POLICY BRIEF

Why Collective Behavior Change Requires a Civic Culture Approach

Paulius Yamin

OCTOBER 2026

HARVARD Kennedy School
ASH CENTER
for Democratic Governance
and Innovation

ALLEN LAB FOR
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Bogotá as a Policy Enigma

In the early 1990s, Bogotá was often described as one of the most violent cities in the world.[1] Violence was pervasive, traffic deaths were extremely high, and public distrust ran deep. Many everyday interactions seemed governed less by shared rules than by improvisation, resignation, and a learned expectation that others, too, would behave badly and take advantage.

Yet within a few years, the city became an improbable reference point for collective transformation. Between 1993 and 2004, homicides decreased by 70%, traffic fatalities by 65%, and per-capita water consumption by 46%. Additionally, over 63,000 families chose to pay a voluntary 10% tax surcharge, to name just a few major changes.[2]

This did not happen — at least not primarily — through tougher sanctions, more efficient policing, or more persuasive information campaigns. Instead, it happened through a set of municipal-level interventions that, at first sight, did not even look like policy. Mimes were sent to street intersections to ridicule reckless drivers and pedestrians. Citizens received soccer-style "thumbs-up" and "thumbs-down" cards to express approval or disapproval of one another's behavior. During a water shortage, Mayor Antanas Mockus appeared on television taking a shower and turning off the tap while soaping, asking residents to follow suit. The administration also staged mock funerals for traffic victims and painted black stars on roads where fatal accidents had occurred, implemented a campaign in which citizens exchanged over 2,500 guns for flowers, and sold kits in supermarkets with ready-to-use concrete so citizens could repair damaged public space themselves. These were just a few of many public acts that mixed pedagogy, humor, moral provocation, and spectacle.[3]

To many outside observers — and many local ones as well — these interventions seemed like eccentric, ineffective games. They were often mocked in the press and in political circles. Yet many of them worked, and their impact soon became visible in citywide data.

Mockus called his approach "cultura ciudadana," translating to "civic culture" or "citizen culture."[4] The idea was that highly visible interventions in public spaces could spark reflection and ultimately transform the norms around citizenship, civic life, and peaceful coexistence.

In this essay, I use the term "civic culture" in a somewhat narrower and more intervention-oriented sense than is typical in government and policy research,[5] where "civic" frequently points toward democratic participation, community engagement, and citizens' voice in governance. Here, by contrast, "civic culture" refers more specifically to the everyday cultivation of citizen and democratic agency: the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (loosely defined by Mockus' supporters as "culture")[6] through which people learn to see themselves as citizens, interpret public problems as partly theirs, and act — sometimes with institutions, sometimes with one another — on collective issues. In that sense, the term refers not only to formal participation or deliberation, but to the everyday cultural conditions that make democratic and civic action more imaginable, legitimate, and practicable.

For years, this approach has attracted international curiosity, with coverage in the *New York Times*,[7] the *Guardian*,[8] and the *Huffington Post*.[9] It also became the subject of a book published by Harvard University Press, *Cultural Agents Reloaded: The Legacy of Antanas Mockus*.[10] In it, James Robinson, co-recipient of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economics, described it as "a remarkable experience with profound lessons for social science."[11] Ben Hecht, president and CEO of Livable Cities, called it "a clear and powerful articulation of the elements critical to enabling cities to deal with our society's most intractable problems by thinking outside of the box."[12]

Yet something important remains missing. We have admiration. We have stories. We have accounts and interpretations from cultural and art theory (for example, in Doris Sommer),[13] political philosophy (Cory Siskind),[14] economics (John Elster),[15] political science (Gerry Mackie and Francesca Moneti),[16] policy (Carlo Tognato),[17] and documentaries (Andreas Møl Dalsgaard).[18] But we still do not have a framework that examines the fundamental issue of why these interventions worked on human psychology and what they can teach those of us seeking to transform collective behavior today.

Part of what is missing is a clearer understanding that these were not only creative policy interventions but also mechanisms that enabled civic agency and shared power in a limited but potentially significant way. They did not just aim to change individual behavior; they reshaped the possibility, visibility, and urgency of addressing public problems and how people could do so across differences. Working at the intersection of psychology and community life, they shifted expectations and meanings while expanding citizens' role in regulating one another and participating in collective action. In other words, this points toward a civic culture approach to collective behavior: a form of intervention that does not treat citizens simply as isolated decision-makers or anonymous members of voting blocs to be nudged, informed, or sanctioned, but as active participants in the shared work of making self-governance and public life possible.

