

American Liberals and the Italian ‘Communist Question’ in the 1970s

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Published: November 10, 2020

Abstract

This essay analyzes the attitude of American experts and policymakers towards the Italian Communist Party (PCI) during the 1970s. As the PCI promoted a moderate line at both domestic and international level, members of American think tanks and academia started looking at it as a legitimate political actor of Italian and European politics. Such a shift from traditional Cold War balances could turn into actual policy under the Carter administration, whose foreign policy was inspired by a logic of interdependence and trilateralism. By taking into account often overlooked actors, this essay outlines the origins of such potential shift and its failed realization.

Keywords: Carter Administration; Council on Foreign Relations; Istituto Affari Internazionali; Italian Communist Party; Trilateral Commission.

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1 The 1970s: A Turning Point?

From 1948 to the end of the Cold War, Italy was ruled by the same party, the Christian Democrats (DC), albeit with different formulas. A peculiarity that added – and was connected – to the fact that the communists occupied a hegemonic position on the left of the political spectrum. The so-called ‘*conventio ad excludendum*’ that kept the Italian Communist Party (PCI) outside the government was put in place in the early stages of the Cold War, when Italy joined the Atlantic community.¹ Preventing the entry of the PCI in the ruling coalition was the one thing in which American elites agreed upon for almost thirty years.² Efforts to ensure this spanned from the covert and overt operations that preceded the 1948 elections to funding anti-communist parties at the beginning of the 1970s.³ To a certain extent, even the support of the ‘opening to the left’ that allowed the socialists’ entry to the government in the early 1960s was part of that strategy.⁴

A potential change occurred in the mid-1970s. In 1973, the Secretary-General of the PCI, Enrico Berlinguer, launched the so-called ‘historical compromise’ with the rival DC. In 1974, he declared that his party favored the process of European integration. In 1975, the PCI largely increased its votes in the administrative elections, and, during the following year, it polled an extraordinary 34.4 percent at the general elections. That same year, Berlinguer declared he felt “safer under the NATO umbrella.”⁵ Under his leadership, the PCI also adopted a strategy that aimed at ‘reform’ and looked for a common path with other communist parties of Western Europe that originated Eurocommunism.⁶ Italian communists were changing, and a part of the DC leadership started thinking that some sort of collaboration was possible. In 1976, the PCI allowed the creation of the Andreotti government (DC), beginning the season of ‘national solidarity.’⁷ The path towards an executive role seemed to be outlined, and it was an alarming perspective for American policymakers. While the superpowers’ détente had put on hold the ideological confrontation of the Cold War, at least as far as Europe was concerned,⁸ it did not immediately follow that domestic political balances could change. For Republicans in Washington, and especially for the key foreign policy figure of the time, Henry Kissinger, Détente would only be secured if the governments of the Western Alliance remained free of potentially threatening elements such as communists, no matter how critical of the Soviet Union the Eurocommunist parties may have

