



# The migration process: crisis adaptation or conscious choice?

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## Abstract

Thinking of migrants brings to mind in the imagination people who leave their land, for an indefinite time, in search of conditions absent in their country of origin. It often becomes difficult to define them, as some are immigrants, some are migrants, and some are nomads or travellers. Migration brings to mind a movement of people between countries of departure and those of arrival, that is, a journey, mostly, into the unknown, the detachment of which also produces a feeling of nostalgia.

The present work seeks to highlight the condition of the migrant who becomes one by choice, in some cases, and at other times is one by compulsion. Migration becomes an evolving phenomenon, prompting insiders to question themselves in order to observe, with a critical lens, the social reality of the host country, which changes rapidly in the interchange with migrants.

It's interesting to read the migration numbers provided by ISMU, UNICEF and UNHCR to understand how this phenomenon has evolved, including by virtue of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Afghan issue and, recently, the Russia-Ukraine war, in light of the economic crisis that characterizes Europe and whose repercussions have resulted in fluctuating migration inflows and outflows, with medium- to long-term consequences.

In the history of migration, there are often stories of abandonment, family tragedies or other painful events from which migrants flee, hoping to find a better condition, creating a kind of “watershed” that separates the “before” from the “after” and especially from the “here” to the “there”.

**Keywords:** *migration; journey; choice; constraint; identity.*

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### 1. Between necessity and will: the journey

«Life is a journey» (Pellai and Tamborini 2019: p. 40): for many scholars, the theme of the journey, associated with the metaphor of man's existence, has been the subject of reflection, that has been framed by literary works and philosophical research. The journey is displacement, going towards a known or unknown destination. It presents a thousand vicissitudes to face and a thousand events to savour. Among the earliest literary works, a well-known one is the "Odyssey", attributed to Homer, which highlights the aspects listed above, concluding that the journey isn't only an opportunity to get to know new places, countries and landscapes, to come into contact with new people and cultures, but above all represents «an agent and model of transformation, an experience of continuous change common to all» (Barsotti 2017: p. 72).

In an idyllic setting, travelling is an object of human desire, a break from the frenetic rhythms of everyday life that can sometimes be a source of stress. In this sense, travel seems to be a gentle pause in paradise, a source of health and well-being (Barsotti 2017: p. 74), where health does not simply refer to the absence of disease or infirmity, but to a state of global well-being encompassing body, mind, soul, society and environment. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as a «state of complete physical, social and mental well-being» (Glossario O.M.S. della Promozione della Salute 2012: p. 1) and «well-being is seen as *Quality of life, Life Satisfaction, Happiness or Wellness*» (Bustreo and Micheletto 2021: p. 86). In this sense, the journey is a pause: the planning of a destination includes a start date and an end date. Thus, a return is planned and «the reason for the return is most often motivated by the feeling of love» (Lucibello 2021: p. 34) towards one's affections.

There are journeys where planning is improvised, details are barely known and very often no return date is foreseen. This happens with migrations, considered as a social phenomenon, which «are closely linked to globalisation processes, of which they are protagonists; they are a central element in development processes; they are a factor of social change; they influence demographic balances» (Livi Bacci 2020: p. 55).

The act of migration, like travel, is displacement, but according to Turco (2018) this comparison is improper, because the processes that occur with human mobility are different from those of a well-organised and planned journey. The uncertainty of whether or not to return has a certain weight that inevitably makes this comparison disproportionate: «migration in only a very improper way can be likened to travel; rather, it possesses the characteristics of a nomadic way of inhabiting the earth» (Turco 2018: p. 119).

Since time immemorial, the globe has been home to all species of living beings. With the exception of others, man, driven by curiosity and survival instinct, has never been identified with a predefined *habitat*, because he has always moved around. In fact, it is cultures that define him. Retracing the course of history, in Europe, migratory flows were accentuated with the discovery of the Americas, which took place between the 16th and 17th centuries. Subsequently, towards the end of the 19th century, as result of technological development, reduced transport costs and improved sanitary conditions, there was a real mass migration, where America was the preferred destination (Bettin 2014: p. 6). Migration flows never came to a halt, not even during the two World Wars, which is why, according to scholars Castles and Miller (2005), we are in an era defined as the "Age of Migration".

