

Class and evangelicalism in Britain

By Kirsten Birkett

Summary

Class in Britain is easy to understand in broad outline but very complicated in practice. This paper surveys ways in which class can be understood in twenty-first-century Britain, and some of the biblical material concerning class and wealth. It identifies a problem for British evangelicals: their evangelism is not reaching the working classes. It is suggested that there is a need to challenge existing evangelical church culture as well as making a concerted effort to plant more churches for working-class people.

Introduction

There's a famous TV comedy sketch first broadcast on 'The Frost Report' in 1966. John Cleese, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett, conveniently of three different heights, represent the upper, middle and lower classes. It satirises the arrogance of the upper class, the social climbing of the middle class, and the cocky carelessness of the lower class. But Britain has moved on since then, and class is not the defining feature of society it used to be – surely?

Movement there has been, but not much. Class might be less obviously recognisable in outward ways, but it is still very important to people. In a survey of British social attitudes, 2023,¹ 77 per cent say social class affects a person's possibilities, which is an increase from the 1980s. People feel more restricted by the class system now than they did decades ago. Class is also strongly aligned with social views.² Class has changed since the twentieth century, but it is still very much part of what makes British people what they are. Scratch a British person and class is not very far below the surface.

The old three-tier description of snobbish aristocracy, solid but envious middle class and salt-of-the-earth working class was always an oversimplification, even if it remains a useful shorthand. We will look at various ways in which class has become more complicated and some of the Bible's wisdom when it comes to class and related issues, before considering some implications for evangelical Christian witness and ministry.

This paper is about Britain and some of the ways class manifests there. However, social distinctions exist wherever there are humans. In other cultures, it may be a matter of tribal structure, or caste divisions, or ancestral bloodlines;

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but humans are prone to make judgements about each other, and the classless society will probably never exist in this world. This paper focuses on Britain, but Scripture speaks in challenging ways to any culture. But why write a Christian paper about class at all? Because there is one glaring problem with class and the evangelical church in Britain:

... you've got this self-perpetuating system. All the books that are written by British evangelicals are about middle-class

1 Oliver Heath and Monica Bennett, 'Social Class', 'British Social Attitudes 40', National Centre for Social Research 2023, <<https://natcen.ac.uk/british-social-attitudes>>.

2 See 'British Social Attitudes 43', National Centre for Social Research, <<https://natcen.ac.uk/british-social-attitudes>>.

Christianity and then that feeds even more into the system. And it means that when a working-class guy goes to get a book to help him in his Christian walk, he is forced to either acclimatize to middle-class culture and start becoming something that he isn't, or he says 'Forget this, this isn't for me'. Nothing tells me in these bookshops about how I deal with a baby mother who hates my guts and who won't let me see my kids and I've got to work out as a Christian what I do now. Am I free to marry someone else? Do I go through the court to get visitation rights? Or do I pray and fast and wait to see? What do I do? A young guy can't get a book on what do I do when I've just left a gang and there's the gang trying to get me back and I want to follow Jesus and another situation's come up and my family's threatened and the gang can help me and the church can't – what do I do?³

The evangelical church, which believes in extending the saving grace of God to everyone, is simply not reaching the working class. This matters.

What is class in Britain today?

The class structure in Britain has changed and developed over the centuries. The twentieth century saw the fruition of social movements for change, encouraged by unprecedented events such as the World Wars. In the twenty-first century, class in Britain definitely still exists, although its definition and attitudes towards it have changed. There are no absolute ways to define class these days, and one short paper cannot survey all the complications.

To begin with, we can note certain concepts that sociologists and other commentators use to describe social distinctions that still cluster around the old three-tier description. If 'financial capital' affords life advantage in obvious ways, we should not ignore the significance of 'social capital' (a person's networks of relationships) and 'cultural capital' (referring to the types of culture you enjoy and are able to participate in – whether you prefer football or rugby, nightclubs or the ballet, rock bands or opera). The division between private and state school education does much to reinforce such distinctions. Those with the most in all forms of capital, including educational capital such as Oxbridge, tend to be 'higher' on the class scale.

