
UNIT 1 INTRODUCING EARLY MODERN WEST

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the term ‘early modern west’;
- understand different features of the early modern west;
- understand the different features of the politics and the civil society of the early modern west;
- understand how the relationship between the individual and collective was shaped in this period;
- understand how the printing and commercial revolution shaped up in this period; and
- understand the nature of social structure of this period.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The term ‘early modern’ gained currency in historiography in 1970s. The famous works of historians Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1972), and *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe* (1978) and Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975) clearly indicate the wide use of the term. It describes a period between medieval and modern period of history in the context of European history and is a response to problem of

periodisation. It may appeal more to those interested in the study of society, economy and popular culture which cannot be satisfactorily examined and explained within the narrow boundaries of monarchical reigns or national events. Although, we still study 'Renaissance' but many scholars objected to the use of term which they argued often had more elitist or literary/artistic connotations and which was seldom used in main European countries (England, Germany, France). Reformation, as a religious reform movement, was more truly a European phenomenon, which engulfed and spread over large geographies in Europe. How does 'modernity' unfold in Europe? It is generally seen by the historians as a long period of change between Middle Ages and the Rise of Modern West. It involved a transition from feudalism to capitalism, from hand crafts to mechanised industrial production, use of animate form of energy to inanimate fossil fuels as source of energy, from religious uniformity to secularism and freedom of worship, from dark ages to scientific rational age, from decentralised polities to centralised nation states and empires and from restricted, elite dominated politics to notions of natural rights, freedom, equality, popular politics and creation of a 'public space'. These themes give some coherence to term 'early modern' but problems persist as we will see.

1.2 PROBLEMS OF DEFINING EARLY MODERN WEST

The term 'early modern' relates to the problem of periodisation. How do the historians divide the long span of past time into specific ages or periods? Periods are divided in different ways. The reign of a monarch or family is one way, for example, 'Tudor England' refers to the time when England was ruled by monarchs from the Tudor family. Historians also talk about particular chronological periods in their descriptions as a narrative tool to generalize about that specific period, such as 'the Sixteenth Sixties', which refers to the decade of the 1660s – and this sense duration of time may stretch to say to include the late 1650s and the first years of the 1670s. A key feature of periodisation is, thus, that each historical period has some elementary features of society, culture, politics and ideas that give the time an underlying unity and set it apart from earlier and later times. These traits of time may not fit neatly into the historians demarcation of time period. This attempt to fix convenient dates of a beginning and an end dates is not easy. For example, who can say with certainty that when does the Middle Ages end and when the Early Modern age begin. The beginning of the early modern and thus the end of the medieval period (also called the Middle Ages) has been associated by historians with a set of terms. The first book in English to have 'modern' in its title was Leonard Digges's. Elementary changes occurred in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Speaking linguistically, we may also say that The 'early modern' was the period when 'modern' was introduced and assimilated into English usage. The first publication was *Arithmetical Military Treatise* (1579) which included a long section on 'modern military' matters.

Before we look into the main attributes of the early modern period in the West, there is another conceptual difficulty related to space or geographical dimension. What do we mean by the 'West'? It is difficult to know exactly where to draw the boundaries of 'the West'. Oceans, seas, mountains and rivers define natural geographical boundaries but there is no natural, geographical feature that clearly marks the East and the West. Can we define it in the same way just as we can define the dates of the early modern period by certain historical social attributes?

Each European national history has different trajectories, at least, in terms of political history and episodes and their colonial histories or history of empires are different again. So where are the point of convergence? History of the West is a history or rather histories of many different countries. Instead of one coherent history, there are a series of discontinuities and divisions. If we speak of transnational or global history, separating the West from the rest of the world is not possible. European overseas colonialism from the sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century has been formative of the history of the West. The two cannot be separated.