1. On the Italian location in the Atlantic community, see Guido Formigoni, *Storia d'Italia nella guerra fredda 1948–1978*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016; Federico Romero, “La scelta atlantica e americana,” in *Nazione, interdipendenza, integrazione: le relazioni internazionali dell'Italia 1917–1989*, eds. Federico Romero and Antonio Varsori, Roma: Carocci, 2006, 155-71 and Alessandro Brogi, *A Question of Self-esteem. The United States and the Cold War Choices in Italy and France*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001.
2. Alessandro Brogi, *Confronting America: The Cold War between the United States and Communists in France and Italy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. See also Federico Romero and Mario Del Pero, “The United States, Italy and the Cold War: Interpreting, and Periodising a Contradictory and Complicated Relationship,” in *Italy in the International System from Détente to the End of the Cold War. The Underrated Ally*, eds. Antonio Varsori and Benedetto Zaccaria, London; Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, 15-34.
3. On the early cold war see Alessandro Brogi, “Ambassador Clare Boothe Luce and the Evolution of Psychological Warfare in Italy,” *Cold War History*, 12 (2012): 269-94 and Mario Del Pero, “Gli Stati Uniti e la ‘guerra psicologica’ in Italia (1948–56),” *Studi Storici*, 4 (1998): 953-88. On covert fundings in the early 1970s see Luigi Guarna, *Richard Nixon e i partiti politici italiani (1969–1972)*. Milano: Mondadori, 2015.
4. On the “opening to the left” see Leopoldo Nuti, *Gli Stati Uniti e l'apertura a sinistra. Importanza e limiti della presenza americana in Italia, 1958–1963*. Bari-Roma: Laterza, 1999.
5. Giampaolo Pansa, “Berlinguer conta ‘anche’ sulla Nato per mantenere l'autonomia da Mosca,” *Corriere della Sera*, 15 giugno 1976.
6. On Eurocommunism see Silvio Pons, “The Rise and Fall of Eurocommunism,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. III, Endings, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 45-65; Maude Bracke, *Which Socialism? Whose Détente? West European Communism and the Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968*. Budapest: Central University press, 2007. On the US response to Eurocommunism see Frédéric Heurtebize, *Le péril rouge. Washington face à l'eurocommunisme*. Paris: PUF, 2014.
7. Silvio Pons, *Berlinguer e la fine del comunismo*. Torino: Einaudi, 2009, 49-57.
8. This responded to the “conservative” reading of the superpowers’ Détente in Europe. Among the numerous analyses see Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013 and Lucrezia Cominelli, *L'Italia sotto tutela: Stati Uniti, Europa e crisi degli anni Settanta*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 2014.

been. Among liberals outside of the political arena — but potentially influential in Jimmy Carter's Democratic administration, elected in 1976 — the issue was more disputed. Some thought that giving an executive role to communist representatives could better serve the case of reforming their parties, and, as far as Italy was concerned, the 'irreformable' DC. Moreover, in an era of both institutional and economic interdependence communists would not have had much space for maneuver anyway.

While the broader picture would include the United States' strategy towards Eurocommunism, this essay will only focus on the PCI, which was, after all, the strongest party and the most discussed case. The list of those who did not foresee tragic scenarios following the entrance of communists into the Italian government, and in some cases supported it, included members of academia, in particular — but not only — of north-east Italian elite universities, members of non-state actors such as the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Trilateral Commission. In Italy, they found different interlocutors — besides those traditionally associated with the so-called 'non-communist left' of "Il Mulino" group⁹ — especially in the think tank Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), whose director Cesare Merlini was particularly active in the international realm. The fact that many of the affiliates to one of these networks were also affiliated with the others reinforces the idea that there was a core group of people who were trying to develop a similar approach to the Italian 'communist question,' one that entailed a certain reading of international relations. Historiography has recognized the existence of such interpretations, which, in some cases, led to the establishment of personal contact between American experts and members of the PCI.¹⁰ These studies suggest that further research can be conducted and that a closer look at the intertwining of academia, think tanks and political elites can be useful for expanding our knowledge into the relationship between the US and Italy in the 1970s and into the protagonists of the decade.

2 The Italian Communist Party: Between Academia and Think Tanks

Within American academia, a new understanding of communist regimes and parties was put forward at least from the early 1960s, when the first signs of the incoming end of the 'Cold War consensus' can be traced.¹¹ By then, the international communist movement had given numerous demonstrations of not being the Soviet-driven monolith described in the US (and presented by Moscow and its allies) in the immediate post-war period.¹² Back then and throughout the 1950s, American political scientists used the 'totalitarian paradigm' to describe communist regimes and parties, including the non-ruling ones.¹³ The 'totalitarian paradigm' was brought to the US by European émigrés during the interwar period and its dismissal started in the early 1960s, as the events that shook the communist movement in 1956 and the Sino-Soviet split came under scrutiny.¹⁴ As far as the PCI is concerned, the first step towards a re-thinking of the party's role and ideological foundations had been taken in 1964, when the Yalta Memorial written by Secretary General Palmiro Togliatti was published. As it is well-known, the importance of the text was more linked to the choice to publish it by the newly elected Secretary,

9. Among others see Francesco Bello, ed., *Diplomazia culturale e guerra fredda Fabio Luca Cavazza dal Mulino al centrosinistra*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020.

