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**Natives of Peru and Bolivia:**  
A Comparison of the Political Mobilization of Indigenous Groups

POLS 219 – Politics of Latin America  
Professor W. Rand Smith  
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December 7, 2009

## 1. Introduction

On September 13, 2007, the United Nations' General Assembly adopted the "Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," a document that was created to support the protection of native people around the world and encourage them to participate in decision-making. Although the document is not legally binding to any country, it can be considered to be a significant milestone in indigenous people's fight for their legal rights. Nonetheless, are today's native groups able to mobilize and demand their rights through politics? Two particularly interesting cases of indigenous politics are Peru and Bolivia. Although both of these Andean countries have large indigenous populations, they are at opposite poles when it comes to the political mobilization of native groups. Whereas the legislation and ethnicity-based political identities in Bolivia have allowed the country's indigenous people to organize themselves in an unprecedented fashion, there continues to be a lack of political mobilization of native groups in Peru. More specifically, the class-based political identities and the country's governance have contributed to the fact that political mobilization of the Peruvian indigenous people remains uncommon, and when native groups do assemble, they lack legal recognition.

This paper will, therefore, compare current trends in the mobilization of indigenous people in Peru and Bolivia. To begin with, I will take a look at how the oppressed social role of native people in Latin America dates back to colonial times. This historical background is fundamental to fully understanding why indigenous people's participation in political processes is necessary throughout the continent. Secondly, this paper will compare the current legislation in Peru and Bolivia regarding the countries' vast indigenous populations and their rights. Furthermore, through appropriate examples, this paper will closely examine recent developments in the mobilization of native groups in both of these Andean countries. Finally, the latter section of this paper will explore some of the sociocultural forces that play a role in Bolivian and Peruvian indigenous people's collective participation in politics.

## 2. History of Indigenous People in Latin America

The year of Christopher Columbus' supposed discovery of the Americas, 1492, is often referred to as a watershed moment in the history of Latin America. In fact, Columbus Day is celebrated around the world in order to commemorate the maritime explorer's arrival in the Caribbean on October 12, 1492. What is often forgotten in the appraisals of Columbus, however, is that his voyages marked the beginning of an elitist colonial system that, while no longer in force, continues to influence and structure contemporary politics in Latin America. The European colonization of the Americas, in other words, inaugurated a long history of oppression of the native populations of Central and South America. Consequently, before analyzing contemporary indigenous groups and their political mobilization, it is vital to understand the severity of the conventional, ethnicity-based, and repressive makeup of Latin societies. This section of the paper will, therefore, present the historical conditions of indigenous groups in Latin America.

Before Columbus arrived in the Americas, the native people, who had begun inhabiting the continent as early as 40,000 years ago, had formed three major indigenous populations. Although numerous smaller native groupings existed, the chief civilizations in the pre-conquest era were those of the Aztecs, Mayans, and the Incas. While the first two were concentrated in the region that is now the Mexican state and Central America, the Incan empire blossomed in present-day Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In total, there were an "upward of 70 million people living in the Americas when the Europeans arrived" (Vanden & Provost 2006, 19 & 83).

In the early sixteenth century, the Spanish *conquistadors* that arrived in the Americas not only almost completely exterminated the native populations, but they also established a new, repressive social structure in Latin America. The Spaniards came to the new world in search of riches; they viewed the colonies as a way to extract resources, such as gold and diamonds. In fact, the conquistadors had legal permission from the Spanish monarchy to exploit and steal the native peoples' possessions. "The only requirement was," as Valen and Provost note, "that they pay the

royal fifth, or *quinto real*" (28). In other words, as long as the conquerors were loyal to the crown and paid taxes, they had free hands to gather as much fortune as possible – at the expense of indigenous people, of course. “The native peoples were often completely brutalized in the plundering of their societies and were at best seen by most as instruments of lucre and occasionally lust: slaves to capture and sell, laborers to exploit, owners of land or property to be seized, women to be used,” point out Valen and Provost (28-29). This oppression of the indigenous populations materialized in the creation of a system of social classification that determined people’s social status or *casta* according to their descent and skin colour. Whereas white Spaniards and their offspring were at the top of the social pyramid, darker-skinned natives and African slaves constituted the lower and most oppressed social classes.

