Gender and Economics

The Sexual Division of Labour and the Subordination of Women

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All societies exhibit a sexual division of labour. That is, there are some tasks which are allocated predominantly or exclusively to women, others to men, while some may be done by both men and women. As societies undergo economic change, the nature of work changes, and so does its distribution between men and women. And at any point in time, of course, the division of tasks varies from country to country. But the existence of some sexual division of labour, some sex-typing of activities, is a very persistent fact of human society.

Feminists have long been interested in this persistent fact, arguing that to understand the sexual division of labour is crucial to any attempt to understand, and to change, the social position of women as a whole. In taking up these arguments in this article I have two aims. First, I survey the reasons why the sexual division of labour is an important problem for feminist analysis, and the theoretical difficulties raised by attempts to explain the creation of such sexual divisions. And second, I seek to use this discussion to address the general problem of the relation between the economic position of women – that is, the type of work women do and the relations within which they do it – and the broader subordination of women in society.

While this article introduces a number of themes which are taken up again in other articles in the book, it concentrates on economic aspects of women's subordination. Many social and cultural aspects of

subordination, discussed in detail in other articles in the book, are not addressed here.

SUBORDINATION AND SEXUAL DIVISION

Two questions of definition need to be discussed at the outset. The first is the distinction between 'gender' and 'sex'. Feminist writers (see for example Oakley, 1972; Rubin, 1975) have come to distinguish sharply between biological sex, and socially constructed categories of gender. Although I continue to use the established phrase 'the sexual division of labour', what I mean by it more strictly is the division of labour along lines of gender. Thus the subsequent discussion uses the concepts of 'gender' and 'gender relations' in the discussion of the activities and relations of men and women, and does not assume that any of the divisions studied can be deduced from differences between the biological sexes (see also, on this point, Elson and Pearson, this volume).

The second concept requiring definition is that of 'subordination'. I am using the concept of female subordination – the subordination of women to men – as the focus of my analysis because this centres attention on what one might call the feminist problematic: the relations between men and women within the social process as a whole and the way those relations work to the detriment of women (see Whitehead, 1979 for an extended discussion of this). If we take the subordination of women to be our central problem, we can then analyse the relation of this gender subordination to other afflictions of women, such as economic exploitation, without conflating the conceptual and political issues.

Feminists, then, are interested in the sexual division of labour in society because it appears to express, embody, and furthermore to perpetuate, female subordination. This can be easily illustrated. In areas where both women and men work for wages, women workers tend to be segregated into certain industrial sectors, and into certain occupations within those sectors. Within these jobs, women are typically lower paid, defined as less skilled, low in the hierarchy of authority and have relatively poor conditions of work. This situation is quite well documented now for developed industrial countries (see Phillips and Taylor, 1980, and the papers in Amsden, 1980), and there is also substantial evidence for the Third World (Elson and Pearson, this volume; Lim, 1978; Blake and Moonstan, 1981; Grossman, 1979; Heyzer, 1981; Stoler, forthcoming; Banerjee, forthcoming). Moreover, it is striking

how rapidly, as new factories and plantations are established, new categories of 'women's work' become established, with relatively disadvantageous wages and conditions (see for example Mackintosh, forthcoming; Pearson, forthcoming). In this way the sexual division of labour is created and recreated as the wage labour market develops, and one form of women's subordination is perpetuated.

The existence of a sexual division of labour is not of course limited to the sphere of wage work. In non-wage work, whether in farming, in urban self-employment in trading or manufacturing, or in 'domestic' tasks such as cooking or child care, a sexual division of labour is also a continuing fact, and frequently works to the relative detriment of women. Women work as unpaid labour in household-based activities – agricultural and non-agricultural – for an often meagre share of the benefits. In poor agricultural areas, the development of cash cropping and new farming methods, and the shifting of food processing outside the home, have brought changes in the sexual division of labour, creating financially profitable activities for men, and segregating women in the less productive activities (Rogers, 1980; Bukh, 1979; Palmer, 1977 and 1978; Roberts, 1979 and forthcoming; Boserup, 1970). And finally, in very many societies, the division of labour by gender is very marked in what I have called above 'domestic' tasks. Where women undertake all the domestic work, this work may be socially undervalued, and sharply restrict women's ability to participate in cash earning activities. In very many areas of the world, the sexual division of labour in the home forces women to work for longer hours than men, to achieve at the end of the day a lower standard of living.

