


## THE DEPENDENT STATE AND SOCIAL POLICIES: A RELATIONSHIP OF CONFLICTS IN THE FACE OF (ULTRA) NEOLIBERALISM

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### ABSTRACT

The present work discusses the relationship between social policies and the State marked by the (ultra) neoliberal moment of capitalism from the dialectical historical materialist perspective, supported by bibliographic research of the literature in the area, with qualitative analysis. It is concluded that social policies, as an instrument created and maintained under the domination of the Bourgeois State, express a role of conflict by guaranteeing the means for the maintenance of social order while offering conditions for the immediate survival of workers, within the international dynamics of capital. (Ultra) neoliberalism, far from altering the purpose of this relationship, intends to make significant changes in the organization of social policies, especially in the influence of the market and the State on their supply, amplifying the contradiction of this relationship.

**Keywords:** State. Social Policies. Latin America. Neoliberalism. Social Classes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Discussing the role of the State in social relations, especially in actions aimed at the working class in reducing misery, hunger and social inequality, is a complex and challenging task, as it presents contradictory elements rooted in the societal system that, shaped by the mode of production, characterizes the State itself. This dialectical relationship allows us to better understand social policies within a historical aspect, currently marked by (ultra) neoliberalism, and the conditioning for Latin American states.

It is known that social policy has an important place in the professional practice of Brazilian Social Work, and it is no exaggeration to say that it occupies an important agenda of studies. Boschetti (2021) states that:

One cannot understand the possibilities and limits of Social Work from oneself, in an endogenous way. Thus, the relationship between Social Policy and Social Work needs to be understood in history, based on its structural and conjunctural determinations (p. 34).

It is immersed in this challenge that we propose to discuss the relationship between social policies and the dependent State currently marked by the (ultra) neoliberal moment of capitalism, understanding the need for this discussion to advance, as a professional category, in future discussions about the impacts of this relationship on the population that uses these policies and by the professionals who use it as a ground for their intervention.

To this end, it was used the bibliographic research with qualitative analysis of the literature in the area, constituting the present work in three parts, in addition to the present introduction and final considerations. The first topic reflects on the concept of State, demarcating the understanding of the Marxist Theory of Dependency to understand this concept in the conjuncture of Latin America, introducing social policies in this arrangement. The following topic, in turn, introduces the discussion about neoliberalism so that, in the third topic, it is possible to bring up the meaning of the transformations of the capitalist mode of production in its (ultra) neoliberal face to reality and its repercussions on social policies, presenting some observations for the professional work of the social worker in this conjuncture.

## THE CONCEPT OF STATE: AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE CREATION OF SOCIAL POLICIES

For Pereira (2008), there are challenges for the definition of the State because there are different notions about this instrument and its idea is associated and confused with its organs or constituent elements. It is understood that the State is not an isolated, closed or



self-circumscribed phenomenon, as it is in constant relationship with society. (Pereira, 2008).

In German Ideology, Marx and Engels (2001) reflect on the formation of the modern State achieved by the fractions of the bourgeoisie that constitute themselves as a class that needs to organize itself at the national level and give a universal form to its common interests, encompassing the working class, but in an illusory way, because the State "is always linked to the dominant class and constitutes its organ of domination" (Marx & Engels, 2001, p. 31) to achieve the aforementioned hegemony.

Thus, if the modern representative State "[...] it is nothing but a committee to manage the common affairs of the entire bourgeois class" (Marx & Engels, 1999, p.10), so its primary function is to ensure the conditions for the accumulation and reproduction of capital. Thus, it is perceived that the political relations of domination (make up the State) are interconnected with the social and economic relations of production (bourgeois interests). In other words, the definition of the modern state is linked to the very characteristics of capitalism.

Based on the principle set out above, deepening this analysis for the national states of Latin America raises greater complexity for this definition, since these countries do not share the same conditions of production and exchange of goods in relation to the central countries of capital, such as the United States. Marine (2005) defines them as dependent countries, as they are subject to a relationship of subordination, even if they are formally independent.

The aforementioned author (Marine, 2005) points out that the economic advancement of the central countries is only possible due to the backwardness of the peripheral countries, through the transfer of value generated by the dependent nations in the production of primary and consumer goods, through (or absence of) industrialization with outdated machinery and technologies - and purchased from the central countries, and in the unequal conditions of exchange.

Unlike the conception of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), created in 1949, which also proposed to reflect on the "peripheral economies in the world economy and the internal limitations of underdevelopment" (Coelho, n.d, p.3.), Marine (2005) points out that only with industrialization could dependent countries not ascend to a central country, because their economies are conditioned by the development and expansion of central economies, including access to new technologies.

For the author, Marine (2014), the maximum that one of these countries could achieve within the capitalist world productive system is the condition of sub-imperialist in



relation to its neighbors, playing an intermediary role between center and periphery, but maintaining the conditions of subordination and exploitation, as in Brazil (Luce, 2012). This idea is reported in the following excerpt:

One of the original aspects with which the new policy of domination is currently presented consists in favoring the industrial development of one of the countries, the one that offers the best prospects for this expansion, in order to use it as an instrument of domination over other areas, which, for economic reasons linked to the high position of the dominator, he can no longer exploit directly. The peripheral world is entering the phase in which it is threatened with witnessing the emergence of a subsidiary imperialism. It is the moment when the dominant center begins to lose the means it used to exercise direct power over backward regions traditionally plundered, and finds itself compelled to re-establish, in the person of another country, a prosecutor, for the purpose of pursuing, now indirectly, the old and always profitable exploitation. The highly industrialized capitalist nation is grappling with contradictions that make it difficult to carry out its usual course: growing workers' unemployment, the obsolescence of valid machines, automation, military production socially without consumption, etc. The time comes when it is convenient for him to establish a branch in the peripheral world, to create an industrial satellite, which he will try to help by all means, so that it may develop, as long as he does so using the outdated machines and techniques of the dominating center. For the latter, it is a matter of taking charge of a backward country and making it repeat the phase of development that the center has already passed, thus renewing benefits that it can no longer directly obtain (Pinto, 1960).

It is noted that the dependence of the sub-imperialist country is not overcome and is under the mediation of the central country, even if it seeks relative autonomy in this relationship, this contradictory dynamic is interpreted by Marine (1965) as an antagonistic cooperation, that is, although both countries gain from this articulation, this relationship still reproduces the condition of dependence of one of these countries, for there is still the transfer of value between the bourgeoisie of the peripheral regions and the central bourgeoisie.

In view of this, the internal bourgeois of the dependent countries resort to a series of actions as a way to recover their capacity for accumulation, enabling the super-exploitation of the national working class, either by increasing the intensity of the working day, or by prolonging this working day, by reducing wages or even by increasing the value of the labor force without an increase in wages (Amaral, 2012).

If the function of the state is to guarantee the conditions for the accumulation and reproduction of capital, and if these conditions are dependent on the central countries, then this state is also dependent on and will fulfill these needs of the internal bourgeoisie. However, for Martins (2011), although it is the dominant class that guides the political interests of the State, it is not the one that necessarily integrates it, for example, presidents, ministers and other political representatives who are not of bourgeois origin, but profess discourses and actions for the dominant class.



For the aforementioned author (Osório, 2014), the composition of the State enables a relative autonomy of the State, that is, it opens space for the State not to act only according to the interests of the dominant class, creating the idea of a neutral State that, contradictorily, reinforces the domination of the dominant class. For the author, the capitalist State expresses not only a correlation of forces in which the interests of the dominant classes predominate, but also refers to:

[...] a social relationship that creates strength and modifies these correlations in favor of those who dominate. To suppose that the State "reflects" the class struggle implies conceiving it as a neutral entity, which reveals the point at which the correlation of forces between the classes lies, something like a political thermometer. But, on the contrary, the State has an active role in the class struggle in favor of the integration and organization of the dominant classes and the dispersion and disarticulation of the dominated classes (OSÓRIO, 2014, p. 51).

The aforementioned author states that the idea that the bourgeois state expresses "conquests" of the dominated, such as the right to strike, unionization, popular parties, democratic formulas of domination, must be understood within these limits. "These are *achievements*, but *they are distorted and filtered* by state action" (Osório, 2014, p.51, emphasis added).

The above-mentioned conception highlights the centrality in the relations between social and production classes, constituting a dynamic of dispute for societal projects within and between classes that, throughout history, diversifies the strategies of domination of the bourgeois State and its interaction with society, despite maintaining the first principle of the State of guaranteeing the conditions of domination of the bourgeois class.

It is in this context that social policies are inserted, as an apparent idea of conquest and rights, but essentially as one tool among others of the framework of the Bourgeois State to guarantee domination, especially by encouraging the supposed neutrality of this State. It is evident that, in order to maintain this system that highlights poverty and deepens social inequality in peripheral countries through super-exploitation, it is necessary to deal with the consequences of this contradiction. Social policies emerge as a way to avoid the collapse of social relations, while promoting consensus between classes. And when they are not enough, they resort to coercion:

If capitalism is a system with civilizing dimensions, it is the dimensions of barbarism, however, that tend to prevail in dependent capitalism. Societies crossed by these processes generate high levels of social conflict, some latent and many others manifest. The reproduction of capital sustained by super-exploitation generates acute social fractures: islands of wealth in the middle of a sea of poverty, workers exhausted prematurely, misery and unemployment. All this tends to create conditions to enhance social confrontations and



class struggle. Thus, social order becomes possible on the basis of an iron exercise of political power, which requires a State in which coercive mechanisms operate on a recurring basis (Osório, 2014, p. 208-209).

With the sub-imperialist phase of Brazil, and the social liberal character of the governments that followed (Lula government from 2003 to 2010, Dilma government from 2011 to 2016), social policies managed to cushion some expressions of extreme poverty and enable the survival of part of the workers, however, as Luce (2012) points out, the condition of a dependent country within imperialist and international capitalism perpetuates the conditions of super-exploitation of national labor, marked by the maintenance of the long working day and the intense pace of production, without the proper updating of the historical-social value of the labor force in the payment received.

### STATE AND NEOLIBERALISM: REFLECTIONS FOR LATIN AMERICA

State intervention in contemporary society is marked by broad debates, especially political and ideological, which put societal projects in dispute. In this plot, liberalism emerges as a non-interventionist State proposal, with an economy organized strictly by the market. Contradictorily, neoliberalism was constituted with "the help of protective tariffs, subsidized exports, and indirect wage subsidies" (Carcanholo & Baruco, 2011, p. 12), that is, the most basic contradiction of the so-called free market is its own relationship with the State, financed by it throughout its process.

Thus, based on this understanding that the market system needed the State for its implementation, for its maintenance this relationship could not be different: "Economic liberalism can, therefore, ask the state to use the force of law; it can even appeal *to the violent forces* of civil war in order to organize the preconditions of a self-regulating market" (Polanyi, 2000, p. 152-153, emphasis added).

This contradiction of the presence/absence of the State, combined with the productive crises of capitalism, questions other political and ideological proposals that, once again, highlight the role of the State, such as, for example, the *Welfare State*, guided by an interventionist State through social policies in the perspective of maintaining consumption and full employment to accompany the production of the Fordist system that, in the 1970s, it enters a crisis (Carcanholo; Baruco, 2011, p. 12).

Thus, the problem that has been engendered in recent years does not hover over the evaluation of whether the State has been less or more intervening, since it will always be intervening, what is questioned is the pattern of state spending, now perceptibly to the detriment of social policies of a universalizing nature.



It is, rather, a State committed to the financial-fictitious capitalist valorization and, for this to be possible, the restoration of capital required, [...], a "mini-max" State, minimum for labor and maximum for capital. By affirming a supposed need to reduce the size of the State, the attack of big capital is actually directed against the democratic dimensions of the State's intervention in the economy, fundamentally its cohesive dimensions (Carcanholo & Baruco, 2011, p. 12).

It is in this scenario that the neoliberalist proposal is consolidated to replace the Keynesianism of the *Welfare State*. Economic behavior began to determine the behavior of human beings in society, inverting values and views on reality, including the population's perception of social inequality. From the economist point of view, inequality is seen in this model as a goal, as it is what "[...] gives meaning to the search for productivity and efficiency, while, from a moral point of view, the incentive to personal effort would only make sense with inequality, or rather, social differentiation would be the prize for the former" (Carcanholo; Baruco, 2011, p. 12).