Journalist David Goodhart has made a distinction between 'somewhere people' and 'anywhere people'.⁴ Somewhere people, whom he avoided calling working class, tend to see themselves in terms of the place where they were born and grew up, where generations of their family may still live. Anywhere people see themselves in terms of life achievements, value diversity and fluidity, and move

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and travel far more; they are more likely to have university degrees and tastes, occupations and leisure activities that reflect traditional middle-class values. Goodhart was interested in understanding the Brexit vote, and the strong distinction – and mutual disdain – between those who were

concerned about immigration and were more socially conservative, and those who valued European travel, multiculturalism and social liberalism. This divide did not fit neatly into the traditional way right- and left-leaning politics had been understood; the working class in this case seemed to come out far to the right of the more affluent and educated. More generally, the way one votes is no longer a clear reflection of class. During Jeremy Corbyn's leadership Labour

surged in members from the young middle class whose liberal cultural attitudes turned off working-class voters who are generally more socially conservative.

The complexity of the overall picture is influenced by rural/urban divides, north/south divides, and the ambiguities associated with race. A great many immigrants, refugees or otherwise, are poor and take up service jobs, so in that sense are in the traditional working class, yet those same people may not welcome them. While those who live on council estates or schemes are probably working class, with lower incomes, within such communities there will be a range of jobs and values.⁵ The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu introduced the idea of 'habitus' in classifying social groupings,⁶ and this feeds into ideas of class. Habitus reflects the internalised assumptions, feelings and habits of life that a group may take on.

The changing economic landscape has generated new developments. The self-employed used to be middle class, distinct from the working class because they owned their own workshop. Nowadays the nature of self-employed work has changed. Many are in a precarious gig economy and are among the lowest earners. So, the old class distinctions don't always still work: is an Uber driver working class because they are on low wages, or middle class because they do not have a boss? Nowadays more and more are forced into self-employment and earn far less than the employed; and they are in competition with each other so don't organise.

At the same time, we have the emergent service worker, highly educated with high cultural capital but not much money. These are very mobile, anywhere people, the result of the 1990s massive expansion of universities. This development has been a major contributor to the redefinition of the class system, as the experience of going to university encourages more socially liberal and geographically mobile attitudes.

A cultural, rather than economic, development in recent years has been the rise of the performative working class.

3 Joanne McKenzie, '“The Person God Made Me to Be”: Navigating Working-Class and Christian Identities in English Evangelical Christianity', *Sociological Research Online*, 22.1, 1–11, p. 7.

4 David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The New Tribes Shaping British Politics* (London: Penguin, 2017).

5 Mez McConnell, *The Least, the Last and the Lost: Understanding Poverty in the UK and the Responsibility of the Local Church* (Leyland: Evangelical Press, 2021), p. 157.

6 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Tony Blair and John Prescott notwithstanding, we are not all middle class now, or at least we claim not to be. More than half (52 per cent) of British identify as working class (indeed up to 60 per cent in some surveys)⁷ – and this is despite all the changes in the labour market, the decline of the manufacturing sector, and the increase in white-collar jobs. While what we might call ‘objective’ class – whether you actually are a manual, lower-rung worker or not – still has objective implications in health outcomes, level of education and so on; in politics it is more about perception. Class *identity* is what counts there. It is about how you feel, not whether you are actually a poor manual worker. ‘I’m middle class from my background, but working class from the views and opinions I hold.’⁸

People want to improve their situation but this is no longer expressed so starkly in class terms. On the contrary, working-class status is now something to celebrate. Keir Starmer in his election campaign emphasised his working-class roots. Kemi Badenoch claimed she was working class because she once worked at McDonalds. It seems that now everyone is actually working class, or wants to be. The rhetoric has reversed. Part of the backdrop to this development has been the rise of victim morality and intersectionality. To have the moral high ground you have to be the most oppressed; and the middle class see themselves as morally superior. Today that means having to identify with the oppressed, so unequivocally middle-class people will take on a working-class identity. Privilege is no longer something to boast about, it is something to be ashamed of and hidden. At the same time, comfort is more important to people than ever. Those who boast of working-class credentials certainly do not want working-class inconveniences.

