B. Bradshaw and Kevin Whelan¹⁶ there is a certain disbalance in respect to audience, targets and contents of critics against the revisionists. But what is valid in general about Bradshaw and the other anti-revisionists, is the fact that they gave expression to public opinion in Ireland, the larger part of which at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, continued to show a keen interest in the deeds of its historic leaders and be proud of its past.

The unifying element among the majority of the historiographical studies is the opinion that, despite the serious debate, an artificial and relative opposition among the Nationalists, revisionists and anti-revisionists is being created¹⁷. Behind it, a thorough and detailed investigation of documents and resources (the greater part of which were not available to the historians of the early years) is being carried out and new research theories and methods are being applied. To sum up, it could be said that after the 1940s there was a tangible process of broadening of the base of knowledge concerning the Irish past, rather than a revision of the ways of its interpretation. In this context, Roy Foster's evaluation "we are all revisionists now" sounds particularly suitable.

In a similar manner to the historiography of Nationalism, the interpretations of Unionism varied, and were dependant to a significant extent on the developments of political debates. A reflection of this tendency is Lord Rosebery's comment that "the Irish question has never passed into history because in has never passed out of politics"¹⁸. The fragmentary character of Irish Unionism provoked a tendency to produce a kind of a simplified historical creed which emphasises periodic changes in accordance with political necessity and agenda.

The first Unionist interpreters were the so called 'Unionist historians'. Their profile is of Unionists engaged in the writing of history, active in the interests of Unionism or just revealing political sentiments, although not all of them participated in Unionist developments. Logically, the early Unionists' writings, from the end of the First World War to the 1940s, were generally characterized by their apologist character. The leading institution connected with Unionist historical scholarship was Trinity College, Dublin. As a predominantly Protestant and landowning institution, it became one of the most influential suppliers of lawyers and historians to the Unionist movement, giving it its ideological substance.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Lecky, as the most distinguished representative of the Trinity intellectual elite, started actively investigating the Unionist tradition in Ireland. Together with Falkiner and Ball, he focused on the main values and achievements of Anglo-Irish political practice, giving a predominantly Anglo-centric viewpoint. The

character of the literature produced during the period of the foundation of Northern Ireland was far from being professional, logically partitionist, or orientated towards the necessities of the Ulster community and its elite.

The most prominent example of this early stage from the development of the Unionist historiography was Ronald McNeil's book¹⁹ "Ulster's Stand for Union". It represented a substantial and thoroughly documented account of the movement written by one of its active participants, giving a new approach from the traditional partitionist one and becoming a harbinger of A.T.Q. Stewart's contribution a few decades later. The first example of professional scholarly interpretation of Unionism appeared in 1967. Stewart's *The Ulster Crisis*²⁰ differed substantially from anything produced before in respect of methodology and research technique, but resembled its precursors in the partial and pro-Unionist presentation of the founders of Northern Ireland, rendering their actions in heroic dimensions. This approach was valid for all the representatives of the early Unionist historiography who, like their colleagues from the Nationalist school, glorified and mythologized historic figures and events.

This tendency started to change in 1969 when the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland created a different environment for the study and research of Unionism. The so called 'historian of Unionism' (differing from the already mentioned 'Unionist historian') emerged, providing a more comprehensive and broader examination of the history of the movement. The new historiographical tradition was connected with the involvement of external comments and analysis as well as the production of more weighty literature, even including some less scholarly contributions. Not surprisingly, more was written in the twenty year period after 1969 than had been written in the preceding fifty years. A rediscovery of the long neglected Southern Unionism can be observed. Patrick Buckland was responsible for renewing interest in the study of Southern Loyalism, and he made a substantial contribution to both the North and South in the pre-partition period²¹. He was supported by J.C. Beckett²², who also put some emphasis on the debate on Southern Unionism through his *The Anglo-Irish Tradition*. F.S.L. Lyons and D.C. Savage focused on Unionism during some of the key phases of its evolution from 1885-1886 and 1904-1905, while Andrew Gailey in his *Ireland and the Death of Kindness*²³ explored the Ulster Loyalist – British connection. Of course, many aspects have still not been researched or at least not extensively studied.

