

THE NEW CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC: PSYCHOPOLITICS AND BIOVIGILANCE

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ABSTRACT. This article aimed to create a theoretical essay about biopolitics in view of the spread of contagion by the new coronavirus. Through analytical work on the increase in biovigilance technologies in the face of the pandemic by Covid-19, this text sought to achieve a perspective of the happening processes in contemporary society in the name of social defense and life management. Studies by Michel Foucault, Han and Bauman helped in this proposal to problematize the control and security practices implemented in the name of making life and letting die in progress, in the current neoliberalism. Therefore, a social psychopolitical and philosophical plan for the pandemic and its effects was approached, as a detailed process of spreading the disease, contagion and ways of dealing with these complex events took shape. Thus, the article presented a theoretical essay on the authoritarian uses of biovigilance during the pandemic and the description of some of its effects and modes of materiality.

Keywords: Psychopolitics; biovigilance; Covid-19.

A PANDEMIA DO NOVO CORONAVÍRUS: PSICOPOLÍTICA E BIOVIGILÂNCIA

RESUMO. Este artigo teve o objetivo de criar um ensaio teórico a respeito da biopolítica diante da expansão do contágio pelo novo coronavírus. Por meio de trabalhos analíticos sobre o aumento das tecnologias de biovigilância face à pandemia por Covid-19, buscou-se neste texto alcançar uma perspectiva dos processos acontecimentos em curso na sociedade contemporânea em nome da defesa social e da gestão da vida. Estudos de Michel Foucault, de Han e Bauman auxiliaram nesta proposta de problematização das práticas de controle e segurança implantadas em nome do fazer viver e do deixar morrer em andamento, no neoliberalismo atual. Portanto, abordou-se um plano psicopolítico e filosófico social da pandemia e de seus efeitos na medida em que se configurou um processo minucioso da expansão da doença, do contágio e dos modos de lidar com estes acontecimentos complexos. Assim, o artigo apresentou um ensaio teórico sobre os usos autoritários de biovigilância durante a pandemia e a descrição de alguns dos seus efeitos e modos de materialidade.

Palavras-chave: Psicopolítica; biovigilância; Covid-19.

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LA NUEVA PANDEMIA DE CORONAVIRUS: PSICOPOLÍTICA Y BIOVIGILANCIA

RESUMEN. Este artículo tuvo como objetivo crear un ensayo teórico sobre biopolítica en vista de la propagación del contagio por el nuevo coronavirus. A través del trabajo analítico sobre el aumento de las tecnologías de biovigilancia ante la pandemia de Covid-19, este texto buscó alcanzar una perspectiva de los procesos que suceden en la sociedad contemporánea en nombre de la defensa social y la gestión de la vida. Los estudios de Michel Foucault, Han y Bauman ayudaron en esta propuesta a problematizar las prácticas de control y seguridad implementadas en nombre de hacer la vida y dejar morir en progreso, en el neoliberalismo actual. Por lo tanto, un plan social psicopolítico y filosófico de la pandemia y sus efectos se abordaron como un proceso detallado de propagación de la enfermedad, el contagio y las formas de lidiar con estos eventos complejos. Así, el artículo presentó un ensayo teórico sobre los usos autoritarios de la biovigilancia durante la pandemia y la descripción de algunos de sus efectos y modos de materialidad.

Palabras clave: Psicopolítica; biovigilancia; COVID-19.

Introduction

This article was organized as a theoretical essay with the objective of problematizing the social practices called biovigilance. To this end, the new coronavirus pandemic was approached from a critical perspective based on an analysis of Byung-Chul Han's psychopolitics and Michel Foucault's biopolitics. In particular, we sought to question the implications of the effects of this overwhelming pandemic of the new coronavirus, which started at the end of 2019, which spread and intensified throughout 2020.

The transmission of the virus occurred and continues to occur rapidly, increasing dramatically as a result of population movement across different countries, regions and continents. This expansion of contagion became exponential and started to represent a pandemic. States delayed precautionary measures, such as isolation, quarantines, distribution of masks, purchase of tests for mass testing, training of professionals to deal with the virus, funding of research so that specific vaccines and medications could be created. There was also a delay in the provision of ICU beds in hospitals, in the dissemination of basic health education information to the population with attention and without the so-called fake news.