Therefore, strategies to combat inequality and expand social protection, such as social policies, come to be seen as obstacles to a neoliberal order. Thus, for the expansion of this political-ideological proposal, the concept of social policies needs to be replaced "by the cold realization of the inevitability of poverty and misery, leading to a path that forces us to treat the phenomenon only in its most acute manifestations, therefore, in a localized and fragmented way" (Iasi, 2017, p. 221).

In this way, neoliberalism begins to dictate how the State intervenes in social inequality and, in this political-ideological proposal, social policies do not occupy a place of centrality, taking no responsibility for their offer.

The post-World War II period marks the genesis of neoliberal ideals, where in the region of Europe and North America, interventionist capitalism prevailed. Friedrich Hayek indicated transformations in the capitalist reference that was developing at the time. In the 1940s, the publication of the work "The Road to Serfdom" in criticism of the interventionist and welfare State, dealt with a "[...] an impassioned attack against any limitation of market mechanisms by the State, denounced as a lethal threat to freedom, not only economic, but also political" (Anderson, 1995, p. 09). Because of this positioning, Hayek has been conquering critics and admirers over the years.

In 1947, Hayek founded the Mont Pèlerin Society in Switzerland, "[...] a kind of neoliberal Freemasonry, highly dedicated and organized, with international meetings every two years. Its purpose was to combat the reigning Keynesianism and solidarism and to prepare the basis for another type of capitalism" (Anderson, 1995, p. 09). A hard and free capitalism was the proposal of the idealizers of neoliberalism. However, the conditions were



not favorable to the proposed model. Since the moment favored the hegemony of advanced capitalism, in the so-called Golden Age, its greatest growth took place in the 1950s and 60s.

The neoliberal model of doing politics, almost inevitable, as a response to the demands of globalization, is based on the deregulation of the economy, privatization of the state model, monetarist macroeconomics, anti-unionist legislation. The neoliberal experiences in Latin America come with Pinochet<sup>4</sup>, the well-known dictator of Chile, who was one of the pioneers in implementation in Latin America between 1973 and 1990, through a group of economists known as the *Chicago Boys*, with strong North American influence.

This influence of the United States is not just a coincidence, the aforementioned central country needs the dependence of peripheral countries and, as a result, expands its influence in the region. Representatives and mediators of these capitals, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) expand this influence and the pressure for the implementation of neoliberalism in Latin America.

The transformations in the posture of ECLAC, headquartered in Chile and created by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, make this influence explicit by, according to Duarte (2013), assuming the position of conductor of the neoliberal prescription in Latin America, despite the opposition discourse. Such imposition is ratified by the Washington Consensus in 1989, as a strategy to expand neoliberalism in the region.

The consequences of these implementations of neoliberal precepts in dependent countries, far from distancing them from dependence, but deepened it. Harvey (2005) describes that from the 1980s onwards, unemployment and inequality grew, while growth in countries such as Argentina and Mexico decreased, conditioned to the reprimarization of the region and expanding the mechanisms of value transfer to the central countries (Mancio & Moreira, 2011), leaving Latin America more susceptible to the crises of world capitalism.

The neoliberal cycle in contemporary Latin history took place through economic deregulation, mass unemployment, union repression, redistribution of income in favor of the rich and privatization of public goods, thus harming the lives of the poor and increasing dependence on the national state. In Brazil, this situation was strengthened after the end of the military dictatorship, under the influence of the Collor government (1990 to 1992) and

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<sup>4</sup> September 11, 2003 marked the 30th anniversary of one of the longest dictatorships in Chile's history. General Augusto Pinochet has ruled the country's life with an iron fist since he led a military coup against socialist President Salvador Allende in 1973, and even after handing over power in 1990, he maintained a strong influence over the direction of the nation. His power was so great that he used to say that he even controlled the movement of the leaves on the trees. Source: "noticias.terra.com/mundo".





with greater emphasis on the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government (1995 to 2003). The 1990s were significant for neoliberal implantations in the country.