In this regard, the studies of sociology are fundamental for understanding the migrations that affect our century (Zanfrini 2016), as they carry different languages and customs from those prevailing in the host territory (Ambrosini 2017). In particular, since the 1970s, the analysis of the migration phenomenon, as well as the process that follows it, have also been the object of study of the Migrants Foundation. In fact, in 1990, the director of Caritas in Rome, Luigi di Liegro, and the secretary of Migrants, Lucrezio Monticelli, decided to draw up a first Dossier to collect all the most significant data on immigration. Over time, this Dossier has become one of the most important tools for understanding the immigration situation in Italy.

At the beginning, the Dossier collected only data and statistics (quantitative material); later it was decided to expand the contents through qualitative analyses, focusing on more aspects, including the factors that favour mobility. Subsequently, they sought the cooperation of university academics and research centres. The aim is maximum dissemination and knowledge so that institutions can become more aware (Caritas and Migrants 2021).

It's important to analyse the factors that drive people to mobilise. Defined as push and pull factors, they are divided into socio-political factors, demographic and economic factors and environmental factors. The former refer to dynamics of persecution, war or the threat of conflict. These conditions make the individual vulnerable and consequently a victim, as his or her human rights are violated. The choice of the preferred destination, by those who migrate, is influenced by the conditions the country offers. It may depend on the greater sensitivity to the reception of asylum seekers; on advantageous conditions that lead to an improvement in one's existence, due to the greater possibility of work that results in a higher salary and improved living conditions; on the desire to develop one's knowledge and skills, thus for study. The latter factors are also related to demographic and economic factors, while natural disasters, triggered by weather or the movement of the earth's crust, refer to environmental factors. Migrants are forced to move and move away from their homes as these situations threaten their living conditions (Parlamento europeo 2020).

The question arises whether migratory flows have a positive or negative impact on the host society. The new should arouse curiosity, the different should be identified as a unique element and not as a risk factor. Unfortunately, «when it comes to migration, the media “bull's eye” always shines on the peak of the crisis. The light is shone on landings, arrivals, reception. The tip of the iceberg in short. Not a day passes without media reports focusing on the negative aspects of migration» (Forti and Albanese 2020: p. 9).

Migration is a phenomenon that affects the whole of society: it involves and disrupts communities, highlighting all the contradictory aspects present, especially with regard to the political aspects that it brings to the attention, of the institutions, the plan of security and therefore of prevention from possible public disorder in terms of deviance and crime.

In this regard, Sayad (2002), a leading scholar of migration phenomena, argues that migration is an act that takes shape through the physical displacement of the subject, from one place to another. Bringing migration policies to attention and preventing the management of a hardship, are not the aspects that research in the humanities and social sciences should be concerned with. The displacement of a person from a context that is a source of discomfort and malaise involves, once the journey is supposedly over, a relationship with the other, i.e. an encounter and confrontation of objective differences, which distinguish the individual, such as biographical history, religion, education, social structures, traditions and cultures, political and mental structures (Sayad 2002).

Since ties favour the insertion of a subject within a context, it is obvious, for Perego (2013: p. 135) that «interpreting the migration phenomenon and understanding how it is creating opportunities for encounters and relationships and, at the same time, creating new integration needs, is certainly a fundamental task today».

The moment the migrant arrives in the host country, he or she will come into contact with new communities, thus with new social groups as well as with individuals. This aspect is by no means to be underestimated: it is necessary to bring the dynamic back into ethical reflection. It is not pure utopia to think that the encounter with the other is an opportunity for knowledge and confrontation. Bauman (2016), in one of his latest works on migration, argues that the subject must become aware of the fact that humanity is one and that it lives on a single planet.

At this point, it seems interesting to investigate whether travelling is a choice, the result of a voluntary or forced decision, dictated by desire or necessity, and therefore a careful analysis and evaluation of the push and pull factors.

Wishing to travel to treat oneself to a break, leads one to think that the desire is also accompanied by a necessity, which will benefit the person in terms of well-being, as it will benefit the traveller's body and mind. However, in the case of migration, the relationship between need and desire presents itself in a different way: the individual is driven by a need to escape from his condition of malaise. This drives him to desire a transformation, on several levels, of his existential condition. Hence, a better future. «Migration, in general terms, whether voluntary or forced, from a psychological point of view implies a strong personal crisis for both those who leave and those who remain. It involves great changes both internal and external in the person who migrates [...] His or her feeling of identity undergoes painful and constant variations in relation to his or her essence and the continuity of his or her life and being in the world» (Ferrero 2017: pp. 58-59).