Gender subordination is thus embedded in the sexual division of labour. As shown, the sexual division of labour, reorganised and often strengthened as the cash economy spreads, tends to act to the detriment of women. Feminist analysis of such sexual divisions therefore starts from the premise that they are not 'natural', that they do not merely embody complementary roles for men and women. Rather, we can turn such a proposition on its head: only in a society where men and women constitute unequal genders is there any reason why gender should be an important organising principle of the social division of labour, with the exception of the physical process of childbearing. For nothing in the fact that women bear children implies that they exclusively should care for them through their childhood; still less does it imply that women should also feed and care for adults, nurse the sick, undertake certain agricultural tasks or work in electronics factories. A society where men

and women were equal would be one where the arbitrary fact of sexual difference did not mark out the possibilities and limitations of economic activity for the individual.

The evidence thus strongly suggests a link between the sexual division of labour and the subordination of women. But how then can the creation and perpetuation of the sexual division of labour itself be explained? I survey below some of the types of theoretical explanation which have been offered, and the problems they present. The discussion is intended not as an even-handed summary of differing points of view, but rather as a distinctly partisan examination of some of the theoretical difficulties involved, concentrating on the difficulty of integrating economic analysis and gender into a theory of the development of categories of women's work.

THE ADVANTAGES OF WOMEN'S WORK FOR CAPITAL

An understanding of the sexual division of labour in any society requires that we examine, not only the jobs that men and women do, but also the relations under which they do them. So much is already clear from the discussion in the previous section. Thus the implications of the sexual division of labour for women depend on whether they work as wage workers, as unpaid household members, as self employed traders; in other words, they depend on the social relations of production under which the work is performed. This concept of the social relations of production, and its importance to an understanding of the division of labour in society, is one of the most useful insights which Marxist economic theory has brought to an understanding of sexual division.

This insight is employed in one area of the literature on sexual division of labour, where the approach has been to ask, what are the benefits of women's work to capital? Writers using this approach, based in Marxist economic analysis, have examined the various categories of 'women's work' – wage work, for example, or small scale farming or domestic work – and have asked how, in different ways, each category of such work is of benefit to the owners of capital (that is, to those who own and run private sector enterprise in mixed economies). The implicit assumption behind such an approach is that if one can show that capital, the dominant economic power in non-socialist economies, benefits from the sexual division of labour and from the economic subordination of women which it implies, then one will have at least a partial

explanation for the existence of such subordination and for its perpetuation once established.

The method of argument in this approach is to try to show that, because of the existence of the sexual division of labour, capital is able to extract greater profits from its workforce than would otherwise be the case. Within the sphere of wage work, for example, women have long formed a cheap labour force, paid less relative to their productivity than men, and the effect of this has been to increase profits both within developed industrial capitalist countries and in the Third World (see Sally Alexander's introduction to Herzog, 1980, and Elson and Peason, this volume). It has also been suggested that capital benefits from using women as a 'reserve army' of labour: a flexible supply of workers who can be absorbed in a phase of expansion, and thrown out – not merely out of work but out of the labour force, back into dependency within the home – when a crisis sets in (see Bruegel, 1979, for an examination of this hypothesis in the context of recent British experience). Women form one of the cheapest and most vulnerable parts of the wage labour force, and are thus open to a high level of exploitation. Furthermore the material divisions which emerge in the work force between men and women – difference in pay, competition for jobs in situations of unemployment – lessen the strength of workers as a whole, allowing capital to divide and rule and thus to increase profits at the expense of wages.

A similar line of argument has been applied to women's work done outside the wage labour force, such as unpaid work within the household. Within Europe and North America, a recent debate about the analysis of domestic labour, or housework, focussed on the advantages of such work for capital. Housework is work done within the home, producing goods for immediate consumption within the household (cooked meals, clean clothes, child care). How then, it was asked, is the process of capital accumulation assisted by this mass of unpaid labour? (See Himmelweit and Mohun, 1977, for a summary of the debate and bibliography). The unpaid labour within the home, almost all done by women, raises the standard of living of the working class above that provided by wage alone, and provides the services of care and socialisation of children, that is, of the future labour force. These are services which could only otherwise be provided, less effectively and at high cost to capital, by the state.