1.3 THE DEFINING FEATURES OF EARLY MODERN WEST

In the field of ideas, this time saw a rekindling of interest in the writings of scholars from ancient Greece and Rome and a new weight given to the use of observation as the basis of knowledge. This series of developments, called the Renaissance, in turn led to new idea of liberal humanism that defined men (not women! but White men of the West or Europe and not the Asian and the Blacks !!) as the engineers, maker of their own history, creators of empires, and masters of language and knowledge. The new way of observing nature and experimenting as tool of knowledge, though still in rudimentary form in the early modern period, also emerged as is evident in the model of the solar system with the sun at the centre while the planets revolved around it, proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543). The spread of these new ideas was aided by the development of printing using movable type, devised by Johannes Gutenberg (c.1398–1468) in the 1450s. There was also a significant change in the economy, with a decline in the number of people holding land under the feudal system. Instead of getting access to land in return for military service or unpaid labour, farmers paid rent in goods or money. In religion, the power of the Catholic Church was challenged through criticism of its theology and practices, which ultimately led to the emergence of new Protestant churches. Finally, around the same time, Europeans discovered cultures beyond Europe; the best-known voyage was that led by Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) which began the colonisation of the Americas.

1.3.1 Lack of Single Power Centre

When we speak about the history of the West either in early modern phase or later when full-fledged modernity emerged, it can be argued that no single power ever gained supremacy for long. This left permanent, long-lasting imprint on the making of the West. There were a number of power centres and no political entity with a common purpose. The historical experience of the Western World has been one in which a plurality of city states, small regional states, territorial empires, and later nation-states dominated with none ever gaining total supremacy and none enduring for long. These polities had differences in terms of economy, social structure and culture but they also exhibited significant similarities. There were frequent wars between the various powers of the West but some sort of balance of power system also evolved since 1648. There were conflicts between church and state in various countries But they were also able to achieve an accommodation between their respective claims. It was an accommodation in which the state got an upper hand at least in a few powerful absolutist states in

the early modern period. But as there was no single centre in inter-state relationship, There was also a lack of single institution/centre within society which could control the entire society.

1.3.2 Strong Tradition of Civil Society

The absence of a powerful institution within societal order was due to a strong tradition of civil society which became quite pronounced in the early modern West. This was a legacy of the Middle Ages itself. Feudalism could not prevent the local powers from winning rights against the nobility and setting limits to the centralization of power. Feudalism was based on decentralized power structure and a polity of mutual obligation. So, even after the emergence of absolute monarchs in a few states, the ruling elites had to negotiate and share power with organized civil society groups, such as merchants, craft workers, the intelligentsia, and later organized workers. This segment was most developed particularly in the autonomous cities. There the demands of organized guilds and civil society held back the growth of absolutism. The structure of power institutionalized by feudalism gave a foundation to legal and symbolic relations of mutual recognition whereby the ruler had to grant rights to those lower down in return for their obligations. This was a legacy which could not be wiped out in the early modern West. The history of early modern West demonstrate this continuity in the form of civil society movements which played a major role in shaping the direction of societal development. The legality of any political order was always open to questioning from those who did not accept its legitimacy. This undoubtedly had a democratizing effect in the long term.

Moreover, the relation between the present time and the past was from very early on in the history of Modern West can be seen in terms of continuities and discontinuities. There are many legacies that can be traced back to the Middle Ages. But there are also periodic ruptures which produce change. Within Christianity disputes over the scriptures and ecclesiastical authority were not new. Primary domain of the Church was supposed to be spiritual but it was enjoying wide powers in medieval period in terms of landownership and worldly privileges. So as a powerful social institution entangled in profane world, tensions were bound to emerge, which Max Weber claimed to provide the West with the basic momentum towards rationalism. The movements that shaped the later history of The West, from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and Enlightenment, shared this propensity towards the disconnection of the present from the past. To be sure, the Reformation and the Renaissance saw the present as deriving its legitimacy from the revival of an older past that if retrieved would allow the present to break free from the recent past. This spirit of rebirth or revival of a more ancient mentality was nonetheless a denunciation of the preceding age. The later and more utopian movements of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, in bringing a more future oriented dimension in the form of idea of progress to the forefront. This is how continuity was achieved to a large degree through rupture, which made possible the reconstruction of the past in new forms.

1.3.3 Contest between Individual and Collective

Then there was a contestation between quest of individual and collective liberty. It has been widely regarded that the idea of the individual was invented in the West. It was central to Christianity, in the pursuit for individual salvation; it was

the basis of the Western philosophy and ethics. While the notion of the individual as such cannot be exclusively attributed to the West, since similar ideas can be found in other ancient civilizations, what is perhaps more characteristically Western were the political implications that followed from the discovery of the individual. The emphasis on the individual later lent itself to the philosophy of liberalism and to the capitalist ethic. But the kernel of idea was discernible in the Calvin's idea of the Calling during Reformation. The concept of the *Calling* was a religious conception, that of a task set by God. However, Weber argues that the concept of the Calling was a new idea, a product of the Reformation, and a Protestant notion. The concept of Calling that was new involved the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume. This gave every-day worldly a religious significance and the individual was to fulfill the obligations of his or her position in the world in order to be acceptable by God. According to Weber, while the concept of Calling was first developed by Luther, he was not all that friendly to capitalism or the capitalistic spirit, and a more traditional view of economic activity came to dominate Luther's teachings – opposition to capital and profit-making and acceptance of one's occupation and work as a divine ordinance. Such a view was not conducive to a radical shift in approach to economic activity, in contrast, the teachings of Calvin, Wesley and others were also concerned with the salvation of the soul, but these teachings had consequences that were unforeseen. Weber argues that for reformers such as Calvin, the Puritan sects, and for men like Menno, George Fox, and Wesley saw the clearest expression of the Calling in a manner that had connections to the development of the capitalistic spirit. That is, the teachings of these writers were not directed toward ethical culture, humanitarianism, social reform, or cultural ideals. But the unintended consequences of their teachings included spurring on the development of the capitalistic spirit. The most widely known groups in this tradition are the Huguenots of France, the Calvinists of Geneva, the Reformed churches of Holland, the Puritans of England and New England, and the Presbyterian Church in Scotland and North America.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How do you define the early modern west?
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- 2) What were the implications of different power centres for the early modern west?
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- 3) How do you see the individual and collective in the early modern west?

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1.4 CULTIVATION OF A GLOBAL ORIENTATION AND THE AGE OF GEOGRAPHICAL EXPLORATION

The Early Modern West saw a trend towards the cultivation of a world orientation, a kind of cosmopolitan outlook. Gradually, people were moving towards a conception of globe as a political and cultural entity, larger than their own homeland. It was still marked by a need to negotiate with “others” and has reflected tensions between home country and colonies. At least, some sections of elites were becoming familiar with what was different, and outside home country. Although the ‘other’ was often seen as something to fear, to attack, to colonise, to dominate or to keep at bay. The Western powers were not the only ones who developed an interest in other peoples, but it is arguably the case that curiosity about other cultures was taken further in the West. There was extensive borrowing of the culture of others, as has been much documented in recent years by the global historians. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the most salient aspects of the Western science and technology were derived from other civilizations. The Western civilization was itself constituted through centuries of cross-fertilization from other cultures, especially those of the East and the Mediterranean. Central to all of this was of course colonial expeditions and expansion of the Western Powers. While not all of European ventures to the furthest corners of the world were colonial ones, many were and this was one of the main ways in which the West related not only to the non-Europeans world but also to itself. The map was not a West European invention, but it was in Early Modern West that sophisticated cartographic techniques were developed that made it possible to think of the world as a globe. The European discovery of what became known as America was the single greatest event that shaped the formation of the Western worldview. Unlike the encounter with Asia, the encounter with America took the form of a ‘discovery’ that challenged the assumptions of a world ordered by Eurasian civilizations. It opened the way for the emergence of the wider category of the West, which ultimately reduced the place and significance of Europe. The explorations began by the Portuguese and Spanish sailors aided by the kings of their country. Beside wealth in the form of silver and gold and control of spice trade, military glory and spread of Christian beliefs were their main motives. A number of technological factors contributed to their success. With the help of instruments like magnetic Compass, Astrolabe and with better cartography (a science of map-making) and shipping, they were able to reach new lands where they fulfilled their ambitions. The *caravel*, was a kind of improved ship designed by the Portuguese. Its triangular sails allowed the ships to sail against the winds. This technique was learnt from the Arabs. The magnetic Compass was invented by the Chinese and Astrolabe by the Greeks.

