

PETER KRAPP & CATHERINE LIU

The Real Class War

The Humanities, as a set of practices and disciplines that used to function as a central pillar of higher education, are increasingly marginalized under the auspices of extreme economic polarization; stark social inequalities are tolerated in the name of the winner-takes-all attitude of mercantile capitalism and corporate expansion, rewarding only an entrepreneurial elite. In the current situation of higher education in the U.S. and around the globe, it is impossible to summon the fundamentals of the Humanities without presenting the academic crisis in a bigger context—and specifically in the context of what it is historically at stake when we make arguments for public support of a cluster of activities once described as cultural production, aesthetic education, and historical consciousness. What are the economic trends and political conditions that have allowed populist rhetoric to roundly dismiss as obsolete and elitist unprofitable practices that produce pleasure for those who come into immediate contact with its effects? The term “liberal arts” was coined to distinguish it from the “servile arts,” asserting the need to cultivate areas of inquiry that are not immediately practical, though they might yield multiple benefits in the longer term. A contemporary set of descriptors for activities associated with the liberal arts includes self-reflexivity, critical thinking, cultural studies or even “doing something for its own sake,” all of which are rather general statements with which one hopes the broadest range of fractious scholars can find a minimum degree of identification. Rather than offering yet another iteration of the ritual “Humanities in crisis” argument, we will emphasize how the current economic crisis and the state of the Humanities are interconnected (Harpham 2005). While we cannot achieve a complete account of a complex and fractured world picture, we nonetheless aspire to a contextualized description, despite the obvious danger of veering towards conspiracy theory. Broad social achievements on a national scale seem a goal of the past as global finance helps itself to a greater share of collective treasure with minimal responsibility for the consequences of such activity. How things have changed since Stuart Hall (1990) hailed the crisis of the Humanities as an early sign of the collapse of entrenched class privilege: his optimism, for it must be called that, could be interpreted as the superstructural manifestation of historic wealth redistribution supported by an unwieldy and unpopular Labor government. Piketty and Saez (2006) demonstrated that postwar income inequality was reduced in almost all industrialized countries. Both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came into power with visions of how to stimulate growth by reducing top tax rates on the highest earners. Tax reform and anti-union policies produced the core of “business-friendly” ideological attitudes that shaped

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ideas of growth for decades to come. When Schmitt and Zipperer (2006) published their comparative analysis of economic growth, income inequality and social mobility and exclusion in the U.S. and Europe, the U.S. showed greater rates of income disparity than any OECD country other than Mexico; even more strikingly, Schmitt and Zipperer found that in comparison with more tightly regulated labor markets, U.S. labor flexibility did not produce more economic mobility for U.S. workers, either within one generation or across generations. When Schmitt and Zipperer conducted their study, U.S. unemployment rates hovered below 5%: by 2011, the unemployment rate had doubled.

A “decline of the Humanities” was even welcomed by some New Left scholars like Stuart Hall or Terry Eagleton as a new phase in the cultural struggle for legitimacy against conservative privately educated elites. Yet it turned out that the New Right (like David Cameron) care as little as their Leftist adversaries about defending civilization and its discontents from its detractors. Does the cultural and theoretical Left now feel that it is time to make hasty alliances with the Old School scholars it once held in contempt, or is time to abandon the sinking ship of aesthetic education altogether for new paradigms such as P2P education and online training? This choice is of course a fundamentally false one, but there is a sense of inevitable decline and defensive self-professionalization that dogs the disciplines relating to cultural and historical production. Despite Louis Menand’s latest reminder in *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (2010) that ideas have always had to consort with markets, the set of activities and kinds of knowledge that constitute any form of autonomous research still claims disinterestedness and market-free rather than free-market values as the guarantor of a certain approach to truth in research, be it in math or sciences or cultural studies. Menand’s most salient point is that in a post-culture war environment, eclecticism in methodology and diversity in objects of study are positive developments. While there may be some old-guard professors who would argue against Menand (the agents of resistance against reform alluded to in his title), it seems that most humanists have accepted, if not embraced, interdisciplinary eclecticism as a more or less desirable inevitability. In her book *Not-for-Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), Martha Nussbaum defends the Humanities as a set of practices critical to democracy, and in so doing rehearses familiar truisms about progressive education and its aspirations. She argues against “educators for economic growth,” another term for philistines who fear the non-conformity of artists and intellectual freethinkers (17-24). