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Sociology as Socioanalysis: Tales of *Homo Academicus*

Loïc J. D. Wacquant¹

INTRODUCTION

An unusually imaginative and productive thinker, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has, over the past three decades, produced one of the most ambitious and fertile bodies of sociological work of the postwar era. The sheer range and diversity of his investigations, however, have until recently hampered the efforts of Anglo-American readers to grasp its overarching unity and therefore its full originality. Spanning the anthropology of colonial Algeria, the sociology of language and culture (including education, science, literature and the arts, sports, taste, and religion), the analysis of class and politics, and the dissection of the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of social science, Bourdieu's writings may, from the outside, seem eccentric and overly dispersed. They scarcely allow for easy entry; on the contrary, their scattered and daunting appearance has often encouraged superficial assimilation. Indeed, a quick survey of their reception in several areas of contemporary theory and research in the United States reveals a distinct pattern of fragmentation, misunderstanding, and selective ignorance.

Beyond the intrinsic difficulty of Bourdieu's texts and, until recently, the erratic flow of translations, this laborious and truncated appropriation — and, sometimes, outright expropriation — of Bourdieu in American sociology can be traced to a number of factors (Wacquant, 1989). Among them are the institutional and cognitive cleavages that structure the field of U.S. social science and inform the assimilation of foreign intellectual products; an oversight of the collective nature of Bourdieu's enterprise, due to the effect of the stereotype of the French "patron" and his "circle"; the relative unfamiliarity of American researchers with the Continental traditions of social

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theory and philosophy that form the backdrop of his endeavor; and the fact that the recent strands of French social thought that American sociologists have imported (mainly Derridean deconstructionism and “postmodernism” of the Lyotard or Baudrillard variety) are, in spite of superficial affinities of topic and style, diametrically opposed to Bourdieu.

But behind the trappings of the sociological camelopard, an overriding concern animates Bourdieu’s work: to understand—and to fight—the mechanism of symbolic domination. This project of a *political economy of symbolic violence* has led him, time and again, to fire his sociological weapons at the chief protagonists of the symbolic class struggle: intellectuals.² In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu (1988a) applies his sociological acumen and interpretive virtuosity to his own tribe, that of French university professors. In doing so he gives us an opportunity to understand better his own work, academics in general, and ourselves in particular.

BOURDIEU, REFLEXIVITY, AND INTELLECTUALS

Because of its ramified texture, an adequate understanding of *Homo Academicus* requires a minimal locating of the book within Bourdieu’s overall project. Very cursorily, one may note that, at a more theoretical level, it offers a concrete resolution of the epistemological conundrums raised in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1980a: Book I): the necessity to overcome the deadly opposition between objectivism and subjectivism, subjective reasons and objective causes, and to control the intellectualist bias inherent in the scientific gaze in order to capture the immanent dynamics of social action (Bourdieu, 1990). More substantively, the book may be seen as an extended sequel to *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), which put forth an analysis of the school as an agency of legitimation and dissimulation of social (class) inequality, as well as an in-depth reexamination of those parts of *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) that explored the role of institutionalized cultural capital in politics and in the unfolding of social strategies of distinction. Finally, *Homo Academicus* is both a prelude to and a critical building block for Bourdieu’s (1989a) latest and perhaps most ambitious book to date, *The State Nobility*, in which the French sociologist tackles head on the internal structure and struggles of the dominant class, and the manifold mechanisms of consecration and naturalization that mask and perpetuate its domination

²It is remarkable that, of the numerous areas of specialized inquiry to which Bourdieu has contributed, the sociology of intellectuals is one where his impact in America seems to be nearly nonexistent, save for the subterranean borrowings of Gouldner, the recent imports of Ivan Szelenyi, and the partly parallel efforts of Randall Collins and Jerome Karabel.

and adumbrates a general theory of technocratic power. Yet by dint of its topic and self-referential dimension, this study of French academics is perhaps the most critical link in the long chain of Bourdieu's investigations: the anchor that ultimately vouchsafes the solidity of all the others.