This colonial discrimination against the indigenous people did not come to an end when the Spanish crown lost its rule in South America. Although most Latin American countries gained their independence in the early 1820s, the colonial system of social classification continued to oppress the lower classes that mainly consisted of natives. “The local elites succeeded in transferring political power into their own hands,” write Valen and Provost, “and the underlying systems of social and economic power inherited from the colonial era remained largely intact” (42). More specifically, the colonial tradition of authoritarian rule, which explicitly discriminated against the natives, prolonged in Latin America despite the countries’ separation from the Spanish rule. It is important to keep in mind this notion of historical discrimination against the indigenous peoples in order to fully comprehend the ground-breaking nature of contemporary political mobilizations of Central and South American native groups.

### **3. Political Mobilization of Indigenous Groups**

#### *3.1 Legislation*

When analyzing the political mobilization of indigenous groups in Bolivia and Peru, it is important that we first take a look at the countries’ legislation on the rights of native people. In

other words, we need to be able to understand the legal framework within which any political mobilization in these two Andean countries can lawfully take place. While Peru and Bolivia have both improved their legislation on native groups' rights, the current Bolivian constitution is a world-wide leader in terms of the extent to which it protects the country's aboriginal groups. Thus, this section will examine the laws regarding the political rights of the indigenous people in Peru and Bolivia.

Overall, both countries have come a long way from colonial times with regards to the rights of indigenous peoples. First and foremost, unlike during the colonial rule and the authoritarian regimes that followed the collapse of the Spanish viceroalties in Latin America, today's native people of Peru and Bolivia have the right to vote in public elections. Whereas universal suffrage was enacted in Bolivia in 1952 (as a result of the Bolivian Revolution), the entire Peruvian population did not get to vote until the country returned to democracy 1980.

Moreover, both countries are signatories to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169. This convention, also known as the "Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention," was first ratified by Bolivia in 1991 and, two years later, by Peru (Wessendorf 157 & 170). The convention, adopted by the ILO's general conference on June 27, 1989, called attention to "the distinctive contributions of indigenous and tribal peoples to the cultural diversity and social and ecological harmony of humankind and to international co-operation and understanding" (ILO, 1989). Furthermore, in addition to stating that indigenous people should, among other rights, be entitled to acquire education, the ILO Convention 169 emphasized native groups' right to mobilize politically. According to the document, governments have the responsibility "to establish means by which these [indigenous] peoples can freely participate, to at least the same extent as other sectors of the population, at all levels of decision-making in elective institutions and administrative and other bodies responsible for policies and programmes which concern them" (ILO, 1989). Nonetheless, an important distinction to make in terms of the actual enforcement of the Convention

169 is that whereas the rights the convention grants to indigenous people are currently recognized in the Bolivian constitution, the Peruvian native groups have never been accorded such official acknowledgment (Wessendorf 157).

Similarly, Bolivia and Peru differ in their legal recognition of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Although the declaration negotiations lasted over two decades, they finally came to an end when the UNDRIP was adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 13, 2007. The most fundamental and previously unrecognized right that UNDRIP addressed was indigenous people's right to self-determination and, therefore, political mobilization:

By that right they can freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development. They have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their rights to participate fully, if they choose to, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state. (Articles 3-5)

Ironically, even though Luis-Enrique Chávez of Peru was the Chairman of UNDRIP's Working Group during the negotiations, only Bolivia has extended its constitution to include the declaration in its entirety. In fact, as Wessendorf points out, "on 7 November 2007, through Law No. 3760, it [Bolivia] became the first country in the world to ratify the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" (170).