I am not approaching this only as an outside observer. Between 2011 and 2013, I worked as Antanas Mockus' research and personal assistant. Later, I worked with several key figures in his administrations, including Liliana Caballero and Efraín Sánchez;[19] created the first behavioral unit in the Colombian government; and then spent over a decade seeking to understand, through research and practice, what this and similar experiences reveal about behavior, institutions, and public action.

One of my conclusions is this: If the problem is collective behavior, then the solution must include civic culture. And if it includes civic culture, it must also concern itself with how a society becomes more connected, more capable of cooperation across differences, and better able to treat citizens not simply as targets of policy but as participants in the shared work of public life. That, in essence, is what I mean by a civic culture approach to collective behavior.

The Limits of the Individualistic Toolbox

Rethinking civic culture in this way is important because many of the most difficult public challenges we face are collective in nature. Domains such as climate adaptation, public safety, corruption, democratic erosion, violence prevention, and public health adherence are not merely questions of isolated individual choices. Rather, they depend on what people expect from one another, what they observe others doing, what they believe others will tolerate,[20] and whether they feel part of a collective world worth caring for.

And yet, much of our behavioral (and behavioral policy) toolkit remains fundamentally oriented toward individual people or organizations. This is not a criticism of behavioral public policy itself,[21] nor of the "nudge" approach that has become so pervasive within it.[22] On the contrary, the field has made invaluable contributions to our understanding of human decision making and how to leverage it in practice to promote behavioral change. It helped move public policy away from naive assumptions of rational calculation and toward a more realistic understanding of human behavior. Frameworks such as COM-B,[23] EAST,[24] and

social marketing have equipped practitioners to diagnose barriers, simplify decisions, and improve interventions.[25]

But these models are often at their best when the desired behavior is relatively discrete and the units of change are clean-cut individual decisions. A reminder may help someone attend an appointment.[26] A default may increase pension enrollment.[27] Better messaging may encourage reuse of hotel towels.[28] These all matter, but they are not, by themselves, especially strong tools for changing expectations around violence, reshaping the meaning of collective responsibility, or increasing people's willingness to act and cooperate indirectly with strangers.

These strategies are less equipped for complex adaptive challenges or "wicked" problems,[29] situations where the behavior and context in question are complex, deeply relational, norm-dependent, and subject to public interpretation (such as homicides, traffic fatalities, corruption, or domestic violence in a seven-million-person city like Bogotá).

This is where a more creative, civic culture approach becomes necessary.

What Makes Collective Behavior Different

Collective behavior is not just "many individuals behaving at once." That's a common misunderstanding. Rather, collective behavior is behavior shaped by interdependence. I act not only based on my preferences or constraints but also based on what I think others are doing, what I expect them to do, how I imagine they will interpret my behavior, and whether I believe they and I are operating under a similar set of rules and expected behaviors. In that sense, collective behavior is inherently public, symbolic, and relational (for the conceptual foundations of these ideas, see Cristina Bicchieri's "Norms in the Wild" and Saadi Lahlou's "Installation Theory").[30]

Collective behavior is not just "many individuals behaving at once." That's a common misunderstanding. Rather, collective behavior is behavior shaped by interdependence.

Expectations about what others will do have been widely documented as critical to sustaining both positive and negative patters of behavior. Brendan O'Flaherty and Rajiv Sethi show how the mutual anticipation of danger between two people, each reasoning about the other's reasoning,[31] can produce preemptive violence that then confirms the very belief that generated it. From an economic perspective, Glenn Loury makes a parallel argument about inequality, insisting that it is produced through ongoing social relations rather than discrete transactions.[32] Together, these accounts suggest that social outcomes are shaped by both individual choices and shared expectations about other people's behavior. But if expectations can sustain some part of urban violence, they can also change. Shifting them means intervening in what is publicly visible, interpretable, and revisable, not in individual choices, one person at a time.