The Age of Exploration as it was called also suggest that religious and worldly affairs were closely connected in the Early Western mind. This found expression in the phrase ‘God, Glory and Gold’.

1.5 TRADE, COLONIES, AND MERCANTILISM

Led by Portugal and Spain, European nations in the 1500s and 1600s established many trading posts and colonies in the Americas and the East. A colony is a settlement of people living in a new territory, linked with the parent country by trade and direct government control. With the development of colonies and trading posts, Europeans entered an age of increased international trade. Colonies played a role in the theory of mercantilism, a set of principles that dominated economic thought in the seventeenth century. According to mercantilists, the prosperity of a nation depended on a large supply of bullion, or gold and silver. To bring in gold and silver payments, nations tried to have a favorable balance of trade. The balance of trade is the difference in value between what a nation imports and what it exports over time. When the balance is favorable, the goods exported are of greater value than those imported. To encourage exports, governments stimulated export industries and trade. They granted subsidies, or payments, to new industries and improved transportation systems by building roads, bridges, and canals. By placing high tariffs, or taxes, on foreign goods, they tried to keep these goods out of their own countries.

1.6 THE GROWTH OF SLAVE TRADE

Another offshoot of the Age of Exploration was emergence of large scale slave trade. During the last half of the fifteenth century, for example, about a thousand slaves were taken to Portugal each year. Before the age of exploration, there were slaves who served as domestic servants. The demand for slaves changed considerably, however, with the discovery of the Americas in the 1490s and the establishment of sugarcane plantations. Cane sugar was introduced to Europe from Southwest Asia during the Middle Ages. During the sixteenth century, plantations, large agricultural farms, were set up along the coast of Brazil and on islands in the Caribbean to grow sugarcane. It led to an increase in demand for labour. The small indigenous or AmeriIndian population had been wiped out died of epidemic diseases imported from Europe. Thus, African slaves were shipped to Brazil and the Caribbean to work on the plantations. In 1518, a Spanish ship carried the first boatload of African slaves directly from Africa to the Americas. During the next two centuries, the trade in slaves multiplied and became part of the triangular trade that marked the emergence of a new world economy. The pattern of triangular trade connected Europe, Africa and Asia, and the American continents. European merchant ships carried European manufactured goods, such as guns and cloth, to Africa, where they were traded for a cargo of slaves. The slaves were then shipped to the Americas and sold. European merchants then bought tobacco, molasses, sugar, and raw cotton and shipped them back to Europe to be sold in European markets. An estimated 275,000 African slaves were exported during the sixteenth century. Two thousand went every year to the Americas alone. In the seventeenth century, the total climbed to over a million and jumped to six million in the eighteenth century. By then the trade had spread from West Africa and central Africa to East Africa. Altogether, as many as ten million African slaves were brought to the Americas between the

early sixteenth and the late nineteenth centuries. This institution was considered to be natural until Quakers, a group of Christian reformers, began to oppose it.

