Dewey's Encounter with Trotsky*

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English Abstract

I begin by explaining the intellectual and political context that serves as a background for Dewey agreeing to serve as chairman of the "Commission of Inquiry" investigating charges made against Trotsky and son at the infamous Moscow purges. Dewey was a sharp critic of the abuses of laissez faire capitalism during the Depression. But he was also critical of the Soviet Union and communism. As a radical liberal and democrat Dewey nevertheless believed that Trotsky deserved a fair hearing. After the Commission issued its report "Not Guilty" Trotsky published his famous essay, "Their Morals and Ours." Dewey was invited to reply and critiques Trotsky's conception of the laws of history and the relation means and ends. Dewey's short polemical reply epitomizes his understanding of radical democracy—and argues that there is an integral relation of democratic means and democratic ends.

Resumen en español

Comienzo por explicar el contexto intelectual y político que sirve como trasfondo para que Dewey haya accedido a servir como presidente de la "Comisión investigadora" que tenía a cargo la investigación de los cargos hechos en contra de Trotsky y su hijo durante los infames Procesos de Moscú. Dewey era un agudo crítico de los abusos del capitalismo del laissez faire durante la depresión económica; aunque también era crítico de la Unión Soviética y el comunismo. En tanto que liberal radical y demócrata, Dewey, no obstante, creía que Trotsky merecía una audiencia justa. Luego de que la comisión emitiera su reporte y lo declarara "inocente", Trotsky publicó su famoso ensayo: Su moral y la nuestra. Dewey fue invitado a dar una replica a dicho ensayo, y como resultado, critica la concepción trotskiana sobre las leyes de la historia y la relación entre medios y fines. La corta y polémica respuesta de Dewey compendia su entendimiento de la democracia radical, al argumentar que existe una relación integral entre medios y fines democráticos.

Resumo em português

Começo por explicar o contexto intelectual e político que serve de pano de fundo para Dewey ter aceito o cargo de presidente da "Comissão de Investigação" das acusações feitas contra Trotsky e seu filho por ocasião dos infames Processos de Moscou. Durante a depressão, Dewey foi um crítico ferrenho dos abusos do capitalismo "laissez faire". Mas ele também era crítico da União Soviética e do comunismo. Como liberal e democrata radical, Dewey acreditava, não obstante, que Trotsky merecia ser ouvido de maneira justa. Depois que a Comissão liberou seu relatório declarando-o "Inocente",

Trotsky publicou seu famoso ensaio "A moral deles e a nossa". Dewey foi convidado a responder e, em sua resposta, critica a concepção de Trotsky das leis da história e da relação entre meios e fins. A polêmica e curta resposta de Dewey resume sua compreensão da democracia radical - e defende que há uma relação integral entre meios democráticos e fins democráticos.

The 1930s was one of the most eventful and productive decades in Dewey's life. He published more than a half dozen books including *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. It was during this decade that he sharpened his understanding of radical democracy and a renascent liberalism. He interrupted his scholarly work to travel to Mexico as the Chair of the Trotsky Commission—or to give its full title, "The Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials." To appreciate the role that Dewey played in the Commission and the significance of his subsequent intellectual exchange with Trotsky, we need to understand the context of his thinking and activities. Dewey began the decade in the midst of the Depression with a sharp critique of what was going in the United States. Citing a few of his passages gives something of the pungency of his criticisms of the failures of American capitalism. In 1933, addressing the economic situation in the United States and the steps needed for recovery he wrote:

> What are the most evident sore spots of the present? The answer is clear. Unemployment, extreme inequality in the distribution of national income; . . . a crazy, cumbrous, inequitable tax system that puts the burden on the producer, and the ultimate consumer, and lets off the parasites, exploiters and the privileged,--who ought to be relieved entirely of their gorged excess, . . . a vicious and incompetent banking system (LW 9: 64).