No doubt Bourdieu's scientific interest in intellectuals has, like much of his sociology, a strong biographical component: the "trajectory of the miracled" that has taken him from one of the lowest regions of the French geographic and social space (a remote village in rural Béarn) to the apex of his country's intellectual pyramid (the Collège de France in Paris) explains his sense of being a misfit in the university world. Thus he writes,

Most of the questions that I address to intellectuals, who have so many answers and, at bottom, so few questions, are no doubt rooted in the feeling of being a *stranger* in the intellectual universe. I question this world because it questions me, and in a very profound manner, which goes well beyond the mere sentiment of social exclusion: I never feel fully justified to be an intellectual, I do not feel "at home"; I feel like I have to be answerable—to whom, I do not know—for what appears to me to be an unjustifiable privilege. (Bourdieu, 1980b:76)

But Bourdieu also has a definite scientific aim in mind when he sets his gaze on his peers and on himself: he wants to demonstrate, in quasiexperimental fashion, that sociological reflexivity makes a cognitive, not merely an existential or rhetorical, difference in the conduct of social inquiry (also Bourdieu, 1982).

Homo Academicus thus occupies a very peculiar place in Bourdieu's *oeuvre*: it is both the most personal and the most impersonal of his books. It reaches into the innermost experiences of its author's biography and yet lies at the core of his scientific undertaking. A reflexive investigation of the intellectual universe, it represents a rarely practiced form of "self-analysis by proxy" (Bourdieu, 1988a:xxvi) that simultaneously stands as the epitome of a self-critical science of society. *Homo Academicus* brings the dialectic of "involvement and detachment," of which Elias (1987) spoke eloquently, to a paroxysmic climax. For all these reasons, it is a book very dear to Bourdieu's heart, as the candid admission of his reluctance and anguish to publish it amply testifies.

What distinguishes *Homo Academicus* from the ever-growing mass of studies that seek to catalogue or categorize, eulogize or reprimand intellectuals, is that, instead of taking up a partial and partisan viewpoint upon the world within which he evolves, Bourdieu discloses the *totality of the game* that engenders both the specific interests of intellectuals and the one-sided vision that each participant has of the interests of others. These interests, he stresses, "are thoroughly irreducible to the class interest traditionally denounced by the heavy artillery of the Marxist sociology of intellectuals, whose cannon-balls are big but fly well above all heads" (Bourdieu and Eribon, 1984:87). Intellectuals are moved by forces,

motivated by stakes, and wield forms of power that are specific to the academic field; and only a professional bias for political escapism could justify starting the analysis elsewhere.

What are these forms of power? An involved analysis of the relational distribution of professors according to their social origins and connections, economic and political resources, academic trajectory, titles and professional practices and renown, and political stances turns up a chiasmatic picture that consistently reproduces the structure of the dominant class. On the side of the “temporally dominant” disciplines, medicine and law (to which one should add business schools, whose development has been nothing short of spectacular in France since the 1960s; see Bourdieu, 1989a:185–328), power is essentially based on *academic capital*, that is, control over the material, organizational, and social instruments of reproduction of the faculty. On the side of the culturally autonomous disciplines, symbolized by the natural sciences, power is rooted principally in *intellectual capital*, that is, scientific prestige and capacities as defined strictly by and among peers. The opposition of these two poles mirrors that between the two main fractions of the dominant class, with businessmen, executives, and state officials on the side of economic and political power vs. artists and intellectuals on the side of cultural and symbolic power. Standing midway between these two poles, the humanities and social sciences are similarly internally organized around the clash between sociopolitical and scientific authority.

Bourdieu shows that the *field* of the university, understood as the set of objective relations that obtain between the various positions and disciplines in the distribution of these species of capital, is the locus of a constant struggle aimed at altering its very structure. Academic power and intellectual prestige are at once *weapons and stakes* in the academic war of all against all. And position within this structure determines, through the mediation of their selection and specific conditioning, the strategies adopted by their occupants to impose this or that principle of hierarchization within the specific universe. Having mapped the immanent structure of the academic space, Bourdieu proceeds to unravel the logic of its transformation, under the push of morphological forces such as the growth of the student body and faculty, changes in the social recruitment of professors and students, and the inflation of credentials, eventually culminating in the May 1968 events. This allows him to establish that the *homology* between position (in the structure of the distribution of various species of capital in the university field), disposition, and stances operates not only in the routine professional practices of different types of professors, but more importantly commands explicitly political opinions and actions taken during a period of crisis. In short, the professional strategies, the political proclivities, and even the intellectual output of academics, who so much cherish thinking of themselves as “freefloating” – as

in Mannheim's *freischwebende Intelligenz*—and beyond the reach of common determinism, turn out to be closely, if complexly, determined by their location and trajectory in academic space.