Another difficult point was the economic aspect, insofar as the lockdown strategies were controversial due to the intense politicization of the pandemic and, therefore, occurred quite late and with moments of suspension and new decree without due seriousness in the face of the conditions experienced in each reality. Both the closure of commerce and services generated many tensions. The issues linked to the transfer of work and teaching to remote mode were and have been complicated and resulted in the most diverse conflicts between the different sectors of society. The suspension of concerts, parties and the most varied events also had an impact on cultural policy and on the offer and participation of so-called entertainment and leisure devices.

Several events put pressure on institutional actors, such as business pressure and the fear of political and economic retaliation, which delayed and also supported decision-

making in relation to the tactics used to protect the population, especially with regard to the so-called assistance to the poor who lost their jobs, to micro-entrepreneurs who suffered losses due to the closure of businesses, specific budget allocation for the expansion and organization of the network of policies to deal with the pandemic. Residents of neighborhoods with poor sanitation, higher population density and lack of access to health services were the most impacted by the contagion of Covid-19, suffering from the worsening of the disease and being vectors of contamination of family members and the community due to absence and manipulation of information by political leaders who aimed to gain some kind of benefit from the politicization of the pandemic.

Elderly and black people, residents of cities and regions with a lack of ventilators and ICU beds in hospitals, poor women and children and unprotected workers have also become potential victims of the new coronavirus infection and have become vulnerable to the effects of the disease in many aspects of their lives. Many had their symptoms aggravated by the omission of states and rulers, by the fragility of public policies in their countries, municipalities and regions due to the decrease in investments in recent decades in social policies, in a neoliberal society.

However, in some countries, especially those that consider themselves more developed in a neoliberal economic and political conception, took advantage of the pandemic to implement more authoritarian measures and planned the implementation of strategies of great social control and intense biovigilance. That is, they reinforced extreme measures with the materialization of security devices based on information management, data surveillance, following up and monitoring people's movements, impediment of circulation by exception laws, installation of computer mechanisms, such as cameras and drones, among other social practices governing conduct in the name of life, health and social defense. Now, society and state racism entered the global public agenda intensively and in a micro- and macro-political network simultaneously.

Byung-Chul Han (2018), in one of his most famous essays – *Psicopolítica: o neoliberalismo e as novas técnicas de poder* says that the internet is in our daily life always. If Han would be an apocalyptic of the internet and digital media, this is perhaps not an issue of effective relevance and validity for the moment we live in, as well as for our discussion. The internet surrounds us. It is always there, whether to make our lives easier, or even to complicate it (although, in fact, today, it is complicated by those who do not adapt to new digital media, unfortunately). This subjectivity modulated by data management and increased connectivity aimed at controlling bodies and population in panoptic systems of social networks have generated a false sense of protection and freedom. In the case of the pandemic, the harmful effects of this rationality appear in the brutal maximization of social and economic inequalities.

The question raised by Han (2020), in the short essay, among many other questions, represents a new and specific paradigm of contemporary subjectivity, immersed under the status of Web 2.0, in virtual, consensual and uninterrupted surveillance, a factor that at least suggests questioning the notion of freedom in digital media. In this way, at the same time, the notion of freedom, in contemporary times – much more than an abstract concept – becomes artificial and substantial; thus, composing the social and subjective ethos. This artificial presence is of the exponential order, to the point of provoking its naturalization and the banality of evil to the extent that it produces a generalized numbness (Cañada, 2016).

The problem would not be, in general, just the mentioned naturalization. After all, as a Genevan philosopher once reported: we would be born free. The issue would be, perhaps, much more that of asking what kind of freedom this is in our time and what are the limits and

pressures in the permanent struggle for free life. For Foucault (2008a), freedom is what one fights for on a daily basis. That is, it is not an essence nor decreed by the legal principles that postulate the institutional place from which we are born free. Thus, freedom is neither a teleology nor a metaphysics, as a certain philosophical tradition would like to establish.

Liberalism places the Rule of Law and the capitalist political economy as scales and thermometers of freedom in relation to security. In neoliberal capitalism, it is possible to question how the construction of freedom takes place amidst our wide range of different devices of control, institutions, laws, values, norms and customs (Foucault, 2008a). Such security practices are rooted in our daily lives, forging contemporary subjectivities, especially through control in an open environment, as highlighted by Deleuze (1992).

