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NOTAS Y DISCUSIONES

Situated universals (visions from the Third World)[1]

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ENG **Abstract:** This note is a version of a talk I gave at the Workshop "Kant and Universalism from a Global Perspective", October 25th, 2024, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. I reflect on my experience with geopolitics of knowledge as a professional philosopher from the Third World, on the colonial, Eurocentred, racist, and misogynist character of the Kantian academe, and on the possible ways out of it. I call for a radical re-elaboration of the philosophical canon based not merely on adding more (European) philosophers to it, but on listening to voices reading the canon from outside of Europe and the USA. True universals are situated universals that do not pretend to be ideals.
Keywords: Kant, Colonialism, Racism, Scholarship, Universalism.

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Blurb: Macarena Marey is Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires and Researcher at CONICET. She is the author of *Voluntad omnilateral y finitud de la Tierra* (La Cebra, 2021), *Diario de Galileo* (Bosque Energético, 2025), and *Pensamiento postdistópico* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, forthcoming). Her latest papers are: "Paradojas de la democracia y desdemocratización", *Tabula Rasa* 2025; Teorías de la república (Herder, 2021) e Introducción a la filosofía política crítica (La Cebra) "Historic injustices as matters of the present", *Res Publica. A Journal of Moral, Legal and Political Philosophy* (with Alejandro De Oto) 2024. Some of her papers on Kant are: "States of nature as theories of normativity", in Rauscher (ed.), *Kant's Lectures on Political Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming; "On Onora O'Neill's Critique of Rawls, and on Rawls' non-Kantianism, with a little help from Charles W. Mills", *Public Reason* 2021; "Kant's popular sovereignty and cosmopolitanism", *Constellations* 2020; "A Kantian Critique of Grotius", *Problemos* 2019; "The Ideal Character of the General Will and Popular Sovereignty in Kant", *Kant-Studien* 2018; "El rol de la felicidad ajena en la filosofía práctica de Kant", *Diánoia* 2017; "A Political Defense of Kant's *Aufklärung*", *Critical Horizons* 2017; "The Originality of Kant's Social Contract Theory", in Krasnoff, Sánchez Madrid, and Satne (eds.), *Kant's Doctrine of Right in the Twenty-first Century*, University of Wales Press 2018.

Let me start with a rant

First: my context. I've asked myself: what am I doing talking about Kant online in a Workshop organised by the Berlin Academy of Sciences, when my routine in the past weeks has been attending university workers' assemblies one after another, teaching my classes on the streets and even at Plaza de Mayo, supporting the students who are occupying university buildings all around Argentina, writing agitation pieces, and the like? I couldn't attend the conference there in Berlin because I am completely unable to pay for a plane ticket and have the money reimbursed later. I simply cannot afford it under because the right-wing coalition ruling my country prioritises paying to the IMF an illegitimate debt they themselves and have taken over public education, health, and research. Both CONICET and the University of Buenos Aires where I work are, as almost all other public institutions, currently defunded. Research is virtually paralysed in Argentina today. It is, then, hard for me to see any sense in talking about Kant and universality here and now.

[1] This note is a version of a talk I gave at the Workshop "Kant and Universalism from a Global Perspective", October 25th, 2024, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. The event was organised by Marcus Willaschek and Simon Rebohm. I thank them for the kind invitation and also Reiner Forst, Lucy Allais and (again) Markus Willaschek for their engagement with my talk. Special tanks go to Inés Valdez, Helga Varden, Huaping Lu-Adler, Nuria Sánchez Madrid, and Alejandro De Oto, anticolonial thinkers.

But I've learnt something really valuable from being a Third-World scholar: my presence and my voice are powerful weapons if I know how to use them right. True universals are *critical and consciously situated* universals. There is also a good reason why I was invited here. I believe it wasn't tokenism; it wasn't just to cover the Third-World quota (note that I am the only person speaking in this workshop that comes from and *still lives and works in* the "Global South"). I am grateful for that, for being taken seriously as a philosopher, not merely as a female Argentinian token. This is not very usual. And, besides, Kant and universality have much to do with the situation in Argentina today.

What is a global perspective? Is it real? Isn't it something like a vision from nowhere? There is one thing that is global, or better said, planetary and ubiquitous today: capitalism. As a social system, capitalism shapes the Globe in a structurally unjust, racist, ableist, imperialist, extractive, exploitative, and dispossessing way. And here lies the epistemic conundrum, the epistemic deficit within capitalism: a capitalist perspective is unable to understand the very same world capitalism itself has created. Racial capitalism's gaze does not perceive injustices as *injustices*, but as necessary effects of the universal, quasi natural laws of the market and the logic of economics; it rationalises inequality, it does not *critique* it. So, I have many doubts that a global perspective could carry one far if the aim is to understand the world in order to transform it.

Also: who can claim to possess this global perspective? Who sees things globally? Which is more global, a European viewpoint or a Third-World perspective? Knowledge has its own Geopolitics, and of course so does academia.[2] Geopolitics of knowledge is a fact. In political philosophy, the centre is composed of the Anglophone world and two European countries: France, and Germany (maybe also Italy). From my own experience, the rest of us who do not live, work, or were born there do not qualify as political philosophers. We are not philosophers because, as we are often tacitly and explicitly told, we are unable to speak in universal terms. We are, at best, providers of particular cases, illustrations, and data for Europeans and Anglophones to study and then produce "their own" philosophical and universal theories. I think most of you are already familiar with the concept of epistemic extractivism, of which this phenomenon is a case (see Grosfoguel 2016). We –those trying to do philosophy in the Third World– speak the language of difference, of particularity, of essentialist identities. We do not speak the language of philosophy unless we adapt and become one of those whose even most personal problems are considered universal philosophical questions, i.e., Europeans and Anglophones.

Critical political philosophy is one of the fields where the unequal distribution of epistemic authority is more striking. I say "striking" because it would seem, *prima facie*, that political philosophers with a critical inclination (Marxists, feminists, anti-imperialists, etc.) are more prone to recognising injustice than people from other disciplines and tendencies. But no one lives outside a system of injustice, and no one is *a priori* completely exempt from reproducing patterns of silencing. Not even ourselves, living and working in the Third World. Many political philosophers working and living in Latin America don't bother to read and cite their own colleagues. This is, to be sure, a shame, but there is a rationale behind this self-destructive practice. Latin American scholars suspect that if they want their papers published in "prestigious" journals, their pieces have even lesser chances of being sent to a reviewing process (we are usually desk-rejected) if they cite "too many" articles in Spanish and by authors working outside of the academic centre. Of course, there are colleagues who just don't cite Latin American colleagues out of their colonial mind-set; and there are those who even take offence at being called out for this.

In many reviews I've received in my career, I have been told to cite books by people from the centre just because they are trending at that moment or are being increasingly cited in prestigious Anglophone journals, even if they would contribute nothing to my piece and research. I have frequently been told by reviewers to give more information about the "particular" social-historical context I am writing from because, apparently, readers don't know a lot about it. This is an almost *verbatim* phrase from a review I got recently. I wonder if readers of Anglophone "prestigious" Q1 journals stop being professional researchers the instant they start reading about José Carlos Mariátegui or Argentina's last dictatorship. Why can't they just do the research by themselves, why don't they just Google it, why should I have to waste characters and words in a paper to educate an overeducated public that is so lazy when it comes to learning about the Third World, but so laborious when it comes to reading all the specialised Anglophone literature on Kant's concept of the state or the categorical imperative, for example?

Being asked to provide context is as tiresome as it is offensive because it is a symptom that some particular contexts, say USA's "democracy" or Germany's history, are taken as *universal* situations. When I cite the work of non-Anglophone authors from outside of the imperial centre, reviewers almost always demand that I include a reference to some famous Anglophone[3] author who said similar things but decades after the time when the sources I quote were written. I've read all these authors. Why haven't these reviewers read the ones I am citing? And why do they feel they have to suggest something else instead of just learning about "my" authors?

To understand structural injustices, it is necessary to read the world from somewhere. Not only is this just unavoidable. It is also because planetary capitalism affects different contexts in different and unequal ways. European and USA's economic and political "development" and "progress" had and still have a historic condition of possibility: the dispossession of the rest of the world. This is the lesson to learn from authors

2 Here I am drawing from my piece "My experience with geopolitics of knowledge so far", available at: https://crookedtimber.org/2024/01/01/my-experience-with-geopolitics-of-knowledge-in-political-philosophy-so-far/

3 Or German / French, without considering gender or race; the power differential here is simple geographical origin.

from the Third World, and from and Black Marxist philosophers and critical race theorists since centuries now. This lesson must be adopted also as a methodological commitment.

To paraphrase Argentinian Historian Juan Francisco Martínez Peria: we are way too used to conferences about "Foucault / Adorno / Fisher and Latin America" down here in Argentina, as if we depended on the work of a bunch of dead white European male philosophers to understand our contexts and problems. But how about conferences on "Aimé Césaire / Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui / José Carlos Mariátegui and European problems" in Europe, would these conferences be as mainstream, every-day, and normalised in Europe as conferences on Foucault or Deleuze in Argentina?

In the Kantian Political Philosophy scholarship there is a well-known paper on why colonialism is wrong that does not cite any anticolonial philosopher from the Third World, and not even one paper from someone working outside of the hegemonic academic centres. The really problematic thing is that for most Kantians this is not perceived as a problem; they just do not realise that there is an inexcusable epistemic and political gap in the bibliography of this particular paper. *This* gap is what is wrong with colonialism, by the way: the fact that anticolonial voices are construed by the imperial gaze only as colonial subjects unworthy of being listened to, even though they have been speaking up and making history for centuries.

But this is not simply a question of identities. It is a question of material conditions, which are by definition both contextual and responding to a planetary capitalist logic. It is not that an Afro-American, African, or South American identity would provide us with a privileged epistemic access to deep moral truths. Rather, and for example, it is by the way in which colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism shaped the Peruvian reality that Mariátegui interprets in his *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928) that he was able to perceive a variety of situated problems affecting Peruvian workers and indigenous peoples that, although different from the problems of the European proletariat, were caused by the same transnational logic of capital. And this perception is, in turn, the first condition of possibility for a cosmopolitan articulation of anti-capitalist struggles.

From this cautionary tale I want to draw the morals that universality must be seized, not abandoned, if the goal is to understand and transform this world.

Occupy universality

Universals are not intrinsically imperialist. The problem is that many universals are just the imposition of a particularity. Here is a list of universals: oppression, domination, class struggle, gender, "race", class, justice, injustice, rights. Of course, all these are subject to interpretation, but this does not imply one should adopt a nihilistic attitude towards them. On the contrary, it means that their normative meaning and use can and should be contended. So now let me consider, as an example, how some rights are construed by mainstream liberal political discourses.

Capitalism always manages to absorb nearly all emancipatory vocabulary. The clearest example of this process of appropriation and distortion is the way liberalism has monopolized the idea of democracy and the language of rights. This usurpation is not harmless. I say "usurpation" because a central hegemonic strategy is to monopolize the production of political meaning and knowledge to hamper, both in theory and practice, any possibility of disputing the meaning of democracy and subjective rights. The immediate effect of this appropriation is the limitation and narrowing of the scope of rights that can be claimed in a democracy. In other words, the effect of capitalism's appropriation of democracy is the reduction of the normative scope of subjective rights. Specifically, liberalism narrows the normative scope of rights by fortifying a limited set of them —mainly private property, freedom of expression, and freedom of conscience—, while leaving the rest in a limbo of claims that, according to this doctrine, "clash" with those fundamental rights. However, subjective rights do not *conceptually* conflict with each other; they do so in specific contexts, practices, and discourses depending on how they are conceived.

The list of rights that liberalism puts on its banners is not abstract at all. It has a very specific content. For example, by "private property", liberals refer to the ownership of the means of production and real estate speculation, that is, capitalist private property —not universal access to dignified housing without fear of eviction or the burden of exorbitant rents—. Similarly, by "freedom of expression", liberals mean the privilege of those who dominate the public sphere to use free speech irresponsibly against marginalized groups, rather than the right to openly oppose those privileges. When injustice is structural, freedom of expression protects oppressors and leaves the oppressed defenceless. By "freedom of conscience" liberals refer to the right to engage in all kinds of discriminatory acts under the guise of "religious freedom", rather than the defence of worldviews that fall outside of the parameters of the hegemonic conception of religiosity (i.e., Christianity, anchored in individual personal conviction rather than communal practices, promoting homophobic and transphobic preferences, and being intolerant towards other religious views).

Of course, giving specific content to abstract subjective rights is not inherently wrong. Without content, rights are merely empty declarations of good intentions, useless for sustaining claims or guiding social protests against the state. The problem with the liberal content of rights is that it conceptually and pre-emptively excludes workers' demands and the claims of marginalized majorities from the sphere of democratic normativity. Fundamentally, it blocks other uses of those same titles, so that the right to property cannot be invoked by those who are not already property owners, freedom of expression cannot be used to criticize the discriminatory and stigmatizing misuse of free speech by those monopolizing discourse, and freedom of conscience cannot be invoked by LGBTIQ+ collectives to demand respect for their religious rights.

However, this doesn't mean that the terms "democracy" and "rights" should be banished from political vocabulary. On the contrary, it means they must be reinterpreted. The same goes for "cosmopolitanism", perhaps the most universal of universals.

The universalist assertion that all peoples and individuals are united as citizens of one Earth is neither inclusive nor naive. On the contrary, this ideal human community has always been hierarchical, and since 1492, the dehumanization of entire collectives has been the premise of all civilizational projects and "humanitarian" interventions. From a critical Third World perspective, the individualistic emphasis of cosmopolitan theories and their disregard for the political realm are more colonizing than emancipatory. Liberal cosmopolitans' abstract criticism of the state is more a defence of transnational capital than an anarchist opposition to the bourgeois monopoly on the use of physical force.

But cosmopolitanism can also be understood as a practical project responding to globalisation, understood in turn as the planetary condition of capital. Understood in this way, cosmopolitanism can relate to globalisation in two different ways, broadly speaking, from above and the centre or from below and the margins. It can be, like liberal cosmopolitanism, a mere rationalisation of the *status quo*, a civilizational project of dispossession and exploitation. Alternatively, it can be the critical pedagogy for a transnational praxis to challenge and transform this structurally inequitable world. In sum, cosmopolitanism can either reinforce planetary capitalism through an individualistic de-politicization of the global sphere, or it can be critical of coloniality, imperialism, and the planetary condition of capital, thereby providing a more useful framework for an emancipatory transnational theory and practice from below and from the margins. Luckily, a truly critical cosmopolitanism without Eurocentric, colonial, and racist assumptions, capable of explaining global injustices and asymmetries and proposing practical guidelines to confront them, *is already available in the transnational and intercontinental Third World canon*. (This is why I find it extremely unsettling when Kantians try to force Kant into being socialist, anti-imperialist, antiracist, and the like: just please read socialist, anti-imperialist, antiracist, etc., authors from the Third World, widen the scope of your literature!).

Kant 300 years later and 12,435 kilometres away

Applying the decolonial critical tools developed by Aníbal Quijano to the Kantian notion of hospitality and its use in contemporary cosmopolitanism, Jasmine Gani made a call to challenge the "Eurocentric cosmopolitan monopoly":

> Rather than addressing this sizeable impediment [i.e., "the constitutive effects of an erasure of race from Kant's legal-political theory on the one hand, and a simultaneous project of racist codification in Kant's natural history on the other] in Kantian hospitality, cosmopolitan theorists have produced an upgraded Kantianism that continues to both obscure and reinforce his racist ontology and epistemology. While Kant's racism has been exposed by both decolonial theorists and philosophers of race, the same level of scrutiny has yet to be applied to cosmopolitan theorists and frameworks of hospitality. It is fitting therefore to conclude with a call for more decolonial scholarship on non-modernist epistemologies and practices of hospitality, which would challenge the Eurocentric, cosmopolitan monopoly on the subject (Gani 2017, p. 446).

My own proposal for reading philosophical modernity moves in the direction of reclaiming cosmopolitanism and other universals such as democracy and human rights for anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist projects. Given the predominance of liberal cosmopolitan theories that claim to be inspired by Kant and the centrality of Kant in modern projects—whether critical or rationalizing coloniality, including gender and capitalism—it is essential to engage in non-Eurocentric readings of his work. By this, which is what I pursued in my 2021 book *Voluntad omnilateral y finitud de la Tierra*, I mean something very simple: reading Kant as a milestone in the history of the formation of academic ideologies, with the questions raised by colonial contexts.

This does not imply, as I said before, that there is some privileged access to a primary truth based solely on the place of enunciation or identity. I merely mean that giving universal significance to the social, geographical, political, and economic contexts of colonialism and coloniality and to their material conditions offers an alternative perspective and perception of the problems of the present —problems that the hegemonic diagnoses and the mainstream readings of the philosophical canon fail even to recognize. Changing the canon is not just a matter of adding new philosophers to it, as it is common with white feminist historians of philosophy that merely add some white European female authors to the canon and stir; the voices that canonize and the spaces of canonization must also change.

My stance is partly aligned with the approach to Kantian philosophy taken by Dilek Huseyinzadegan and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who propose using a "methodology of constructive engagement", which begins by acknowledging that "as professional philosophers who construct and reconstruct Kantian arguments, we are implicated in the very problems exemplified by Kant's texts" (Huseyinzadegan 2018, p. 2). The issue is not merely that Kant made racist and misogynistic remarks or that his theory has an explicitly Eurocentric perspective that led him to describe global problems only insofar as they affected Europe. The issue is also that academia has always been imperialist, colonialist, racist, and sexist, *and continues to be so*.

The greatest obstacle when seeking an emancipatory potential in Kant (or in any other canonical philosopher) lies in the canonical and Eurocentric readings of his philosophy and of global problems in general. If "we as professional philosophers" belong to a network of oppression and privilege that extends along a timeline in which Kant was an active participant, the challenge is to become aware of one's own imperial gaze, so as not to reproduce it uncritically when engaging with the Western canon.

In recent years, fortunately, a critical trend has been gaining strength within Kantian studies. This trend contrasts with the more traditional laudatory approaches that either deny the negative aspects of Kant's texts, or justify his racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism as innocent products of a less self-critical time than our own—the familiar "he was merely a child of his time." But Ottobah Cugoano published *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, a radical abolitionist text, in London in 1787, the same year as the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*. Olympe de Gouges wrote her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* in 1791. Anti-racism and feminism existed in the late 18th century Europe: "child of his time" is a euphemism for "intellectual collaborator with oppression". Kant's ideas on race were links in the history of 19th- and 20th-century "scientific racism", not mere isolated statements without any further consequences. One can debate whether his entire philosophical system is inherently supremacist or not, but one cannot deny nor minimize, as some colleagues do, Kant's (or Hegel's or Nietzsche's) role in consolidating the racist, patriarchal, white-supremacist, and Eurocentric ideologies that served the colonial projects of modernity.

This critical trend within Kantian studies today has two main branches. One of them, paradigmatically represented by Helga Varden, after presenting the limitations of Kantian philosophy regarding gender, race, and class, goes on to develop a critical theory through a novel reconstruction of some Kantian theses. The other one, exemplified by the work of Huaping Lu-Adler, Nuria Sánchez Madrid, and Inés Valdez, brings to the forefront the systematic depth of Kant's philosophical limitations, opening the question of whether anything can be "salvaged" from his philosophy. My position takes elements from both. What interests me most is what the involvement of Kant's thought in various forms of oppression means for those of us practicing philosophy today. The real danger is to denounce Kant's racism and sexism without addressing the on-going relevance of these two systems of oppression within philosophical practice itself.

