

Labour in the European Single Market: cultural perspectives vs. neoclassical views

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Abstract: The European Single Market (ESM) enables free movement of people, goods, services, and capital within the EU, creating a unified internal space much like a single nation-state. Key among these freedoms is labour mobility, which not only allows individuals to pursue better employment but also promotes EU integration and cohesion. This paper explores how labour market theories—the cultural perspective and the neoclassical viewpoint—influence the ESM’s structure and impact on integration. Through content analysis of academic literature and EU legislation, it examines how these perspectives shape the conceptualization of the European labour market. The analysis aims to clarify whether the ESM aligns more closely with cultural or neoclassical ideals and to assess how this alignment affects the EU’s integration process. The study’s findings shed light on the theoretical foundations that guide the EU’s approach to labour mobility within the ESM and their broader implications for European unity.

Keywords: Single Market, European integration, labour market, the Cultural perspective, the Neoclassical view

Introduction

As envisioned in the 1958 Treaty of Rome, and ever since its formation in 1993, the European Single Market, also known as the internal market, has sought to offer to people, goods, money and services the opportunity to move as freely as in the context of a single state-like entity. Therefore, the European Single Market provides four fundamental freedoms, and numerous benefits, including increased economic growth, job creation, and overall prosperity inside the EU. Some of the benefits include the removal of barriers, which has resulted in a significant increase in trade within the EU; the single market has helped transform the EU into one of the world’s most powerful trade blocs; and EU citizens benefit from high product safety standards and can study, live, work, and retire in any EU country (European Parliament, 2023). The free movement of people is one of the four freedoms foreseen by the European Single Market, and one of the most essential provisions in terms of

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labour market mobility. It is worth noting that the phenomenon of migration continues to have a significant impact on the European labour market, with its trajectory marked by clear milestones throughout the EU's existence. In this regard, the establishment of the European Economic Community (1957), the collapse of the Iron Curtain (1989), the expansion into Central and Eastern Europe (2004, 2007), and the Syrian Refugee Crisis (2015) can all be viewed as occasions that influenced the European labour market. The European Single Market can also be viewed as an important achievement that had a significant impact on the European labour market, as it promotes free mobility of labour, allowing workers to pursue employment opportunities throughout member states without encountering biased restrictions (European Council, 2024). The free movement of people, and particularly labour mobility, is essential to achieving European integration. By allowing persons to freely live and work across EU borders, this principle promotes economic, social, and political solidarity among member states. Labour mobility increases resource efficiency, cultural interaction, political solidarity, geographical inequalities reduction, and cross-sector collaboration. As a result, free labour movement is a cornerstone of European integration, propelling the EU toward greater interconnectedness and unity (Delivet, 2017).

It is evident that the mobility of labour within the EU, facilitated by the free movement of people within the European Single Market, engenders numerous beneficial effects on the European labour market and contributes significantly to the process of European integration. Nonetheless, a pertinent inquiry arises as to how the European labour market can be contextualised within theoretical frameworks. The Cultural and Neoclassical theoretical paradigms offer divergent insights into the formation and functioning of labour markets, suggesting a compelling avenue for exploration regarding the potential influence of theoretical perspectives on the European Single Market and EU integration, particularly in relation to the free movement of labour. On the one hand, the cultural perspective argues that cultural norms can play a significant role in shaping the labour market, influencing individuals' attitudes, behaviours and expectations about work. On the other hand, the neoclassical perspective states that human activity is often characterised by goals that are considered independent of individual culture, and human behaviour is not perceived as a product of culture. The present paper's purpose was accomplished using a qualitative research method called content analysis. Through the content analysis there was undertaken a comprehensive examination of academic literature and EU legislation in order to explore the European labour market in the context of the Single Market, and the theoretical framework of the cultural and neoclassical perspectives on the labour market. The remainder of this paper is organised in the following manner: Section 1 explores a concise overview on the European Single Market and the European integration process; Section 2 outlines a brief incursion on labour market considerations within the EU; Section 3 presents the Cultural perspective vs. the Neoclassical view on labour market; Section 4 emphasises the

results and discussion on the relationship between theoretical perspectives on the labour market, the internal market and European integration. Some final remarks conclude the paper.