10. Valentine Lomellini, "The PCI and the USA: Rehearsal of a Difficult Dialogue in the Era of Détente," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 20 (2015): 346-60 and Valentine Lomellini, "When Hopes Come to Naught. The Question of Italian Communists' Participation in Government and the Failure of a Particular Strategy, 1974-1978," *Journal of European Integration History*, 20 (2014): 233-44.

11. Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

12. Marc J. Selverstone, *Constructing the Monolith. The United States, Great Britain, and International Communism 1945-1950*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

13. On totalitarianism see Enzo Traverso, *Le totalitarisme. Le Totalitarisme. Le XXe siècle en débat*. Paris: Seuil, 2001. On its influence on American scholars see David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy. The Rise and Fall of Soviet Experts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

14. See for example Alexander Dallin, *Diversity in International Communist Movement: A Documentary Record*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963; Walter Laqueur and Leopold Labedz, eds., *Polycentrism. The New Factor in International Communism*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1962 and William E. Griffith, ed., *Communism in Europe. Continuity, Change, and the Sino-Soviet Dispute*, Vol. I. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1964.

Luigi Longo, than to its content, which added little to what had been expressed up to then by the party leadership. To be clear, the Yalta Memorial did not cause a wide debate in the United States. Nonetheless, those scholars of Italian politics who glimpsed the originality of the PCI since the launch of Togliatti's 'polycentrism' strengthened their views by reading the text. Among them, were Donald Blackmer of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Sidney Tarrow (Cornell University), and Joseph LaPalombara (Yale). In 1964, they took the chance offered by the publishing of Togliatti's political will to launch a debate regarding the Italian Communist Party that drifted away from the past. Deliberately excluding from their academic community "cold warriors" such as Giorgio Galli and Gabriel Almond, who authored several studies on the PCI, the above-mentioned political scientists set their analyses within a different framework, using a methodology based on empirical and comparative analysis.¹⁵

The attention around the PCI increased when Italian communists condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to repress the Prague spring in 1968, and, in the following years, when the newly-elected Secretary General Enrico Berlinguer initiated a dialogue with its Western European counterparts.

The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), for instance, formed a specific committee for the study of non-ruling communist parties, which identified Italian Communism as the benchmark with which to compare others, namely French and Spanish communists.¹⁶ The committee, led by Donald Blackmer, made the first timid efforts to organize seminars to which members of the PCI would be invited, along with non-communist Italian intellectuals and politicians. Several attempts in this direction failed because of the American visa policy (stated in the McCarran Act of 1950), which envisaging that "non-democratic party" leaders could not enter the United States. When the ACLS finally managed to organize a seminar under its auspices, it was 1972, at MIT's Endicott House, but no major leaders of the PCI were invited.¹⁷ The proceedings from the seminar were collected in a book published in 1975 that was welcomed as a step towards objectivity by Italian communists.¹⁸

If the 1960s are a turning point for academic studies on the PCI, a new stance within the foreign policy elite, including informal networks and think tanks, began in the 1970s.¹⁹ It was 1973 when Brzezinski and his friend, David Rockefeller, co-founded the Trilateral Commission, a network that gathered American, Western European and Japanese elites in response to contemporary issues.²⁰ It published reports and analyses on monetary and political issues and sought for contact with other networks potentially interested in a look-alike elaboration of foreign affairs. To name but one example, the *Project for the 1980s*, an ambitious joint venture put in place by the Trilateral Commission and by the CFR was based on the belief that the global balances of the coming years would be dictated by the relationship between North and South rather than between East and West.²¹ In the Trilateral Commission's most well-known pamphlet, *The Crisis of Democracy*, the rapporteurs presented the PCI, not so much as a threat, but more as a factor of stability against Italian terrorism and as a necessary partner of ruling parties to face the economic crisis.²² European members of the Trilateral commis-

15. Donald L. M. Blackmer papers (hereafter DLMB), MC 715, Box 5, Blackmer to Tarrow, March 22, 1965, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (hereafter MIT), Institute Archives and Special Collections.

