

On “What Causes Poverty? A Postmodern View”

A Postmodern View or Denial of Historical Integrity? The Poverty of Yapa’s View of Poverty

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Postmodernism is, to put it bluntly, a call to inaction and a surrender to capitalist triumphalism. Those of us in academia who face it every day find its appeal to our students and colleagues deeply depressing. But there is at least some consolation in the fact that its esoteric and exclusionary posture, not to mention its divorce from reality (reality?) and its political emptiness, must ultimately limit its practical efficacy.

Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (1996:44)

Let me first stake out my position. Once again, critical social Geography appears to be undergoing an identity crisis. Although Geography has been called by Kenneth Boulding (1987) “the queen of the sciences,” as Paul Sweezy has remarked,¹ it remains somewhat “ill-defined.” Despite its historical prominence, Geography has not yet found secure coordinates in the grid matrix of scientific space and time. When there is a crisis of identity, we often plunge into a whirlpool of chaos and confusion, a condition that engenders boredom with the old and a search for the new. Indeed, “so voracious are the appetites of the culturati to embrace the new, so as not to be bored with the old,” says Daniel Bell (1996:312), that they act like a drowning man trying to clutch a floating straw. Bell’s characterization seems to fit closely the current reflexive mood of Geography. “Here we have a cultural contradiction—a culturati, often drawn from the ‘sensibility of the sixties’ but now ensconced in comfortable chairs in universities, promoting PoMo in the *recherché* . . . quarterlies” (1996:312).

In this climate of uncertainties, many geographers are being seduced to ride this fast-moving train called “postmodernism” or PoMo—and I use Bell’s term to refer to both postmodern(ism) and postmodernist—hoping to fill an intellectual void. There is, obviously, something alluring about PoMo. I cannot quite pinpoint whether it is its hallucinogenic effect or historical amnesia that entices so many intellectuals to jump on its

bandwagon. In his recent article in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (86:707–28), Lakshman Yapa has driven the PoMo bandwagon right into the realm of poverty. It appears that PoMo has completed its march, moving from the heights of arts and literature to the core of poverty and power relations. But wait!

Regardless of reasons (and reasoning), PoMo has surfaced as the latest avatar to enter the sanctum of Geography, presumably to help us attain our intellectual nirvana. Perhaps the various avatars of Geography, appearing in different forms at different times, are an unavoidable historical sequence. Maybe it is, to use the Kuhnian equivalent of *episteme*, a “paradigm” shift—or even a (epochal) “rupture,” as Yapa prefers to call it (see Kuhn 1970). After all, academia has historically proven to be a battleground where postulates and paradigms compete and clash, ideas rise and fall. In this sense, every discipline can expect some type of periodic paradigmatic shift over the course of its evolutionary march. But does PoMo really represent a paradigmatic “shift” or merely a paralytic “shaft” of Geography, or is it simply a heap of husk, awaiting its turn to be blown away by another gusty wind? Is it a theoretical revolution or historical convulsion? Is it going to make critical Geography a new social science “queen” or merely a “concubine?” More specifically, does PoMo, as Yapa contends, reveal “a more satisfactory view of the poverty problem. . . . a new understanding of the power we possess to act in the world” of poverty (p. 707; my emphasis), or is it yet another prankster of poverty disguised in

intellectual garb that human civilization has witnessed time and again since its dawn?

I raise these questions, not because I intend to explore the depth of PoMo in these pages of the *Annals*, nor does the scope of this commentary permit me to take on such a task. I raise them because Yapa's revisionist PoMo view of poverty is a view that is analytically unsettling and historically misleading. Camouflaged in the dense language of complex vocabulary and syntax that PoMos have invented for themselves as a medium of their "tribal" communication, there is *poverty* in Yapa's postmodern view of poverty.

It is not so much the language, however, that concerns me most, although I do find it amusing, especially when juxtaposed against the backdrop of poverty that is the focus of his article. How can such a dense, muddled language empower the poor and those who are fighting against poverty day and night in urban trenches as well as rural fringes? How are they going to grasp its *message* (if there is one)? Language, after all, is not simply a set of words and sentences with particular meanings. It also communicates, as Yapa himself notes, distinct messages. It is the prevailing social science discourse, Yapa emphasizes, that lies at the core of poverty and its perpetuation. Part of his argument, therefore, calls for the deconstruction of this discourse so that poverty can be addressed through "substantive action, . . . [i.e.] the postmodernizing of social science" (p. 721). But, the more PoMos rely on such dense language to break the heavy hands of social science, the more impenetrable and inaccessible their "discourses" become. Postmodernism as an intellectual current has gotten as thick and academic as it can get (Wood and Foster 1996:44).

Admittedly, Yapa states that " 'My solution' is aimed at fellow academics who, like myself, are deeply implicated in the problem and whose *power lies primarily in our capacity to engage the discourse critically*" (p. 723; my emphasis). This position is saddled with two problems, however. First, this is no justification for complicating the language of discourse. Second, his aim is tantamount not only to aimless intellectual pontification of the poverty problem with little ability to capture its ground-level truth, but also to intellectual defeatism and hence political resignation. If the *primary power* of academics is to engage the discourse, then we have truly reached the pinnacle of academic priesthood where poverty becomes a fascinating intellectual toy. Any wonder

why academicians are, to use Marsha Hewitt's (1993) phrase, often labeled the "verbal radicals" (or should I say, "verbose rascals")?

To repeat, my concern is mainly with Yapa's flirtation with the postmodernization of poverty, a conceptual position that represents a notable digression from his previous critical and illuminating research on development and diffusionism. At any rate, lacking any historical integrity, Yapa's postmodern view is suspect. It is like the naked emperor who was profusely praised for his nonexistent magnificent clothes until a little boy broke the code of silence that everybody shared, but nobody dared to utter about the emperor's nakedness. I now focus on Yapa's postmodern view of poverty and its fundamental discord with, and distance from, the historical reality of poverty. My discussion is divided into two parts: Yapa's postmodern perspective and his view of poverty.

Yapa's Postmodern View

"Reality is my teacher. I seek truth from facts," Deng Xiaoping, the late architect of China's modernization in the post-Mao period, used to say. And this is what Yapa seems to claim in his postmodern view: seek truth about poverty from the facts of poverty. But does Yapa really seek truth? Does he allow reality to be his teacher? In fact, can one seek—and then uncover—truth from facts when one denies the historical integrity of the social reality as Yapa does in this article? Simply asked, can such a postmodern view, so heavily directed at the intelligentsia within the ivory towers of academia, provide a progressive analysis of, and solutions for, poverty?

In his epistemological discussion of postmodernism, Yapa projects its aura of authenticity and innate ability to advance the cause of liberating the poor from poverty. In a loosely tied network of *discursive* arguments, he equates his postmodern view of poverty with what he calls "a substantive approach" to poverty. Yapa writes:

the material deprivation experienced by the poor is a form of socially constructed scarcity. . . . [D]iscourse is deeply implicated in creating poverty insofar as it conceals the social origin of scarcity. Although the experience of hunger and malnutrition is immediately material, 'poverty' exists in a *discursive material formation* where ideas, matter, discourse, and power are intertwined in ways that virtually defy dissection. To study such formations,

we must first transcend the limits, assumptions, and language of social science. I contend that a postmodern discursive approach yields a more satisfactory view of the poverty problem: 1) it reveals a multiplicity of causative relations; 2) it points the ways to multiple possibilities of actions; 3) it moves beyond the realm of poverty experts to identify numerous agents of social change; and 4) it yields a new understanding of the power we possess to act in the world (p. 707; emphasis in original).

While one may see Yapa's contentions as a lofty research agenda, little evidence is offered to show how his "postmodern discursive approach . . . moves beyond the realm of poverty experts to identify numerous agents of social change." Who are these agents of social change? How do they bring about such change? How does it point "the ways to multiple possibilities of actions?" What are these actions? How exactly does his approach yield "a new understanding of the power we possess to act in the world?" And what is this act? In other words, these vital contentions rarely go beyond the parameters of mere contentions. Yapa does, however, discuss "a multiplicity of causative relations" of poverty within a "nexus of production relations" framework, and offers some loose and functionalist examples of how scarcity is socially constructed. Then, finally, toward the end of the article, Yapa rests—in a rather preemptively defensive manner—his case by arguing:

The causative relations of poverty exist in a dense network of scarcity-inducing discursive and nondiscursive relations (my translation: nexus of production relations). By concealing that, social science hinders the alleviation of poverty at many levels. It is not possible to describe 'a solution' to poverty in a manner demanded by the question, 'What is your solution to the problem?' . . . My response is that I wish to shift the focus from the notion of 'a solution in the world' to the notion of 'your/my solution.' The 'academic' work that I do on poverty is 'my solution;' it is the 'practice' of my politics (pp. 721, 723; my emphasis).