Although written in 1933, it might just have been easily written in 2012. And in focusing on the crisis of liberalism, Dewey argued that a doctrine that had once been a rallying point for a demand for equality, toleration, and social justice had become an ideology for defending the status quo of "laissez faire" capitalism. "[T]he crisis of liberalism was a product of historical events. Soon after liberal tenets were formulated as eternal truths, it became an instrument of vested interests in opposition to further social change, a ritual of lip service, or else was shattered by new forces that came in. Nevertheless, the ideas of liberty, of individuality and of freed intelligence have an enduring value, a value never more needed than now" (LW 11: 35). Dewey called for a "renascent liberalism," a radical liberalism that categorically rejects any appeal to violence. On the contrary those "who decry the use of violence are themselves willing to resort to violence and are ready to put their will into operation. Their fundamental objection to change in the economic institution that now exists, and for its maintenance they resort to the use of the force that is placed in their hands by this very institution . . . Force, rather than intelligence, is built into the procedures of the existing social system, regularly as coercion, in times of

crises as overt violence. The legal system, conspicuously in its penal aspect, more subtly in civil practice, rests upon coercion" (LW 11: 45).

> Liberalism must now become radical, meaning by "radical" perception of the necessity of thoroughgoing changes in the set-up of institutions and corresponding activity to bring the changes to pass. For the gulf between what the actual situation makes possible and the actual state itself is so great that it cannot be bridged by piecemeal policies undertaken *ad hoc*. The process of producing the changes will be, in any case, a gradual one. But "reforms" that deal with now with this abuse and now with that without having a social goal based upon an inclusive plan, differ entirely from effort at re-forming, in its literal sense, the institutional scheme of things. The liberals of more than a century ago were denounced in their time as subversive radicals, and only when the new economic order was established did they become apologists for the *status quo* or else content with social patchwork. If radicalism be defined as perception of the need for radical change, then today any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed (LW 11: 45).

In theory and practice, Dewey was a radical critic of the abuses of American capitalism —a left critic of The New Deal. He was not innocent about power. He felt that both existing parties—the Democratic and the Republican parties—were only "errand boys" of big business. He (unsuccessfully) argued for the need for a new party to take up "the business of educating people until the dullest and the most partisan see the connection between economic life and politics. Its business is to make the connection between political democracy and industrial democracy as clear as the noon-day sun."[1]

But unlike some of his fellow liberals, Dewey became increasingly skeptical and critical of any actual communism. He had visited the Soviet Union in 1928 and was favorably impressed (especially by the experiments in education), but by the early 1930s he became a sharp and persistent critic. He thought that communism posed a serious threat to his vision of a radical democratic liberalism. In 1934, he joined Morris Cohen and Bertrand Russell in stating explicitly "Why I am Not a Communist." He opposed the dogmatism of an ideology that "has made the practical traits of the dictatorship *of* the proletariat and *over* the proletariat, the suppression of civil liberties of all non-proletarian minorities, integral parts of the standard communist faith and dogma" (LW 9: 91-2). He rejected the absolute determinism of a Communist theory of history and the inevitability of class war. Dewey does not pull any punches. Having personally experienced the ruthless attacks by Communists, he finds extremely repugnant the methods of dispute by Communists.

> Fair play, elementary honesty in the representation of facts and especially of the opinions of others, are something more than "bourgeois virtues." They are traits that have been won only after long struggle. They are not deep-seated in human nature even now—witness the methods that brought Hilterism to power. The systematic, persistent and seemingly intentional disregard of these things by Communist spokesmen in speech and press, the hysteria of their denunciations, their attempts at character assassination of their opponents, the misrepresentation of the views of the "liberals" to whom they also appeal for aid

> in their defense campaigns, their policy of "rule or ruin" in their so-called united front activities, their apparent conviction that what they take to be the end justifies the use of *any* means if only those means promise to be successful—all these, in my judgment, are fatal to the very end which official Communism profess to have at heart (LW 9: 94).

Indeed, already in 1934, Dewey saw the parallels between what was happening in the U.S.S.R. and the growth of fascism in Italy and Germany. "As an unalterable opponent of Fascism in every form, I cannot be a Communist" (LW 9: 93).