## **SOCIAL POLICIES IN THE (ULTRA) NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT**

So far we have already pointed out that the way the capitalist State deals with inequality is historically related to the economic model that dictates what its level of intervention should be in the expressions of the social question. In this context, one of the main strategies for maintaining the dynamics of production and, at the same time, for confronting inequality, are social policies, which are framed according to the most diverse stages assumed by the capitalist social mode of production.

In other words, it is possible to affirm that, in essence, social policy plays a contradictory role in capitalism and that it is fundamental and immutable to it: at the same time that it responds to the demands of the working class, it also serves the interests of the reproduction of capital and the dominant classes as a strategy for the legitimation of hegemonic political power. In this vein, Ribeiro and Salvador (2021, p. 103) state that "social policy and its determinations are necessarily linked to economic policy" and add, when reporting the contributions of Osório (2012), that

The instruments of economic policy can make the cycle of capital more fluid and adequate to the needs of accumulation. Under the same logic, social policy is part of the totality of the capitalist system that structures it, from its insertion in the sphere of production and reproduction of social relations; therefore, one of the aspects that allows class domination is the reproduction of capital. (Ribeiro; Salvador, 2021, p. 103)

Thus, understanding social policy today requires a look at the capitalist system in its neoliberal facet, realizing that it was not able to respond as expected to its own crisis, crossed by tribulations of the most diverse, long and profound natures, which reverberate in the economic, social, political, cultural and health spheres. In view of this reality, there are notes in the literature that highlight that neoliberalism has changed its *status* to the "ultra" level, according to Cislighi (2021):

We characterize this period, then, as an inflection, or new phase of neoliberalism, sharpened in depth, speed and violence in relation to the previous period. It is not ultraliberalism, insofar as there is no return to classical liberalism (LAVAL, 2018), which still did not count on the State as a financier, legitimator, and direct expropriator at the service of capital. By assuming its "ultra" form, as an adjective, neoliberalism enters a new round of deepening its assumptions supported by exponential forms of Bonapartism in liberal democratic regimes and their governments (DEMIER, 2019), of expropriation of common goods, exploitation of labor and extra-economic appropriation of necessary labor and the creation of fictitious capital, amplifying a multifaceted systemic crisis that puts the survival of humanity at risk (p. 17).



Regarding the aforementioned conjuncture of capital, Behring, Cislaghi and Souza (2020), reinforce:

We understand by ultra-neoliberalism this most recent form of neoliberalism, which is not limited to Brazil, as it can be observed in several countries around the world. Most authors in the critical field, whether or not they adopt this term, agree that neoliberalism undergoes an inflection that deepens its assumptions, as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis. Although the crisis was centrally related to the activities of the private financial sector, and was part of a structural moment of capital crisis that dragged on for decades, it was presented, once again, as a crisis of the State, which in fact absorbed the losses of capital through public funds, with the justification that banks and financial institutions were "too big to fail" which would affect society as a whole (p. 106).

This is a reality that brings to the fore, primarily, labor and social security issues for the bourgeoisie as a whole, since they refer more directly to the antagonism between capital and labor and to the niches to expand accumulation (Ribeiro; Salvador, 2021, p.106). This moment in Brazil is expressed by the Temer government (2016 to 2018) and continued by Bolsonaro (2018 to 2022), which carried out (counter) labor reforms in 2017, social security reforms in 2019 and budget strangulation (Sposati, 2018).

This conjuncture represents its face marked by the worsening of misery, caused by greater deregulation, precariousness of work, increasingly deep levels of social (un)protection and withdrawal of rights. In this context, within what Paiva (2006) recommends, there is an inversely proportional movement, to the extent that the expansion of unemployment and the loss of rights, combined with the growing social (un)protection of citizens in the ultra-neoliberal conjuncture, will exert strong pressure on other equally precarious safety nets, among which we can highlight social assistance.

This fact demonstrates a trend already highlighted by Mota (2007), marked by the assistance of social protection, notably symptomatic of this process of miserability of the population, which was already poor:

Social Assistance now assumes, for a significant portion of the population, the task of being the social protection policy, and not part of the social protection policy. These findings seem to point to something that has not been put into the debate: Social Assistance in the twentieth century. XXI is acquiring the condition of an integrating mechanism, instead of the role played by work (Mota, 2007, p. 137)

What is put on the scene, then, are social policies, hegemonically, to combat socioeconomic vulnerability (but not only), of an increasingly lean, restricted, focal and selective nature, aimed at the growing miserable. In other words: social policies are gradually ceasing to be available to poor segments (once benefited), to be focused, almost exclusively, on the miserable, indigent population and completely exfoliated of basic rights.