Yet for all the changes, there are still distinct class differences, and considerable bad feeling between the classes. Those with less can easily resent those with more and see them as undeserving; those with more may resent those with less and on social benefits. In popular culture, the posh, and posh ways of living, are characteristically derided as elitist and snobbish, or conversely the lower classes are censured as lazy, entitled, violent and lawless. Class judgementalism is well and truly alive.

How should Christians think about class?

The doctrine of creation establishes the fundamental equality of all human beings. Genesis 1:26–27 declares that humanity is created in the image of God which endows every individual with inherent dignity and worth. This theological foundation undercuts any notion of intrinsic superiority or inferiority among people, irrespective of their social or economic status. This notion is further

underscored in Genesis 2, where the creation of man and woman establishes the relational aspect of humanity, designed for community and mutual support.

The fall of humanity, as narrated in Genesis 3, introduces sin into the world, fundamentally disrupting human relationships and creating a propensity for inequality and exploitation. Augustine sees pride as the essence of sin. Luther agreed, describing it as *curvetus in se*, being curved in on oneself – thinking of yourself first and others for your benefit. This disruption is theologically significant for class, as it sows the seeds of economic hardship and judgemental social stratification, which are manifestations of a broken world in need of redemption.

With sin in the world, the Mosaic Law reflects God’s concern for justice and the protection of vulnerable members of society. For instance, the laws regarding gleaning (Leviticus 19:9–10) which work against profit maximisation, and the Sabbatical Year (Deuteronomy 15:1–11) which forgives debts. These are designed to provide for the poor and prevent the accumulation of excessive wealth and power in the hands of a few.

The Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:8–55), where all debts are forgiven and land returned to the family who originally owned it, is particularly noteworthy as it provides a systemic reset, once every fifty years, to prevent perpetual poverty and ensure that no family line is permanently disenfranchised. The prophets frequently denounce social injustice and economic exploitation (Isaiah 5:8; Amos 2:6–7; Micah 2:1–2). These prophetic voices emphasise

that true worship of God is inseparable from ethical behaviour and social responsibility.

The wisdom literature similarly calls for ethical behaviour around wealth and status. The book of Proverbs is not at all against commerce and making money, but is emphatic about doing so honestly (e.g. Proverbs 10:2; 16:11; 20:23). Indeed the lazy poor are very much criticised (Proverbs 26:15). We are to be generous, and aim to work diligently, seeking neither to be too rich nor poor (Proverbs 30:8–9). Life is not about accumulating wealth, and security is not in wealth, for us or for our children. Those high in status are to use it for justice and righteousness (Proverbs 25:5).

Jesus’ ministry is marked by a radical inclusivity and a challenge to social norms. He associates with tax collectors, sinners, and the marginalised (Luke 5:27–32; John 4:1–26), demonstrating that the kingdom of God transcends social and economic barriers. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12) particularly highlight the blessedness of the poor in spirit and the meek, indicating a reversal of worldly values.

The Gospels contain numerous teachings of Jesus that address wealth and poverty, underscoring the ethical and spiritual dimensions of class. Jesus’ parables, such as the

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7 <<https://natcen.ac.uk/news/40-years-british-social-attitudes-class-identity-and-awareness-still-matter/>>; G. Evans and J. Mellon, ‘Social Class: Identity, awareness and political attitudes: why are we still working class?’ *British Social Attitudes* 33 (2016), np.

8 Unknown voxpop interviewee, ‘Know your place part 1: the class shift’, The Conversation podcast.)

Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), and his direct teachings, like the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), emphasise the dangers of wealth, the blessedness of the poor, and the call to generosity. Jesus’ ministry is marked by love for the poor, transcending social class as well as religious class, reaching those at the economic margins of society (Luke 5:12–26; 7:11–17).

But this does not amount to a removal of class. Jesus explicitly says that there will always be poor among us. He challenges individuals to change their attitudes to wealth and social status but does not call for people to work at social change in general. Paul recognises that class divisions exist (1 Corinthians 1:26), and certainly there were disparities of wealth as well as racial divisions in the churches he wrote to (Romans 15:26–27; Ephesians 3:6). These distinctions did not disappear, but the apostle is absolutely emphatic that any negative judgement based on them must disappear (Galatians 3:28). Even slaves were to be treated as brothers, and freed if possible (Philemon 16; 1 Corinthians 7:21).