This explains why purely individual tools often disappoint when applied to collective problems. They can alter behavior when choices are well defined and we know the full range of possible outcomes (as Gerd Gigerenzer's work on decision-making under risk and uncertainty shows).[33] They can facilitate compliance without generating commitment. They can improve behavior temporarily without altering the conditions that reproduce it. However, excluding defaults (where people have preset options unless they actively choose something else, such as automatic registration as an organ donor upon receiving a driver's license), the

effects of nudging have proven modest, especially when accounting for publication bias. For instance, a well-known study that looked at 126 trials covering 23 million people applied by two major U.S. government units that apply behavioral science to improve public programs (nudge units), found that nudges increased take-up by around 8% on average.[34] This is not to say nudges don't work; achieving an 8% shift through a small and cost-effective measure represents a considerable success. Rather, it suggests we have something to learn from the effects achieved through civic culture interventions.

A civic culture approach starts from a different premise: collective behavior changes when social expectations change, and when the wider social and cultural architecture around them changes as well. Of course, this premise extends well beyond Bogotá. For instance, it can help explain why some cradle-to-career place-based partnerships in U.S. cities (see Rob Watson's work)[35] succeed where others produce coordination without change. What distinguishes the successful initiatives is less the alignment mechanisms than a shift in what a community expects of itself and of its children.

This means taking seriously elements that policy often treats as secondary or ornamental: symbols, rituals, public visibility, moral interpretation, humor, shared narratives. More broadly, it requires engaging with the social and cultural norms that cause certain behaviors to be perceived as desirable or undesirable (for example, the willingness to participate or the willingness to peacefully regulate others).

For the Mockus administration in Bogotá, these were not decorative supplements to "real policy." They were the core mechanism for effecting change. Without interventions that shift cultural and social norms, they argued, long-term peaceful coexistence remains impossible.

This is where the civic culture approach connects with Danielle Allen's insistence that democracy works best when power is shared rather than simply exercised from above.[36] If collective problems are sustained through interdependent relationships, then solving them requires more than influencing isolated choices or enforcing compliance with authority; it requires creating occasions in which people can exercise agency together. Civic culture interventions do not merely seek enforcement or compliance. At their best, they redistribute epistemic and practical power, inviting citizens to participate in shaping what is considered socially acceptable, what collective problems mean, and the role of citizens in solving them.

Civic culture interventions also help build a more connected, cohesive, and diverse society,[37] one where people are better able to relate across differences, not only within their usual circles, and act with strangers under broadly shared rules rather than retreating into siloed groups. In this sense, they strengthen what Allen terms "bridging networks": the ability to engage across social groups without requiring domination or stifling diversity.

What Bogotá Reveals

In my view, Bogotá shows that lasting collective change often requires intervening not only on individual decisions but on the public conditions under which some behaviors become visible, intelligible, discussable, and open to peaceful mutual regulation.

Extensive interviews, questionnaires, and a systematic analysis of press coverage over a 24-year period reveal several recurring features of Mockus' interventions that explain their psychological effect. Together, these six features point toward a practical intervention framework that will be developed in my upcoming book.

Behavior in Context

First, these interventions worked on behavioral context far more holistically than policy usually does. Rather than treating context simply as friction or convenience, they addressed the physical settings, psychological cues, and social meanings that together shape behavior — the three main determinants of local behaviors in Lahlou's Installation Theory.[38] Many years before Lahlou formally conceptualized this theory, Mockus' interventions were already putting it into practice, transforming not only individual knowledge or preferences but also the local contexts in which actions occurred and the public consensus around what is considered typical and acceptable.

For instance, low compliance with traffic norms was pervasive (and expected!) in Bogotá before Mockus' tenure. As research on harmful social norms shows,[39] widespread frustration and high mortality rates were not enough on their own to produce change. By substituting theatrical performance and silent mockery for police and fines, the mime intervention created and then reframed a debate on whether noncompliance was desirable, communicating that people were changing and that peaceful regulation between citizens was both possible and acceptable.

The Reinterpretation of Everyday Symbols

Second, the interventions always began by reinterpreting everyday symbols. A mime, a soccer referee card, and a funeral were all ordinary cultural symbols present in people's everyday lives. As a result, they were culturally identifiable. Now, however, they were reinterpreted and given a new civic (culture) agency. Mockus' administration dismissed the city's traffic police and replaced them with silent mimes who couldn't impose fines. Then, they distributed 1.5 million soccer referee cards for citizens to express their disagreement.