The reflections of this barbaric conjuncture have direct impacts not only on the population that most needs these policies, but also on the work of Social Workers, as rights, many materialized through social policies, have been harshly attacked. It is therefore urgent that the professional category appropriates a critical reading of the current reality, since social policies are "the ground of our professional work", as well as "objects of research and training" (Boschetti, 2021).

That said, the author points out:

This ultra-neoliberalism is connected with authoritarianism, constrains any possibility of maintaining and expanding democratic social policies, has a hard impact on the reproduction of the workforce and also on the professional practice of the social worker, since it causes an erosion of the soil in which he or she intervenes. Not only do they suffer losses of their rights as salaried workers, but they also face increasingly insurmountable difficulties to mediate access to the rights and public goods of the subjects with whom they work, which constitutes one of their main professional attributions (p. 36).

What can be seen is that as professionals, we are facing an enormous challenge: that of concretizing, within the limits of our salaried work, the principles recommended by the Code of Ethics of the Social Worker, since they mark the direction of a new societal order with foundations opposite to those that found the capitalist dynamics.

If the impossibility of capitalism overcoming the social and material sequelae of the accumulation process is unquestionable, so is the possibility of using means to confront them within the limits of the bourgeois order, allowing owners and workers to become citizens subject to rights (Mota, 2007, p. 137).

The challenge increases even more when we understand that one of our main arenas of professional movement and the viability of rights, which is social policy, contributes to the maintenance of capital. However, not losing sight of the fact that our ethical-political and professional commitment is linked to the process of building a society, without domination, exploitation of class, ethnicity and gender, even in the face of such a controversial reality, helps us to hope (Freire, 1992) and not to disbelieve in what Brecht (1982) already advised us: "nothing should seem impossible to change".

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Understanding the place of the State in capitalist social relations makes it possible to visualize the limits and dynamics that are built (and tensioned) between social classes in the construction of strategies of domination and survival, as social policies are characterized. By broadening our field of analysis to the reality of Latin America, this relationship of contradiction in the increase of the productive forces while the super-exploitation of the



working class occurs, this condition of dependent countries particularizes the challenges in the region, summoning, once again, this Dependent State to represent the interests of the dominant class by hiding expressions of contradiction that manifests in social inequality, poverty, intensification and extension of the working day, among other examples.

It is known that one of the main strategies to confront inequality is social policies, and these are framed within the limits of capital, in a contradictory relationship that is fundamental and immutable to it, to the extent that at the same time it responds to the demands for survival of the working class, but essentially also meets the interests of reproduction of capital and the dominant classes as a strategy for the legitimation of hegemonic political power.

In the current scenario, social policies are deeply impacted by the ultra-neoliberal phase of capitalism, which hegemonically focuses on the assistance of social protection, deepening the socioeconomic consequences of imperialist relations in dependent territories. This approach reproduces leaner, restrictive, focused and selective social policies, directed almost exclusively to the population in a situation of misery, deprived of basic rights, instead of a minimum standard of social security. With ultra-neoliberalism in Latin America, the idea of conciliation through social policies is progressively abandoned, being replaced by coercive actions of an authoritarian nature. These actions are manifested both by physical violence (police, military or the arming of the population) and by ideological control, through meritocratic values, competition and the promotion of misogynistic, racist, LGBTphobic discourses and other forms of inferiorization of groups and fractions of the working class.

In this context, the work of professionals involved in these social policies, such as social workers, becomes even more challenging, requiring a critical posture committed to the defense of social rights and to the construction of alternatives that break with the logics of domination and exploitation, which seek the transformation of current social relations, without losing sight of the limits imposed by salaried and exploited labor. The construction of a new societal order, free from class, ethnicity, and gender oppression, is an ethical horizon for the work of social workers, challenging them to resist and find loopholes for the implementation of actions that promote social justice in a context of intensified exploitation.



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