Homo Academicus is thus the very antithesis of the disguised pamphlet seeking to impose a particular viewpoint on intellectuals, taken from within the intellectual universe itself, as the objective truth of this universe, whose emblems are Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) in the United States, and Ferry and Renault's (1986) *La pensée 68* in France—two essays that elevate partial, self-interested lucidity to the status of an epistemological principle. Similarly, none of the recent studies of intellectual currents by Birnbaum (1987), Bové (1986), Hughes (1988), or Johnson (1988), to name but a few, takes the trouble to scrutinize systematically the network of institutions that produce cultural producers and shape symbolic production by virtue of the configuration they form.³ Analysis of the objective locations of the various protagonists in the arena of forces operating within and upon the university, including the location and viewpoint of the analyst (as “a view taken from a point” within that space), is the prerequisite of any rigorous sociology of intellectuals.

There is a sense in which, like *Distinction* before it (see Garnham, 1986, for an analysis of *Distinction* along those lines), *Homo Academicus* is both a deliberate, if measured, provocation and a political intervention in the specific politics of academe. Bourdieu's book is a weapon he hopes will be used in academic struggles to help increase the autonomy of the scientific field and thereby the political responsibility of its participants. For the French sociologist, there is no opposition between autonomy and engagement. In point of fact, the “unstable combination” of these two dimensions, the scientific and the political, is for him what defines the specificity of the modern intellectual as a “bi-dimensional, paradoxical being” historically wedded to the “corporatism of the universal” (Bourdieu, 1989d; also Charle, 1990). Just as the crisis of May 1968 opened up a space for political work by shattering the prevalent *doxa* of French society, Bourdieu's hope is that *Homo Academicus* will foster, however modestly, the kind of rupture with the doxic acceptance of the existing academic world that may help open up new spaces for intellectual freedom and action. The publication of the book creates at least the possibility of a generalization of the questioning it effects: each reader can reproduce or extend the analysis for him- or herself, so that the work of objectivation of the objectivizing subject can eventually become the task of the scientific field *in globo*.

³A notable exception is Boschetti (1988), who develops an analysis of Sartre's “intellectual enterprise” using Bourdieu's concept of the intellectual field. The comparison of *Homo Academicus* with some of the “sociological autobiographies” of eight major American sociologists in *Sociological Lives* (Riley, 1988) also gives a measure of the abyss that separates scientific reflexivity from native self-analysis (see Wacquant, 1990, for a discussion of this point). See also the important article by Ringer (1990).

READING *HOMO ACADEMICUS*

For foreign readers, and for American social scientists in particular, *Homo Academicus* has value in several respects. First, as a case study of the French academic scene of the 1960s, it fills in critical gaps in our understanding of recent intellectual history: the rise of structuralism and so-called poststructuralism (semiology, archeology, grammatology, etc.), and the ensuing transformations of the arcane world of French social and cultural theory are placed firmly within their organizational and political context. The book takes us on a journey through a landscape rarely traveled in such company: having occupied an institutionally marginal but intellectually central place in the French intellectual field of the time, Bourdieu has been in a position uniquely suited to his purpose.⁴ His keen eye for detail and for the subtle interplay of biographical and institutional factors allows him to capture the sense of pathos and vibrancy of the world he depicts. Far from getting in the way of a demanding scientific analysis, Bourdieu's native knowledge of French academe enriches it and enables him to weave together objective explanation and subjective comprehension.