In addition, still on the subject of housework, there is an unresolved debate concerning the effects of women's housework on the average level of wages paid by capital (see Beechey, 1977, for a contribution to

this debate). It has variously been argued that the performance of housework lowers wages below what they would otherwise be, by providing goods which would otherwise have to be bought with the wage, and that its performance by women excluded from the labour market may tend to raise the wage of those in work (in particular, the wages of men), by allowing them to fight for a 'family wage' to cover dependents' consumption (for the last argument, see Humphries, 1977; for a critique see Barrett and McIntosh, 1980). This is a continuing debate and one which cannot be resolved at the level of theory alone. There are many conflicting influences on the general level of wages in any geographical area or historical period, and the relation between housework and wage levels may well be a question for economic history as much as general theory.

All these analyses seek to show that women's work, as cheap wage workers or as housewives, is of benefit to capital. Critics of this approach to the sexual division of labour have generally argued, not that it is incorrect, but that it is insufficient as an explanation. For it does not seem to explain why it is *women* who perform these tasks. The problem becomes clear when we move outside the developed capitalist countries. Thus Bennholdt-Thomson (this volume) takes the line of argument that housework lowers the value of labour power, and stretches it to its logical conclusion. That is, since it is the unpaid nature of housework which is crucial, one may use exactly the same framework of analysis for other productive activities such as subsistence argricultural production which are performed by both men and women, and contribute to the standard of living of the capitalist labour force (Meillassoux, 1981, makes an analytically similar argument). Therefore simply to analyse the benefits of this type of work for capital is insufficient to explain why women predominate in particular areas of such work.

THE LIMITS OF ECONOMICS AND THE LIMITS OF MARXIST THEORY

In order to explain the sexual division of labour therefore we have to move beyond an explanation solely in terms of the benefits of women's work to capital. This need for additional explanation is reinforced by the observation that some form of sexual division of labour predated the spread of capitalism in virtually all countries. Historically, as wage work has spread, capital has seized upon pre-existing division between men and women, and has incorporated that division within its own workforce to its own advantage.

That capital should seize upon existing division in this way is the result of the form of organisation of capitalist production. Production is organised on a hierarchical and exploitative basis, by a management constantly attempting to increase its level of control of the production process in the face of various forms of worker resistance (see for example Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977). Any existing divisions, such as those based on gender or race, tend therefore to be exploited and worsened to increase management control, and become embedded in the internal hierarchies of the production process. The spread of the wage economy thereby brings new forms of the sexual division of labour, and new forms of subordination of women embodied in that sexual division of labour (see Elson and Pearson, this volume, for examples of this process).

The theoretical problem then arises: if women's subordination within society predates capitalism, then surely we cannot hope to explain it solely in terms of the inherent logic of the capitalist system? Or to put it more generally, if women's subordination has existed across different modes of production, then surely one cannot hope to explain it by the demands of any particular set of production relations?

This takes us to the heart of the debate about the limits of economic explanation – or more generally the limits of Marxist theory – in the analysis of women's subordination. The problem just outlined has led many feminists to argue that even the sexual division of labour (an apparently economic phenomenon) cannot be explained solely in terms of the demands of the production system. Rather they have argued (see in particular Hartmann, 1979) that our central problem of analysis is, or should be, the relation of women to *men*, not to capital or other economic forces; accordingly it is proposed we have to go beyond the bounds of Marxist analysis, since the object of study of Marxist theory is production or production relations, a different object of analysis from that of feminists.

Their alternative proposal is that we seek to understand the sexual division of labour in society as the intersection of two sets of social forces: capitalism and patriarchy. It should be said that the argument along these lines has so far only been developed for capitalism, not for other sets of production relations in societies incompletely dominated by capital. Patriarchy is used in this argument in its most general sense of the social dominance of the male. This general usage has been criticised (Beechey, 1979; Edholm et al, 1977); critics have suggested that we should keep 'patriarchy' for situations where society is organised

under identifiable patriarchs,[1] (e.g. for lineage societies, or for peasant households dominated by the oldest male), and not weaken it to include more general and socially diffused systems of male dominance. Defenders argue that if we wish to understand male dominance in society we have to analyse the social processes of the creation of two unequal genders, and that the family remains under capitalism the central site of that process: hence the appropriateness of the term.