16. American Council of Learned Societies Records, Box II: 1033, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.

17. Events can be retraced in DLMB Papers, MC 715, Box 4, MIT Archives and Special Collections.

18. Donald Blackmer and Sidney Tarrow, ed., *Communism in Italy and France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

19. The definition is in Philippe Chassaigne, *Les années 1970. Fin d'un monde et origine de notre modernité*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2012. For a literary review on international historiography of 1970s see Michele Di Donato, "Landslides, Shocks, and New Global Rules: The US and Western Europe in the New International History of the 1970s," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 55 (2020): 182-205.

20. See Dino Knudsen, *The Trilateral Commission and Global Governance: Informal Elite Diplomacy, 1972–1982*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

21. The Project for the 1980s has been largely overlooked. It is briefly mentioned in Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed. The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 173-174 and more extensively in Laurence H. Shoup, *Wall Street's Think Tank. The Council on Foreign Relations and the Empire of Neoliberal Geopolitics 1976–2014*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015.

22. Michel J. Crozier, Samuel Huntington Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy. Report to the Governability of Democracies to the*

sion included the Italians Gianni Agnelli, head of the FIAT automobile company, Arrigo Levi, head of the newspaper “La Stampa,” Cesare Merlini, and the Italian Ambassador to the US, Egidio Ortona. Before American presidential elections, the European group of the Trilateral Commission sought contact with Sergio Segre, head of the PCI’s foreign affairs section. It is hard to understand the nature of this relationship, certainly created by Italian members. It served, nonetheless, to strengthen Segre’s feeling that the Trilateralists were different than Nixon-Ford.²³

In the mid-1970s, the CFR launched a project on international communism, gathering together several experts of communist affairs, including Blackmer, MIT historian William Griffith and Harvard trained political scientist Suzanne Berger.²⁴ Following the advice of IAI Director Cesare Merlini, CFR Director Zygmunt Nagorski invited two prominent communist leaders to give presentations in CFR’s headquarters in New York. The first was Segre, and the second was Giorgio Napolitano. Both times, he failed to waive the McCarran Act from the Department of State headed by Kissinger, fearful of giving the impression that Washington was loosening its anti-communist veto.²⁵ Nevertheless, the CFR and the IAI kept working together on Italian politics. Their joint effort led to the organization of a seminar in Bologna in 1976. The list of attendees included Segre and Eugenio Peggio, head of the economic section of the PCI, several American academics, representatives of the IAI such as Merlini and politician Altiero Spinelli, Fabio Luca Cavazza, a former founder of “Il Mulino” group, Marcello Pacini, director of the Agnelli Foundation and the Italian trilateralist and director of “La Stampa” newspaper Arrigo Levi.²⁶ The CFR and the IAI also organized the first well-known trip of an Italian communist leader to the US in 1978, Giorgio Napolitano. Napolitano was allowed to cross the Atlantic thanks to a revision of the US visa policy that occurred in 1977 when Congress passed new legislation to comply with the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act, approved during the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in 1975. During his trip, he visited several universities, the CFR and met with members of the Democratic party.²⁷ When he came back, he suggested that similar encounters be organized more frequently, as they represented a way for the PCI to acquire credibility in the eyes of Americans, including those sitting in Washington.²⁸