In general, the current Bolivian constitution, which was passed after a referendum on January, 25, 2009, is unprecedented in terms of the recognition it gives to the rights of indigenous people. It recognizes the existence of native Bolivians prior to the Spanish conquest and gives them the right to practice their own traditions, cultures, and norms. Unlike that of Peru, the Bolivian constitution gives thirty-three indigenous languages equal standing with Spanish (in Peru, native languages are considered official only in areas where they predominate). Moreover, the constitution defines the Bolivian state as a "community" (Georgetown University, 2009). This notion is particularly interesting because it allows three different types of democratic participation to be

officially recognized. In addition to participatory and representative democracy, the Bolivian constitution acknowledges community democracy, as Wessendorf notes, “by means of election, appointment or direct nomination of representatives according to local custom” (177). The current Bolivian constitution even acknowledges traditional customs of the country’s vast and diverse native groups. In Article 8, the constitution states that the Bolivian state assumes and promotes multiple indigenous values and principles, like *ama suwa* (transl. “don’t be weak, don’t be a liar, and don’t be a thief”), *suma qamaña* (transl. “live well”), and *ñandereko* (transl. “harmonious life”) (Georgetown University, 2009).

To sum, while Peruvian and Bolivian indigenous groups have both gained some major legal rights they did not have during the colonial rule, such as universal suffrage and the right to participate in decision-making, the Bolivian constitution goes a lot further in protecting the country’s native groups’ rights.

### 3.2. *Native Groups’ Mobilization in Bolivia*

On Sunday, December 6, 2009, Bolivia’s first president of native origin, Evo Morales, was elected to his second term. “This is the return of the Pachakuti for us, the indigenous majority of this country,” commented Eugenio Rojas on Morales’ re-election in an interview with *The New York Times*, making reference to the fifteenth century Inca emperor and revolutionist Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui (Romero A8). Indeed, the political mobilization of indigenous groups in Bolivia over the past two decades has been, if not revolutionary, at least unparalleled in modern political history. Accordingly, this section will take a look at recent trends in the political mobilization of native groups in Bolivia.

The year that most academics consider to be the most crucial in the history of political mobilization of indigenous groups in Bolivia is 1990. That year, over 700 indigenous men and women walked from the country’s lowlands to La Paz in order to demonstrate against the “500 Years Celebration” that would be held two years later in commemoration of the anniversary of



Columbus' discovery of the new world in 1492. "By the time they [the demonstrators] arrived, *el movimiento* was born," Goodale notes, "and in the process Bolivian indigenusness had been recast within a wider universe...and the 500 Years of Celebration had given way to 500 Years of Resistance" (636). In other words, the 1990 march symbolized the beginning of a pluralistic indigenous movement in Bolivia that embraces the country's diverse native groups.

Three years after the watershed rally of 1990, a self-identified indigenous Bolivian was elected to a high political office for the first time, when Víctor Hugo Cárdenas Conde became Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's vice president. More importantly, however, Sánchez de Lozada or "Goni," as Bolivians refer to him, enforced progressive social and legal reforms, such as bilingual education and "the implementation at the national legal level of different international human rights norms, especially those involving the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples" (Goodale 637).

Nonetheless, the neoliberal economic policies of privatization and deregulation, promoted by Goni and his successor, Hugo Banzer Suárez, led to another milestone in the political mobilization of Bolivian indigenous groups: the Cochabamba Water War of 1999-2000. Pushed by the World Bank, Banzer decided to privatize the government agency in charge of water services in the Cochabamba Valley, the *Servicio Municipal de Agua Potable de Cochabamba* or SEMAPA, and sell the concessions to *Aguas de Tunari*, a subsidiary of the U.S.-based multinational Bechtel Corporation. "Once the water services had been privatized, prices rose dramatically within a very short period and social unrest soon followed," states Goodale (637). The protests, led by indigenous Oscar Olivera, were attended by large groups of native people carrying the *wiphala* flag, a prominent symbol of the Andean indigenous tribes. Finally, due to the vast demonstrations "in which one youth was killed and dozens injured by soldiers," as Goodale reports, "the Banzer government was forced to cancel its contract with Bechtel in April 200" (637). In other words, a decade after the march of 1990, the Bolivian indigenous groups were able to assemble successfully and reject an unfavorable government policy.