What is distinctive and admirable about Dewey in the early 1930s is the combination of a sharp critique of the excesses of American capitalism and Soviet Communism combined with a passionate commitment to a vision of a radical democracy. Dewey practiced what he firmly believed. This became evident when Dewey agreed to chair of Commission of Inquiry into the charges made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow trials. Popular front liberals tended to downplay the significance of these purges, but not Dewey. Dewey was not only severely attacked for agreeing to chair the Commission.There were even threats on his life. Dewey made it clear he was defending "Trotsky's right to a public trial, although I have no sympathy with what seems to me abstract ideological fanaticism." So Dewey, at the age of 78, set aside his work on his *Logic*, and made the arduous trip to Mexico City where he chaired the hearings in Coyocan, Mexico that consisted of thirteen sessions held between April 10 and 17. Strictly speaking, the inquiry was not a trial. The Commission sought to ascertain the veracity of the charges that had been made against Trotsky and his son. As Dewey stated in the opening session, the Commission "is here in Mexico neither as a court nor as a jury .... Our sole function is to ascertain the truth as far as is humanly possible" (LW 11: 306). The transcript shows just how active Dewey was in carrying out its task. Ironically, for the all the criticism of the pragmatist conception of truth, Dewey before, during, and after the inquiry defended the importance of ascertaining the truth. I find it both moving and consistent with his character that Dewey concluded his opening remarks of the first session with the following personal declaration:

> Speaking finally not for the commission but for myself, I had hoped that a chairman might be found for these preliminary investigations whose experience better fitted for the difficult and delicate task to be performed. But I have given my life to the work of education, which I have conceived to be that of public enlightenment in the interests of society. If I finally accepted the responsible post I now occupy, it was because I realized that to act otherwise would be to be false to my life work (LW 11: 309).

The following September, The Dewey Commission issued a summary of its findings and concluded: "We therefore find the Moscow trials to be frame-ups. We therefore find Trotsky and Sedov not guilty."[2] After the publication of the Commission findings, the attacks on Dewey became even more vicious. He was called a "fascist," "a tool of reaction." A letter appeared in the *New Masses* signed by many prominent American intellectuals warning that Dewey was being used by Troskyists. And Dewey, who had

long been a contributor to the *New Republic* resigned from the editorial board because he felt it took an equivocal stance on the Moscow purges instead of forthrightly condemning them. In response to those "liberals" who questioned the work of the Commission, Dewey wrote, "For if liberalism means anything, it means complete and courageous devotion to freedom on inquiry" (LW 11: 318). In the Soviet Union, Dewey—who after his 1928 visit had been praised as a sympathetic friend—was now condemned as "the mouthpiece of modern imperialistic reaction, the ideologist of American imperialism."[3]

Although Dewey consistently defended the right of Trotsky to have a fair hearing, he was not sympathetic with the Trotsky's ideological convictions. The opportunity for an intellectual confrontation with Trotsky came after the findings of the commission were published. In June 1938, Trotsky published his famous polemical article "Their Morals and Ours" in *The New International*. The editors invited Dewey to reply in their August issue. Dewey's reply is short but sharp. A careful analysis of it reveals a great deal about Dewey's understanding and commitment to a radical democratic vision.

Dewey begins by noting that the relation of means and ends has not only been a long standing issue in morals but also a "burning issue in political theory and practice" (LW 13: 149). Dewey, in his firm but judicious manner, once again condemns those who defend Stalin "on the grounds that the purges and prosecutions, perhaps even with a certain amount of falsification, were necessary to maintain the alleged socialistic régime of that country." But he is just as critical of those who wanted to condemn Trotsky because he was a Marxist, and Dewey concluded that if he had been in power he would have used "any means whatever that seemed necessary to achieve the end involved in dictatorship by the proletariat" (LW 13: 349). Trotsky, in his article, had brought to the fore the explicit discussion of means and ends in social action. Dewey finds common ground with Trotsky in rejecting "absolutistic ethics based on the alleged deliverances of conscience, or a moral sense, or some brand of eternal truths" (LW 13: 350). Dewey "holds that the end in the sense of consequences provides the only basis for moral ideas and action, and therefore provides the only justification that can be found for means employed." The specific thesis advanced by Trotsky that Dewey discusses is the following: "A means can be justified only by its end. But the end in turn needs to be justified. From the Marxian point of view, which expresses the historic interests of the proletariat, the end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of man over nature and to the abolition of power of man over man" (LW 13: 350).[4]