Han explains the notion of freedom by stating that it is an intermission. We would say, a propeller of connections between individuals, a feeling that is established, passing from one life to another, until it becomes a mode of coercion whose maxim is oblige yourself to freedom! But, let's ask what is this notion of freedom that we have today? And Han continues developing liberation would be a supposed fate of the subject. Stressing its etymology, 'subject', means to be subjected to (Han, 2018). Would we then be subjected to freedom regulated by security in technological networks, especially those on internet platforms and large international corporations, even in the face of the pandemic and as part of the fight against it? How does this question look when applied to the scope of the internet and the pandemic in terms of the materiality of social practices?

With the expansion of the internet, something that has been going on for at least three decades (if we consider the moment in which it emerged for domestic use), the assumptions Han raises in his essay are increasingly intensifying. The idea of freedom, combined with the ease and speed of access that we have today in the virtual world, has been strengthened and continues to follow the same path of intensification. The freedom present in the virtual world, without a doubt, is a productive idea and in times of neoliberalism, its supporters would say, this is what matters, since the free individual, on the internet – and if they are compelled to the ideas of self-production, self-management, self-entrepreneurship, or, as Foucault would say, the search for human capital – will find in it a wide space of and for production (Han, 2018).

However, moving on to a more general point, paying attention to the historical thresholds of the notion of advancement present in the theme of technology, it is worth underlining that much has been thought (and still is thought) about the latter, when the various appearances of it in the social world, particularly the contemporary one, are put into question. To better clarify, we have, for example, the criticism that the integration and communicative dissemination that many of the different technologies promised in their projects have always been highly applauded; and there would be a problem.

As Evgeny Morozov (2011), a notorious critic of the internet and technology, states, "the critique of technology is as old as its worship", an argument that confuses the eyes of policymakers who, according to him, do not should, on account of such antiquity, lightly assume that adverse attempts to reduce the effects of technology on society are vain practices. They should, however, become familiar with the history of the technology, in order to guide greater scrutiny on the possible exacerbations that are issued about it, when necessary.

For this purpose, Morozov (2011) shows in a brief genealogy of social communication, examples such as the telegraph – created around the mid-nineteenth century, hailed as something that would enhance the integration between nations –, where much was believed to be solely a transmitter of knowledge, a reducer of misunderstandings, and, most notably,

a promoter of peace and harmony throughout the world. Now, according to the author, it did not take long for disillusionment to come, given that the telegraph had been a two-way street: while it helped to locate a fugitive, it also served them, insofar as it could also be manipulated to spread false alarms (Brigs & Burke, 2006).

Morozov (2011) comments, without optimism, that the attempts to point out the benignity of technology were only thinly veiled attempts to reduce its impacts. Thus, for example, despite the fact that radio has intensified and opened the political debate in the public sphere, and has required candidates to be more prepared with regard to their speeches, the Belarusian remains critical. This hostile condition – which impels the subjects not to criticize, but to acceptance; even when one has in mind, in an almost determined way, the fallibility of a certain innovation – present at the technological limits, it demonstrates how terrifying its impacts on contemporaneity can be. Of course, we take into account the gains and benefits of technological advances, as well as the positive effects of internet democratization. Denying them would be frivolous, as much as ignoring their ills. Indeed, our questions revolve around what we will call harm reduction. That is, the reduction, subtraction or preservation of subjects exposed – at an individual or population level – to possible damages they may suffer with the unreasonable advancement of the internet and technology: both at a social level (when it facilitates the rise of political regimes not desired); regarding the psychological level (in view of the ease with which subjects have to be, today, prone to different anxiety syndromes, depression, etc.), as well as physiological dependence, on the most varied technologies available in our most recent reality.

Recalling the beginning of this article, when we began our debate on freedom in the digital sphere, we now highlight another meaning present in the excerpt extracted from the text by Han (2020), namely, that of monitoring, that is, that of total control. Now, a priori, an eventual premise that we would have in this regard, when discussing this issue, would surface in the form of another dichotomous question: how would freedom on the internet be possible if we are, at the same time, subjects who are virtually monitored, as pointed out by Han?

