

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this work was to analyze, from the perspective of social representations, the question of the historical construction of Mexican identity, based on the dynamic interaction between popular culture and the so-called "high culture", which has been producing in recent times, a syncretism that contributes to the psychosocial debate related to the problem of defining the Mexican national character. To this end, a documentary investigation was carried out, analyzing texts that address the historical problem of the definition of Mexican national identity, from an approach that puts culture at the center of the issue, as it is considered that this has been a significant element in the different national projects emanating from various political administrations over time, for the construction of a Mexican identity. It was found that the socioeconomic heterogeneity, typical of an unequal society like the Mexican one, has been a factor that has prevented the consolidation of a national character that provides the social cohesion necessary to configure a national identity project that is the basis of the country's development in different areas.

KEYWORDS: social representations, culture, identity, national character, Mexico

INTRODUCTION

What is the function that culture plays within the process of consolidation of a developed society? To answer this question, it is necessary to address different important ideas that will allow us to fully understand the complex phenomenology associated with a question of this type. Firstly, it is essential to recognize that "culture is at the base of social integration and, therefore, is the essential factor of national identities" (Estrada 2010, 455), which requires approaching a deep understanding of the concept of culture, which distinguishes it from the popularly rooted belief that culture refers only to the fine arts or expressions related to aesthetic manifestations, both from academic currents and from popular ones that arise from people's need to describe themselves and show themselves to the world, as identity groups differentiated from others.

Culture must be understood as a much broader dimension than that which has to do with artistic expressions, although these, of course, are a manifestation of it, if it is recognized that art is one of the many ways of materializing or objectifying the culture of a civilization. That is, culture includes the arts, but is not limited to them, but, on the contrary, is built and developed before them, but it is also nourished by the contributions of its artistic and in turn, feeds back to them, in an extremely complex process that, for its understanding, requires transdisciplinary approaches that include Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, History and Politics.

Culture is autonomous, in the sense that it develops in a field independent of other spheres of society such as Economy or Politics, and is not limited to being only an analytical dimension of the social practices of a group, but, by understanding it as a repertoire of codes, values and symbolic references, the logic of a symbolic structure can be attributed to it that distinguishes it from the structuring principles and practices of these other dimensions (political, economic, geographical, etc.), which gives it its own phenomenology that allows study and understand it based on its particular dynamics (Farej 2023).

On the other hand, culture is also transversal and integral, in the sense that its influence on the practices of social groups can be observed in all its spheres, and although it is feasible to assume the existence of specific cultural worlds that operate with a logic differentiated from the rest (religion, education, art, work, politics, democracy, etc.), all of them have a root derived from shared values, principles, practices and references that contribute to building a more or less homogeneous worldview that favors cohesion. of the group (Giménez 2016).

Furthermore, culture is not limited to being a symbolic reference that promotes this cohesion, but is exercised through the interaction between the members of the group, which produces ritualized behaviors and practices that are produced, reproduced and transformed intergenerationally to feed the group of references of a shared origin, a vision and traditions that, as a whole, contribute to the formation of a collective identity that can influence the way in which relations between members are carried out, and in the way in which the group he sees himself and distinguishes himself from others (Florescano 1998).

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

Understood in this way, culture is positioned as a phenomenon that has great significance and relevance in the life and development of communities, because it becomes a reference for the construction of an identity that fosters the cohesion necessary for the people of a community to recognize themselves in others, and, derived from this, achieve the understanding and awareness that this shared identity can become a strength to face challenges together, as well as to recognize the common past that feeds the traditions, customs, values and worldviews that favor the feeling of belonging sufficient to work cooperatively for collective progress.

But culture is also spirit, in the sense that that feeling of belonging, those traditions and customs, and that worldview are substrates for the expression of emotions, perspectives, historical positions and even protest demonstrations against injustice and needs. Culture, in this sense, is materialized through a diversity of expressions that have the intention of describing and making the identity of a nation known to the world; their passage through time and space, and their vision of things, including, of course, cosmogony and the ways of narrating history and the future (Jia and Kretteneuer 2017).

This materialization of cultural expressions is what can be called "art", in a broad sense, since art can be understood as a means to channel the set of emotions, values, principles and worldviews of a community, which, as has been said here, is the result of the influence of culture on people and in the way in which they build the interaction relationships that give rise to a nation identified and distinguished from others. Art, however, is not a monolithic phenomenon, but, on the contrary, is as dynamic as culture itself, since contexts and social relations change, and, with this, so do needs, expectations, and Kumar's own identity (Singh 2022).

Thus, art and culture are phenomena that feed each other, since art emerges from the culture of its time and space, but, in certain situations, it can become so powerful and so influential in the worldview of the nation, that it can modify cultural structures and patterns, and, with it, also the dynamics of identity construction. In that sense, certain artistic currents, in their different manifestations (literature, painting, music, cinematography, etc.), can drive changes in the way people perceive themselves; in what they want to be and in their imaginary expectations (Anhejer 2020).

The periodic emergence of certain artistic currents can, in this order of ideas, mark breaking points in the cultural continuum that foster the development of identity transformations that represent a tension between tradition and the emergence of new values and new ways of understanding the world. This dialectic has been a constant in time and space, and has favored the development of cultural expressions that have been able to shape the way in which societies define themselves, and, as said in previous paragraphs, have influence in different social spheres, such as Economy, Politics or Education (Bound et al. 2005).

The role that culture plays in a society is, then, as crucial as it is in a person's ability to build and define an identity that allows them to know themselves based on their strengths, their values, their principles, their past and their expectations for the future. Just as a person who has not been able to consolidate an identity may experience difficulties in functioning in the world, by not being able to identify their position and role in it, a nation that does not consolidate its identity may present social problems linked to the lack of cohesion, collaboration and a sense of belonging, all of which is essential to move towards progress (Oztabak – Avci 2019).

The Mexican case, for example, can be understood in that sense, since, since it originated as an independent State, it has experienced a variety of difficulties in finding a common factor that represents the different identities that make up its nation, since the different national projects that have attempted over time to consolidate a legitimate vision of what it means to be Mexican, have not produced the expected results, and it has only been possible to move from one attempt to another, without, to date, there being a widely accepted reference (Béjar Navarro 1988).

The objective of this work is to analyze this phenomenon from the study of the dynamics of interaction between the so-called "high culture" and "popular culture" in Mexico, to try to find in it a source of shared values and worldviews that contribute to the debate on the question of Mexican identity, in a context in which the influence of globalization on culture adds a special complexity, due to the emergence of feelings of identification with cultures of other nations, thanks to the development of information technologies.

For this objective, social representations will be taken as an analytical framework, since it is considered that, above all, identity is a social representation of culture, with the understanding that the symbolic nature of culture can be manifested through the representation that a nation makes of it, and that art, both popular and academic, are also representations of that culture, understood from different perspectives, in accordance with the social conditions of the different population groups in the country.

Thus, the work will be divided as follows: the first section will be dedicated to addressing the model of social representations, pointing out its most important theoretical elements, and extending the analysis to its usefulness as a method of approaching social reality. In the second section we will talk about culture as a social representation, with the aim of having a reference to understand how the identity of a nation can be built from the representation and objectification that its members make of culture.

Towards the third section, the question of the different projects throughout history will be analyzed, which have attempted to define and build a Mexican identity based on the influence of the dynamic sociopolitical contexts of each era. Finally, the fourth section

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

will address how, currently, the Mexican identity still under construction can be understood based on the existing dynamics between popular culture and high culture, framed by a context of cultural diversity and openness, typical of the influence of globalization.

Social representations as a model for understanding reality

In order to understand the influence that culture has on the construction of individual and collective identities, it is necessary to recognize that, above all, an identity is a representation of a set of values, principles, ideas, norms and worldviews that have been manifested contingently in the attitude that an individual or a community takes with respect to the world. That is, identity is the result of the experiences that individuals have accumulated throughout their lives, and that have served as a reference to apprehend the world, the objects in it and the relationships between one individual and another (Saaida 2023).

These experiences have provided individuals with elements to be able to identify the different situations they face as part of the natural dynamics of interaction in the world of daily life, and, consequently, respond to them in the most convenient way, according to their needs, abilities and interests. As the learning derived from these experiences becomes a consolidated and coherent heritage, it is possible to affirm that an identity has been defined in substantive terms, understood as a posture towards the world, built from what each individual considers relevant to present themselves to others, based on attributes and capabilities that allow them to interact satisfactorily with those situations (Moscovici 1986).

However, it was said that the manifestation of such an attitude is contingent, because it is possible that it may vary as new situations are experienced, there is access to more and better information, structural changes occur, or there are developments within new social circles that have the potential to modify the way of understanding oneself and the world. In other words, although identity at a certain stage of life may be constituted by a well-defined core, the peripheral elements are susceptible to transformation and, with this, so does the vision of things (Jodelet 1986).

Now, it was said that identity is a representation, because people, being social entities that interact not only with other people, but with structures and institutions, recognize objects in the world from those interactions, as sources of knowledge that provide information to identify, codify and specify the qualities of those objects. Therefore, the objects of the world are represented, that is, re-presented, that is, re-presented to achieve their understanding and interact with them according to the way in which such representation has been subjectively formed (Moscovici 2008).

However, the social part of the representation is given by the fact that no individual is isolated from the world, and, on the contrary, is subject to the influence of the attitudes of other individuals, and macro structures such as politics, education, religion, the economy and others. Then, the accumulation of experiences of each individual, as well as the things they learn and know, come from social dynamics, so, although the attitude they present and, therefore, the identity they have built, manifest themselves individually, in reality, everything that has contributed to defining them comes from social interaction (Jodelet 1986).

A social representation, in this sense, is a bridge between the subjective and the objective, since, on the one hand, it is produced individually in people's minds, but, on the other, the mental process to construct it receives a significant and constant influence from the interaction with the social world. It is a mechanism that allows subjects to identify objects in the world based on their own configuration of the information they receive from them; It is, in short, a way of interpreting the world and interacting with it based on one's own definition of it, based on experiences and transformations in contexts (Moscovici 1986).

The process of representing the world and its objects develops through three mechanisms: micro genesis, onto genesis and socio genesis. The first has to do with the interaction that occurs at the most basic level of communication, that is, the exchange of ideas, perspectives and positions that occurs in face-to-face encounters with people. When two people communicate, they reciprocally influence their worldviews, they learn from each other and they know and recognize each other, with which the stock of information increases and consolidates (Estrada 2010).

This interaction has the potential to modify the attitude and worldview, while the information that is exchanged can be so relevant that it leads to a modification in the way of understanding the world. For example, when a teacher teaches his class, the information he communicates to his students can help transform their attitudes toward the world, as well as their knowledge of it. The same thing happens when a scientist presents the findings of research: the people who listen to him can transform their representation of things (Estrada 2010).

Ontogenesis, on the other hand, refers to the individual process that each person experiences in their intrapsychic environment to define an image of objects, that is, a representation. This process consists of configuring the information received from outside to create a code with which it can relate to the object in question, and, derived from this, can identify it to begin interacting with it. Ontogenesis has the potential to modify the attitude and therefore the identity of a person to the extent that the configuration of information is dynamic and strong enough to overcome previous mental structures. Otherwise, new information is anchored to such structures to incorporate and adapt it to what is already recognized, with which the individual integrates the newly acquired knowledge to previous bases and, in that case, reaffirms an attitude (Estrada 2010).

Finally, sociogenesis consists of the construction of representations collectively, which occur when a community receives similar guidance regarding information about certain objects, such as education, religion or political ideologies. The promotion of

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

certain values, narratives and axioms by institutions such as the State, the Church or political parties contributes to the sociogenesis being successful, in the sense that more and more individuals feel identified with them and perpetuate them (Estrada 2010).

Thus, microgenesis is a moment in which the influence of sociogenesis can be identified, since, based on a person's way of behaving and expressing themselves, it is possible to identify the framework they use as a reference to understand the world and, with it, to define their identity. At the same time, microgenesis can cause ontogenesis to modify or reinforce attitudes and identities, therefore, the three mechanisms operate dynamically and simultaneously, building a framework whose result is an identity, both individual and collective.

Social representations fulfill the role of making the abstract concrete; to transform the vastness of the world into something accessible to people, making a relevant distinction between the sphere of scientific logic and that of common sense, since, according to Moscovici, it is through common sense that people apprehend the nature of objects, define them, interpret them and codify them to give them a meaning, that is, a representation of how the object is perceived by the person in question (Jodelet 1986).