Here is where Dewey digs in. Dewey notes that "end" covers here two things—"the final end and the ends that are themselves means to this final end." Dewey is here referring to a distinction that is not only relevant to his critique of Trotsky, but absolutely central to his own philosophy. For Dewey consistently argued for the interdependence of means and ends. There is no absolute distinction here. On the contrary, means are constitutive of ends—and what are taken as ends may well be the means to further ends. Why is this conception of the interdependence of means and ends so important for Dewey? In regard to Trotsky's thesis, it bears on his claim: "That which is

permissible, we answer, which really leads to the liberation of mankind." Moreover, Dewey says:

> Were the latter claim consistently adhered to and followed through it would be consistent with the sound principle of interdependence of means and end. Being in accord with it, it would lead to scrupulous examination of the means that are used, to ascertain what their actual objective consequences will be as far as it is humanly possible—to show that they do "really" lead to the liberation of mankind (LW 13: 350-51).

If the question is raised about the justification of means, then the first task to understand, as clearly as one can ("as far as it is humanly possible"), is what will be the actual consequences of the means. This cannot be "deduced" from any a priori principles or claims about the "laws of history." And here we see the double significance of the idea of an end:

> As far as it means consequences actually reached, it is clearly dependent upon means used, while measures in their capacity of means are dependent upon the end in the sense that they have to be viewed and judged on the ground of their actual objective results. On this basis, and *end-in-view* represents an idea of the final consequences, in case the idea of *the ground of the means that are judged to be most likely to produce the end*. The end-in-view is thus itself a means for directing action—just as a man's *idea* of health to be attained or a house to be built is not identical with end in the sense of actual outcome but is a means for directing action to achieve that end (LW 13: 351).

We need to distinguish two senses of end—end in the sense of the consequences that actually follow from our action and an end-in-view. The end-in-view is the imagined or conceived end that we adopt to guide our actions. It is the *present means* for directing action. But it is crucial to distinguish this role of an end-in-view as a means for directing action—and the objective consequences of the means that are adopted. Why? Because when it comes to any action—especially political action—we cannot make a categorical distinction between means and end. Indeed Dewey consistently argued that if one seeks to achieve or further democratic ends, then this demands the employment of democratic means. Democratic means are constitutive democratic ends. It is crucial to emphasize the difference between anticipated consequences and actual consequences for two reasons. First, because when we evaluate a means, we must evaluate the anticipated consequences as carefully as we can. And this is an issue open to debate and public controversy. Second, we must always be alert to the disparities that can arise between anticipated consequences and actual consequences. The relation of means and ends is not only interdependent; it is dynamic—not static. Ends-in-view guide our actions. They demand that we anticipate the objective consequences of our actions. But when there is a disparity between anticipated consequences and actual consequences then we are required to alter our ends-in-view.

> An individual may hold, and quite sincerely believe as far as his personal opinion is concerned that certain means will "really" lead to a professed and desired end.

> But the real question is not one of personal belief but of the objective grounds upon which it is held: namely the consequences that will actually be produced by them (LW 13: 351).

This demands judgment and public debate about anticipated objective consequences and a real willingness to alter our ends-in-view in light of actual consequences. So from Dewey's perspective, if Trotsky were consistent in his claim that "dialectical materialism knows no dualism of means and end" then he ought to consider the various means without a "fixed preconception of what they *must* be." But this is not the course adopted by Trotsky. He writes: "The liberating morality of the proletariat is of a revolutionary character . . . . It *deduces* a rule of conduct from the laws of development of society, this primarily the law of all laws" (LW 13: 351).