In a specific and practical context, an equally opportune question emerges: in Wuhan, China, the use of the internet combined with biovigilance, or digital surveillance, turned out to be positive for controlling the pandemic crisis that has been plaguing the world today, that is, Covid-19 (Sars-Cov-2), which at the time of writing this text has taken more than 200,000 lives and infected around 2.97 million people. Is this a positive use of digital surveillance? Thus, we will begin our discussion, aiming to problematize this fact.

Biovigilance

We begin our debate through an incursion: the passage in which Michel Foucault (2008a) discusses the shift from a disciplinary society to a society of security is notorious in one of his most prominent courses, which inaugurates and deals with the theme of government of the population, that is, *Sécurité, territoire, population*, or, simply, the course of 1978. As our debate covers the sign of security, present in our contemporary society manifestly through various technological devices, it becomes important to incursion into Foucault's texts (2008a).

Foucault (2008b), when thinking of biopolitics as life management, traces the genealogical script of the emergence of security mechanisms and social security, conceiving them as paradoxically state and society racism. At first, the philosopher goes back a few centuries to the XVIII (this moment in which he accuses the appearance of security

mechanisms). For example, in order to draw exact demarcations, the model of exclusion of lepers in the Middle Ages had as a background, according to the French philosopher, a whole game, an intertwining of legal and religious questions which were protected by the binary separation between the leper and the non-leper, thus, the exclusion of the sick to the outskirts of cities took place, in a distance that characterizes the sovereign power over the body of the individuals submitted to it.

In a second moment, unlike the exclusion model or leprosy model, there is Foucault's analysis (1999a) regarding the plague model, that is, the quarantine government, launched over Europe that suffered from the spread of the bubonic plague, social scrutiny was delimited in such a way as to no longer exclude, but confine individuals to their homes; and not only confine them, but control them as to what they should eat, when they should go out, when they should open their doors to inspectors; actions that, through a series of prohibitions, guaranteed to obtain the total control of a city.

In a third moment, finally, the one in which we want to establish this opportune debate, the implementation of security models, as Foucault demarcates, can be verified from the inoculation practices, that is, practices administered in the treatment of smallpox. For Michel Foucault (1999b, 2008a), what is at stake in the change to this model in the 18th century – in relation to the previous two – would be, precisely, epidemic or endemic control, through the notation of age, contagion, effects, mortality, injuries and sequelae, or, at the highest level of analysis, seeking to know what the 'statistical' effects are on the general population; becoming evident that the problem in question would no longer necessarily be the attempt to completely eradicate a crisis, but the reduction, leveling and control of its abrupt levels of occurrence (Foucault, 2008a, 2008b).

Even with the historical divisions mentioned above, Foucault makes it very clear in some passages of the 1978 course that the three models (leprosy, plague and smallpox, or, sovereignty, discipline and security) coexist; and, in fact, we agree with this coexistence, to the extent that, even today, we can verify both the wide social exclusion of certain individuals, or, as well as the wide disciplinary control of bodies present in the most varied institutions, and, from the likewise, the managerial biopolitics of the human species. The common and central problem of the three cases, Foucault tells us, is that of multiplicities: in the case of sovereignty, the people; in the example of discipline, the individualization of bodies; and, finally, on the issue of security, population management (Foucault, 2008a). From this exposition, it is worth returning to our object, that is, the issue of digital surveillance, or biovigilance.

An important aspect of Foucault's analysis (1999a) was the questioning of the panopticon as a technology for governing bodies through maximum visibility and mutual surveillance. In effect, we now live in a complex network of looks, surveillance and permanent examinations. Bauman commented, regarding the updating of Bentham's panopticon, which Foucault (1999a) addressed in *Surveiller et punir* for the present day, that it is alive and well, in fact, armed with (electronically reinforced) muscles. David Lyon (2006), a sociologist who has been researching electronic surveillance for a long time, also opportunely commented that current issues, such as the demand for more privacy in our lives, are in sharp conflict with the strange acceptance of new surveillance mechanisms in everyday life. And this computerized security, or 2.0, gains high prominence through the most diverse databases existing in the virtual world. Such technologies effectively make surveillance *work*.