Due to this condition of subjectivity, it is possible for the same object to be represented in a variety of ways that may be contradictory to each other, because the way in which each person interacts with the object may be different and, therefore, the experiences of each person may also be different and produce different attitudes in them. In that sense, the wealth of knowledge, experiences and information that each subject possesses contributes decisively to constructing the meaning of the object (Moscovici 1986).

This process is known as "anchoring"; and it consists of the new objects being mentally molded so that they fit into some of the consolidated mental structures of the individuals, in such a way that the configuration made of the information received from that object inserts it into the pre-constructed categories of images and objects to be able to identify it, understand it and express a corresponding attitude. Of course, the greater the adaptation capacity and mental flexibility of individuals to carry out this anchoring process, the more likely it is that more and better categories will be produced that allow them to define objects more substantively, and avoid prejudices and generalization fallacies (Moscovici 1986).

On the other hand, the diversity of ways of representing the same object depends largely on the social groups to which each individual belongs, since the values, worldviews, attitudes and practices that are fostered in them can be a significant reference for each member to guide their perception of things accordingly. Social class, religion, the place where one lives, the type of education received or nationality can influence the way of seeing things, since the idiosyncrasy that is promoted in each context is different. For example, it could be assumed that the son of a successful businessman will have a different representation and attitude towards the market economic system than the son of a worker in an underdeveloped country (Jodelet 1986).

In all cases, however, for the social representation of an object to occur, and consequently the individual to express a corresponding attitude, it is necessary to cross three fields: information field, representation field and attitude field. The first consists of the set of formal and informal information that the individual has received regarding the object. This includes education, the media, books, interactions with other individuals, and any other source from which all types of data (real and fallacious) come that provide the individual with information about the object to begin to encode it and build a defined image (Moscovici 2008).

Of course, not all the information that the individual receives is used to construct a representation, but rather, in the field of representation, it is filtered, hierarchized, configured and ordered to produce a defined image. This mental process is influenced, as stated, by the individual's membership in certain social groups, and by their psychic trajectory, that is, by the set of emotional and cognitive experiences that have made them build mental structures and categories so that the anchoring of the new object occurs. It is at this moment when the meaning of the objects makes sense for the individual and the representation, itself, occurs. At the end of this stage, you already have a well-defined image of the object (Jodelet 1986).

Once the representation of the object is made, and also based on the individual's psychic trajectory, an attitude is produced, that is, a posture with respect to the object. This position, naturally, may or may not be favorable to the object, so that, depending on it, the individual will express behavior that is coherent. If the object is represented in negative terms, the behavior will be critical and even antagonistic, while, if the representation is favorable, the individual could adopt the object and its functions as part of his or her daily life and practices (Moscovici 1986).

Whether the representation of the object is favorable or not, the corresponding attitude will become part of the individual's identity, since the issuance of value judgments about things intervenes in the process of defining it. Favorable attitudes define preferences and tastes, which guide behavior towards desirable and pursued things, scenarios, expectations and practices, while unfavorable attitudes will define what one wants to avoid and what one does not want to interact with. In both cases, representation is relevant, because it will guide behavior, and, with it, the repetition of behaviors and the consolidation of worldviews that, in short, will influence to produce an identity that, as said, can change in the periphery, maintains a consolidated core (Jodelet 1986).

Culture as a field of information for the definition of identity

Until now, the question of culture has been purposely left aside, because it was considered pertinent to address it until now, once the theoretical assumptions of the model of social representations have already been presented. It was mentioned that the membership of individuals to certain social groups significantly affects the way in which they represent objects, because each of them shares and

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

promotes certain values, worldviews and guiding principles of behavior. It was also said that the vastness of information they receive is filtered, hierarchized and configured based on said belonging and subjective psychic trajectories. It is pertinent now, then, to link both things with culture, since, as noted in the introduction, culture is transversal, autonomous and has the potential to materialize in representations.

This means that the processes through which individuals construct representations of things are guided by the way they understand the world, the objects in it, and the relationships with other individuals and with political, economic, and social structures. In other words, through culture, well, as described in previous paragraphs, culture is, precisely, a way of understanding the world through interactions with the objects and subjects that make it up, so that, when representing objects, a representation of culture is actually being made (Coteli 2019).

The above is affirmed, because, if culture is a way of understanding the world, the representations made of it must be connected to that understanding, as a transversal source of knowledge of things and the relationships between them. Therefore, when an individual creates a representation of some object, he is appealing to his culture; to your way of seeing the object and assimilate it with the knowledge you have (anchoring) and transform it into an accessible and defined image (objectification). In short, to the collection of principles and values that make up its identity, from which a clear relationship can be established with the culture to which it belongs (Moscovici 1986).

It was said at the time that during the process of microgenesis it is possible to identify the culture of an individual through the way in which he expresses his ideas and interacts with other individuals, while language is a way of objectifying culture, since it is a way of narrating and representing worldviews. Analogously, in other expressions of social life it is possible to identify the objectification of culture, since, being transversal, it manages to exert influence on any practice and sphere in which social subjects are involved. Thus, in art, politics, education, religion and education, elements of the culture and the group to which each individual belongs can be traced (Espinasa 2010).

However, the plurality of groups, with its consequent axiological influence on its members, leads to recognizing the existence of a similar diversity of cultures, as each one is understood in a different way, as noted in the previous section, with respect to social representations. In that sense, if the attitudes and identities of individuals are representations of culture, and there are several identities, there must also be, in addition, different cultures, which makes it essential to make a distinction between the singularity and plurality of the concept of culture (Estrada 2010).

In other words, in order to approach in greater depth the understanding of the influence that culture exerts on the process of constructing an identity, it is necessary to consider that we must speak of "cultures", instead of "culture", due to what was mentioned above, with respect to the objectification that each social group makes of the information field within which culture is inserted. Being more specific, it would be pertinent to introduce at this point the notion of "concrete cultural worlds", which refers to the dynamics, identities, values and worldviews shared between members of a spatially and temporally delimited group, which substantively distinguishes them from others and are a guiding model of behavior and purposes (Espinasa 2010).

A concrete cultural world is autonomous, in the sense that it develops its own vision of how to carry out the interaction between its members and their members with the rest of the world, and follows a logic oriented by particular purposes that feed the motivations of its members to reproduce the group's identity and turn it into a referent of agency. Likewise, shared history provides a framework of belonging that provides members with certainty regarding their origins, their way of doing things and their way of sharing practices and traditions that include the use of a common language, and, in the case of towns, of artistic, gastronomic, architectural expressions and other reference models for collective identity (Espinasa 2010).

The daily development of the members of a specific cultural world, within the referential framework of practices that that world promotes, consolidates the sense of belonging that feeds the identity and promotes the development of the group, and, in certain contexts, can lead to super specialization, in the sense of focusing excessively on the dynamics of the group, that the other cultural worlds become so alien that they can be represented as strangers, which could contribute to reinforcing identity in the sense of opposition: I am, because I am not you. (Estrada 2010).

However, none of the specific cultural worlds is isolated from others, so the interaction between them can produce dynamics that, on the one hand, promote collaboration, mutual understanding and even syncretism, but, on the other hand, it is also feasible to assume that, depending on the rigidity of the identity construction and the worldview associated with it, tensions are generated that could eventually represent a source of risk to coexistence (Estrada 2010).

Derived from this, it is possible to speak of specific cultural worlds that manifest themselves, for example, in work culture, political culture, educational culture, financial culture, Mayan culture, Inca culture, Roman culture, etc. Each of them is a specific cultural world, because the individuals who interact within the referential framework of values and practices that are promoted in them distinguish them from other cultures, and, to a greater or lesser extent, according to social representations, it affects their identities, and, with it, their way of understanding the world and responding to the different situations that arise (Estrada 2010).

This recognition of the existence of a plurality of cultures that, in certain situations and contexts, could become not only symbolic distinctions, but also operational ones, in the sense that their visions and interests are antagonistic, can represent a problem

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

in achieving or maintaining the cohesion necessary for a society to work and develop harmoniously on its path to comprehensive development (USDS 2005).

Therefore, the role of institutions such as the State, the Church, the Market or the media, in that sense, has consisted of the administration of difference to manage possible tensions that could arise between specific cultural worlds with different visions. This administration, which pursues stability and order, however, has led to the hierarchization of cultures and the hegemonic structuring that has favored the synthetic division of societies into “majorities” and “minorities”, with the consequent unequal distribution of resources and influence in the different spheres of government (Bentriz 2023).

Also, this attempt to preserve order and social stability through the management of identity differences has contributed to the distinction of “high” cultures (those related to the fine arts and hegemonic cultural expressions promoted by academic and political elites), and “low” or “popular” (those related to the dynamics that arise in the daily social interaction of the majority of the population), which could be associated, in certain contexts, with a set of symbolic practices of exclusion and elitism. In this order of ideas, the issue of symbolism is crucial, because, when interaction dynamics associated with class distinction occur, in terms of symbols of superiority and hegemony, it can contribute to the construction of social representations of otherness linked to segregation and contempt for some specific cultures and cultural worlds, which can represent an obstacle to coexistence, and generate feelings of resentment and antagonism between groups, which are potentially risky for the stability of society. (Morales et al. 2021).

Culture and symbolism have a close relationship, since, from a Bourdian perspective, culture is a habitus that is reproduced with practice and generational transmission through the family, school and other institutions through codes (symbols) that are internalized by individuals to build an identity. These symbols are objectified through language, behavior, clothing, product consumption and preferences for cultural goods, all of which, according to Bourdieu himself, can be linked to social class (Pajtinka 2014).

Likewise, the spaces in which cultural practices are expressed contribute to the distinction between “high culture” and “popular culture”, since the former is disseminated in museums, theaters, concert halls and other more academic or institutional venues, while the latter is disseminated in the diversity of common settings that make up daily life in the streets, markets, squares, neighborhoods, etc. This spatial distinction is important, because it feeds the meanings that social representations of culture produce, and that create meanings regarding the identities of the people who usually enjoy one or another type of it. That is, the dynamics that are experienced in each type of space contribute to shaping the behaviors and worldviews that one has with respect to oneself and others, and, with it, cultural differentiation (De la Vega 2010).

The different circles (specific cultural worlds) that individuals from different social classes frequent contain their own symbolic codes that feed and consolidate a vision of the world, which includes their stratification and division into sectors to which the symbols themselves endow them with qualities that distinguish them as “high” and “low” culture, therefore, the power and influence that the highest social classes have allows them to place their circles and cultural goods in a higher category from which the quality of the products is symbolically defined. themselves, and, with it, also, an implicit hierarchization of identities, which defines them as “elite” and “popular” (Estrada 2010).

This cultural hegemony, associated with social class, can manifest itself in the different concrete cultural worlds, since, as has been said, the transversality of culture makes it ubiquitous, which implies that, in the way of speaking and dressing, as well as the spaces that are frequented, the type of activities that are carried out, and even the places in which food is consumed, it is possible to identify the existing link between culture and social class that has been artificially constructed as a consequence of the sectorization of culture in “high” and “low” (Espinasa 2010).

Even more serious is the fact that, among some circles in societies such as Mexico, there is a belief that not having access to the spaces, knowledge, enjoyments and practices that are common to the upper classes, makes a person “uneducated.” That is, the cultural hegemony of the upper classes has contributed to the construction of social representations that relate “high” culture to culture itself, so that those who do not belong to those classes do not possess culture because, from that perspective, they do not have the knowledge of cultural goods that the elites do.

In other words, the elitist division of culture into “high” and “low” has led to only identities related to the first being worthy of being considered “cultured,” while the others are symbolically devoid of that attribute, which, in turn, is linked to segregation practices that belittle the contributions made to culture (understood as a universal accumulation of knowledge) by the specific cultural worlds that are exercised in “popular” spaces.

Thus, the social representations associated with this distinction tend to be stereotypes that reinforce inequality, classism and other reprehensible practices such as racism or xenophobia. In the particular case of Mexico, this hegemony of culture has particularly affected the many ethnic groups that inhabit the country, since their identities and cultures, despite the different state efforts to vindicate them in national projects, continue to be the object of contempt and prejudice, not to mention the aggravating factor that many of their communities suffer from great deficiencies that undermine their quality of life (Villanueva 2019).

Therefore, it is important now to talk about how, at different times in Mexico's history, attempts have been made to build a national identity that, while defining the Mexican people in their transition towards progress and modernity, maintains the link with their Mesoamerican roots. The situation becomes more complex today, because the influence of globalization on culture has led to

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

the emergence of new identities and the consumption of overseas cultural goods, all of which represents a challenge for these national identity projects.

Mexican cultural identity as a modern problem and unfinished nation Project

At this point, it is worth asking another question: is there a peculiar way of being of the Mexican? That is, is it possible to speak of a “Mexican culture,” such that it can be characterized to speak of Mexicans as a whole and distinguish them from other peoples and other cultures? The answer to this question can be given by resorting to the comprehensive sociology of Max Weber (2002) and his ideal types, which, as is known, allow us to build models of objects in order to interpret their senses, meanings, and, in terms of what has been written so far: their social representations.

Guided by this strategy, and making a methodological effort to build a model that allows us to speak of “Mexican culture” ideally, it is necessary to take into consideration that, as said in previous paragraphs, a culture is, in reality, constituted by multiple concrete cultural worlds that result in cultures, in plural, and that, in the case of the intention to address the possibility of identifying a Mexican culture that contains the different worlds that operate within the national territory in order to characterize and distinguish it from Other times, it is necessary to recognize that the ideal type that is constructed will not be able to include all of the specific cultural worlds that coexist in the country, and that what is shown as “Mexican culture” will be the result of an interpretative selection of qualities common to Mexican social practices, influenced by history, institutions, the hegemony of social classes, and costumbrismo transmitted intergenerationally (Villanueva 2016).

Thus, the result will then be an unfinished phenomenon that can be reconstructed as many times as social dynamics motivate it, maintaining, however, a core that serves as support for the periphery that mutates depending on the evolution of time and space. Of course, the intervention of the institutions, as has been said, is crucial for the definition of this phenomenon, since part of that process consists of presenting and promoting it in the world for political and diplomatic purposes, so the selection made for this will have an important pragmatic nature.

Recognizing the above, it should be noted that, as a space within which multiple identities and specific cultural worlds coexist, the selection that the State makes of a “national culture” will necessarily be guided by hegemonic criteria, since since it is unrealistic for this national identity to encompass all the expressions of the cultural worlds that develop within the territorial space that corresponds to the State, the pragmatic result is to present a national culture defined from what the State wishes to present, and that desire will materialize through criteria determined and agreed upon by a group of intellectual elite linked to official interests (Villanueva 2022).

These criteria are promoted through education and official narrative, through study plans and programs, commemorations, museography, the exaltation of historical figures and dates, and other propaganda resources that have the purpose of highlighting certain aspects of the identity that the State intends to be internalized by the population in the form of “national culture.” However, the natural political changes of democratic systems mean that the arrival of new administrations brings with it changes in that narrative and those figures, energizing the process of defining national identity (Anhejer 2020).

This dynamic, however, does not leave aside the question of a dialectical relationship between hegemonic cultures and relegated or minority cultures, the result of which can decisively intervene in the consolidation of a national culture. If this dialectic produces a synthesis in which the hegemonic culture manages to impose itself almost absolutely over the relegated cultures, to the point of eventually excluding them from political agendas and public perception, then the dominant culture will be considered the undisputed reference of national culture, to which is associated the quality of being a finished and consolidated State and nation (Bound et al. 2005).

Por otra parte, si de esa dialéctica surge un estado continuo de resistencia por parte de las culturas relegadas, el discurso de la cultura dominante no terminará por imponerse, favoreciendo el desarrollo de tensiones que contribuyen a la falta de identificación y sentimientos de pertenencia entre segmentos significativos de la población, lo que dificultaría la consolidación de la definición de una cultura nacional, y, por lo tanto, de un Estado igualmente consolidado (Farej 2023).

De manera especial, puede observarse una correlación entre los Estados que históricamente han tenido problemas para definir y consolidar su identidad y cultura nacionales, y el hecho de que hayan entrado de manera tardía al sistema mundial capitalista de la división internacional del trabajo, pues ello les ha condicionado significativamente “para lograr acceder a una situación de relativa madurez societaria” (Béjar Navarro 1988, 29) que, entre otras cosas, ha propiciado “la conformación de un pueblo todavía no totalmente hecho” (Béjar Navarro 1988, 29).

The above does not mean, by any means, that the path to the consolidation of a national culture and identity is the imposition of a hegemonic culture, to the detriment of those cultures considered minority, since that would be a practice tending to ethnocide. The path must be guided by the recognition of the elements common to all cultures that coexist within a national space, and by the freedom for each of them to develop and participate in the national project, contributing strengths, knowledge and traditions that manage to merge in a multicultural and multiethnic melting pot, especially in nations whose history has been marked by miscegenation and cultural syncretism.

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

Given this condition, it is necessary to propose another question: what is the importance for a nation-state to present and promote a national culture linked to an identity? The answer to this can be approximated when it is recognized that “human history gives many examples of how pseudo-knowledge about the character and behavior of specific human groups serves as a basis for groups or nations to carry out actions of conquest, subjugation and exploitation over others” (Béjar Navarro 1988, 19).

In other words, the importance of defining and consolidating a national culture has to do with the fact that it promotes the cohesion and sense of belonging necessary for a people to function successfully in the competitive and rapacious international dynamic, in which the power of some cultures favors their hegemony over others and gradually absorbs them, which, at the end of the day, would produce their extinction until forming a monoculture convenient to the market logic that prevails in contexts such as globalization, at the cost of the loss of cultural wealth. of those nations that are not hegemonic, and that the advance of that monoculture slowly erases (Florescano 1998).

Given this, States aim to build a national culture that reflects the strength of their identity and allows them to survive in this context of rapacity. However, for countries like Mexico, the issue has not been simple, since the problem of defining national identity has existed since the very birth of the independent nation, when the chaos derived from internal political revolts made it difficult to work in that area definitively, during practically the entire 19th century. The Pax Porfiriana, however, allowed, at least for a brief period, to dedicate academic and intellectual efforts to the consolidation of that identity, which underwent a new turn after the outbreak of the armed conflict of 1910, which brought with it a new national identity project based on the social principles derived from the Constitution of 1917, with which it was expected that the long-awaited definition would finally be achieved (Estrada 2010).

However, as early as 1950, Octavio Paz (1998) noted in “The Labyrinth of Solitude” that the Mexican nation was going through an identity crisis derived from what he considered was a rejection of its mestizo origins, the result of the perception of the illegitimate birth of a people between a traitorous mother (Malinche) and an invader from another culture. This people, since then, according to the same author, has tried unsuccessfully to find an identity that allows it to consolidate itself as a nation worthy of presenting itself to the world and moving towards progress without masks, and without the feeling of finding itself alone in a labyrinth full of frustrations, anxieties, fears and, above all, self-denial.

It was said that 1950 was an early date, because, when the aforementioned work was published, not much time had passed since the armed conflict derived from the Revolution had ended, which sought to transform the social, economic, political and cultural structure of the country through the ideals that were reflected in the Constitution of 1917, but that, by then, it was beginning to be seen that this would not be the case, and that the problem of the identity of the Mexican was not going to be able to be resolved through the nationalist principles that the Revolution and the governments emanating from it they tried to establish themselves in society (Béjar Navarro 1988).

These governments gave great importance to culture and education, knowing that a nation that sought to achieve development could not achieve it if it did not first define itself, with the understanding that culture is the basis of the social cohesion necessary for that purpose. For this reason, an attempt was made to ensure that the conception of the post-revolutionary Mexican nation was based on the social values that the armed struggle supposedly achieved for the benefit of the people, especially the peasants and workers (De la Vega 2010).

Among these values, one of the most important was to recognize itself as a multicultural nation in which different ethnic identities had a place, and, as a result of this recognition, a robust and consolidated national identity was built. These ideas were mainly promoted by José Vasconcelos, who, taking the Soviet cultural model as a reference, tried to promote cultural knowledge of the different regions of the country in the country through, for example, instruction in dances and typical dances in schools, which would allow young people to identify the country's folkloric diversity. At the same time, Vasconcelos' literacy campaign included the dissemination of classic works of thought, and the promotion of cultural activities, such as the arts, and the use of the nascent radio to make educational content known to the population (Béjar Navarro 1998).

This project, of course, was framed by a nationalist conception of culture and education, since it was hoped to take advantage of the momentum of struggle and social consciousness that the Revolution had awakened. It was thought that the best way to build a revolutionary national identity was through promoting the sense and pride of belonging to a nation with a rich ancestral culture, a working class with social security, and a body of intellectuals and academics working on the same page (Estrada 2010).

Thus, as part of that nationalist spirit, many artists expressed in their works the vision they had of being Mexican, and how the Revolution would become a crucial point of national identity. In that context, the muralist movement was so representative that to this day it continues to be a reason for dissemination in the world through Mexican cultural diplomacy. But literature also contributed to this identification through the emergence of the genre of the novel of the Revolution, producing transcendental works such as “Los debajo”, and others in tune with that context, such as “El llano en llamas,” which provided very important cultural elements for the identification of a national identity oriented by that situation (Espinasa 2010).

However, what Octavio Paz (1998) observed was that, little by little, these ideals were fading as the country began its transition towards modernity, and the peasants were little by little losing ground in the interest of public agendas, in the face of the

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

advance of a growing middle class that had other cultural preferences and another way of understanding Mexican national identity. In fact, Juan Rulfo's (2005) own work portrayed, in a certain sense, the disappointment of peasants with respect to the expectations of improvements in their quality of life after the Revolution, and how that nationalist spirit began to decline.

The middle class no longer felt identified with the caudillos or with the peasant struggles, and the entrance to the golden age of Mexican cinema introduced another type of characters, more related to the problems of urban family life, than, with the bucolic environment, which contributed to the revolutionary nationalist conception gradually turning towards another perspective, more focused on the environments of modernity, and on the spirit that the post-World War II context, with its industrializing vision, brought to the world (De Vega 2010).

In this context, and parallel to the modernization of the country, the more cosmopolitan education of the middle and upper classes motivated their cultural interests to be guided by the influence of more developed societies, such as North America, whose cultural influence in Mexico is notable. Gradually, the separation between what began to be identified as "high culture" and "popular culture" became greater, hand in hand with elitist practices and perceptions linked to hegemonic groups that relegated worldviews that were outside of what the different official models considered to be the national culture destined to be promoted in the world, as part of Mexican cultural diplomacy. However, the substantive issue is much more complex than an arbitrary distinction between types of cultural consumption, and this has had important repercussions on the construction of identities in today's Mexico, which is the object of analysis in the following section (Estrada 2010).

The social representations of what is Mexican from culture

It was said in previous sections that belonging to a group is a determining factor for the process of constructing social representations, while said membership provides particular experiences, values and worldviews that contribute to understanding the world and its objects based on how the group perceives itself and how it perceives others. This way of perceiving is linked to culture, since, as mentioned here, culture is the set of elements that dynamically construct the vision of things, so that culture is the main source of the information field within the process of social representation.

If we add to this the previously mentioned distinction between "high culture" and "popular culture", it is necessary to recognize that, although it is a typology built from the hegemonic vision of an elite, it is a factor that, in practice, can divide a society into two large groups, guided by the identification that individuals experience with one category or another. Derived from this, therefore, belonging to them would have to influence the way in which the social representation of objects is carried out, and, in tune with this, with the identity that is developed collectively.

The above leads to think that, when trying to define a national culture, the hegemonic institutions of the State could guide their definition by the values disseminated in one of the two types of culture indicated, according to the interest they have in matters of cultural diplomacy. That is, depending on the cultural model that guides political decisions in these institutions, the image of the national identity that is projected to society and the world may be influenced by the interest of aligning it with what is promoted within "high culture", or with what is promoted within "popular culture" (Giménez 2016).

Thus, if the official intention is to promote a national identity linked to "high culture", emphasis will be placed on those cultural products and industries related to that world, such as fine arts and institutionalized and recognized academies. If, on the other hand, one chooses to relate national identity to "popular culture", one would appeal to traditions, customs and expressions emanating from customary matters.