1.7 PRINTING AND NETWORKS OF INFORMATION

Then there was a new system of spreading information already in existence. Two of the key events which defined the beginning of the early modern period were linked to ideas. The first was technological: the development of printing using type. Ideas had been circulating in manuscript for centuries, but the printing press provided an additional means of reproducing texts in very large numbers. Books were produced in both cheap and expensive editions. The production of cheap editions, coupled with the increasing numbers of people who were able to read and write meant that people from across society were reading – the rich, the middling and even some working people had access to books and ideas. Printing affected all areas of life. For example, the availability of cheap books would have had a big impact on religion and culture. For the spread of the Protestant ideas, books and pamphlets were crucial. Reading and writing had existed in the European Middle Ages and Asian Empires but they remained restricted activities, largely limited to the clergy and the medieval scribes' who tirelessly copied and re-copied. The peasantry and most of the populace still lived by orality, although they did have what Illich calls "lay literacy," which was an awareness of the existence and importance of books and deference to the authority of written documents, even if they themselves could not read them. Literacy remained an elite privilege, and until 1500 CE, most likely not more than 10% of the world population could read or write.. What changed then, in the Early Modern West, of course, was the arrival of Gutenberg's printing press and movable type. Until Gutenberg's invention, the only way to reproduce text was copying by hand, a laborious task. The printing press made books a mass commodity, and for precisely that reason, literacy became a mass phenomenon. The social history of 'Book' has been traced by Roger Chartier. Standardized typefaces made reading an easier activity, because readers no longer had to deal with the idiosyncrasies of another person's handwriting. The errors so frequently made by scribal copyists were eliminated, and thus thousands of people could have access to the same, presumably error-free "standard edition" of a text. This introduced new modes of production, transmission and reception of written word. It also brought into life new categories of 'author', 'book' or 'work' and helped to create 'communities of readers' and 'libraries'. Although measuring literacy in pre-industrial societies and early modern Europe is a daunting task, but spread of literacy cannot be doubted although the same 'text' could have been appropriated and understood differently by different social groups. The geography of literacy indicate higher literacy in North and North-West Europe, however, there were inequalities across gender, occupations and estates. literacy was predominantly linked to a person's work and status. Then, the Early Modern West had interlinked system of communications. West Europe was considerably more networked than other parts of the world due in part to its navigational rivers, trade routes, centres of learning from monasteries to universities, translations, map making, the early development of printing and the techniques for the manufacture of paper etc. The bourgeois culture of modernity, as Seigel shows, was based on networks that facilitated its diffusion.

1.8 THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN EARLY MODERN WEST

The Society constituted of three major social orders in the Middle Ages — the clergy, the nobility and lower rank of the peasant or serf-cultivators and artisans.. The estates or orders of medieval Europe were unequally ranked and this hierarchy of ranks was legally recognized and approved by religious-normative order of the society. It is an over simplified view of social structure as there were significant variations within each social strata in terms of access to wealth, power and resources. Nobility was differentiated from within which included kings with big, estates, many castles and palaces to minor nobles with a small estate and may be a single house. It also leaves out merchants, traders and manufacturers: groups which grew in numbers and importance over the early modern period. But contemporaries thought in terms of ranking of society in these terms. Here are two definitions of the structure of society. Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), a novelist and social commentator, in an eighteenth-century newspaper. described it poetically as follows showing finer variations in terms of wealth or social produce one has entitlement to in society:

The great, who live profusely.

The rich, who live very plentifully.

The middle sort, who live well.

The working trades, who labour hard but feel no want.

The country people, farmers, &c., who fare indifferently.

The poor, that fare hard.

The miserable, that really pinch and suffer want.

Although nobles continued to dominate the social elite in the Early Modern Western society, owning much of the land and wealth, they were also joined in the social elite by wealthy merchants and bankers. Some merchants were much richer than the nobles. The society started undergoing a slow, long transformation. This transition process has evoked a lively debate within the scholars but one thing is certain that the institution of serfdom weakened in Western Europe and peasant cultivators were no longer a homogenous social group. Society was also divided along gender lines. Early modern Europe was a patriarchal society, where men held greater power than women but it depended on class location also. Men dominated the worlds of trade and of politics, but women were confined to domestic domain and kitchen. As mothers, they may have exercised some emotional power over their children. Wealthy women of nobles and rich merchants ran large households, and some of the wives of nobles looked after their husbands' estates while they were away on business or at war.