In recent years, migration flows have seen an increased mobility of families and, in the XXVII edition of the Annual Report, of Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity (ISMU), Cesareo (2022: pp. 9-13) highlights the migrations that have taken place in 2021, with reference to the dramatic Afghan issue and the Coronavirus pandemic, whereby many people move and will continue to do so in search of better living conditions and economic opportunities. In this regard, the role of the family deserves attention and «placing it at the centre of the analysis does not, however, mean considering the migration choices of individuals exclusively as the product of a common decision formulated within the nucleus» (Lagomarsino 2005: p. 218).

## **2. The journey between pull and push factors**

Travelling usually requires organisation and planning, which is why it has taken on a central role for the individual (Maeran and Fontana 2009: p. 191). A different scenario arises when one sets out without knowing the destination, hoping to benefit from it. It is precisely the hope that there will be better opportunities that drives the individual to undertake long journeys and, in migration processes, this aspect is most evident. However, the unknown with which the migrant is confronted causes him/her to experience a crisis, resulting in a process of disorientation, which will affect personal, social and cultural identity. Migration is an “all-encompassing social fact”, which involves all dimensions of life, individual and social, and in which a series of variables emerge: «there are those who choose to migrate and those who suffer migration; those who consider it an opportunity, those who experience the drama of uprooting, of moving away from what is customary and

familiar, those who accept the risks consciously and enthusiastically and those who, instead, suffer the experience as a drama» (Perego, 2014: p. 206- 211).

Fulantelli and Pipitone (2017: pp. 14-15) argue that migration flows will not diminish and will continue to increase in the near future, both due to conflicts, with political and administrative consequences, and due to climate and environmental changes; consequently, over the next generations, we will witness a natural transformation of European society. This transformation may prove to be a great opportunity for growth and development for the entire EU, and for this to be the case, rapid social integration processes are desirable, affecting the labour market and the education system.

In the choice of migration, the factors of attraction and impetus play a fundamental role, but also the condition of coercion, imprisonment, physical and sexual violence and economic hardship or poverty, in which case the possibility of deciding and choosing is removed. In the latter case, it is forced migration and the difference is remarkable: for voluntary migrants, defined as economic migrants, it is a real investment, with an assessment of costs and benefits, which does not cause an irreversible break with the country of origin (Fulantelli and Pipitone 2017: p. 7); for forced migrants, on the other hand, the choice may be economic in the case of poverty, but also dictated by the need to physically protect oneself from war or extreme violence. In this case, it is a real escape from the country of origin, with which any kind of relationship is severed (Fulantelli and Pipitone 2017: p. 7; Ambrosini 2021: p. 18).

Self-protection constitutes a basic survival instinct that does not require meditation and reflection. The goal is to protect oneself and, where one succeeds, to protect one's closest affections. Being catapulted into a new reality in a short space of time is vital, even if it will not always result in a state of well-being. The migrant has a desire for change and this is only likely to happen if there is integration and inclusion, not only by the migrant himself, but also by the host country (Stirone, Spoto and Trinchieri 2021: pp. 104-105). Indeed, for Stirone, Spoto and Trinchieri (2021: pp. 104-105), those who migrate are forced to come to terms with a new culture, characterised by ways of conceiving and expressing any aspect of life that will be different, and therefore new. Most of the time, this happens in solitude, without the usual parameters and criteria of reference and without the support of one's social network.

In the migration process, cultural difference is the first aspect the migrant comes up against. According to the British anthropologist Tylor (1871), culture refers to the subject's ability, which translates into social behaviour, to critically and consciously render the elements and dynamics that are identified as historical data. Thus, the individual becomes what the author calls "survivors of culture", referring to the «processes, customs, opinions and so on, which have been carried on by force of habit in a new state of society other than that in which they had their original home, and thus remain as evidence and examples of an older condition of culture from which a newer one has evolved» (Tylor 1871: pp. 14-15).