1. The European Single Market and European integration

Prior to the establishment of the contemporary European Union (EU), the notion of the Single Market had already been a central objective within the framework of the European Economic Community (EEC). Consequently, the Treaty of Rome, establishing the EEC in 1958, intended to eliminate customs barriers and implement a common customs tariff (European Council, 2024). The provisions outlined in Articles 12, 95, and 30 of the Treaty of Rome encompass a range of regulations, including the outlawing of customs duties on imports, the forbidding of systems of internal taxation which differentiates against imported goods, and the outlawing of quota systems and measures. These stipulations represented significant strides toward facilitating the free movement of goods (McGee & Weatherill, 1990). The Treaty of Rome underlined the freedom of movement for individuals between Member States through Articles 48, 52, and 59, which extended this prerogative to both individuals and companies as beneficiaries thereof (McGee & Weatherill, 1990).

In subsequent years, the EU persisted in advancing its efforts towards the internal market, with a concerted focus on dismantling impediments to the free movement of goods and individuals. Hence, the formal establishment of the European Single Market took place on January 1, 1993, under the stewardship of the European Commission President, Jacques Delors. This important milestone presented the removal of internal border controls and the establishment of a unified economic zone (European Commission, 2024a). As previously mentioned, in terms of objectives, the European Single Market embodies concepts expressed in four fundamental freedoms: the free movement of people, goods, money, and services. More specifically, products, services, capital, and people may circulate freely within the internal market, allowing citizens to live, work, conduct business, study, and retire anywhere they chose in the EU. Additionally, it is noteworthy to highlight that the goals and principles of the internal market entail both benefits and drawbacks within the European framework. Certain favourable elements of the internal market encompass access to a multitude of suppliers of commodities and amenities within the singular market, decreased expenses attributable to economies of scale, and standardised regulations, norms, and requirements across the region, fostering the generation of additional employment opportunities, reduced pricing, and an extended array of commodities and facilities, alongside the opportunity to reside, work, pursue education, and engage in commercial activities across the European Union. (Eur-lex, 2020). However, critical perspectives also emerge highlighting adverse aspects of the European Single Market, and emphasising reasons for its

perceived failure to fulfil its intended objectives. For instance, there are concerns regarding the tendency of the internal market to foster social dumping, wherein businesses may seek to undercut or circumvent existing labour standards and regulations within the framework of free movement in the single market, thereby gaining a competitive edge over reliable enterprises (Jorens, 2022; Bernaciak, 2014). Furthermore, it is contended that the internal market's approach to competition fails to adequately account for market scale and incentives for innovation, with growing assertions that it serves as a tool for advancing protectionist agendas in industrial policy (Bauer, 2023).

Post-war European nation-states selectively aggregated their national sovereignty, or ultimate oversight of a body politic, to create European integration. It resulted in the European Union (EU), a successful example of international collaboration in modern history (Peterson, 2001). More specifically, European integration refers to the industrial, economic, political, legal, social, and cultural integration of states located in or near Europe. From a chronological perspective, European integration can be traced back to the inception of the European Economic Community with the Treaty of Paris in 1951, which established the decision to consolidate the coal and steel industries of six European nations. In addition to the Treaty of Paris, the Treaty of Rome in 1958 further reinforced the foundations of this integration and the concept of a shared future for the six participating European countries (European Parliament, 2018). Subsequently, a significant advancement in European integration was achieved with the Single European Act of 1986; this act included provisions such as the expansion of the European Union's powers through the establishment of a comprehensive internal market and the enhancement of the European Parliament's role (European Parliament, 2018). In 1993 the Maastricht Treaty revised preceding European treaties and founded the European Union upon three pillars: the European Communities, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and collaboration in the areas of justice and home affairs. Then, in 1999, The Amsterdam Treaty introduced essential modifications to enhance the Union's efficiency and democratic processes in anticipation of its expansion (European Parliament, 2018). Later, the Treaty of Nice and the Convention for the Future of Europe, signed in 2001, aimed to prepare the EU for its two Central and Eastern European enlargements in 2004 and 2007 (European Parliament, 2018). The Treaty of Lisbon, signed in 2009, changes how EU institutions work and decisions are made to be more appropriate for an EU that had grown to 28 members following additional expansions. It also reforms the EU's internal and external policies and, by giving the European Parliament additional legislative authority (Eur-lex, 2017).