Homo Academicus also has value as an *exemplar*—in Kuhn's (1970) sense of the term—of Bourdieu's larger enterprise by vividly illustrating the workings of his paradigm. In it, the notions of capital, habitus, field, and symbolic violence (see Bourdieu, 1977, 1979, 1980a, 1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1988b, 1989b), which form the conceptual foundation of his theory of practice, all spring to life. Substantively, the book also speaks to a topic that Bourdieu has tended to slight in his better known previous forays: the dynamics of structural crisis and transformation. The concluding chapter in which he presents an analysis of the events of May 1968 contains the embryo of a theory of revolution as a product of the synchronization of localized crises in structurally homologous fields, and a sustained reflection on spontaneity and determination in social movements and political action. Finally, the book gives us an *experimental demonstration* of the distinctiveness and virtue of sociological reflexivity as Bourdieu conceives it. It makes clear that this conception differs sharply from that of Gouldner, another well-known exponent of "reflexive sociology" (Gouldner, 1970; see also Phillips, 1988; Swartz, 1989). For the French thinker, reflexivity entails chiefly, not a moral focus on the private experiences of the analyst, but

⁴A former student of Canguilhem and other French philosophers of science (Alexandre Koyré, Eric Weil, and Gaston Bachelard), Bourdieu was for a time Raymond Aron's *protégé* before their breakup over the May 1968 revolt. His precocious nomination at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales in 1964, at age 34, was sponsored by perhaps the most illustrious troika of French social science: Aron, Lévi-Strauss, and Fernand Braudel. From there, Bourdieu moved directly to the Collège de France in 1982, without having bowed to the academic ritual of the sacrosanct *thèse de doctorat d'Etat*.

an effort to control sociologically the distortions introduced in the construction of the object, first by the position and dispositions of the sociologist within *academic space* (and not the class structure at large), and second by the mere fact of taking up a contemplative stance vis-à-vis the social world, that is, by adopting a “scholastic point of view” on society (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu’s brand of reflexivity also differs sharply from that propounded by “postmodern” social scientists in that it is designed to strengthen the claims of a science of society, not to undermine its foundations in a sterile celebration of relativism that opens the door to epistemological and political nihilism.⁵

On a more methodological level, several lessons can be drawn from *Homo Academicus*.⁶ First, there is Bourdieu’s innovative exploitation of data sources and his intricate combination of diverse methodological approaches. The peculiar usage he makes of standard methods deserves notice: not only does he often triangulate or validate his results *ex post* with different methods—the fit between the various outcomes thus generated replacing the technical discussion of confidence intervals and the like—he also reads quantitative data “ethnographically,” that is, as exploratory or confirmatory means of locating underlying patterns while, conversely, he often interprets field observations “statistically,” that is, with the aim of drawing inferences and to elaborate relations between variables. (This is even truer of *Distinction* [Bourdieu, 1984], a point overlooked by most commentators on the book.) In particular, Bourdieu’s creative, if parsimonious, use of correspondence analysis (an advanced variant of factor analysis developed by the so-called school of French Data Analysis led by J. P. Benzécri, Rouanet, Tabard, Lebart, and Cibois; see Greenacre, 1984, and Lebart et al., 1984, for two recent expositions in English) should do much to alert American researchers to the rich potential that this technique of statistical examination holds up for social inquiry. There are those who will be frazzled by losing the conventional bearings of American multivariate statistical analysis. Others will be stimulated by this methodological strategy and will readily concede that its substantive payoffs are well worth it. Collins (1989:460), for

⁵“Reflexivity is not an end in itself . . . [or] a form of ‘art for art’s sake’ . . . In *Homo Academicus*, I use the instruments provided by reflexivity to control the biases introduced by un-reflexivity and to make headway in the knowledge of the mechanisms that can alter my reflection. *Reflexivity is a tool for more science, not less*. Secondly, by helping the progress of science and thus the growth of knowledge about the social world, *reflexivity makes possible a more responsible politics*, both inside and outside of academia” (in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989:21 and 23ff, italics in the original).

⁶“A grave and swarming text, this analysis will no doubt constitute one of those rare and irreplaceable instruments for the pedagogy of research, rigorous yet open, which represent the best antidote to the poor certainties of theoretical and methodological fetishism” (Arliaux, 1985:713). Inglis (1988:18) notes that the book’s opening chapter is “an exceptionally severe and exacting discourse on method.”

one, has not hesitated, somewhat provocatively, to dub Bourdieu “the world’s most successful survey researcher” for blazing this trail.