The early Christian community, as described in the book of Acts, embodies a radical form of economic sharing and mutual support (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35). This communal life reflects a practical outworking of the gospel, where social distinctions are minimised in light of the believers’ common identity in Christ. This communal lifestyle reflects the early church’s commitment to living out the values of the kingdom of God, where social distinctions are minimised, and the community embodies God’s justice and generosity.

We don’t know whether there will be class divisions in the new creation, but it’s not impossible. There could be stratification according to different responsibilities in the community; there is also room for a wonderful diversity of cultures, and as we have seen, class refers to culture as much as it does economics. What there won’t be is judgement about belonging to a certain class. There will certainly be no poverty or lack of provision. There will be no envy or negative comparison or coveting. Everyone will have all they need, and if some have more – of anything – than ourselves, we will rejoice in their riches or status or ability or whatever it is. Whatever our organisational structure, it will lack the sin that mars human class relationships now.

Why class is an issue for the evangelical church

Class undoubtedly raises issues for evangelical Christians in Britain. Even though class differences can be both causes and symptoms of deprivation and injustice, these are not the main challenge. The real issue is that, for all their evangelistic zeal, evangelicals in Britain are just not reaching the working classes with the gospel.



‘Evangelical’ is not a category that government surveys single out, but research done by various evangelical organisations suggests that the evangelical church is overwhelmingly middle class. Some 66 per cent of evangelicals in Britain identify as middle class.⁹ Eighty-one per cent have university degrees, compared to 44 per cent of the English population,¹⁰ and the people who are least likely to know a practising Christian are those who do not have a university or other higher education.¹¹

The gospel is for all. So, it’s good to have middle-class, and upper-class, Christians. In fact, this is the result of many decades of intense investment into their evangelism. The Varsity and Public Schools camps¹² focused on public schools, and Christian Unions, linked through the Inter-Varsity Fellowship,¹³ focused on university students. These evangelistic movements, and their successors, have had considerable impact and influence. Their aim was certainly to evangelise future leaders; but an expected trickle-down effect was frequently cited, that having evangelised these classes, evangelism and conversions in the working classes would follow.¹⁴

However, that has not worked as hoped, and as the above statistics show, evangelicalism largely stopped with the middle class. This has led to various consequences. The most concerning is that large numbers of working-class people remain untouched by evangelical churches. The challenge of reaching people who are working class is compounded by a second consequence, namely that Christian culture is frequently confused with middle-class culture. This is reflected in our Sunday services:

Certain forms of Bible teaching, an emotionally restrained mode of communication, styles of music used in worship, rationalist apologetic methods and the corporate business-like mood of many evangelical services were identified as potentially intimidating or alien to working-class culture and were felt to contribute to a ‘self-perpetuating system’ of disengagement.¹⁵

9 Premier Christian News, ‘Church attendance dominated by middle class’, 29 January 2015, <www.premierchristian.news>.

10 *Talking Jesus: Perceptions of Jesus, Christians and Evangelism in England*, 2015, p. 7. Note that this is England, not Britain, and considers ‘practising Christians’, not evangelicals per se, although the definition of ‘practising Christian’ is ‘those who report regularly praying, reading the Bible and attending a church service at least monthly’ (p. 4) which overlaps strongly with most definitions of ‘evangelical’.

11 *Talking Jesus Report 2022: What people in the UK think of Jesus, Christians and evangelism*, p. 14.

12 These camps came to include Iwerne (until 2020), Lymington and Rushmore (which subsequently merged), and Gloddaeth, under evolving operational arrangements, and since 2000 (with LDN added later) run by the Titus Trust.

13 Since 1974 the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF).

14 Indeed, importantly, some converted at public school or university did go on to minister in poor or less prosperous areas.