The question then immediately arises, if we do want to divide up our objects of analysis into capitalism and patriarchy, what kind of analysis of patriarchy are we looking for? Is the analysis of the creation and recreation of a society divided into unequal genders an analysis entirely outside economics, in the realm of ideas or ideology? Is the analysis of sexuality, which such an analysis necessarily involves, an analysis of social processes which are outside the realm of production relations?

Many feminists, myself included, have a strong desire to answer no to both of these questions. First, on the question of ideology, the influence of Marxist theory has led us to seek to root our understanding of ideology in material processes, and what the Marxist tradition has generally understood by material processes are those in the realm of economic relations. Ideologies, we tend to believe, do not persist if they are not supported by and embedded in material processes. However, the attempt to understand ideologies of gender differentiation suggests that we may have to widen our concepts of the 'material' beyond economic processes to include the area of sexuality. The relations of sexuality, several feminist critics of an earlier draft of this paper pointed out, are surely as material as production relations.

Second, however, even if we widen the concept of material in this way, this still leaves open the problem of the relation between sexuality and economic processes. Most[2] feminist writers do not seek to conflate production and sexuality in theoretical terms, but the close links between the organisation of production and the operation of sexual relations have been traced by feminists in the areas, for example, of prostitution, inheritance and economic relations within marriage (see Millett, 1975; Phongpaichit, 1980; and the papers by Stolcke and Whitehead, in this volume). Rubin (1975) has made a plea for the development of a 'political economy of sex' which would precisely trace the links between sexuality, marriage and kinship on the one hand, and economic relations and accumulation on the other.

The search for a material understanding of women's subordination has therefore led some feminists to study in more detail one particular area of the sexual division of labour: that area of work, so frequently the exclusive preserve of women, which consists of the care of children and the provision of a range of domestic services for adults. This work has often been referred to in the literature as 'reproductive' work (see for example Beneria, 1979). The reason for using the term reproductive is that this work has seemed to be particularly closely related to the areas of sexuality and the reproduction of human life, which in turn are important to an understanding of patriarchy. A clearer understanding of these domestic tasks, and the social relations under which they are done in different societies, has therefore seemed to provide a link between the operation of the economic and the non-economic factors in the maintenance of women's subordination.

THE ECONOMICS OF REPRODUCTION

Reproduction has been a very vexed concept in feminist theory. It has been used with a variety of different definitions, and the theoretical debate in this area is still very much open. I am only discussing a small area of that debate (for discussion of the conceptual issues, see Edholm et al., 1977; and Harris and Young, 1981), concentrating on the relation between productive activity (and its associated sexual division of labour) and reproduction.

For my purpose here I need to distinguish several meanings of reproduction. The first has been called the reproduction of labour (Edholm et al., 1977) and involves the production of people: not merely the bearing of children (which might be called biological reproduction) but also their care and socialisation, and the maintenance of adult individuals through their lives, processes which create individuals to fit more or less into the social structure of society and so ensure the continuation of that society in the next generation. It should perhaps be said that there is nothing inevitably successful about this or any other process of reproduction: it is a contradiction-ridden process, often threatened with failure in certain societies.

Included within the concept of reproduction of labour is a narrower concept, also found in the recent feminist literature: that of human reproduction (McDonough and Harrison, 1978; Bryceson, 1980; Mackintosh, 1977). The relations of human reproduction are generally taken to centre on the relations of marriage and kinship in a society, or, put more broadly, those relations which circumscribe and determine the

operation of fertility and sexuality, and construct the context for the bearing, care and socialisation of children.

A further meaning of reproduction is mentioned merely to distinguish it from the above, but I shall not be further concerned with it in this article. This is the concept of social reproduction: the process by which all the main production relations in the society are constantly recreated and perpetuated. Thus, for example in developed capitalism, social reproduction involves not only the production and maintenance of the wage labour force, but also the reproduction of capital itself, through the processes of production and investment under the control of a restricted class within the society. Needless to say, this kind of reproduction under capitalism is also contradiction-ridden and unstable.