Let me first deal with Yapa's diversionary postmodern view at a *general* level.

On the surface, Yapa's arguments sound logical. No doubt academic work is important as it aims to find solutions to the problems. Moreover, who can question his intentions when their proclaimed objective is to tackle poverty? I certainly don't. But intentions alone are not enough, as we all know full well. Good intentions can produce dubious results. In the end,

it is the course of action that determines the nature of outcomes. Being *logical* does not necessarily mean arguments are *consistent* with appropriate social theory and action necessary to iron out the issue at hand or conform to the veracity of history and its social reality. I am not suggesting that the historical reality of poverty ought to be accepted or repeated; the objective surely is to change it. Unless we understand the historical reality of poverty in its totality, however, we cannot reverse its oppressive course. As Said (1993) points out, past and present inform each other and coexist together. While the past feeds the present, the present mirrors the past. In this sense, there is no just way in which the oppressive past of poverty can be quarantined from its present, and then transformed to build a progressive future.

In essence, what Yapa, with all his sober thoughts and informed arguments, fails to see is the shallowness of the PoMo position or what Hewitt (1993:78) terms its "illusions of freedom." Postmodernism is anything but "substantive." His claim that this is the "practice" of his "politics" sounds hollow unless, of course, we justify anything we do, including aimlessly "discursive" exercises, as "political practice." "[W]hat appears as emancipatory critique in postmodern discourse is often little more than 'verbal radicalism' that conceals a latent, but nonetheless insidious political conservatism which undermines, rather than contributes to, the possibility of human liberation in either theory or practice" (Hewitt 1993:79).

PoMo is hardly about seeking truth; it is all about, to borrow David Harvey's point, seeking exclusionary "identity"—be it culturally bounded or academically grounded. "The idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of postmodernism" (Harvey 1989:48). As such, it is divisive and consequently detrimental to any common cause that transcends various lines and boundaries, be they cultural or national. PoMo is rarely conducive to creating a climate for the cultivation and growth of political culture, one that is tightly fused with broad-based social theory and practice, i.e., a point where theory melts into activism leading to concrete and concerted actions against such social ills as poverty. What it promotes instead is narrow cultural politics centered around only certain members of

society (Sivanandan 1996a). "The politics of difference," iterates Kenan Malik (1996:3), "has evolved as the intellectual embodiment of social fragmentation" that PoMos espouse (also see Ahmad 1995; Henwood 1996; Wood and Foster 1996). As Daniel Bell (1996:314) pointedly notes: "Postmodernism does not wish to 'transform' reality, but to retreat from it, as in some hermetic deconstruction of texts; to mock it by pastiche and parody; or to gibe at its commercialism by being commercial. . . . PoMo is formless because it turns its back on history." By individualizing the "practice" of politics, Yapa's postmodern discursive approach not only denies the universality of poverty's class roots, but also reduces the whole debate on poverty to fragmented episodes and self-centeredness. In other words, PoMos adopt a revisionist position in that they "appropriate struggle [against poverty] without entering it" (Sivanandan 1996b:10; brackets added).

PoMo is, therefore, little more than an intellectual facade, a fad that is neither reflective of the historical reality of poverty nor compatible with the fusion of social theory and action. As such, postmodernism cannot provide a moral compass for a just Human Geography to fight against the forces that breed poverty. As Sivanandan (1996b:10-11) stresses, PoMo is a condition that bears no relation to poverty. For PoMos, he continues, "everything is transitory, fractured, free-floating—there are no grand narratives explaining the world in its totality, no universal truths. Hence, discourse sans analysis, deconstruction sans construction, the temporal sans the eternal. . . . The notion that everything is contingent, fleeting, is the philosophical lodestar of individualism, an alibi for selfishness [and thus inaction], a rationale for greed. They are the cultural grid on which global capitalism is powered" (brackets added).