However, for the Mexican case, at least, the intention of the different state projects for defining a national identity, since that of José Vasconcelos in the revolutionary period, has been to integrate elements of both cultures to try to build a Mexican national identity that, on the one hand, identifies with modernity and the avant-garde marked by hegemonic cultural models in the world (mainly European), and, on the other, includes the ancestral popular traditions and celebrations that have been the result of the cultural syncretism of the colonial period. (Bentriz 2023).

As an example of this, it is enough to point out that Vasconcelos himself intended, when he was secretary of public education, that in public schools the classics of Greek philosophy would be studied, but that traditional cultures would also be promoted through the practice of regional dances, with the purpose of creating a national consciousness based on the richness of traditional Mexican cultural diversity, which went beyond the centralism that had previously governed public education (Béjar Navarro 1988).

This syncretic model has been, to this day, the basis of attempts to define a Mexican national identity, since, at the same time that the transition with the dynamic modernity of the world is promoted, the link with ancestral roots is maintained. In that sense, the identity that has historically been promoted in the world through Mexican cultural diplomacy has to do with the mix between the magnanimity of "high culture" and the richness of Mexican popular practices (Estrada 2010).

Evidence of the above is muralism, a current that, supported by the most rigorous academic artistic criteria, was dedicated to presenting the Mexican reality of its time, as happened with the novel of the Mexican Revolution from the field of literature. That is to say, these elements, which have historically been a tool for promoting the country's image abroad, are the result of the dialectic

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

between “high culture” and “popular culture,” as are gastronomy and dance, with Amalia Hernández's ballet being a praiseworthy example of the latter.

But at the societal level, that is, speaking of what has to do with the dynamics of everyday interaction, does this syncretism also occur? Or is there a tension between the identities of the two types of culture? In other words: one thing is what state institutions intend to promote, and another is what happens in daily practice. In that sense, the distinction between “high culture” and “popular culture” can become more significant, given that, speaking in statistical terms, the second is more plausible to identify among the common denominator of the people, since it is accessed in a more direct and simple way, since it is experienced in the daily life, while, to access the first, due to a certain elitism that surrounds it, it is necessary to enter spaces and circles that are not always within the reach of the socioeconomic level of many people.

This difference between the two can lead to a kind of tension, while “high culture”, as already mentioned, is usually presented by institutions as a model of national culture, relegating the cultural expressions of the majority of the population to the realm of the artisanal, the exotic or even the vulgar, since “popular culture in opposition to hegemonic culture is a structure that is built and energized from the themes that arise from the daily experience of the people subjugated by the elite, but which does not reach, more than incidentally, to express themselves in one or another isolated product of literature, painting, music and crafts” (Béjar Navarro 1988, 28).

This means that considering “high culture” as the foundation of what is presented to the world as national culture is to leave aside the set of values, preferences and worldviews of the majority of the population, which would not be appropriate to link that national culture with the common identity. Furthermore, due to socioeconomic differences, the exclusion of popular cultural expressions from the representation of national identity can lead, of course, to elitism, but also to classism, racism and other practices that are detrimental to the social dynamics, especially in a multi-ethnic and multicultural country like Mexico.

Given this scenario, in which the predominance of one culture has led to the rejection or relegation of popular cultural expressions, it is possible to understand why a part of the Mexican population represents its culture through identities related to foreign cultures. That is to say, this dynamic of exclusion has caused many people to not feel identified with those practices emanating from the popular, considering them vulgar or unworthy of being presented to the world. Instead, these people prefer to consume cultural products from nations whose hegemony is proven, and whose influence in the world is undeniable (Florescano 1998).

In fact, what is presented to the world through the institutions of cultural diplomacy has more to do with the influence of these other consolidated cultures than with what is actually consumed in the country. That is to say, the image that is presented of Mexico in the world is associated with fine arts, but the type of culture that is massively consumed is of a different type. For example, according to the music platform Spotify (<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZEVXbO3qyFxbkOE1>), the four most listened to musical exponents in Mexico so far in 2025 were Toto Double P, Fuerza Regida, Calle 24 and Natanael Cano.

These figures support what was stated by Béjar Navarro (1988), regarding the fact that the cultural consumption of the majority of the population is not taken into account for the official projection of national culture, but rather what is politically and diplomatically convenient for the formation of an image of the country abroad is presented, which leads to a discrepancy between what is intended to be represented as a national identity, and what it really and substantively is.

This is what Paz (1998) was referring to when in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* he spoke of Mexican masks as a metaphor for the attempts that Mexicans make to disguise what they are trying to escape from without becoming aware that there is no escape for what is found within oneself. This is, then, a problematic issue that concerns not only the majority of the population, but also the institutions, which use high culture masks to try to hide a national identity that is not based on the fine arts, but on the music of Tito Double P, which, in turn, is rejected by that other part of the population that considers its identity closer to North American culture than to Mexican culture.

This unfinished dialectic is what, precisely, produces a social representation of the Mexican that is so conflictive, so expectant of always being something better, but without knowing exactly how to achieve it, and this has led to a lack of knowledge of himself, because, to this day, he does not know if he is Spanish, indigenous, mestizo, Western, Latin or some other category. An attempt has been made to resolve the issue through multiculturalism, recognizing, and rightly so, the multicultural and pluriethnic essence of Mexico, but these attempts have only remained in narratives and projects, since, substantively, a hegemonic culture linked to Western tradition continues to predominate in the country that seeks to represent what is Mexican in the style of that worldview, simply incorporating exponents in music or painting that are worthy of being shown to the world, but that are not truly part of the common denominator of the people. Mexican, and, therefore, they are not a significant representation (Villanueva 2022).

Now, to understand this problem, appealing to social representations, it is necessary to approach the field of information, that is, the set of elements from which Mexicans configure and prioritize experiences and knowledge to build a representation of themselves. In doing so, once again, one faces a consistent tension between what is officially promoted through institutions and education, and what is experienced in everyday life, since the civic values that are promoted in schools contrast with the practices of corruption, violence and insecurity that citizens suffer, so it has not been possible to develop sufficient trust for these values to be translated into a normalization of social interaction (Jodelet 1986).

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

Furthermore, the arrival of new overseas practices that arrived with globalization further diversifies identity, since the digital world has opened to the youngest the doors of vast cultural universes that, although in a positive sense they represent the possibility of building a cosmopolitan citizenship, in another, they could imply the forgetting of local customs that could gradually be replaced or mixed with foreign ones, further complicating the problem of defining a Mexican national identity (Coteli 2019).