In particular, the Water War of late 1999 and early 2000 was a turning point for Evo Morales and, thus, for the entire process of political mobilization of Bolivian indigenous groups. Together with his political party, *Movimiento al Socialismo* (transl. “Movement for Socialism”) or the MAS, then-congressman Morales joined the Cochabamba protests. Native groups and union workers advocating against the government’s neoliberal policies found it easy to relate to an indigenous *cocalero* (a supporter of coca production) that was promoting a bottom-up approach to Bolivian politics. Encouraged by the vast support, Morales ran for presidency in the 2002 elections and, to the surprise of traditional right-wing parties, he came in second place. Although Morales did not win, the Movement for Socialism became, for the first time in its history, the second largest in both houses of the Bolivian Congress (Singer & Morrison 180).

Morales’ victorious moment came on December 18, 2005, when he won the presidential elections with an absolute majority. Moreover, MAS made history by becoming the largest party in the Congress with seventy-two deputies and twelve senators (CNE 2006). On the day of the elections, Morales described himself as the “candidate of those despised in Bolivian history, the candidate of the most disdained, discriminated against” (BBC News 2005). His statement depicts the great significance of the 2005 elections; for the first time in Bolivia’s history, the indigenous majority had been able to successfully mobilize and gain absolute political power. Furthermore, as the most recent statistics from the December 6, 2009 elections show, Morales and MAS seem to be only increasing their popularity. As a supporter of Morales symbolically comments on the elections, “This revolution, this process of change, is unstoppable” (Romero A8).

Indeed, the political mobilization of Bolivian indigenous groups seems to be relentless. As the Movement for Socialism continues to become more and more popular, other indigenous political parties are being established. The second largest indigenous political party in Bolivia, the *Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti* (transl. “the Indigenous Pachakuti Movement”) or the MIP, has already participated in three consecutive presidential and legislative elections (2002, 2005,

and 2009). Although the party received only around two percent of the popular vote in 2002 and 2005, it managed to win six seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 2002 (Singer & Morrison 180). Another example of the increasing political mobilization of Bolivian native groups is the *Movimiento Originario Popular* or the MOP, a small social and political party active in Bolivia's norte de Potosí region. "Despite the fact that MOP is not nearly as well-established as MIP – either nationally, or within its home region – it has managed to fundamentally shift relations of power in the norte de Potosí," emphasizes Goodale (638). In other words, while other indigenous political parties might still lack the executive power of the Movement for Socialism, native groups around Bolivia are more and more politically mobilized.

### 3.3. Native Groups' Mobilization in Peru

On February 23, 2007, the Alan García government of Peru decided to bring the *Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo de los Pueblos Andinos, Amazónicos y Afroperuano* or INDEPA (transl. "the National Institute for the Development of the Andean, Amazonian and Afro-Peruvian Peoples") to an end and shrink it to a Native Peoples' Department within the country's Ministry of Women and Social Development (MIMDES). "With this measure," Wessendorf noted on the severity of the verdict: "The government took a seven-year step backwards in terms of public institutionality on indigenous peoples given that, from being an autonomous ministerial-level decentralized public body . . . it has gone back to being hierarchically and functionally much lesser body" (158). Although the Congress passed a law cancelling the executive decree in December of 2007, García's initial decision depicts the current Peruvian administrators' unwillingness to act upon the ILO Convention 169 or the UNDRIP and listen to the demands of indigenous groups. This section of my paper will, therefore, not only take a look at the overall lack of indigenous political mobilization in Peru, but it will also examine how the Peruvian government continues to neglect any demands put forward by the country's native groups that are not often politically organized.

Unlike the Movement for Socialism and the Indigenous Pachakuti Movement in Bolivia, there are no Peruvian political parties that are highly affiliated with indigenous groups. The most prominent example used to support the existence of indigenous politics in Peru is the *Partido Nacionalista Peruano* (transl. “The Peruvian Nationalist Party”) and, more importantly, its founder Ollanta Humala. In 2006, Humala ran for presidency and came in second place, right after García. Nonetheless, although Humala is, indeed, of native descent and his father and brother are ideological leaders in the Peruvian indigenous movement called the *etnocacerismo*, he has explicitly taken distance to his relatives and campaigned on the premises of the left-wing Nationalist Party. In other words, while Humala does advocate for many indigenous rights, such as the legal protection of native languages of Quechua and Aymara, paralleling his Nationalist Party with Morales’ MAS would be far-fetched.