In short, postmodernists reject any historical grounding and emancipatory theory. In view of this general picture, how can postmodernism free the masses of humanity from the trenches of poverty that transcends both regional and historical boundaries and defies cultural categories (Malik 1996)? This leads me now to *specific* comments on Yapa's PoMo treatment of poverty, a stark social reality that stalks more than half of the world's population (see Burkett 1990; Bender and Smith 1997).

Yapa's View of Poverty: A Postmodern Fiasco

One of Yapa's postmodern arguments, to repeat, relates to the social construction of scarcity and poverty, a process which he ties to "the nexus of production relations" (i.e., multiple roots of scarcity and poverty). Also included in this nexus is the academic discourse. He writes about the fundamental inability of contemporary development to alleviate poverty. There is no substantial dispute here, for I, too, have made these arguments, documenting how scarcity and poverty are socially produced, how they are class specific, how their social manifestations have changed over time, and how the growing pressure of official development and intrusive global capitalism has exacerbated both (Shrestha 1997). The main problem is Yapa's failure to reveal poverty's direct connection to class relations. One may, of course, argue that, since Yapa rejects a political economy or Marxist perspective on poverty and instead pursues a postmodern line, the question of class relations is moot in his discourse. But such an argument is flawed. How can one talk about the social construction of scarcity and hence poverty without discussing class relations? The social construction of scarcity itself is rooted in the class process, both historically and currently. While the absolute scarcity of resources may exist in certain geographical areas due to physiographic limitations, social (relative) scarcity rarely occurs in the absence of class relations whether defined in terms of production or power. So, to talk about the social construction of scarcity divorced from its class roots is theoretically marred and historically myopic.

Yapa does, to be sure, suggest that capitalist production is responsible for creating wants, but he fails to expose its various sinister nodes at which capitalist relations generate undue wants and thus social scarcity ad nauseam. Nor does he show how the social relations of capitalist production are linked to the various points in his nexus of production relations, including academic. To deal with poverty so superficially from a consumerist angle (p. 715) is, therefore, fundamentally problematic. His quick insertion of the "semiotic theory of signs" and the "concept of polysemy" adds little to his explanation of poverty. No matter how one cuts it, his analysis is largely a sort of intellectual massage with little social conviction to the cause of struggles against poverty.

Such a postmodern discursive approach sheds little light on the historical role of capitalist production in generating and regenerating poverty. Also conspicuously absent from his article is any careful discussion of how capitalist globalization has fractured local production relations (e.g., patron-client relations that traditionally provided some cushion against poverty), as well as heightened already existing social scarcity and class divides. Surprisingly, Yapa does not even pay attention to how the postmodern tendencies of excessive greed and self-centeredness (self-absorption with the materiality of life) brought on by rabid capitalist globalization have intensified both social scarcity and poverty across the world (Broad 1995; Cox 1997; Henwood 1996; Polanyi 1957; Robinson 1996; Shrestha 1997). Nor does he furnish any insight into the feudal/agrarian relations of production that construct scarcity and therefore poverty, ever deepening in many agriculturally dependent countries. Nor is there anything on the colonial relations of power and production that reinforced indigenous class relations and ravaged colonized countries, leaving them in a sinkhole of underdevelopment, out of which many have yet to crawl. He ignores all these stories of the social construction of scarcity and poverty, relegating their whole history and profound social reality to conveniently omitted memories.

To express it simply, *class* is a concrete social structure, and class relations form the meta roots of poverty no matter where it occurs in space and time. Yet, amazingly, class is entirely missing from Yapa's fuzzy view of poverty. Is Yapa ready to *believe*, let alone *prove*, that class relations are no longer relevant to the social origin and perpetuation of poverty, and to pronounce the death of class as a central social construct? Or does he believe that PoMo has totally erased "class" from the vast plain of poverty? To the dismay of historical reality and commonsense, Yapa's treatment of poverty personifies a discursive spaghetti of his "ideas, matter, discourse, and power." So it is not the political or Marxist economy (or this genre of social science discourse) that "conceals the social origin of scarcity," as he contends. Rather it is his much-touted "postmodern discursive approach" that fails to reveal the social origin of scarcity in its totality and subsequently to outline a concrete plan of determined action against the class roots of poverty (p. 707). That is the *poverty* of Yapa's view of poverty. To be blunt, it is simply a misguided postmodern fiasco, a historical folly, a pure

diversion from his previous line of original and substantive scholarship.