The new approach allows criticisms and redefinitions of some of the key concepts and the previously created myths spread in the 'apologetic' interpretation of Unionism. Of course, this does not mean that the promotion of the loyalist tradition has ceased. On the contrary, in 1985, the *Ulster Society* was created "to promote an awareness and appreciation of our distinctive Ulster-British culture"²⁴. It was connected with the production of well-illustrated, cheap and attractive editions, designed for the mass market, eternalising the merits of the loyalist tradition.

The literature on Unionism during these years became even more diverse and heterogeneous. The reason is that a certain number of issues provoked intellectual debates

among the historians dealing with it. The key one is partition and its historical background. According to A.T.Q. Stewart²⁵ the conflict in Northern Ireland dates back to the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries where the roots of the problem lay. In other words the developments in the early 20th century Irish history and especially the partition and the Nationalist/Unionist clash in Ulster was something inevitable, irrespectively of circumstances, which *de facto* is more a symptom of the problem than its cause. Against this interpretation came Brian Walker's thesis that the role the past plays in the present in Northern Ireland is not unique and that the current situation is not linked in a distinctive way to the past:

The conflict in Northern Ireland is not an age-old one...other parts of Europe have also faced and still do face similar problems. As elsewhere, leaders and people in Ireland, both north and South, have a vital role to play in determining the shape of their own society, and are not just helpless victims of a turbulent past²⁶.

The historiography in the period after 1969 is mainly characterized by its diverse character, combining both old and new approaches, but remaining predominantly influenced by the specifics of the political debate. The political controversy has had an immense impact on those researching Unionism and it could be concluded that the evolution of the Unionist historiography is a reflection of the evolution of the Unionism itself.

Among the historiographical interpretations on the Irish history at the beginning of the 20th century there is another parallel approach – the Marxist one. The latter is comparatively similar to the one revealed among the traditional historians, writing on the problems of Irish Nationalism and Unionism, especially in respect to the internal division and controversy among the Marxist academics. Similarly to the revisionist/anti-revisionist debate here we can talk about a Marxist/neo-Marxist divergence.

The early representatives of the traditional Marxist historiography on Ireland stuck to the classical tenets of the founders of the school, Marx and Engles. Marx and Engles had even greater impact on their colleagues, as they both made a certain personal contribution, turning into one of the few non-Irish writers on Irish affairs. The Irish Marxists presented the Irish Nationalism as a 'pure' and 'centuries-old heroic' Nationalist struggle against foreign oppression²⁷. Consequently, they found themselves close to the first Nationalist historians' writings, in exhibiting a very sympathetic manner towards the cause of the Irish Nationalism and a negative one towards the Unionists. Starting from the very first attempt to interpret the country's history in classical Marxist terms made by the prominent Irish labour activist James Connolly, passing through the works of Erich Strauss and C. Desmond Greaves and finishing with T.A. Jackson²⁸ – all Irish Marxists revealed the English involvement in Ireland (at that time under the form of partition) as the prime reason for the country's troubles²⁹.

Since the 1960s, in parallel and to some extent within the developing revisionist criticism, a new generation of neo-Marxist or Marxist-revisionists historians has emerged (Paul Bew, H. Patterson and P.Gibbon). They have questioned the contribution of the older Marxist tradition, and revised the main concepts of the classical tradition, basing

their approach on newly available archive material and using freer and more informal language. Practically drifting apart from the traditional Marxist emphasis, they set a new agenda for their project. They speak against the role of Imperialism in Ireland and reject the traditional approach based on Lenin's "rights of nations to self-determination". Bew, Patterson and Gibbon³⁰ defend "The State in Northern Ireland" and particularly the Protestant working class, which according to them is a key actor and determinant social force in the various crises of the Northern state. Contradictory to the classical tenets, the Marxist revisionists wish to reinforce artificially created national boundaries, reassure the architects of a sectarian state and foreign investors that Imperialism is not under threat.