In the context of European integration, it is worth discussing some theories that are attempting to explain this process. Neo-functionalism was a popular theory in the 1960's which emphasised the concept of spillover in order to explain European integration. The term spillover refers to how integration in one policy area puts pressure on integration in other areas. Furthermore, the idea of spillover is used to

articulate the role of supranational and subnational players in the integration process, since they put additional pressure on deeper integration in order to promote their interests (Hatton, 2011). Intergovernmentalism is another theory which stresses the fact that national governments of member states should be the most important players in the process of European integration, rather than being undermined as some of their sovereignty is delegated to the EU, but rather strengthened by it (Hatton, 2011). Intergovernmentalism opposes the idea of a self-perpetuating integration process, instead viewing European integration as the outcome of logical and measured negotiation among national governments, who balance the costs and advantages of cooperation in light of their national interests (Kuhn, 2019). Another explanation of European integration comes through the multi-level governance theory. This concept describes the fragmentation of authority across different levels of political authority. More specifically, authority and sovereignty in Europe have shifted away from national governments and toward supranational entities such as the EU and regional and local governments (Hatton, 2011). It appears that European integration is a process that has been built up over time, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, and requires continual and consistent interest and effort to attain and progress. As previously indicated, the development of the internal market was a significant catalyst for European integration. Furthermore, in the context of the internal market, free movement of people, which has resulted in significant labour mobility across the EU, has been and continues to be an essential part of achieving proper European integration.

2. Labour market considerations within the EU

The free movement of people is one of the four liberties incorporated within the framework of the Single Market, and it has shaped the way the European labour market looks like. The European labour market is characterised by its diversity and complexity, encompassing a broad spectrum of industries, occupations, and labour market policies across its Member States. With the onset of globalization and the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC), European nations witnessed heightened trade integration and economic interdependence. This has resulted in the restructuring of industries, the emergence of new sectors like services and technology, and shifts in the composition of the workforce (Huberman & Lewchuk, 2003). In 2023, the European labour market exhibited its lowest level of fragility since the financial crisis of 2008, marked by a reduction in EU unemployment to below six percent and a concurrent rise in the vacancy rate to nearly three percent (European Commission, 2023a). The simultaneous occurrence of low unemployment and a significant number of job vacancies and labour shortages shows a continuously tight labour market notwithstanding the slowdown in economic activity (European Commission, 2023a). In the first half of 2023, employment growth was notably robust in the construction and IT-related services

sectors (European Commission, 2023a). Conversely, contact-intensive service activities witnessed less vigorous employment growth, while the arts and entertainment sector remained stagnant. Additionally, the manufacturing sector experienced sluggish growth in its labour force (European Commission, 2023a).

Since the free movement of workers is a fundamental component of the European Single Market, it facilitates labour mobility and allows businesses to attract talent from across the EU to satisfy labour demand (European Commission, 2023b). Eliminating obstacles to labour mobility within the internal market enhances economic efficiency by enabling workers to relocate to areas or countries where their skills are needed, thereby alleviating labour shortages and mitigating job skills mismatches (Ilzkovitz et al., 2007). In 2021, 1.4 million individuals relocated from one EU country to another, marking a 10% increase compared to 2020, a year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurostat, 2023). An analysis based on previous residence indicates that in 2021, Germany received the highest number of immigrants from other EU member states, followed by Poland, Spain, the Netherlands, and Romania (Eurostat, 2023). By 2022, Romania had the largest proportion of its nationals residing in other EU countries (24% of all EU citizens living in another member state as non-nationals), surpassing Poland and Italy. Additionally, it is notable that in 2022, EU countries collectively issued nearly 3.5 million first residence permits to non-EU citizens, reflecting an 18% increase from 2021 and a 14% rise compared to pre-COVID-19 levels in 2019 (Eurostat, 2023). It is important to highlight that work was the primary reason for residence permits in 2022, along with family and educational reasons. In 2022, the highest share of permits issued for employment was recorded in Croatia, followed by Romania and Malta (Eurostat, 2023).