Language also plays a fundamental role, as it gives the subject a narrative of their own culture and identification with a social group. The migrant, when moving and relocating, comes into contact with and is confronted with a new historical-geographical context. This inevitably creates a situation of transformation that requires adaptation in order for change to be consolidated. In this complex dynamic, migrants, in order to achieve this, should have not only protection, but also support: the country of arrival, which hosts or will become their definitive home, should facilitate integration by creating situations in which to act as a container for the imminent process of disorientation, which will call into

question the identity of the person who has mobilised (Karp 2014: p. 171). Thus, the language factor may constitute the first obstacle, as «knowledge of their mother tongue is not enough to move spontaneously in the [new] world around them» (Karp 2014: p. 170).

The person who migrates is subject to change and therefore undergoes a process of alteration and profound change, such as to induce him/her to reconstruct and renegotiate his/her characteristics, through the interconnection of the elements present in the arrival context and those in force in the country of origin (Lagomarsino 2005: p. 221).

Protecting, enhancing and promoting cultural diversity are tasks that fall to the host state with the aim of preserving the identity of the individual as unique. In this sense, there is also an urgent need to rethink a pedagogy that is able to develop intercultural competences, with the aim of elaborating educational practices to be implemented in the contexts that will see the migrant as a protagonist, such as the world of work, school and society in general (Portera 2020: pp. IX-X).

For Salvini and Romaioli (2016: p. 13), the aim is to preserve the subject's personal identity, which comprises a «set of processes that converge in the organisation of a cognitive structure with which the individual is able to regulate himself, connecting culture and nature, personal and social». In this way, man is able to modify himself and develop capacities that will enable him to deploy resources functional to his well-being. Inserting oneself in a new context requires the implementation of a process of assimilation and accommodation: adaptation. Indeed, through personal identity, men and women not only acquire a cognitive and emotional experience of themselves in relation to others, but also learn to process information about themselves in a coherent manner (Salvini, Romaioli 2016: p. 13).

Personal identity, writes Re (2012: p. 80), encompasses social identity and cultural identity. The first two, personal and social, are subject to change and depend on the various developmental stages that the individual goes through during his or her life, whereby, according to his or her age, he or she assumes a social role and identifies himself or herself in a group, so that there is inter-subjective recognition. In contrast, the description of a foreign country and its inhabitants highlights an individual's view of his or her own culture and how he or she fits into it, i.e. his or her cultural identity. Thus, each image is constituted through a continuous confrontation from Identity to Otherness, as the narration of others always reveals something of oneself.

For Santoro (2011: p. 2), cultural identity rarely undergoes changes, unless there is a displacement such as occurs with migration flows. The encounter with the other inevitably generates a side effect, which brings diversity into confrontation. Instead of valuing it as a resource and an opportunity for knowledge and enrichment, diversity is perceived as a threat to one's self and sense of belonging. The individual, in order to cope with new situations, tends to come into contact with diversity through a cynical and sceptical attitude, which leads him to rely on things he already knows as the only certainties.

Stereotypes and prejudices are cognitive tools that guide our behaviour towards others, providing us with an initial idea of how to relate to unknown individuals (Santoro, 2011: p. 2) and, in the case of migrants, stereotype and prejudice can hinder the migrant's insertion into the host community, as the link between the sense of community and one's own ethnic identity becomes decisive in determining one's own well-being. When the migrant individual feels a strong sense of belonging, then he/she perceives him/herself as welcome and useful, so that the sense he/she attaches to his/her ethnic identity takes on a positive and constructive value, so much so as to lay the foundations for a new stability.

The opposite occurs when the context disseminates criticism and condemnation (Dainese 2013: p. 105).

It is evident that the migrant will face a process of disorientation of the self, but despite this he prefers to take the risk. Escape from the critical conditions of the home country may become a necessity for his survival. During the journey he/she will be accompanied by a feeling of hope, i.e. to be welcomed, recognised and valued. This hope will still be present during the stay, as returning to the country of origin also means finally reconciling with one's self, which will be kept alive by nostalgia through memories. In this sense, the journey seems to be a real necessity for the person (Stirone, Spoto and Trinchieri 2021: p. 107).