That is why, in several countries, ultra-nationalist outbreaks have been emerging that seek to reclaim their original cultures in the face of the advance of Westernization and monoculture promoted by globalization. The risk that these movements imply for democracy is considerable, so it is necessary to design appropriate cultural strategies and policies to be able to face this dialectic that has been pointed out in this work (Farej 2023).

Regarding what has to do with the processes of defining a Mexican national culture and national identity, it is important that intervention strategies be designed through cultural policies that encourage citizens to recognize the common points between the diversity of specific cultural worlds that develop within the country, with the objective of achieving a social representation of the Mexican that is not conflictive and that finally allows overcoming the frustrations of the past that have prevented accepting the multiple condition of heirs of various worldviews and of being a nation that in its blood possesses the value of mestizaje that Vasconcelos (1948) sought to exalt through the Cosmic Race.

Vasconcelos' intention was to show the Mexican people that this mestizo condition was not a reason for contempt with respect to hegemonic European cultures, but, on the contrary, a reason to recognize in that essence the strength of the Mexican, which, as in a genetic melting pot, contrary to nineteenth-century racist ideas regarding racial purity, represents possessing a variety of qualities inherited by the various races that throughout history have built the Mexican nation.

As said in previous sections, a nation that is not capable of recognizing itself or defining its identity and culture will find itself at a disadvantage in relation to those that have achieved this, which, in turn, has to do with the ability to lead or be led in the global concert. The success of hegemonic nations has an important connection with the promotion of their culture abroad, since this allows them to position their economic and political interests in other latitudes to contribute to their development and continuous modernization.

Culture is a valuable input for strengthening the social cohesion necessary for a nation to represent itself solidly enough to present itself to the world in a satisfactory manner in terms of cultural diplomacy. The relationship of socioeconomic dependence that countries like Mexico have with cultural powers like the United States can be linked to the Mexican inability to define a robust and consolidated identity of its own, which does not require importing cultural practices that provide a reference that has not been able to be forged nationally in a coherent manner.

This inability to represent oneself in a satisfactory manner is what keeps the Mexican people in the labyrinth of loneliness, masking themselves with foreign cultures to cling to being someone authentic that distinguishes them from the other peoples of the world and who also does so in a successful way to navigate the predatory dynamics of globalization. The multiplicity of relevant national actors, including the State, private initiative, cultural promoters, and, of course, civil society, must contribute to achieving this objective (Espinasa 2010).

An important part of this process involves recognizing that the cultural expressions of the majority of the population must be taken into account to define national identity, and not only the elements that have traditionally been associated with "high culture" to promote national culture abroad. To the extent that this is achieved, there will be more chances that the social barriers that hinder social cohesion that favor the definition of a collective identity will be overcome and that Mexicans will finally be able to escape the labyrinth.

Final considerations

In order to successfully face the challenges that the international system demands of States, it is necessary that they have consolidated social bases, in the sense that these are sufficiently robust so that each State can develop autonomously and can perform competitively in global dynamics. These bases are built from the recognition of a national identity that serves as a sense of common belonging that guides the behavior of citizens and is a reference to the shared past and the common objectives that are set as a society.

This identity, however, is susceptible to being energized based on the transformations inherent to the current conditions of each State and the world as a whole, but it maintains certain elements that transcend time and that are transmitted intergenerationally through education, official institutions and customary practices. The totality of these elements is what can be identified as national culture, and, although no modern society is homogeneous in that sense, it is possible to statistically verify common denominators that allow identifying the sociocultural features from which it is feasible to define a national identity distinguishable from others.

To the extent that States are successful in achieving this definition, their possibilities of being protagonists of international dynamics will be greater, since they will be in better conditions to influence the system, compared to those States that have either not yet been able to resolve this issue, or have done so late, in relation to the existing international political structures. Of course, the economic and political dimensions are transcendental to consolidate these positions, but what has been maintained in this work is that both have a cultural origin that has governed the actions of the powers of the system throughout history.

Social Representations of Mexican Identity Based on the Interaction Between High and Popular Culture

Culture, as a worldview, fosters an understanding of the world, in such a way that those societies that are most culturally advanced are also those that lead the international concert in the modern system. They have been able to achieve this position because they have managed to culturally influence the dependent nations, since they have managed to establish the rules of the game based on their own interests and visions, which, necessarily, are anchored to their cultures.

In the case of dependent nations like Mexico, the constitution of a national identity has been an unresolved problem to this day, since there is no consensus about how to define what is Mexican without falling into tensions of class, race, origin or future. That is, strong cultures, like that of the United States, have managed to define a national identity based on certain values, principles and worldviews that govern the way their society should conduct itself in the world and within itself, such as freedom, private property and democracy.

On the other hand, in Mexico, it would be difficult to find a consensus about the values that define national identity, and, therefore, its performance in the world. As described at the time, this problem has its origin in the inability to reconcile with the past and to accept the mestizo condition of the Mexican nation, since both those who fight for pre-Hispanic origin as the basis of national identity, and those who choose to focus it on the Hispanic heritage, have not been able to reconcile a vision that includes both worlds, without a perceived tension between the conquered and the conquerors.

This tension is largely contributed by the climate of social pathologies that have prevailed in the country for generations, such as racism, classism, corruption or violence, which are all obstacles to the consolidation of a shared consciousness among Mexicans about the values that are common to them. Instead, institutions have chosen to emulate successful models in other societies to promote Mexican culture in the world, without implying true national representation, but rather, a forced attempt to adapt to the canons recognized by hegemonic cultural powers, mainly Western ones.

The formation of a national identity authentically representative of Mexican culture requires, first of all, overcoming the aforementioned obstacles to begin to move towards scenarios and conditions in which it is possible to achieve convergence between the various visions regarding what it means to be Mexican in the global context. This is a task shared between the State, civil society and private initiative, which will not be easily achieved in the short term, but which is essential to begin building. A stable culture will gradually foster the long-awaited social development of the country.

Author contribution statement

Alvin Lopez Retana is the only author of this investigation. He was involved in the conception and design, or analysis and interpretation of the data; the drafting of the paper; revising it critically for intellectual content; and the final approval of the version to be published. He agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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