Continuing, the specific record that Bauman (2013) fits his analysis is, again, the one that superimposes technological advances on subjects, among them, the intense

manipulation of virtual devices with different functions; the physical panopticon, then, previously applied to every place where it was intended to be watched, gave way to something else, the *synoptic*. This last word is an update, or, if we take what Bauman says literally, an element that replaces the panopticon, something that no longer requires the construction of large environments and walls, as well as the confinement of subjects so that surveillance takes place smoothly. Then, the idea of self-surveillance is the starting point for all these reflections. To the extent that contemporary subjects are constituted in such a way as to be consumers and entrepreneurs of themselves, the idea of self-surveillance goes hand in hand with such a constitution. Self-surveillance that stands out as something that is part of the subjects' daily lives (Bauman, 2013).

It is an idea of surveillance, according to Bauman, of the do-it-yourself type (Bauman, 1999), easily thought out and clarified, placed alongside the neoliberal model of capitalism that impels us to hyperproductivity. Therefore, even with the large-scale production of various mini-panopticons (cell phones and tablets, for example) that, spread around the world, generate the synoptic effect, the idea of individuals participating in surveillance becomes evident. The synoptic is, by its nature, global; the act of surveillance detaches the guards from their location, transports them at least spiritually to cyberspace, in which distance no longer matters, even if they physically remain in place (Bauman, 1999).

The technical-virtual reach made available by such novelties has modulated the way of surveillance present in the contemporary world in a way never seen before: GPS's, social networks, various applications, satellite signals, high-performance drones; these and other artifices effectively exercise the idea of a principle (Foucault, 1999a) of uninterrupted surveillance. Biovigilance, then, not strangely, comes from a complex notion of exercising power over the population (as we see in the quotation above), mainly due to the fact that the various mechanisms of social control and security, in contemporary times, have changed, in the wake of technological advances (Maciel & Machado, 2004).

Such techniques, obviously, are used on predetermined populations, or, as Maciel & Machado indicate, suspects; producing impacts on the governmentality of bodies of the listed populations, as well as generating cultural identity processes. The logic of the use of such technological devices has as its main purpose, in criminal investigation, to generate scientific evidence for the court. The collection of data, traces and biogenetic information favor the creation of profiles of convicts and suspects, with the purpose of creating databases with the objective of identifying perpetrators of crimes. A biopolitical-vigilant paradigm probed by the spectrum of law (Maciel & Machado, 2004).

According to the authors of the text, in 2004, there were around 56 countries in the world that made use of such innovations (24 in the European Union, the rest dispersed across the globe). The success of such a model is due – and, here, we do justice to Foucault's lessons about the intrinsic relationship between knowledge and power – to the search for a discourse that aims at the collective good, decoded in a powerful idea of security which will achieve the truth that will allow to identify criminals and exonerate innocents, a true example of the union between science and law, or, of the scientificization of the justice system. These advances are present, mainly, at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the subsequent century, and can be characterized, according to Maciel and Machado (2004), by network interconnections in information sharing; data processing power; the modification and transformation of computers into devices supposedly suitable for such processing; and the emergence of real-time location technologies (e.g. GPS).

In general, the idea is to digitally root the knowledge acquired about entire populations (fingerprints, general social profiles and even DNA, where control and security is aimed) in

machines, so that such data can be easily manipulated. Manipulation is operated by social control agents or criminal investigation institutions (Maciel & Machado, 2004).

Biovigilance and the new coronavirus

Bearing in mind the path we have taken so far, we would like to highlight some of the main discussions that cover the theoretical scope of biovigilance, or the use of the internet/technologies, as a way of helping to face the pandemic. In this way, we aim to outline a reflective critique. The Chinese government, through the control of citizens' data and the massive use of surveillance cameras spread across cities (it is estimated that in China there are around 200 million cameras), manages, for example, to know who crosses at crosswalks, who buys and consumes healthy food, who reads newspapers linked to the government, and so many other interventions in everyday life that, we Westerners, would say is an invasion of the "private sphere", by the way, a vocabulary that does not exist in the Chinese language, according to Han (2020).

Many of the questions listed have as their specific target the current model of exacerbated production and consumption, that is, the neoliberal model; or even, the way certain governments and rulers deal with the spread of the pandemic (Agamben et al., 2020). Surveillance camera technology is so advanced that its artificial intelligence is capable of capturing minimal images, such as moles on citizens' faces, even the body temperature of each person. In this way, if someone is in worrisome thermal conditions, data collection systems quickly identify both the sick person and those who are nearby, thus warning them to protect themselves.