Bourdieu makes a further, and rare, contribution to social methodology by reflecting upon the act of *reading social science*: sociological communication, he argues, necessitates a form of reading that does not collapse the constructed language of social-scientific analysis, which applies to constructed or “epistemic individuals” in order to fulfill cognitive functions, into the logic of commonsense understanding, which thrives on performative denunciations of “empirical individuals” (Bourdieu, 1988a:21–26; see also McCleary, 1989:378). Much energy has of late been expended on questions of rhetoric and writing in the production of social science discourse (among the more notable volumes, one can single out Edmonson, 1985, Becker, 1986, McCloskey, 1985, Brodkey, 1987, Van Maanen, 1988, and Brown, 1989). Bourdieu demonstrates that we would be well advised to pay equal if not greater attention to the ways in which the character and evolution of sociological knowledge is shaped by its mode of consumption.

Theoretically, *Homo Academicus* intervenes, if unwittingly, into the ongoing “micro–macro” debate by *pointing a way beyond it*. Bourdieu (1988c; also 1981) stubbornly refuses to let himself be trapped in what he considers to be a false antinomy. On the surface, he seems to side against radical reductionists, of either micro- or macroleanings, by implicitly acknowledging that each level of analysis may be profitably pursued without need for reducing it to the other. But on closer reading, the more important message is what separates Bourdieu from most American discussants of this issue and how he thoroughly reframes it. First, he confronts—or rather circumvents—the problem *empirically*, in the course of the construction of his concrete research object, rather than try to resolve it at a purely abstract, conceptual level à la Giddens, for instance, in whom the resolution remains largely terminological. Second, Bourdieu effectively dissolves the distinction between micro- and macrolevels of analysis by use of such *dispositional concepts* as habitus that capture their interpenetration (Brubaker, forthcoming), and by developing a structural phenomenology of classification struggles that fuses the analysis of objectified and embodied social causation (see also Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984, 1989a, and 1989b). Habitus is a multilayered complex of generative mental and bodily schemata, “a subjective, but not individual, system of internalized structures” (Bourdieu, 1980a:101) that structure practices and representations. It effects, from within, the reactivation of the meanings and relations objectified “without” as institutions. Third, and consequently, Bourdieu takes as his unit of analysis neither the “actor” (as in various brands of rational-choice theory) nor the “situation” (as constructivists of diverse stripes do) nor the “structure” (as structuralists or functionalists advocate), but the *relation between the two states of history*

represented by habitus—history incarnate in the body as *dispositions*—and by fields—history “frozen” in the form of institutions or an objective space of *positions*. His investigation of the academic and political strategies of French intellectuals conclusively shows that “actors” are always structurally constituted, each habitus being an individuated permutation of social structures internalized in the form of cognitive and evaluative categories (Bourdieu, 1980a:101). Situations, too, are structurally constrained: their most essential properties derive from their location in a network of hierarchically intersecting fields that remain invisible as long as the analyst restricts his or her observations to interactional processes themselves; and such conjunctural factors become efficacious only when activated by agents endowed with the pertinent categories of perception and appreciation. In a discussion of sporting practices, Bourdieu (1988d:155) makes this point on the structural determination of interactional processes as follows: “If I do not know that perturbations on Uranus are determined by Neptune, I will believe that I understand what happens on Uranus, while in reality I only understand the effects of Neptune.”

Such an empirically grounded approach, coupled with a theoretical reconstruction (in the sense of *Nachbildung*—not a “deconstruction”) of the micro–macro puzzle, is clearly more promising than either pure conceptual exegesis or the ritual canonization of the problem.⁷ In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu constantly goes back and forth between structures and “actors” (or, rather, agents as he insists for theoretical reasons discussed at some length in the methodological warnings that open the book) and unravels the logic of their mutual constitution, thereby truly transcending this dichotomy within a relatively limited time–space continuum. What he has not done thus far at the historical and societal level is to provide a detailed sketch of the progressive differentiation and articulation of fields, and a dynamic theory of their collective configuration and trajectory—other