Irish Unionism and Irish Nationalism are mutually connected and inductive concepts, proper understanding and analysis of which is impossible without a detailed exploration of this complicated interaction. Most historians have focused on either the development of Nationalism with its various dimensions or on the internal dynamics of Unionist resistance to home rule. Until now, the full scope and the actual interaction of Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism has been systematically neglected. Knowledge of the two traditions has increased, but there has been no attempt to combine them in a scholarly analysis based on primary sources from both the North and the South.

NOTES

- ¹ N. Curtin, *Varieties of Irishness: Historical Revisionism, Irish Style*, "The Journal of British Studies", 35, 2, Revisionisms, 1996, p. 195.
- ² T.W. Moody, *Irish History and Irish Mythology*, in C. Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, Dublin 1994, pp. 71-86.
- ³ C. Brady, 'Constructive and Instrumental': *The dilemma of Ireland's First 'New Historians'*, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* cit., Dublin 1994, p. 4.
- ⁴ Moody, *Irish History and Irish Mythology* cit., p. 84
- ⁵ R.W. Foster, *History and the Irish Question*, "Transactions of the Royal Historical Society", xxxiii, 1983, pp. 188-189.
- ⁶ Curtin, *Varieties of Irishness* cit., p. 195.
- ⁷ R. Fanning, *The Great Enchantment*, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* cit., Dublin 1994, pp. 156-7.
- ⁸ T.W. Moody, *A New History of Ireland*, Oxford 1976.
- ⁹ E.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland after the Famine*, London 1971.
- ¹⁰ R.W. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972*, London 1988.
- ¹¹ Curtin, *Varieties of Irishness* cit., p. 196
- ¹² B. Bradshaw, *Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland*, "Irish Historical Studies", 26, 1989.
- ¹³ Quoted in D.G. Boyce - A. O'Day, 'Revisionism' and the 'revisionist' controversy, in D.G. Boyce - Alan O'Day (eds.), *The Making of Modern Irish History*, London 1996, p. 11.
- ¹⁴ D. Fennel, *Against Revisionism*, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* cit., pp. 184-185.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

- ¹⁶ K. Whelan, *Come All You Staunch Revisionists: towards a Post-revisionist Agenda for Irish History*, "Irish Reporter", 2, 1991 and K. Whelan, *The Recent Writing of Irish history*, "U.C.D. History review", 1991.
- ¹⁷ Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* cit.; Boyce - O' Day (eds.), *The Making of Modern Irish History* cit.; Curtin, *Varieties of Irishness* cit.
- ¹⁸ A. Jackson, *Unionist history*, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* cit., p. 256.
- ¹⁹ R. McNeil, *Ulster's Stand for Union*, London, 1922.
- ²⁰ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, London 1967.
- ²¹ P. Buckland, *Irish Unionism, 1885-1923*, Belfast 1973 and P. Buckland, *Ulster Unionism and the Origins of Northern Ireland, 1886-1922*, Dublin 1973.
- ²² J.C. Beckett, *The Anglo-Irish Tradition*, London 1976.
- ²³ A. Gaily, *Ireland and the Death of Kindness: the experience of constructive unionism, 1890-1905*, Cork 1987.
- ²⁴ A. Jackson, *Unionist history*, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* cit., p. 264
- ²⁵ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects Of Ulster, 1609-1969*, London 1977.
- ²⁶ B. Walker, *Dancing to History's Tune: History, Myth and Politics in Ireland*, Belfast 1996, p. 158.
- ²⁷ A. Coughlan, *Ireland's Marxist Historians*, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* cit., Dublin 1994, p. 288.
- ²⁸ T.A. Jackson, *Ireland Her Own, An Outline History of the Irish Struggle*, London 1947 – this represented the first comprehensive history of Ireland from Marxist standpoint.
- ²⁹ A. Coughlan, *Ireland's Marxist Historians*, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History* cit., p.29
- ³⁰ P. Bew, P. Gibbon and H. Patterson, *The State in Northern Ireland, Political Forces and Social Classes*, Manchester 1979.

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