Furthermore, any other attempts of the Peruvian native groups to mobilize politically have been either subjugated or neglected by the country’s ruling regime. This was the case, for instance, when the indigenous groups in the farming communities of Yanta and Secunda y Cajas tried to mobilize against Monterrico Metals’ (a London-based mining company) operations in the region in 2007. “The municipalities of Ayabaca, Pacaipamba and Carmen de la Frontera organized a local consultation on 16 September to ascertain the local people’s opinion with regard to mining activity,” Wessendorf points out on the legal mobilization process (163). The members of the consultation process voted on the Monterrico Metals’ Majaz Mining Project and a striking 94.54 percent objected the company’s operations (Wessendorf 164). Notwithstanding the peaceful and legitimate civic participation, the Peruvian government embarked, in the words of Wessendorf, “on an aggressive and intolerant campaign in opposition to the consultation” (163). The measures the García administration is willing to take to silence any indigenous mobilizations are vast, corrupted, and diverse. In the case of the Majaz Mining Project, for instance, the “Prime Minister Jorge del

Castillo even threatened the council authorities and the broadcaster Radio Cutivalú for refusing to distribute a message that carried misleading information” ( Wessendorf 164).

The increasing emphasis the García regime puts on neoliberal policies has forced Peruvian native groups to mobilize in order to protect their rights. By auctioning oil and gas concessions to the country’s Amazon region, the government attempts to attract as much of foreign direct investment (FDI) as possible. The year 2007 was unprecedentedly good for Peru in terms of FDI received: “The State ended the year with a record 24 hydrocarbon exploration contracts, surpassing the 16 contracts in 2006 and 15 in 2005” (Wessendorf 164). Nevertheless, like with mining projects, the Peruvian government has continued to ignore the ILO 169 and UNDRIP principles of including local native groups in the decision-making processes. In June 2009, the lack of official recognition given to the indigenous peoples’ attempts to express their opinions regarding the oil and gas concession to the Peruvian Amazon escalated into the deathliest political crisis in Peru since the 1980s guerilla wars of the Shining Path. The indigenous protestors, led by the National Organization of the Amazon Indigenous People of Peru (*Asociación Inter-étnica por el Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana* or AIDSESEP), roadblocked a stretch of highway in the Peruvian Amazon known as the "Devil's Curve." President Garcia, who has stated that “everyone should benefit from the country's natural resources not just the people who happened to live in the areas concerned,” ordered the Peruvian military to break up the roadblock (BBC News 2009). At least nine policemen and twenty-one tribesmen were killed in the clashes between the protestors and security forces.

Although the events of June 2009, were another example of how the Peruvian government disrespects any mobilization of native people, the Amazonians’ protests were at least partly successful. On June 18, the Peruvian Congress overturned two of the fundamental decrees that had initiated the protests at the Devil’s Curve. In response to the Congress’ decision, the leader of AIDSESEP, Daysi Zapata, stated enthusiastically, “Today is a historic day for all indigenous

people and for the nation of Peru” (Zarate A13). By overturning the two decrees, the Peruvian Congress did, indeed, take into account the native groups’ right to be involved in the decision-making process. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, despite the Congress’ verdict, President García is yet to meet with AIDSESEP in formal negotiations.

### 3.4. *Cultural Factors*

In addition to the differences in legislation as well as the current governments’ policies on and reactions to the mobilization of indigenous groups, Bolivia and Peru are dissimilar in their people’s sociopolitical identities. Whereas Bolivian politics are founded on collective identities of indigenous cosmopolitanism, class-based identities prevail in Peru. Accordingly, this section of the paper will explore how these distinct political sociopolitical identities influence the mobilization of native groups.