Poverty has a long history, a history embedded in class relations. And the history of poverty has not ended yet—at least, I think not. Poverty is a *grand narrative*, filled with bitter memories and endless oppression. Bounded by neither time nor space, it is universal (see de Castro 1977). For the sake of convenience, let me use my own case to illustrate poverty's universality. I was born and raised in a poor family. So routine was my hunger that it seemed both natural and eternal. I got so used to going hungry that every day passed without food felt like simply a day of religious fasting. While I was growing up, the most common explanation given for chronic hunger and poverty was one's karmic configuration. It was only later that I began to unravel the mystery of poverty, that it was a direct product of Nepal's agrarian class structure with land ownership forming its axis. It slowly dawned on me why rich boys' plates were overflowing with food while mine went empty regularly. Notwithstanding some minor variations in details, my story of poverty was not much different from other poor boys' in my town. As I traveled around Nepal as a student activist, the story kept repeating itself; virtually every poor boy I encountered along the way was in the same boat (see Shrestha 1995). In fact, I would readily bet that it is not much different from the story told by any poor boy or girl anywhere in the world, from Sri Lanka to Sierra Leone, from Brazil to Botswana, from Kampuchea to Costa Rica, from Angola to America. The common denominator in all of these cases is the intrinsic class relations and characteristics of poverty. Such is the universality (and massiveness) of poverty.

It is, therefore, pure self-deception on the part of PoMos to assume that their refracted view can provide any "substantive" solution to poverty and deliver the masses from the swamp. By individualizing poverty solutions as episodic fragments, Yapa has stepped right on the methodological booby trap set by conservatives and neoconservatives who love to evoke anecdotal stories of rags-to-riches as a "true" model of poverty solution—a model that ultimately makes every poor person look like a basket case and every rich person a genius, and that intellectuals like Dinesh D'Souza (1995) have been hawking for their personal and political gains. As such, it even takes on a biological, racial undertone in that those who fail to make it are viewed as pathologically deficient and hence naturally fated to poverty. They might

even use my own story as a tangible proof of the power of their PoMo model, how a poor Nepali boy became a professor at a university in the U.S. In doing so, they would certainly have their facts right, but they would not know the truth that there were many hands along the way that pulled me up from the quicksand of poverty. Without those hands, I would most likely have been just a face in the vast pool of poverty, one more poor boy rotting somewhere in a filth-drenched corner of Nepal.

We cannot uproot the class roots of poverty with this kind of individualistic, self-directed PoMo instrument that Yapa is supplying in his “*your solution, my solution*” approach to poverty. This may be wishful thinking, but by no means a *substantive* approach. It may certainly uplift a few poor here and there, but we cannot fight poverty this way; if we could, the battle would already have been won. Not many would choose to remain in poverty. PoMo can neither explain poverty nor eliminate it.

These points made, there are other questions. As Ellen Meiksins Wood (1996) would ask, what is so new about Yapa’s postmodern view of poverty? What is new about his contention that scarcity and poverty are socially constructed and that such construction occurs at multiple nodes in the nexus of production relations? What is new about his argument that social science itself is problematic as it reinforces poverty through its discourse (it is a tragedy of common sense that he lumps all social-science views together into one adversarial category, including the dissenting ones)? There is hardly anything new in this argument. Didn’t Marx talk about the ruling ideas coming from the ruling elites and blocking the formation of revolutionary ideas? Marx also held that knowledge is socially mediated and that science is a social practice (see Begley 1997; Blaut 1993; Nanda 1997; Said 1993).