Here we can locate what is perhaps the most fundamental difference between Dewey's fallibilistic pragmatism and the Marxism professed by Trotsky (and many others.) Dewey, like all the thinkers in the pragmatic tradition, is profoundly skeptical and critical of a conception of "science" that seems to owe more to nineteenth century German conceptions of *Wissenschaft* (with its suggestion of necessity and finality) than the actual practice of experimental science. All scientific hypotheses and theories in the natural and social disciplines are fallible and open to public criticism and revision. If we refuse to carefully and publicly evaluate different means for achieving our goals, then we are violating the most elementary principles of inquiry. And if we do not acknowledge that any scientific claim is open to revision and criticism in light of further evidence and argument, then we are abandoning scientific inquiry. To speak of "the law of all laws of social development" is sheer dogmatism. Trotsky, in effect, is dogmatically taking the class struggle as the *only* means for achieving the "liberation of mankind" without a careful, critical examination of the meaning and actual consequences of "class struggle." Despite Trotsky's claim that "dialectical materialism knows no dualism between means and ends," Dewey shows that Trotsky presupposes just such a dualism.

> For the choice of means is not decided upon the ground of an independent examination of the measures and policies with respect to their actual objective consequences. On the contrary, means are "*deduced*" from an independent source, an alleged law of history which is *the* law of all laws of social development (LW 13: 352).

Dewey's doctrine of the interdependence of means and ends does not rule out the role that such a struggle may play in furthering democratic ends-in-view. But if these means are to be justified, they must be justified "by an examination of actual consequences of its use, not deductively." "It is one thing to say that class struggle is a means of attaining the end of liberation. It is a radically different thing to say that there is an absolute *law* of class struggle which determines the means to be used" (LW 13: 353). It follows from Dewey's analysis that we must also be critical of taking a vague abstraction as if it specified a concrete end. For the very meaning of what Trotsky takes to be the final end that does not need justification—"the liberation of mankind"—is itself open to public

discussion and criticism. What precisely does he mean by "the liberation of mankind"? There is something desperately wrong with thinking that there are "final ends" that are not subject to critical evaluation. To speak as if we can simply dogmatically specify "final ends" is to remove these ends from public criticism.

Dewey makes a further point. To speak of the liberation of mankind as an end to be striven for is to speak about a *moral* end. "No scientific law can determine a moral end save by deserting the principle of the interdependence of means and end" (LW 13: 353).

> A Marxian may sincerely believe that class struggle is *the* law of social development. But quite aside from the fact that the belief closes the door to further examination of history—just as an assertion that the Newtonian laws are the final laws of physics would preclude further search for physical laws—it would not follow, even if it were the scientific law of history, that it is the means to the moral goal of the liberation of mankind. That it is such a means has to be shown not by "deduction" from a law but by examination of the actual relations of means and consequences; an examination in which given the liberation of mankind as end, there is free and unprejudiced search for the means by which it can be attained (LW 13: 353).

The point that Dewey emphasizes goes beyond his dispute with Trotsky. Dewey called for the application of experimental scientific procedures in dealing with moral and political issues. But he certainly did not think we can read off from science—whether the natural or the social sciences—the *moral* goals for which we ought to strive. In so far as Trotsky's conception of science is one that reveals—once and for all—what are supposed to be the "laws of history and social development" (LW 13: 353), he is guilty of a confusion of what we can *learn* from science and what ought to be our *moral* ends-in view. Scientific knowledge is relevant in articulating and defending our moral ends-in-view but the appeal to science is never *sufficient* to justify our moral vision and the moral ends-in-view that we seek to achieve. Here again Dewey is not only criticizing Trotsky's appeal to "*the* law of all laws of social development," but as deeply flawed conception of science (LW 13: 353).

Dewey concludes his sharp critique of Trotsky by accusing him that in avoiding one form of absolutism, he plunges us into another form of absolutism.

> The only conclusion that I am able to reach is that in avoiding one kind of absolutism Mr. Trotsky has plunged into another kind of absolutism. There appears to be a curious transfer among orthodox Marxists of allegiance from the ideals of socialism and scientific *methods* of attaining them (scientific in the sense of being based on the objective relations of means and consequences) to the class struggle as the law of historical change. Deduction of ends set up, of means and attitudes, from this law as the primary thing that makes all moral questions, that is, all questions of the end to be finally attained, meaningless. To be scientific about ends does not mean to read them out of laws, whether the laws are natural or social (LW 13: 354).