Over the past two decades, there has been an increased discourse of multiculturalism in the Bolivian society that has allowed the countries’ native groups to mobilize politically. This new sociopolitical atmosphere is most vividly expressed in the lyrics of Wayna Tambo rappers. Through their music, the members of the flourishing El Alto rap movement envision a new type of sociopolitical citizenship or a new framework of belonging in which Bolivia’s repressed and marginalized are brought together. “By refusing to accede to all of the traditional categories of Bolivian identity (campesino, Indian, Aymara, Quechua, *runa*, *q’ara*),” Goodale writes, “the rappers of Wayna Tambo are part of a second revolution in Bolivia...this second Bolivian revolution is essentially discursive” (635). The discussions have taken a more cosmopolitan approach to the discrimination against minority groups; in fact, the rappers often refer to other oppressed groups, such as the North African Muslims during the Parisian civil unrest of October and November 2005.

Although the Wayna Tambo rappers might be the most explicit example of how indigenusness is embraced in today’s Bolivia, an entire new cultural identity, indigenous cosmopolitanism, has become dominant. Since the 1990s, sociopolitical issues in Bolivia have been

reinterpreted, as Goodale puts it, “through a much different, cosmopolitan, discourse, one that is anchored in an indigenous imaginary that is both empowering and utopian” (643). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the over 700 indigenous men and women who marched from Bolivia’s lowlands to La Paz in the 1990 marches carried *wiphala* flags with them. The rainbow-colored flag has been the symbol of indigenusness since the ancient times, but since the 1990s, the *wiphala* has also come to “express an emergent indigenous cosmopolitanism, which brings together Bolivia’s different *originarios*, or ‘original ones,’ with all of the ‘First Nations’ of the Americas” (Goodale 636).

Unlike in Bolivia where the newly defined indigenous cosmopolitanism has given native activists the ability to “bring together apparently disparate discursive of belonging...and the meanings of modernity itself,” the class-based identities of Peruvian politics make it hard for the country’s indigenous groups to mobilize politically (Goodale 634). In order to participate in decision-making, Peruvian native people are forced to give up some of their cultural traditions and identify according to their socioeconomic class rather than their ethnicity. The famous Peruvian author, Mario Vargas Llosa, recognized the indigenous people’s need to assimilate in the dominant culture: “Indian peasants live in such a primitive way that communication is practically impossible. It is only when they move to the cities that they have the opportunity to mingle with the other Peru. The price they must pay for integration is high – renunciation of their culture, their language, their belief, their traditions and customs...After one generation they become *mestizos*, and they are no longer Indians” (Paredes 22). Indeed, the Peruvian sociopolitical culture and its discrimination against indigenous people force native groups to emphasize subsistence over preserving their culture. This social phenomenon has gone so far that some Peruvian indigenous people do not even want their children to attend bilingual schools; they acknowledge that by maintaining their native cultural habits, indigenous children will continue to be discriminated against. “If Quechua were privileged, the situation might be different, and we might even want our children to read and write

in our language,” noted an indigenous father, “But until that happens, our strategy for the improvement of our children’s education is still determined by our reality” (Paredes 23-24).

To sum, the native groups of Peru are forced to politically organize themselves according to their socioeconomic status (as opposed to their cultural identity), whereas an entirely new native identity, indigenous cosmopolitanism, has become dominant in the Bolivian society.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Bolivian native groups, on one hand, have been able to not only politically mobilize in a magnitude that is unprecedented in the world but also transform the sociopolitical culture of Bolivia into one of indigenous cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, the current Peruvian government continues to neglect the country’s vast native population in its decision-making, which has led to a sociopolitical atmosphere in which the political mobilization of native Peruvians is rare. It is interesting to see, however, what the recently re-elected President of Bolivia, Evo Morales, will do in the future. Will he continue granting the Bolivian native groups more privileges, and will he seek to prolong his tenure indefinitely like Hugo Chávez of Venezuela? At the same time, the next Peruvian general elections in 2011 will show if the aggressive neoliberal policies promoted by García will have a similar effect to that of the Cochabamba Water War. Will Ollanta Humala or another candidate be encouraged by the relative success of the Amazonian protests in June, 2009, and campaign on an anti-U.S. and pro-indigenous premises? Although Humala or another native leader did win the elections, it should be acknowledged that it takes more for sociocultural change to take place than just political elections. In other words, the future Peruvian governments need to make preserving the country’s diverse native groups’ cultures a priority; only vast social programs will allow Peruvian indigenous people to be proud of and embrace their native identity.



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