Labour mobility within the internal market plays a crucial role in shaping European integration by promoting economic convergence, social cohesion, and political unity among EU member states. Although concerns about the effects of free movement (and immigration from outside the EU) have emerged as significant political issues in some countries, the economic impacts have generally been positive (Porters, 2015). Destination countries have experienced modest macroeconomic and fiscal benefits, while sending countries have also gained. Surprisingly, the negative labour market impacts have been minimal (Porters, 2015).

From a legislative perspective, residing and working within the internal market is governed by an extensive array of directives and regulations applicable to both EU and non-EU citizens. A selection of these will be highlighted below. *Regulation (EU) No 492/2011 on the right of EU workers to move within the EU* benefits both individuals who prefer to work elsewhere in the EU and the societies that receive them. It allows the first group to exercise their right to free movement and improve their personal and professional circumstances, while the second group can fill employment gaps and skill shortages. *Directive 2014/54/EU on measures facilitating the exercise of rights conferred on workers in the context of freedom of*

movement for workers' demands national authorities to guarantee that judicial processes are available to all EU workers who believe they are discriminated against in some way. Furthermore, organisations, associations, trade unions, and employer groups participating in the directive's application may represent or assist EU workers and their families in any legal action they may take. *Regulation (EC) No 883/2004 on the coordination of social security systems* establishes common norms for protecting social security entitlements while moving between the European Union (EU), Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland. *Directive (EU) 2021/1883 – conditions of entry to and residence in the European Union of non-EU nationals for the purpose of highly qualified employment* regulates the entry and residency conditions as well as rights of highly skilled third-country nationals and their immediate family members. *The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning Recommendation* guarantees that every kind and degree of qualifications are covered throughout the EU, including those obtained through higher education, vocational education and training, and general education, as well as those provided by private sector and international sector organisations.

Similarly, the free movement of people within the internal market has influenced the European employment legislative context. This strategy encompasses various provisions that shape the structure of the European labour market. From Social dialogue, Youth employment support and social economy and inclusive entrepreneurship to Rights at work, Long-term unemployment and public employment services, the European Employment Strategy seeks to create more and better employment opportunities across the EU (European Commission, 2024b). A brief examination of the rights to work, which significantly contribute to the European labour market and the free movement of people within the internal market, reveals that these rights encompass regulations related to health and safety at work, labour law, and anti-discrimination measures in the workplace. Labour law, in particular, covers aspects such as minimum standards for working conditions at the European level, transparent and predictable working conditions (Directive (EU) 2019/1152), adequate minimum wages (European Commission, 2020), or the Work-life Balance Initiative, which addresses the work-life balance challenges encountered by working parents and caregivers (Directive (EU) 2019/1158).

3. The Cultural Perspective vs. the Neoclassical View on labour market

In 1989, Jon Elster proposed an intriguing contrast between Adam Smith's *homo economicus* and Emile Durkheim's *homo sociologicus*. In this regard, the former is motivated by future benefits, whereas the latter is encouraged to act through inertial elements (Elster, 1989). As a result, *homo economicus* is thought to be directed by instrumental reasoning, whereas *homo sociologicus'* behaviour is influenced by cultural norms (Elster, 1989). This interesting distinction properly

illustrates the differences between the Cultural and Neoclassical perspectives on the labour market.