Let me tell you an anecdote. A Kantian scholar from Europe invited me some years ago to write a paper for a collection of essays on Kant's political philosophy. My thesis in the paper was that as Kant was a defender of popular sovereignty, then he should have been committed to a normative principle of sovereign equality among peoples and transnational solidarity. This anti-imperialist thesis is (it goes without saying) about power asymmetries between powerful, affluent countries and their organizations (like NATO), on the one side, and the rest of the world, on the other, elaborated from a Third-World Perspective. Now, when he gave me his view on my paper, I found an outburst of unfriendly and straightforwardly rude comments. He even "objected": "is it okay that in an international system Andorra and China count as equal?" (*verbatim*). Just this phrase alone is a token of how geopolitics of knowledge impairs many scholars' understanding of a text written from another perspective other than that Euro-centred, white liberal vision of the world that pictures it as a harmonic place actually devoid of injustice, power differentials, domination, exploitation, and dispossession.

If most authors in the Kant scholarship seem to discuss a world devoid of capitalism or racism as structural systems of domination, can there still be emancipatory uses of Kant? I believe this is possible, though with many limitations. Contemporary Kantian cosmopolitanism tends to overlook aspects of Kant's own thought that could be useful for developing cosmopolitanism as an emancipatory transnational praxis, capable of critically addressing the structural problems caused by capitalist globalization everywhere —even when those problems do not result in acute crises for European states and their citizens—.

Kant's political thought does not picture an ideal society (*polis*), nor does it link the political to a law of nature (*cosmos*). Instead, it starts from the material and normative fact that humans share a finite place of residence, and that, as a result, their actions necessarily affect the lives of other people and even the course of the world. I emphasize that this remains true even if human beings (or, more precisely, affluent countries and billionaires) colonize other planets. That entire process would still radically impact human and non-human lives on Earth. This is the ontological and material foundation of Kant's cosmopolitanism (and of his political philosophy in general), meaning that it is a thesis about how normative orders arise and why it is politically and ethically necessary to organize such normativity in a popular and omnilateral way. Kant was a thinker opposed to the Westphalian legal-political configuration of the Earth because he was acutely aware of the harmful consequences of organizing the world in this way, even when he only saw the way it affected Europe and only Europe.

Furthermore, some of Kant's theses openly and directly contradict the neoliberal dogma currently prevailing in Argentina. For Kant, freedom and equality are not contradictory but rather two aspects of the same concept. Freedom and equality are inseparable because one can only be truly free within a political community of equals. Kant believed that political communities allow people to undertake projects to counteract the violence and asymmetry present in situations lacking omnilaterality. He also maintained that, although achieving one's own happiness is nearly impossible, humans have a duty to promote the happiness of others according to their own conceptions of happiness. Contrary to the misleading image of Kant as a liberal thinker, which gained fame in the 20th century in the French and the Anglophone academia, Kant was a thinker of the community. His participation in the hegemonic ideology of coloniality was his greatest epistemic failure, condemning him to restricting freedom and equality to white Europeans (despite his later efforts to rid himself of many of these prejudices), and making him in several respects useless for truly emancipatory projects. *And still.*

As expected, last year there was a proliferation of special issues in academic journals, conferences, and even op-eds on Kant, particularly regarding his relevance today. I find the question of the relevance of dead white European philosophers rather puzzling. I prefer to argue that instead of framing the issue in terms of relevance and obsolescence, we should reread mainstream philosophies by asking how important they are for understanding our own situation and present. The goal, however, is not to find trans-historical and

universal answers to situated and current problems. The goal is to understand how oppressive systems of ideas and the counter-systems of emancipatory ideas that remain relevant today were formed.

A key task of any critical theory is reconceptualization. The negative moment is not enough; it is necessary to take concepts and reconfigure the spaces, terms, and languages through which philosophical debates unfold. Part of this work involves non-canonical readings of the canon and recognizing within the canon the presence of silenced and expropriated voices. This is where Audre Lorde's question arises: can the master's house be dismantled with the master's tools? I do believe it can: the master's house can be dismantled because the master did not build it with his own hands; his house was built by people he had enslaved. The master does not own the house by natural right; he became its owner by expropriating the labour, the personhood, the bodies, and the territory of others.

The importance of reading a philosopher who was born 300 years ago in Prussia and who overwhelmingly shaped modern and contemporary philosophical agendas lies in that his thought is an organic part of the oppressive normative and material systems that persist today and shape the conditions within which our own emancipation remains possible. Writing anti-colonial histories of philosophy is also part of the project of writing universal, that is, decolonised, philosophies.

Bilbiography

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