I have analyzed Dewey's response to Trotsky for several reasons. Dewey is frequently criticized for his "wooly" prose, but his trenchant critique illustrates how Dewey could be precise, perceptive and polemical in his critiques. He raises some of the most searching questions about what is presupposed and obscured in the doctrine that the "end justifies the means." He questions the very idea of science, law, and history that underlies Trotsky's understanding of the relation of means and ends. When we read his critique of Trotsky in the context of his thinking and actions during the 1930s, we can see how Dewey is an exemplar of the committed radical liberal democrat who refuses to be seduced by any form of dogmatism. Dewey was also a consistent and persistent critic of the abuses of capitalism. He condemned severe economic inequality and the rapacious character of unfettered capitalism. He feared that money and power were undermining what is most vital in democracy. He chided those who appealed to an outdated "liberalism" to defend the status quo. He called for a radical liberalism that demanded "a social goal based on an inclusive plan." But unlike some popular front "liberals," Dewey had no illusions about Communism and what was happening in the Soviet Union under Stalin. And he had no patience with those who wanted to sacrifice truth to what they took to be political expediency. Dewey was viciously attacked from the right and the left but he had the courage of his convictions. His willingness to chair and take an active role in the Trotsky inquiry showed how seriously he took the values of truth and fairness and toleration that he took to be fundamental for a fighting liberalism. He had no sympathy with the ideas professed by Trotsky, but defends his right to a fair hearing. He had no patience with those who ignored or downplayed the horrors of the Moscow trials and purges. Dewey knew that in times of a crisis, there is an enormous temptation to abandon democratic means, to resort to violence, to use any means possible to achieve one's ends. But he exposed and resisted this temptation. He never wavered in his conviction that there is a dynamic interdependence of democratic means and democratic ends –and that *both* means and ends-in-view need to be constantly rethought in light of actual consequences. In opposition to Trotsky on means and ends, Dewey's states:

> *The fundamental principle of democracy is that the ends of freedom and individuality for all can be attained only by means that accord with those ends ....* There is intellectual hypocrisy and moral contradiction in the creed of those who uphold the need for at least a temporary dictatorship of a class as well as in the position of those who assert that the present economic system is one of freedom of initiative and of opportunity for all .... A democratic liberalism that does not recognize these things in thought and action is not awake to its own meaning and to what that meaning demands (LW 11:298).

I have frequently said that we cannot turn to Dewey to solve our current problems. But I believe that he can serve as a source of inspiration. He exemplifies what is the best of our democratic liberal tradition. He had the courage to stand up against his critics on the right and left. He expressed his outrage about the injustices and failures of American capitalism and called for radical reform of economic and political institutions. He supported protest movements against the abuses of capitalism. At the same time, he had no illusions about "really existing communism," especially Stalinist totalitarianism.

He was not afraid to stand up to those "liberals" who equivocated about the scandals of the Moscow purges. He refused to compromise on the principle that the achievement of creative democracy can only be achieved by democratic means.

Hannah Arendt spoke about living in dark times. Dark times occur when there is a debasement of speech and action, when " light is extinguished by 'credibility gaps' and 'invisible governments,' by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality" (Arendt 1995: viii). Arendt went on to say, "[T]hat even in the darkest of times we have a right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth" (Arendt 1995: ix). We are now living through "dark times." Dewey's life, works, and deeds—especially as exemplified in that other dark period, the 1930s—provides the type of illumination that is so badly needed today as we encounter and engage new threats to the democratic ideals that Dewey cherished and to which he dedicated his life's work to achieve.

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Notes

[1] "Democracy Joins the Unemployed," a speech delivered on July 2, 1932 cited in Westbrook 1991; 443.

[2] *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials*. (1938, xv)

[3] Quoted in Westbrook 1991: 482

[4] Trotsky's passage continues: "That is permissible... which really leads to the liberation of mankind. Since this end can be achieved only through revolution, the liberating morality of the proletariat of necessity is endowed with a revolutionary character. It irreconcilably counteracts not only religious dogmas but all kinds of idealistic fetishes, these philosophic gendarmes of the ruling class."

Steven Lukes argues that Trotsky exhibits what Lukes labels the "paradox" of Marxism. "[W]hat is striking about Marxism is its apparent commitment to both the rejection and the adoption of moral criticism and exhortation." Lukes 1985: 4

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