Too often, people experience policy interventions as abstract or punitive. In this case, they experienced them through concrete and recognizable objects, roles, and signs, with tangible tools that allowed them to participate in ways that felt both humorous and safe. These civic culture interventions succeeded in part because they adeptly manipulated those symbolic materials, surprising and engaging people.

As Doris Sommer has argued, the creative methods used in art are not exclusive to artists, nor confined to the cultural sphere; they can be reproduced, learned, and taught as civic culture capacities. Through her work in Harvard's Cultural Agents initiative,[40] she shows how artistic and humanistic practices can expand civic agency by training citizens to reinterpret symbols, reframe social situations, imagine alternatives, and intervene creatively in public life. From this perspective, the symbolic, playful, and participatory interventions seen in Mockus' Bogotá are neither one-time strokes of political genius nor mere eccentricities. Instead, they are examples of civic culture capacities that can, at least in principle, be cultivated and reproduced more broadly.

Asking Questions Rather than Providing Answers

Third, these interventions often used questions, ambiguity, gentle provocation, and humor rather than relying on instruction alone. Speaking about civic culture interventions, Mockus once put it this way:[41] "What people love most is when you write on the blackboard a risky first half of a sentence and then recognize their freedom to write the other half." Mimes did not give instructions on how to act. Instead, they generated public debates by silently mocking transgressors. They made it possible for people to redeem themselves with a light, humorous touch.

That intuition captures something fundamental about a civic culture approach: it relies on co-creation rather than mere transmission. It invites people to think, interpret, and play with a problem rather than simply receive a top-down solution or authoritative instructions. This is what power-sharing looks like in practice — not the disappearance of leadership, but leadership that creates room for people to exercise agency. Collective change is much more durable when people feel they are actively constructing meaning and helping others change, rather than merely receiving a mandate.

Mutual Regulation and Agency

Fourth, Mockus' civic culture approach enabled mutual regulation. The traffic cards are an obvious example, as is the broader effort to legitimize citizens' role in shaping one another's conduct. This is one of the most important and least appreciated aspects of civic culture interventions. Public life does not become more cooperative simply because the state asks for cooperation. It becomes more cooperative when people acquire the tools, confidence, and permission to sustain behavior and norms together, without fear of hostility when issues arise. Of course, this dynamic can go either way: social norms and mutual regulation can be — and more often are — weaponized by authoritarian regimes.

But a valuable aspect of Mockus' interventions is precisely that they show how mutual regulation can promote empowerment and reciprocity, rather than oppression and control. At their best, they demonstrate a form of reciprocity:[42] a practice of mutual responsiveness in which people become more willing to correct, support, and answer to one another to promote mutual coexistence and tackle major collective problems, such as traffic fatalities, homicides, and gender violence.

In this sense, they should be understood not only as horizontal control but as a form of agency. People are not **just** being corrected; they are being invited to realize their place in a shared world and to take part in its betterment. Even when that agency is exercised toward others, it still has an important civic culture meaning, teaching people that public life is a collective endeavor that is partly in their hands.

This was also visible in the tax campaign mentioned above, in which over 63,000 families voluntarily paid 10% more than they owed, transforming tax compliance from a mere legal duty into an act of collective agency. What made the initiative especially significant was not just the extra revenue itself but how citizens were invited to help decide its use. Taxpayers could choose the budget line to which their additional payment would go, such as park lighting, road repairs, or increased police presence. In this way, the campaign did more than encourage prosocial behavior. It gave ordinary residents a concrete role in allocating public funds, opened a small but meaningful space for participation in institutional decision-making, and strengthened civic agency by treating people not only as taxpayers to be influenced but as contributors to collective outcomes. The results were then publicly reported by budget line, often alongside examples of the works funded. Rather than demanding mere compliance, the initiative created a tangible form of democratic participation in the governance of shared resources.

Collective Observation and Self-Awareness

Fifth, Mockus' approach created moments of collective observation. Public spectacle was not a side effect; it was part of the logic. Many harmful or apathetic behaviors persist because they remain diffuse, privatized, unquestioned, or even socially encouraged. Once those behaviors are made visible in a public and emotionally resonant way — and a concrete, accessible, and "safe" way to express disagreement is implemented — they can become objects of reflection, debate, and action. One begins to act differently in part because one knows that others saw and knows that others know it was seen.