So there is very little new in any of Yapa’s postmodern arguments; not even his claim that his “academic work” is *his solution* to poverty and *the practice of his politics* is new or postmodern. Academicians are mostly “verbal radicals,” whether they fall on the right or the left. What I discern instead is a great deal of recycling of ideas. Many have argued that poverty is both socially constructed and class specific (Lappé and Collins 1977; Perelman 1979). In his seminal book, first published in 1952, Josué de Castro (1977:383) articulated his position most lucidly, backed by numerous examples from different parts of the

world. For example, he revealed how food scarcity was created in the former British colony of Gambia by abandoning the culture of food crops for local consumption in order to concentrate on peanut production. He succinctly noted: “To try to justify hunger in the world by seeing it as a natural and inevitable phenomenon is only a technique of mystification, an attempt to hide the true causes. . . . The knowledge that man now possesses . . . would provide humanity with enough food of the necessary quality to insure its nutritional balance for many years to come. . . . The difficulties in resolving what is known as the Malthusian dilemma are not technical; they are political difficulties of much greater complexity” (de Castro 1977:461, 466). Echoing de Castro’s findings, Jean-Pierre Berlan (1977:30) added: “An emphasis on science and technology tends to encourage people to approach the problem of hunger essentially in terms of food production, even though we have seen that ‘social factors’ [are at the root of the problem]. . . . The problem, on a world scale or within countries, is not so much of absolute scarcity as of inequality. It is unrealistic to expect that the problem can be solved by increasing the size of the ‘pie,’ *when the very economic and technological forces marshalled to make this increase possible merely widen the gap between wealth and poverty*” [emphasis mine].

Let us not forget Malthus, the master narrator of poverty, who launched a blistering attack on the poor. Not even this passionate advocate of the dominant class in eighteenth-century England could ignore the social reality of poverty, namely the role of class relations and capitalist development in creating scarcity (Patterson and Shrestha 1988). Contradicting his own theory of poverty, Malthus (1959 [1798]:110-11) wrote, most revealingly I might add:

The inclosure of commons and waste lands certainly tend to increase the food of the country, but . . . the inclosure of common fields has frequently had a contrary effect, and that large tracts of land which formerly produced great quantities of corn, by being converted into pasture, both employ fewer hands and feed fewer mouths than before their inclosure. It is, indeed, an *acknowledged truth* that pasture land produces a smaller quantity of human subsistence than the corn land of the same natural fertility, and (because of) the increased demand for butchers meat of the best quality, a greater quantity of good land has annually been employed in grazing (thus leading to) the diminution of human subsistence. . . . [T]he present great demand for butchers meat, and the quantity of good land . . . annually employed

to produce it, together with the great number of horses at present *kept for pleasure*, are the chief causes, that have prevented the quantity of human food in the country" [emphasis mine].²

It is clear that the social construction of scarcity and poverty is not only a direct product of class relations, but also a running theme in social science. Poverty and plenty—they are the historical parallels of class relations and capitalist development. So what is new or postmodern about Yapa's view of poverty? Not much. I rest my case.

A Final Note

In the final analysis, Yapa's postmodern discursive approach (and solution) to poverty amounts to little more than an open surrender to the moral bankruptcy, social irresponsibility, and political expediency of those who are ever ready to see the poor as the problem in order to preserve their class privileges and insatiable greed. If critical geographers accept postmodernism as Geography's newest avatar and wear it as our new identity, it may only reveal—wittingly or unwittingly—plenty about its "colorful" past immersed in the racist dogma of its "environmental determinism" avatar and its endless service to the cause of Europe's predatory empires that pillaged the world and consequently submerged its human masses into the sea of poverty (Blaut 1993; Peet 1985; Said 1993). But I doubt postmodernism, given its denial of historical integrity and social reality, will help critical Geography secure its place in the history of sciences, nor will it ever wage a concerted battle against the class forces of poverty. I firmly believe Geography will remain valuable as a scientific tool as it has in the past, but it will not flourish as a scientific discipline with its own guiding principles if we keep chasing each faddish idea that blows by, especially one such as postmodernism with its lack of foundational grounding or substance. Such faddish pursuits may very well help some to attain short-term academic gains, but only at the expense of secure disciplinary identity and integrity.

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Notes

1. Personal communication with Paul Sweezy, Co-Editor, *Monthly Review*, 1990.
2. For a detailed discussion of Malthusian contradictions, see Patterson and Shrestha (1988). See Mandel (1974) for further discussions on the natural and social scarcities of land, a resource that plays a critical part in agrarian production relations. In such societies, both poverty and power revolve around land.

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