⁷The micro–macro debate has so far generated considerably more heat than light (but see Collins, 1988). It has turned into an intellectual fad and seems on the verge of becoming to American sociologists what structuralism was in the mid-60s to many French social scientists and philosophers: a social badge of theoretical proficiency. The problem is even projected back onto the whole history of social theory (e.g., Alexander and Giesen, 1987), as was structuralism before in its Marxist version. This is regrettable because when the current formulation of the problem fades away (as it will once “theorists” move on to fresher issues), the obdurate problems of epistemology and methodology that underlie it will remain. Also the micro–macro puzzle has become partly interwoven with the rationality vs. norms or culture controversy in the “theory of action” (e.g., Elster, 1986, 1989; Friedman and Hechter, 1988; Coleman, 1986, 1987; Sewell, 1987; and Hindess, 1988; see Wacquant and Calhoun, 1989, for a critical survey of this discussion and its import), and has helped individualistic economic models regain unwarranted legitimacy, thus recreating the conditions for the sterile repetition of a debate already enacted a century ago between Tarde, Durkheim, Spencer, and others.

than in the form of broad propositions on the ultimate dominance of the economic field and the progressive autonomization of the fields of art, science, and state, etc., in modern societies. To be fair, there are scattered indications that this is a task that Bourdieu (1988b) may not consider worth pursuing or feasible at this “pre-Galilean” stage in the development of social knowledge.

USING *HOMO ACADEMICUS*

Yet the greatest value of *Homo Academicus* lies perhaps in the symbolic threat it practically poses to the cognitive and institutional organization of the field of American sociology. This book thoroughly violates the working consensus—to use Goffman’s (1959) apt concept—that currently obtains between “theorists” and “researchers,” and that allows each side to practically ignore the other, while paying lip service to the necessity of the integration of conceptual and empirical work. Bourdieu (1988c, 1989b) has explained that he cares not at all about the boundaries between disciplines, that he rejects the “theological” distinction between Marxists, Weberians, and Durkheimians, and that he wishes to bridge the gap that separates subjectivist and constructivist perspectives from objectivist and structuralist ones. In the pages of *Homo Academicus* he proves all of that but, in the process, he also renders obsolete the current division of labor between theory, methodology, and research. He thus forces us to critically reexamine what is arguably the most taken-for-granted and deeply entrenched disjuncture in our scientific practice.

It follows that there could be no greater misunderstanding of *Homo Academicus* than to reduce it to a clinical anatomo-physiology of the unique species of *homo academicus gallicus*. While many of the substantive findings of Bourdieu’s inquiry need not, and will not, hold up in a different societal setting, due to differences in the historical evolution of each academic field within its national field of power and in their relative location in the emerging complex of “world sociology” (Bourdieu, 1989c), the validity of the method and the potency of the general model he offers clearly transcend their context of origin. Its paradigmatic status, the epistemological issues it confronts, and the instruments of analysis it provides all belie a monographic interpretation of the book. Bourdieu’s theory further suggests that such dismissals of the study as “idiosyncratic” to France are in all likelihood a defense mechanism that must itself be subjected to sociological scrutiny. However much we may wish, as Inglis (1988:18) nicely puts it, “to wave them away as the phantasmagoria of a dense Frog,” Bourdieu’s analyses have a cutting power that can change the way we see and think

of ourselves as intellectuals, if only we are willing to do the necessary work of transposition to discover, through homological reasoning, what he is telling us about American professors by talking about their transatlantic cousins. They give us a lead to follow and standards to emulate as we reflect on our own academic world.

The ultimate challenge and calling of *Homo Academicus*, then, is to submit it to a truly *generative reading*, that is, to take the socioanalytic tools it supplies to construct an equally rigorous and uncompromising political economy of the American intellectual field in order to uncover its invisible structure, to locate the specific forms of capital that are efficient in it, and to raise our collective awareness of the hidden determinisms that regulate our practices as symbolic producers. Only when we do so will Bourdieu's goal be fully realized: the task of reflecting sociologically upon the world of sociological production will have become the collective enterprise that it should never cease to be. Like a train carrying its own tracks, *Homo Academicus* rolls into the American Academe station steaming and awaits our stepping up into the locomotive.

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