Many harmful or apathetic behaviors persist because they remain diffuse, privatized, unquestioned, or even socially encouraged. Once those behaviors are made visible in a public and emotionally resonant way — and a concrete, accessible, and "safe" way to express disagreement is implemented — they can become objects of reflection, debate, and action.

According to the designers, the interventions had to be sufficiently surprising and provocative to generate media coverage on their own, since they lacked large communications budgets and considered conventional institutional messaging less effective. Even ridicule could serve a purpose if it helped broadcast an intervention widely. In one of the country's largest newspapers alone, the mime intervention was featured in 37 articles when it was introduced in 1995 — almost one article per week. On their end, citizens reported that they often obeyed traffic rules even when no mimes were present, assuming that others had seen the interventions in the news and were now more likely to challenge misconduct. This reflects what game theorists call "common knowledge":[43] It is not simply that individuals know something, but that everyone knows that everyone else knows it as well.

Goals, Anchors, and Actors

Finally, these interventions helped people make sense of what was happening through goals, anchors, and actors. Citizens are constantly interpreting interventions, even when policymakers pretend otherwise. What is this trying to do? What familiar policy intervention does it resemble? Who are the actors behind it, and what authority or intention do they carry? One of the reasons many interventions fail is that these questions are left implicit.

If people don't understand the purpose behind the surprising elements presented (such as mimes mocking people at busy intersections), or if they don't realize who is orchestrating them (in this case, the mayor's office), the intervention will only generate confusion rather than the reflection it was meant to prompt. Indeed, several of Mockus' campaigns were never fully understood by the public, and they were thus quickly forgotten or dismissed as proof of the eccentricity of Mockus' character. For example, one of his political campaigns consisted of him wearing an orange pyramidal hat with a confusing inscription intended to represent the characters "Art.11".[44] Look at the photo at the link in the footnote; if you're confused, you're not the only one. The "cheese hat" was mocked but never understood. It was meant to be a Sierpiński triangle, a fractal triangle that can be subdivided infinitely and is identical at every scale, perhaps to signify the coherence of the law-morality-culture triad that was the base of his political discourse. The "Art.11" represented the 11th article of the Colombian Constitution, which reads "the right to life is inviolable, and there shall be no death penalty."

This misstep demonstrates a key concept that Mockus himself explained to me: For people to make sense of an intervention and engage with it, you must use a symbol that is

familiar in their everyday life but shift its significance and purpose. Thus, the mimes worked because they were a known sight in Bogotá's downtown long ago, while Sierpiński's triangle failed because few were familiar with it.

Likewise, our data showed that when people can relate the intervention to a familiar reference point — what psychologists call an "anchor" [45] — they are able to interpret it in a way that makes sense. In our research,[46] most people described the mime interventions using expressions like, "Mimes were like policemen but without the fines." These anchor points are essential for enabling people to interpret and articulate such interventions, and yet they are often ignored in behavioral policy interventions.

Why This Requires a Civic Culture Approach

Taken together, these lessons point to something more than a collection of clever tactics. They indicate the need for a civic culture approach because collective behavior is sustained through collective mechanisms. It is shaped by the quality of public life, by how people see one another, by whether they feel implicated in one another's conduct, and by whether institutions are capable of activating participation and mutual engagement.

To call an approach a "civic culture strategy" is not simply to say that it takes place in public space. It is to say that it treats people as members of a shared world rather than just decision-makers with biases. It is to say that norms matter, that meanings matter, that citizens are not only targets of intervention but potential co-authors of change. It is to say that public problems cannot always be solved by targeting individuals one by one, because the problem often lies in the relations between them.

It is also to say that a civic culture approach strengthens not only bonding ties but bridging ones:[47] It helps people coordinate beyond their immediate in-groups and cooperate across differences. In societies marked by fragmentation or distrust, this balance matters. Cohesion within groups is not enough if public life remains fractured across them. At their best, these interventions help create a connected society in which collaboration with strangers becomes a little more thinkable, a little more meaningful, and a little more feasible.