At the end of the decade, Columbia University’s Research Institute for International Change, directed by Sovietologist Seweryn Bialer, put in place some conferences in Europe and in the US where representatives of communist and social democratic parties were invited. The meetings were organized in the attempt to support a dialogue between the forces of the European left that started, with mixed results, some years before.²⁹

Experts involved in these meetings put forward a new look at Italian Communism. Despite still being skeptical about the PCI’s foreign policy, they recognized two interesting features of the path the PCI had been undertaking. The first was that the creation of a Western European pole of communist parties, the ‘third way’ promised by Eurocommunists, could erode the power of the Soviet Union and have a destabilizing effect on the Eastern bloc, where the economy was suffering and demands for civil liberties and were increasing. The second was the acknowledgment that different strands ex-

Trilateral Commission. New York: New York University Press, 1975.

23. Archivio del Partito comunista (hereafter APC), Note alla Segreteria, mf 243, p. 0427x, V bim. 1976, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci (hereafter FIG).
24. Current Issues Review Group on Domestic Politics in Western Europe (First Meeting, 1975 October 30), 1975-1976; Council on Foreign Relations Records: Studies Department Series, Box 214, Folder 5; Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
25. Segre decided to withdraw his visa application. Napolitano’s case, instead, raised voices within the liberal community. See Rodolfo Brancoli, *Gli Usa e il Pci*. Milano: Garzanti, 1976.
26. Telegram from Italian Embassy to Secretary of State, US/Italian Meeting in “Italy in Europe,” Electronic Telegrams, Series and Files Records Central Foreign Policy Files, created, 7/1/1973 - 12/31/1979, documenting the period 1973 ? - 12/31/1979, <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=280223&dt=2082&dl=1345>.
27. Giorgio Napolitano, *Dal Pci al socialismo europeo. Un’autobiografia politica*. Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2005, 159-169.
28. APC, Note alla Segreteria, mf 309, p. 483, VI bim. 1977, FIG.
29. APC, Sez. di Lavoro, mf 440, p. 912, I bim. 1980, FIG, and APC, Sez. di Lavoro, mf 467, 895 and 961, III bim. 1980, FIG. Several representatives of European socialist parties were also invited. See Michele Di Donato, *I comunisti italiani e la sinistra europea, 1964–1984*. Roma: Carocci, 2015.

isted within the party and that moderates could lead the process of reform and, eventually, transition towards European socialism.

3 The Carter Administration

Although most observers, among the liberal community, agreed on the transformation of the Italian communists, different opinions emerged on how to support it. Would a revival of the 'opening to the left' work with the communists? For those who gave a positive answer to this question, the only chance to see their strategy transformed into actual policy occurred in November 1976, when Jimmy Carter won the presidential elections. Carter was a member of the Trilateral Commission, as were Vice President Walter Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Ambassador to Italy, Richard N. Gardner. Joseph LaPalombara became cultural attaché of the Embassy of Rome. Despite occupying roles that were unrelated to European issues, other political scientists who had previously expressed open views on the PCI were also included in the Carter administration.³⁰

In contrast to the anti-communist veto of previous American governments, the Democratic administration seemed to offer a more open stance towards Italian communists. During the election campaign of 1976 and in the first year of government, the members of Carter's entourage expressed their preference for the creation of government coalitions that were not "dominated" by communist parties in Western Europe. This was a formula that did not seem to exclude a priori party coalitions in which communists were a minority, and that complied to the general policy of non-intervention elaborated by Washington. Italy was certainly not a top priority for Washington at the time, and the 'communist question' was framed within the European political context. On January 12, 1978, the administration released a well-known Memorandum that stated that either the dominion or the participation of communists in a Western European country was an unwelcomed perspective for the US. The ambiguities were swept away as Washington re-affirmed anti-communism as a driving principle of its policy. The declaration was an outcome of an internal debate in which Ambassador Gardner had a determining role. This can be best explained by looking at the 1977 Bonn meeting of the Trilateral Commission. Some of those who attended the gathering - especially Europeans - stated that, had the Italian communists gone to power without occupying key ministries (that is, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Italy's participation in multilateral institutions and the possibility of intervening with conditional loans would have guaranteed the maintenance of the country's democracy and ultimately of its Atlantic location.³¹ Gardner expressed an opposite view, and was supported by the newly-affiliated members such as Kissinger. The report that summed the outcome of the conference was a compromise between the two positions.³²