15 Joanne McKenzie, ‘A different class? Anglican evangelical leaders’ perspectives on social class’, pp. 170–189 in Abby Day (ed.), *Contemporary Issues in the Worldwide Anglican Communion: Powers and Pieties* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), p. 178.

Likewise, this is reflected in common attitudes. Christian godliness is often confused with middle-class niceness. In Christian circles it is implicitly assumed that everyone really should be middle class. Middle-class Christians may often say that we do not judge people on their jobs – but they would hate to have lower-status jobs, or see their children drop out of university to be refuse collectors. People who live with a great deal of comfort are very often unwilling to give it up to go to actual deprived areas. Williams and Brown challenge middle-class Christians on the following assumptions:¹⁶

- Home ownership is better than renting;
- Saving money is better than giving it away;
- The longer you stay in education the better;
- You should choose carefully the neighbourhood where you live;
- You should try to send your children to the highest-achieving school;
- Being organised with a diary is a sign of spiritual maturity.¹⁷

Some things about middle class values and Christianity cohere. In Christianity a book plays a central role, so education to the extent that people can access Scripture for themselves is good for everyone. Middle-class courtesy and formal good manners at best reflect a genuine concern for the other. Provision for one's family is good. History shows it is not unusual for families who become Christian to improve their material lives as new moral directions and behaviour patterns take root.¹⁸ The dismantling of Christian influence on social morality, and the resulting rise in families with children from multiple partners, and single mothers with very unstable relationships, tends to have its most adverse effects on those already facing material deprivation. Lives can be transformed by the gospel, but conversion does not have to go with middle-class tastes and social manners.

Yet working-class Christians commonly report that they feel like unwelcome foreigners in evangelical churches, and that they have to change almost everything about themselves to be more middle class just to fit in. Congregations full of doctors, lawyers and lecturers can be very intimidating. People report that the preaching does not apply to them.

If I go to a church and I'm a working-class man and I hear the middle-class preacher preach I'm probably not going to get any hint that he has struggle in his life, therefore, I'm going to say he can't talk to me because he doesn't know what I've been through. And when he tells me about God's

love and God's provision I'll be, like, 'It's alright for you, you've got your inheritance and you've got all like whatever, nice stuff in life: you can't talk to me.' When he talks to me about being forgiven and Christ's righteousness, I'll be like 'Well, that's all right for you, but you haven't done the bad things I've done.'¹⁹

It can be very difficult for a working-class person to move into evangelical leadership. One interviewee described 'a glass ceiling with regard to leadership' within evangelicalism: 'working-class leaders can feel a lack of legitimisation despite their shared commitment to the theological and doctrinal positions that are valued within the movement'. Middle-class ways of doing things 'are more easily accepted as the "right" way to do things'.²⁰

Ministry resources are overwhelmingly written by middle-class people, for middle-class people, relying heavily on reading culture with assumptions of a middle-class kind of background and education.

Many evangelicals are aware of a failure to reach large parts of British culture, and absolutely do not want to be snobs or class-conscious. Certainly some churches try hard to welcome all and are shining examples of integrating different backgrounds well. But in many cases, such concerns do not seem to be translating into action.

So what do we need to do?

Challenge the culture of evangelical churches

It seems that our churches, however individuals might wish they did, do not genuinely welcome a range of social classes. Class is not always geographically separate; the same suburb could combine council flats with the old working class; refugees and migrants; and young professionals starting on the property ladder. How would you create a church that preaches to them all?

There are many middle-class values that could be challenged with attitudes that come from those who are poorer and less well-educated. Poverty is inherently destabilising; we do not want to wish suffering on people, but the attitudes that result can be a very biblical trust in God, and a humility that does not live for the things of this world but those of the next. These are attitudes that all Christians should have.

We could question middle-class assumptions. You don't *have* to own a house. You don't *have* to work up the career ladder. You don't *have* to own a car. Some of the energy directed at these goals could be applied, collectively, to lobby for efficient, warm and frequent public transport which would increase convenience for all. Renting is more flexible, makes relocation easier,

¹⁶ This is not to dismiss these statements as always wrong, but to point out that certain middle-class assumptions about responsible living are not the only possible conclusions to reach from gospel principles.