Defining culture is complex; however, it can be described as the knowledge and behaviours that characterise a specific group of people (Heyes, 2020). Within this broad definition, culture has traditionally been the domain of the humanities and social sciences, where various experts have studied and compared the language, arts, cuisine, and social habits of different human groups (Heyes, 2020). Austen (2000) posits that, in general, culture influences the value and importance individuals assign to different labour market actions and outcomes. Furthermore, specific elements of culture, such as social norms, help delineate the boundaries within which individuals pursue their culturally defined objectives in the labour market (Austen, 2000). Austen (2000) highlights Di Maggio's (1994) classification of cultural factors, which can be used to explain the connection between culture and economic decisions. The described effects are constitutive and regulatory; the constitutive effects of culture shape individuals' economic behaviours through the categories, understandings, and values that culture provides. A notable example is how culture influences individuals' perceptions of their self-interest and their preferences for various labour market activities or outcomes (Di Maggio's, 1994). He also addresses the regulatory effects of culture, wherein social norms, morals, laws, and conventions set boundaries on the pursuit of culturally defined objectives. In conventional economic behaviour models, these cultural effects are particularly evident in how they regulate individuals' pursuit of self-interested goals (Di Maggio's, 1994). According to a cultural perspective, individual preferences are endogenous, which means they are influenced by their environment (Austen, 2000). This viewpoint emphasises the relationship between an organisation's culture, structure, and employees' ideas of self-interest. The investigation of internal labour markets implies that such structures support employees in internalising organisational norms. For instance, Austen (2003) emphasises the fact that social norms of fairness can have a large impact on wage determination, possibly more than skills, education, training, and labour supply. Wage structures that do not reflect social norms of justice may be perceived as unjust, resulting in decreased worker effort and productivity. Societal pay structure decisions might have an impact on employment figures. Employees' worries about fair salaries may encourage employers to offer wages that reflect these perceptions, affecting business profitability. Wage changes caused by market pressures unrelated to productivity are frequently regarded as unjust. Workers' perceptions of fair compensation differentials across occupations can also have an impact on unemployment rates and how occupational labour market's function (Austen, 2003).

The primary critique of the cultural perspective on the labour market originates from the neoclassical viewpoint, which will be examined further in this discussion. Additionally, other critics argue that the cultural perspective overlooks various factors influencing labour market outcomes, such as labour policies and

institutions, as well as the gradual evolution of employment rates and working hours over time (Alesina et al., 2005). Nevertheless, research has found a positive link between culture and labour market outcomes. For example, beliefs toward women's roles in family life and leisure have been found to be statistically and economically important determinants of women's employment rates and average working hours (Giavazzi et al., 2009). Furthermore, religion as a cultural background has a substantial impact on an individual's chances of becoming an entrepreneur (Nunziata & Rocco, 2011). Protestantism, in particular, increases the likelihood of entrepreneurship when compared to Catholicism (Nunziata & Rocco, 2011), and there are significant differences between young Orthodox and Catholic individuals in terms of the relation between their desire to be entrepreneurs and their willingness to take risks, need for achievement, and capacity for creative thinking (Popescu et al., 2019).

As previously outlined, the *homo economicus*, related to the Neoclassical view, appears completely formed, with preferences determined, is engaged, independent (Nelson, 1993), adjusts to new circumstances, and always strives for improvements (Elster, 1989). The environment has no impact on it; it is simply the passive material over which its rational mind exercises control. He engages with society yet is not impacted by it (Nelson, 1993). The neoclassical paradigm, rooted in the principles of marginalism, established the foundational concepts of economic theory within labour market economics. Marshall's model of a partial competitive labour market, characterised by the interaction of market supply and demand, is derived from the concept of diminishing marginal labour product. Smith's notion of the "invisible hand" efficiently allocates work tasks according to their marginal product values and ensures that labour markets are cleared comprehensively (Brozova, 2015). The neoclassical standpoint examines human behaviour through aims that are considered as independent from the individual's culture; more particularly, human conduct is not seen as a product of culture, language, or norms, but rather as the consequence of a distinct set of individual interests (Mayhew, 1987). Furthermore, Mayhew (1987) underlines the idea that assuming that because most individuals, most of the time, reason in a reasonably rational manner with the knowledge available to them, the behaviour patterns, institutions, and culture of any given group are also rational, or reasonably so, constitutes a logical error (Mayhew, 1987). Therefore, the neoclassical paradigm rejects the validity of social norms. The importance of norms is disputed either by arguing that individuals will only be driven by their own self-interest (Hicks, 1963) or by arguing that the norms themselves may be justified by the self-interest of those involved (Austen, 2000). Contrasting the cultural perspective, the Neoclassical economic approach often implies that preferences are independent of the decision-maker's cultural surroundings. This viewpoint holds that preferences are consistent across individuals, and that any observable variation in behaviour between people or communities over time or location can be explained by examining price and income considerations (Stigler and

Becker, 1977). In line with this perspective, people from various cultures participate in different activities or develop and sustain different institutions because they perceive different benefits and costs associated with comparable actions (Stigler & Becker, 1977). Predictably, the primary criticism of the neoclassical perspective on the labour market arises from the cultural standpoint. In this regard, Austen (2000) argues that the cultural viewpoint on issues related to labour markets recognizes that individuals' behaviour in the labour market is influenced by their culture. It includes a knowledge that language, categories, traditions, standards, and other characteristics of culture influence an individual's assessment of alternative options and objectives, and they also impact his or her view of valid and viable action (Austen, 2000). The cultural critique isn't that the neoclassical understanding of the labour market is wrong, but rather that it is insufficient because it does not account for societal norms that impact individual behaviour. Neoclassical analysis implies straightforward rationality, in which individuals behave to maximise utility while minimising costs. Culture and the rules that govern behaviour, on the other hand, are far more complex (Book Reviews, 2007).