I am chiefly concerned here then with the reproduction of labour and the narrower concept of human reproduction. What is immediately clear is that the process of reproduction of labour contains within it a great many productive tasks. There is in other words no way in which we can divide up social activity into distinct spheres of production and reproduction. The two concepts are not of the same order, and this fact alone has caused a good deal of confusion. The reproduction of labour includes many of the productive activities undertaken in society, although not all of them. Under developed capitalism for example, it includes the production (under conditions of wage labour) of the goods and services consumed by the working class; it includes the provision of state services such as health and education, and it also includes domestic work.

This list of productive activities which reproduce labour includes a large part of the productive activity of society. However, what has concerned feminists is that certain of these activities, in particular societies, appear to be more closely tied into the relations of human reproduction than do others. What I mean by this can best be explained first by the example of developed industrial capitalism. In such societies, the marriage-based household is an institution constructed by definition on the basis of gender. Economic relations within such households are highly structured by gender (see Whitehead, this volume), and despite some moves towards the sharing of housework the allocation of the domestic labour (especially child care) to women is extraordinarily persistent and still defended by many non-feminist commentators as natural and correct. In these societies then, housework and childcare are the activities most directly influenced by the relations of marriage, or the relations of human reproduction as defined above. They are *therefore* the

activities where the sexual division of labour is most rigid, and where any change in the sexual division of labour is often perceived as a serious threat to established forms of gender identity (that is, established understandings of masculinity and femininity).

I have also observed (Mackintosh, 1979) this greater rigidity in the sexual division of labour in child care and in such areas as cooking, cleaning, caring for the sick and old, in an agrarian West African society still dominated by non-wage labour. The allocation of these tasks largely to women constituted a sexual division of labour which showed itself much more rigid than the agricultural sexual division of labour, in a period of great pressure for change in work patterns, and great pressure on women's working time. The question then is, why is the sexual division of labour so rigid in these areas of production?

Any answer can only be tentative for the moment, more a specification of areas for further study. We know that child care and what I have called 'domestic' tasks are not always in all societies allocated to women (see Rogers, 1980, for a summary of the evidence), but they are predominantly female tasks. We also know that these tasks in many societies become tightly tied to the concepts of gender identity, although other tasks may also become involved in gender-definitions in this way. One might expect to find that those tasks where the sexual division of labour is most rigid, are also those for which that gender allocation of tasks is most crucial to the perpetuation of existing forms of the relations of marriage, procreation and filiation. That is, gender-typing is most rigid in areas crucial to the social relations which I have called the relations of human reproduction, and which generally incorporate male dominance and control of women's sexuality.

Thus in developed capitalism the household has become a kind of mediating institution, mediating that is two sets of social relations: those of marriage and filiation, which act to constitute the household and determine the context of much of child care, and the wider economic relations of the society. Women's performance of domestic work, especially the care of children within the home, both expresses their dependence and subordination within marriage (since men actively benefit from this work) and also weakens their position within the wage labour market, contributing to their low wages and poor conditions as wage workers. The constraints put by domestic responsibilities on women's participation in wage work is shown by the rapid rise in part-time work for married women in Post-war Britain (Hurstfield, 1978), and has also been discussed in the feminist literature (e.g. Herzog, 1980; Beechey and Perkins forthcoming).

Women's domestic work therefore is the economic expression of the fundamental inequality of the marriage contract. The implication of this argument is that the subordination of women through an unequal division of labour in the wage sphere, described in the first section of this article, is ultimately derivative of subordination within the marriage-based household. I am not implying by this that one depends solely upon the other: on the contrary, once established each area of economic subordination has considerable independent momentum and acts to reinforce the other. The implication of this is that in the long run inequality in the wage sphere can only be overcome – and indeed could be relatively easily overturned – were the relations of reproduction, and the form of the household which they create, first to be transformed.

I have cast this argument so far in this section largely in terms of the sexual division of labour in and outside the home in developed industrial capitalism. But similar kinds of questions can also be asked, I suggest, about the implications for women of the spread of capitalism elsewhere, whether this occurs through increasing wage labour, or through the reorganisation of small-scale production for the market. One can ask there too, what are the areas of production where there is most resistance to a reorganisation of the sexual division of labour? How is this resistance tied into the organisation of marriage and household forms, and male dominance of those institutions? If in crucial areas such as child care the sexual division of labour is being reorganised, is it to the detriment of women's position within the marriage contract (whether formal or informal)? An analysis – which clearly has to be historically and geographically specific – of which areas of an existing sexual division of labour are most resistant to change, and why, is clearly useful to any attempt to abolish the division of work by gender and the subordination of women that it implies.

THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR: A POLITICAL ISSUE

This has brought us then to the question of women's struggle against the sexual division of labour. The implication of this discussion is that whatever the theoretical disagreements the sexual division of labour is an important political issue for women. The form taken by the sexual division of labour is perpetually being transformed and recreated as economic and social change occur. Thus for example the opening of new factories and plantations in the Third World bring new forms of division of labour by gender, and therefore new forms of the hierarchy between men and women.

Once firmly established, these new forms of sexual division of labour, and the subordination of women which they embody, are hard to challenge. Once, for example, young Asian women in textile or electronics factories have become a super-exploitable workforce for capital, once particular jobs have been cast as 'women's work', then the sexual division of labour within wage work takes on an autonomy of its own. Once men and women workers have been created as two relatively non-competing groups within the labour force, with men relatively privileged in terms of wages and work conditions, then there exists a material division between men and women (however much as workers they also have in common), which can be exploited by management, and which reinforces women's social and economic subordination in the new economic sphere. Thus gender hierarchy and the subordination of women, however much they may be based within the household or marriage relations, nevertheless become an embedded feature of the wider economic structure.

Furthermore, once established, different areas of the sexual division of labour tend to reinforce one another. In some societies inadequate wages trap women within marriage-based households. The need to support and care for children weakens women's bargaining position in the labour market throughout the world. Men acquire a vested interest in women's services within the home, and more generally in their own relatively favourable position in the economy. In many countries the state will operate to support an unequal sexual division of labour once it is established: for example, by legislating against industrial action to improve pay and conditions, by turning a blind eye when women are paid below minimum legislated wages, or by reinforcing through legislation women's unequal position within the household. Thus social service provision in Britain treats women as the dependants of men, so reducing their ability to survive and support children without male support (McIntosh, 1978). Elsewhere, legislation on marriage and divorce, rules for the allocation of public housing, indeed a wide range of social legislation, may operate to weaken women's economic and social position (Land, 1977). Agricultural development policy too, implemented by government, may operate to the detriment of women's position in production (Rogers, 1980; Roberts, forthcoming). Thus, as the sexual division of labour is transformed and recreated by the spread of the cash economy, any struggle against new forms of sexual division tends to

involve not only a struggle against employers but also against state policy (LEWRG, 1980).

The emergence of new forms of the sexual division of labour, then, should always be a matter of concern to feminists. New divisions of labour by gender embody new forms of subordination of women, and once established acquire a momentum of their own. Any strategy aiming to change the sexual division of labour has to take into account the benefits of that division to men, as well as those to the dominant economic class in society. To leave either benefit out of one's calculations is to underestimate seriously the scale of the problem.

To return to the general theoretical issues raised in this article, it is true to say, I think, that the analysis of the sexual division of labour proposed here raises important issues for a feminist understanding of class in any society. Women workers' perception of the class of which they are a part, is of a class containing deep material division between men and women. These material divisions are then reflected in the forms of organisation of different groups of workers. Women are so frequently marginalised and ignored by formal union organisation (from Britain, see Coote and Kellner, 1981, to West Africa, Mackintosh, forthcoming, to Indonesia, Stoler, forthcoming) resulting in their often resorting to sporadic 'wildcat' protests (Heyzer, forthcoming; Cardosa-Khoo and Khoo, forthcoming). Feminists are frequently accused by male socialists, both in Britain and elsewhere, of undertaking divisive political activity, dividing the working class by creating conflict on gender lines. The implication of the analysis above is that the working class is already materially divided, women's subordination being embedded in a sexual division of labour relatively favourable to men. Feminists have therefore replied that, far from being divisive, to struggle against those divisions is necessary if the divisions are to be overcome.

NOTES

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1 This point was made by a conference participant, Awa Thiongane.

2 Some feminist writers would however, argue that relations of sexuality can for women be treated exactly as if they were production relations. Claudia Werlhof made an argument to this effect at the conference.

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