¹⁷ Natalie Williams and Paul Brown, *Invisible Divides: Class, Culture and Barriers to Belonging in the Church* (London: SPCK, 2022), p. 39.

¹⁸ 'Redemption and lift' was the term coined by missiologist Donald McGavran to describe this effect. See Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970).

¹⁹ Quoted in McKenzie, 'The Person God Made Me to Be', p. 7.

²⁰ McKenzie, 'The Person God Made Me to Be', p. 6.

and takes away responsibility for repairs and upkeep. There is nothing unbiblical about private property; but it is easy to assume that accumulating property is the only responsible way.

When it comes to Christian values, the multiplication of wealth and social status should not be Christian ambitions at all. So why do we cling to an unspoken, yet widely assumed, narrative of social climbing? Some middle-class values should be overtly challenged in our churches. Greed and selfish ambition are condemned in Scripture (1 Timothy 6:10; 2 Timothy 3:1–2; Hebrews 13:5). We could do with a lot more teaching and exploration of the nature of contentment (Philippians 4:11; 1 Timothy 6:6, 8). In relation to class, James teaches us not to take pride in being rich or feel shame in being poor (1:9–10); not to show favouritism to the rich in church (that is failing to love your neighbour) (2:1–10); to show our faith by helping poor brothers and sisters (2:14–16); to rely on God for all our plans (4:13–16); and describes the evil of the rich exploiting the poor (5:1–6). Such verses are not calling on people to change class, but definitely to change their attitudes.

Do you pray publicly for the young people about to go off to university? What do you do that genuinely celebrates those who are going into work, or an apprenticeship, or the police, or some other future? What are you modelling and teaching that unconsciously teaches that some honest jobs are better than others? How are you promoting Christian ministry as of eternal value, paid or unpaid?

Plant working class churches and do real evangelism

There is much more that evangelical churches could do to help the real working class. We need to help the spiritually poor as well as the materially poor, by going to them and preaching the gospel. For most middle-class evangelicals, this will be a genuinely cross-cultural ministry, and it will be as hard – and require as much long-term commitment, thought and effort – as any overseas cross-cultural mission. The church has a lot of experience in cross-cultural mission to draw upon – let us apply it to this mission field.

This is not the place to describe all the challenges of church-planting,²¹ but it will certainly have to involve local research (sociological, cultural, political) and getting to

know people. Any existing churches in the area should be contacted and consulted. A church model that is successful in another area cannot just be transplanted.

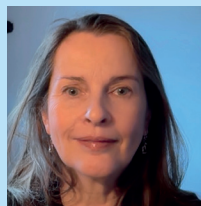
This is a challenge for the whole evangelical constituency. We need to put as much effort and money into working-class evangelism as has gone into middle- and upper-class evangelism. The intensive school camps and university ministry worked. It was a highly successful strategy. What is the equivalent for the working class? It might be vocational college ministry. It might require moving house to the schemes and council estates. It will take research, talking to people, listening to people, and thinking about it; it will take experimentation, trial and error, and learning from pioneers who are already trying.

Raise up working-class church leaders in a genuinely welcoming way

This will mean identifying those with leadership gifts, even if they have not been encouraged early in life. It means giving leadership opportunities to provide experience and training. It may mean new kinds of theological training, or longer theological training, or compulsory pre-training training.²² And that might be even more expensive than training the already university educated.

Conclusion

The biblical vision of the eschaton, where God will establish his kingdom of justice and peace, provides a hopeful framework for addressing class issues. Visions in Isaiah especially show the kind of *shalom* harmony that is our ideal. It is sin that makes class divisions a problem, not the stratification of society in and of itself. But the answer to sin is the gospel that saves; and we must make every effort to see that class is not a barrier to hearing it.



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21 Some useful resources: Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Zondervan, 2012); also <<https://redeemercitycity.com/resources/>>; <<https://www.namb.net/send-network/mobilize/>>; and the podcast <<https://reachaustralia.com.au/resources/>>.

22 Interested readers might profit from looking into the Knutsford Ordination Test School, a fully funded pre-theological training residential course established after WWI for ordination candidates who did not yet have the educational background to study at university level.

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