4. Results and discussion

Conceptualising the European labour market from a theoretical perspective is a complex task. It is well acknowledged that the labour market within the EU has been profoundly influenced by the internal market, particularly through one of its four fundamental freedoms, the free movement of people, especially their workforce. Both the Cultural and Neoclassical perspectives on the labour market provide genuine and valid viewpoints on how the labour market operates and exists. However, considering the numerous efforts undertaken over time to facilitate the free movement of people and their workforce, it can be argued that the EU labour market tends towards a Cultural perspective. More specifically, considering the multi-state nature of the EU, all the existing and aforementioned directives, regulations, and recommendations related to the labour market, including EU labour law, are made possible by a shared heritage within the European context. Furthermore, this common heritage among EU member states has developed due to a shared historical trajectory over time and mutual interests, especially economic, but also including cultural ones. Despite the differences among EU member states, a shared context of existence has gradually established a common framework of social and cultural norms. These norms can support the conceptualization of the European labour market from a Cultural perspective. Elements of the labour market, such as the establishment of minimum wages and clear working conditions, likely reflect social norms of fairness. Consequently, as long as there are provisions within the labour market that reflect specific social norms accepted and adhered to by all EU member states, the EU labour market can be situated within a cultural theoretical framework. This raises the question of whether viewing the EU labour market

through a cultural theoretical perspective has facilitated European integration over time. The answer is likely affirmative, as European integration has been supported not only by economic and judicial motivations but also by common cultural foundations. These cultural elements are evident in the conceptualization of the EU labour market and the free movement of the workforce. For instance, according to a Eurobarometer Opinion survey in 2013, free movement was regarded as the foremost achievement of European integration by European citizens, with 56% identifying it as the EU's most positive accomplishment, even surpassing peace between Member States (EB79.5, 2013).

Although this paper frames the EU labour market within a theoretical cultural perspective, emphasising that this approach has facilitated European integration over time, it also acknowledges certain limitations. Two primary limitations are as follows. Firstly, the paper only examines two theoretical perspectives on the labour market, omitting other viewpoints such as the Institutional view, Human capital perspective or Behavioural economics standpoint. Secondly, it might be argued that the differences between EU member states are so significant that a common cultural ground could hardly exist. Therefore, they might contend that the numerous directives, regulations, and EU labour law provisions were established solely based on individuals pursuing their personal interests through cost-benefit analysis.

Conclusions

The European Single Market originated from a desire to strengthen the European community, shaping it into a significant economic, political, and cultural entity on the international arena. Essentially, the Single Market has acted as a catalyst for European integration by promoting the free movement of individuals, goods, services, and capital within the Union. These freedoms, known as the four core freedoms, are fundamental to the internal market and apply to all EU member states. This paper focuses on the free movement of people, which has significantly influenced the European labour market. The European labour market exhibits characteristics that reflect the internal market's impact, notably the extensive efforts made over time to align the labour and labour mobility interests of all EU member states. Furthermore, both the Cultural and Neoclassical perspectives on the labour market offer insightful and valid viewpoints on its formation and existence. In brief, the Cultural perspective highlights that cultural norms significantly shape the labour market by influencing individuals' attitudes, behaviours, and expectations regarding work. In contrast, the Neoclassical perspective posits that human activity is driven by goals that are independent of individual culture, viewing human behaviour as not being a product of cultural influences. The common cultural heritage and shared European identity, which have established specific social and cultural norms, allow the European labour market to be viewed through a theoretical Cultural Perspective. However, this paper also acknowledges its limitations, as there might be valid

arguments for framing the European labour market within a Neoclassical perspective as well.

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