### **3. The journey: a changing constant**

The migrant is the protagonist of the journey and the use of the noun, as the present participle of the verb migrate, is intended to indicate the action in fieri, i.e. not yet concluded, as it better describes the process of migration, which should be considered as a process that never ends (Derosas 2007: p. 381).

For years, social studies have been investigating and analysing the phenomenon of globalisation from various perspectives. Biggeri (2008: p. 7), an Italian economist and statistician, president of ISTAT from 2001 to 2009, states that human movements have contributed to the development and establishment of nations and cultures. The displacement of one or more people is a defining element in the evolution of civilisation; indeed, it is not possible to think about the history of civilisation and its evolution without taking into account the contribution of migration.

Migratory flows focus attention on being with others, highlighting some very interesting aspects, which sociology and other disciplines are called upon to make a fundamental contribution to; in fact, «migrations represent a privileged observatory from which to scrutinise many aspects of contemporary society, from the functioning of social networks to the attribution of citizenship rights, from the social integration of young people to the birth of new entrepreneurship» (Ambrosini 2020: p. 2).

Analysing the ISTAT data (2022: pp. 1-2), it emerges that in 2020 emigrations amounted to just under 160,000 (-10.9% compared to 2019), immigrations to about 248,000 (-25.6% compared to 2019), while internal mobility involved 1,334,000 transfers (-10.2% compared to 2019). The data on new entry flows decreased sharply and the reason for this trend is attributable to the restrictions and protection programmes that each state put in place following the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2020, ISTAT (2021: pp. 1-4) reports that Italy issued a very low number of residence permits compared to the last 10 years: about 106,500 were issued (almost -40% less than those issued in 2019), just as the new permits issued for study (-58.1% compared to 2019) and asylum permits (-51% compared to 2019) are in sharp decline.

The number of non-EU citizens legally present also fell by 7%, i.e. from 3,615,826 to 3,373,876 (considering the period from 1 January 2020 to 1 January 2021), as a result of the increasing number of people acquiring Italian citizenship. In addition, according to ISTAT (2021: p. 1), more than 1,250,000 people born with citizenship of a non-EU country and who then acquired Italian citizenship were residing in Italy on 1 January 2020.

The processes that are triggered in post-modern society, as a result of international migration, require in-depth study and research: that is, a transactional perspective. According to Olwig (2003: p. 787), this flexible and dynamic approach is functional for

understanding these phenomena, as it sees the creation of a new social space, formed by the union of the place of departure with the place of destination. The novelty does not so much concern the phenomenon as the interpretation attributed to everything that revolves around it: «migrants define their own interests, make decisions, create relationships and networks and act in an inter-spatial dimension, feeding circuits through which information, ideas, objects and capital flow» (Bartolomei 2009: p. 123).

According to the Twenty-seventh Migration Report 2021, compiled by the ISMU foundation in 2022, «it is undeniable that for a couple of years foreign citizens have been going through a phase of moderate regression in terms of absolute numbers of presence, [and] it is equally undeniable that they have not, however, stopped consolidating their relative position» (Blangiardo and Ortensi 2022: p.68). In fact, in Italy, at the beginning of 2003, foreign citizens represented only 2.6% of the native population. Since then, the growth in density has advanced: after ten years, since 2003, it has reached 7.6 per cent until 2021 with a percentage of 8.5 per cent.

Italy hosts the largest number of migrants and refugees, compared to other EU countries. According to Unicef (2022: p. 4), at the end of 2021 there were 78,421, of which 12,284 are children and unaccompanied minors. Furthermore, according to the statistics, by the end of February, 4,590 refugees and migrants had arrived in Italy since the beginning of the year 2022, of whom 600 are minors. Analysing the data in percentages, 81% are men, 6% women and 16% are minors, of which only 6% are minors followed by their families and 10% are unaccompanied foreign minors.

According to Castiglioni, Agostinetto and Bobbo (2020: p. 2), unaccompanied minors constitute a phenomenon in their own right, of equal importance, since it is a «perilous journey, full of pitfalls, obstacles, events and situations that are properly traumatic», for which the adults who take charge are not support or accompanying figures. Unaccompanied minors do not voluntarily and autonomously choose to move to another country, but undergo the experience of migration, unlike those who move with their entire family or for reunification.