1.9 COMMERCIAL REVOLUTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The Commercial Revolution of late Middle Ages had profound impact on the society as is evident from the rise of fairs, to the physical expansion of cities, the increased output of books, and the growth of population and urbanization. It is estimated in 900 C.E. Western Europe had only about 1% of its population living

in cities with more than 10,000 people; by 1500, the urbanization rate for Western Europe stood at over 8%, with peaks of over 10% and 20% in the Netherlands and in Belgium, respectively. The medieval “commercial revolution”—was simple expansion of trade but it should not be confused with the Early Modern commercial or financial “revolutions” in the Low Countries and England (involving the long term development of the bourse, exchange banks, joint stock companies, and so on). The invention, diffusion, or earliest perfection of holding companies, of cashless transactions using bills of exchange, of contracts for marine insurance, and of advanced bookkeeping techniques including so called “double entry” accounting, practices facilitated the expansion of long distance trade, international banking, and commercial and industrial partnerships. The desire for merchant credit and decreased transaction costs in long distance trade led to the use of moneys of account and the creation of the earliest instruments of international finance; the most fundamental of the latter was the “bill of exchange”. It was a multi party payment order executable in a foreign currency in a distant location. This was invented in Northern Italy, widespread already in the fourteenth century, and in use — largely unchanged — until the eighteenth. Cashless exchanges had occurred at the fairs, on the basis of obligatory letters. The bill of exchange was revolutionary because the issuer could thereby order a distant third party to pay the debt in another currency, which allowed the bills to circulate widely and function as instruments of both credit and transfer in international trade. Now, merchants pooled capital and shared risk to enrich themselves and their polities, utilizing the infrastructure and markets that they helped to make, and creating new legal and financial instruments to facilitate their ventures.

1.10 SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND UNIVERSITIES

Then the role of institutions and institutional change is always important as an underpinning factor in any social change. The Early Modern period saw not only economic transformation in Western Europe, but also the establishment of the first universities — first one was established in Bologna in the 11th century. Then fifty more in the emerged following four centuries. There was also the development of formal legal institutions and state administrative systems. probably, these educational and legal institutions played some role in promoting economic activity. Huff (2003) argues that the European university was an institution that was uniquely suited to promoting technical change, and that the rise of universities can be seen as an important institutional turning point in the history of European science. But it is a doubtful conjecture and perhaps an exaggerated statement. The initial universities such as Bologna had close affinity with Medieval Islamic centres of learning, although they had acquired some corporate features and privileges and legal status. Outside Universities, academic degrees accorded by them were not an entitlement to practice any particular profession. For example, the study of theology was not a pre-condition or eligibility for priesthood in Church. Only gradually, university degree became a marker of professional elites engaged in the cure of souls, legal practice, government administration and medical care and education. Universities in Early Modern period provided education mainly in arts, theology, law and medicine and not in disciplines like architecture, ship-building, agriculture, veterinary-medicine and military technology.

- 1) Did the invention of printing bring about changes in the way knowledge was shared and circulated?

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- 2) What was the impact of the commercial revolution on the early modern west?

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1.11 LET US SUM UP

We have seen that how with the end of Middle Ages in the Western Europe, a period of transition set in. This period of transition to modernity was long and slow and the pace of change varied from country to country. It entailed changes in almost all aspect of social life-religious beliefs, trade and human settlement, economy, social institutions, mode of communications and relationship with non-Western world. In the Early Modern times in the Western Europe, trade had expanded, towns had grown in number and size, and a new, more sophisticated society had emerged. In large parts of western Europe feudalism, with its fragmented power-structures, began to erode. The Unit has highlighted some singular features of this change. In later units we will learn more about this social metamorphism in greater detail.

1.12 KEYWORDS

Renaissance: Literally means ‘rebirth’.Refers to the period in early modern Europe when there was a revival, development and flourishing of classical arts and learning. This led to notions of humanism and individualism which challenged the medieval and feudal world views.

Reformation: The process of reform in organised Christianity where the hegemony of orthodox church and the pope were challenged.

Periodisation: The notion of dividing a particular phase in history in terms of its well defined characteristics. This can lead to debates and controversies as different scholars highlight different features of a period and adopt different classificatory terms. For example the controversy over the term feudalism in India.

1.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 1.2
- 2) See Sub-section 1.3.1
- 3) See Sub-section 1.3.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 1.7
- 2) See Section 1.9

1.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

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