Han (2020) explains that criticism of such control is almost non-existent among Asian countries, and problematizes: apparently, the use of such technologies has become effective and is far ahead of the measures taken by Europeans, such as, for example, closing borders. In China, many cameras were spread out in front of and inside people's homes, cell phones were monitored using devices that track the flow of bodies, detailed data was collected from each Chinese person in a way never seen before, it was decided to massively use facial recognition software, surveillance devices were created for all recent trips by Chinese citizens and for looking for relatives and close friends of these monitored people. Furthermore, data was captured from passengers on trains, subways and buses, from pedestrians and people assisted by all health equipment and health surveillance.

A technology was also developed to identify all infected people by means of a colored tag with a QR code on their cell phones. People who lied about their travel history were arrested, those who violated quarantines and isolation were fined with high fees, citizens' cars started to be tracked, where they passed, places with contaminated people and body temperature detectors were widely used, mandatory to ensure the entry of people in places such as transportation, pharmacies and supermarkets. In view of the information described above, it can be seen that there is a significant increase in the use of control technologies based on a rationality of biovigilance in the name of health and safety, going beyond protection policies and becoming racist, authoritarian and segregation devices.

In the name of the population's life and security, a security biopolitics is installed that goes far beyond the logic of democratic care, gaining shades close to the characteristics of dictatorial societies. Remembering the work of Butler (2018, 2019), it is important to highlight how these practices carried out due to the new coronavirus pandemic are frameworks of war, as they create ways of seeing and delimiting the frameworks of policy focused on

disease control from specific perspectives, which materialize ways of interpreting and photographing contagions, disease treatments, safety in the face of risks and varied vulnerabilities of precarious lives in the face of the effects of the rapid and serious manifestation of the infection with Covid-19. It took advantage of a pandemic to create, commercialize and implement a machinery that politicized the disease and its prevention with an indescribable security scale and limiting freedoms.

Biovigilance in the pandemic has led to a unique expansion of health control, regulation of the movement of people, a constant exercise of isolation and quarantine in the name of social security and the management of health as well as life. Concomitantly with the increase in biovigilance, as a biopolitical strategy, there is omission and letting die as a policy of life due to the racist paradox of making live and letting die. Political decisions for that purpose operate on a classification of a supposed value of lives, which in fact leads to the racism of considering which lives deserve to live and which ones would have no value and could be discarded, left to negligence and neglected in terms of health care.

The panopticism of biovigilance gained materiality from a centripetal and corporate control, highly persecutory and disproportionate in the name of health and the preservation of lives. There were resistances and protests, however, frustrated by more restrictive and punitive measures. The biopolitical framework looks at life through the rule of prejudiced, stigmatizing, stereotyped valuation and marked by negative discrimination, in a kind of dispute and competition of the neoliberal market through value scales that would indicate superiority and inferiority, that is, racist practices in management of social protection and defense.

Final considerations

This article outlined some initial sketches regarding the expansion of the biopolitical society through the intense use of security mechanisms and control technologies in an open environment in an exhaustive way, creating authoritarian effects and modulating ideas of law and order that came to gain moral nuances as well as largely regulatory and punitive. In the name of health and life management, detailed information collection and storage networks were implemented, databases and exception punitive systems were created, tracking technologies and surveillance devices were installed in time and space of meticulous effect of the hierarchical view on the governmentality of the Chinese population, starting to be presented as a solution for the control and extinction of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this way, social practices and authoritarian policies were proclaimed and implemented with decrees, regulations, creation of laws and the materialization of a whole rapid biosurveillance marked by a vector of exception and urgency, these measures of a racist nature, in the name of social defense, expanding a fine and intense disciplinary device of the bodies and highly regulatory of the population. Security was the promise offered and sold as a remedy and decision-making in the management of what had become a worldwide chaos, the rapid and dramatic contagion of the Covid-19 virus and its various harmful effects. Living in times of a pandemic is a challenge to keep up with the contagion at the same speed to kill in which states anchored in the free market despise lives that fall outside their scope of value.

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