At the end of 1977, Ambassador Gardner engaged in more active pressure on the administration until the Memorandum of January 12, 1978 was released. From then on, that was the official US policy.³³ Anyway, the chances for the communists to enter the government virtually disappeared in 1978 and Washington never had to face that perspective.³⁴

30. I am referring to Richard Holbrooke and Robert Putnam. Holbrooke authored an essay on the 'visa issue', while Putnam published several articles on the PCI. See Richard Holbrooke, "Dateline: A Little Visa Problem," *Foreign Policy*, 21 (1975): 241-247 and among Putnam's works see Robert Putnam, "The Italian Communist Politician," in *Communism in Italy and France*, 173-220.

31. The Bonn debate is recalled in Richard N. Gardner, *Mission: Italy Gli anni di piombo raccontati dall'ambasciatore americano a Roma 1977-1981*. Milano: Mondadori, 2004, 157-59.

32. Jeremy R. Azrael et al., eds., *An Overview of East-West Relations. Report of the Trilateral Task-Force on East-West Relations to the Trilateral Commission*, Triangle Paper n. 16, 1978.

33. James E. Carter Presidential Library, National Security Archive, Brzezinski Material, VIP Visit File, Italy, Prime Minister Cossiga, 1/24/80: Briefing Book, Memorandum from Brzezinski to the President, January 24, 1980.

34. Formigoni, *Storia d'Italia*.

4 Conclusion

In 1979, the season of Italian ‘national solidarity’ ended and, as Détente faded away, Eurocommunism disappeared from current affairs to become a subject of historical analysis.³⁵ At the end of the 1970s, the Cold War ideological confrontation was back on track. In 1981, Carter left the White House to be replaced by Ronald Reagan, whose anti-communism was inspired by the old ‘totalitarian paradigm.’³⁶ Nonetheless, the dialogue between Italian communist leaders and American think tanks and universities went on. Actually, Napolitano’s first trip to the United States took place in May 1978, after the Carter administration released its January Memorandum. Napolitano went back to the CFR at the beginning of the 1980s. Reporting to the party leaders, he stated that strengthening the relation between Italian communists and American liberals was functional to the PCI’s legitimation. He added that Europeanism was the best way to gain credibility with Western allies.³⁷ Two other PCI members crossed the Atlantic in 1980: Romano Ledda and Napoleone Colajanni, whose visit was sponsored by DC leader Giovanni Galloni. Only Berlinguer was aware of the trip, which eventually turned into a fiasco. Ledda and Colajanni only met with low-rank officials and with neoconservatives, the intellectuals closer to Reagan’s administration.³⁸ The room for a *rapprochement* with American political elites had virtually disappeared. On one hand, the PCI failed to have a comprehensive strategy to approach them. On the other, the pragmatic view put forward by the above-mentioned liberals clashed on the walls of the still existing bipolar division of the world. However, if we take a closer look at informal contact between broadly defined foreign political elites — including the Europeans and the Italians — and PCI leaders, we can add a piece to the debate that occurred in the 1970s and that was best synthesized by Formigoni’s image of a confrontation between a ‘party of immobility’ and a ‘party of evolution.’³⁹

35. Frédéric Heurtebize, “Eurocommunism and the contradictions of Superpower Détente,” *Cold War History*, 41 (2017): 747-71.

36. Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 196-197.

37. APC, Sez. Estero, mf 512, p. 1903, 1982, FIG.

38. APC, Sez. Estero, mf 8011, p. 0067, VI bim. 1980, FIG.

39. Formigoni, *Storia d'Italia*, 528-530.

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