These data are worrying and call for an activation with regard to the development of programmes aimed at safeguarding and protecting minors. In Italy, Law 47/2017, which makes the reception of unaccompanied minors compulsory, has been in force since 2017: a minor has the right to live in a family, understood as a place of normality and affectivity, in order to be able to build his or her own identity (Valtolina and Pavesi 2022: p. 291), although to date only 3% have been able to benefit from family fostering. Emphasising «the link between these young people and migration processes means bringing to light a reality that would otherwise risk being even more marginalised, neglected, or taken into consideration only as a problem and a threat» (Ambrosini 2010: p. 23).

Data on migration flows from Ukraine following the ongoing war with Russia are also worrying: the UNHCR (2022), on 10 June, published new data recorded since the beginning of the war, according to which there have been about 7.3 million border crossings from Ukraine to Italy and another 2.3 million returns to their country. This is a situation that needs to be carefully monitored, as it is constantly changing.

According to Ambrosini (2020: p. 1) the complexity of migratory flows necessarily requires sociological reflection as a whole: «from the sociology of economic processes to the sociology of deviance, from political sociology to the sociology of education, of the family, of religion», and adds that in the analysis of contemporary societies «cultural diversities count, and as we have seen they can be taken as resources, but also the position



in the family migration cycle, participation in non-domestic work, the age of children, the presence and occupation of husbands, play important roles» (Ambrosini 2012: p. 38).

#### **4. Conclusions**

Ulysses, the traveller par excellence, goes through a thousand vicissitudes with his companions, even though he alone is the protagonist of the journey (Barsotti 2017: p. 73). Migratory flows, which according to Turco (2018: p. 126) have connotations other than travel, require the migrant to implement the capacity for agency, and a number of factors are taken into account when planning the journey.

As migration is a political concern, Europe has been engaged in identifying the causes that drive a person to move. Between socio-political, push and pull, environmental and economic factors, it is possible to get a somewhat clearer picture of the motivations that lead migrants to leave their homeland (Parlamento europeo 2020).

For some time now, migratory flows have been part of our reality and present themselves in a global manner, offering social studies the opportunity for an interesting analysis of the processes of transformation and change, from a geographical, but also an ethnic, linguistic and religious point of view, of a society that is «becoming increasingly post-national, pluralistic, culturally intertwined and complex» (Ambrosini 2020: p. 2). Migrations contribute to the reflection of the history of civilisation and its evolutions (Biggeri 2008: p.7).

Two dynamics emerge in the analysis of the migration phenomenon: voluntary migration and forced migration. The person who decides of his own free will to undertake migration is aware of the resources and risks involved in such an experience, so he will think of different ways to deal with it. This is not the case for the person who experiences forced migration, as he or she «has no choice [and] usually has not previously carried out such an operation of elaboration and preparation» (Ferrero 2017: p. 58) that can meet his or her expectations.

By force of things, such as extreme poverty and scarce economic resources, the dynamics of war and the extreme violence suffered, the migrant feels the need to protect his or her own person by depriving himself or herself of any kind of connection with his or her homeland (Fulantelli and Pipitone 2017: p. 7; Ambrosini 2021: p. 18).

Migrants, or “cultural survivors” as Tylor (1871) would define them, undergo a process of variation in their identity and, specifically, in their cultural identity: coming into contact with the other, confronting diversity leads to attitudes of cynicism and scepticism, which are harbingers of stereotypes and prejudices (Santoro 2011: p. 2). These attitudes provoke malaise in the host subject, as he or she does not feel welcomed and, consequently, struggles to integrate (Dainese, 2013: p. 105).

In spite of all these considerations, the data published by ISTAT (2021, 2022), Fondazione ISMU (2022), Unicef (2022) and UNHCR (2022) reveal a decrease in migration flows, especially in Italy, certainly due to the Covid-19 health emergency. Subsequently, particularly in the European context, the war events in Ukraine led to a critical exponential increase in the number of refugees from that area.

Despite being aware that the journey will involve a process of disorientation, for the migrant such a journey presents itself as a real necessity functional to his survival. Therefore, for his psycho-physical well-being, he escapes from his homeland, even though, during his stay, he will be accompanied by a feeling of hope, linked to the possibility of reconciling with his affections (Stirone, Spoto and Trinchieri 2021: p. 107).

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