This pedagogical dimension is not secondary — it is central to why civic culture interventions matter. They do not seek only to nudge behavior or change defaults; they aim to foster citizens who understand themselves as long-term participants in public life.

Good interventions do more than obtain a result. They generate what Mockus called a "saldo pedagógico," a pedagogical remainder or learning dividend. Even when an intervention does not "work" in the narrow instrumental sense, it may still teach people something about their role as citizens, their capacity to act with others, and the possibility of collective action itself. This pedagogical dimension is not secondary — it is central to why civic culture interventions matter. They do not seek only to nudge behavior or change defaults; they aim to foster citizens who understand themselves as long-term participants in public life.

This is also why a civic culture approach is not opposed to behavioral science. On the contrary, I see it as one possible next step for the field. Behavioral science has given us powerful tools to understand attention, choice, habits, and decision environments. But if behavioral scientists and policymakers are to help solve collective problems more effectively, they need

to become more comfortable with culture, symbolism, and public agency. They will need to expand their understanding of what constitutes a serious intervention.

That does not mean replacing rigor and evidence with wishful thinking and pure charisma. It means acknowledging that for collective problems, tools like theater, symbolism, and public meaning may themselves serve as evidence-based mechanisms (as scholars such as Elizabeth Levy Paluck and Hana Shepherd have famously long understood).[48]

From Fascination to Usefulness

For too long, the Mockus experience has occupied an uncomfortable position in the policy imagination. It is admired, cited, and even celebrated, but often in a way that keeps it at a distance — treated as fascinating, exceptional, and perhaps even unrepeatable. It is viewed as something to marvel at, a strange experiment in a violent developing country, rather than a strategy to be learned from operationally.

And yes, to a certain degree, the experience has proven relatively difficult to replicate. Mockus' nongovernmental organization applied similar interventions in Colombia and Latin America, but none achieved the impact or scale of the ones in Bogotá. A notable exception occurred in a Colombian city of around 100,000 inhabitants, where an intervention targeting intimate partner violence was designed around the same principles discussed in this article, resulting in citywide rates falling by roughly 40% in two years.[49]

In my opinion, there are two main reasons for this. First, after being a mayor, Mockus' only other elected position was as a member of Congress, despite running several times for mayor and president. Members of his political group have since held prominent public roles, including as ministers, but none with the political and resource leverage of a major city administration. Although every mayor after him (along with many in Colombia and Latin America) established a civic culture program — to the extent that Bogotá's administration now includes a dedicated sub-secretariat — these programs have remained limited and largely cosmetic.

The second reason was articulated by Mockus' second-in-command, Professor Paul Bromberg, during his first term as mayor.[50] He wrote that this kind of large-scale cultural and behavioral change requires both "prophets" and "engineers." Mockus always disliked the article, but I think Bromberg has a point. Prophets set the vision, name the need and goal, and make people want to act; engineers design the interventions, implement them, and measure whether they work. If true, this division of labor may extend to other experiences and policy domains.

And yet, I think relying on this is also a mistake.

The question is not whether every city needs mimes, nor is the point that creativity alone will solve institutional problems. Rather, the point is that changing collective behavior often requires forms of intervention that are more public, symbolic, participatory, and culturally attuned than those our dominant frameworks currently foreground.

If this is right, then the lesson of Bogotá is not only anecdotal. It is methodological: A clear and applicable intervention framework can bring us considerably closer, allowing other prophets and engineers to leverage their power elsewhere.

The civic culture experience suggests that when the challenge involves collective behavior, the response cannot remain purely individualistic, nor can it rely on giving rational information or nudging. It must be rooted in civic culture: attentive to shared meanings, public interactions, mutual regulation, and the fragile but real possibility that citizens can learn to transform the worlds they inhabit, together. In the end, that is also why the horizon of these

interventions is not just compliance or coordination but something a little closer to Allen's civic friendship:[51] a relationship of mutual respect, shared commitment to the common good, and cooperative engagement across differences.

That is, at least, the wager. Given its potential, it is worth taking it seriously.

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This brief is dedicated to Liliana Caballero, the "legal engineer" who made possible a lot of Mockus' achievements (in his own words). Liliana passed away last month after dedicating her whole life to promoting civic culture in the Colombian and Latin American public sectors.

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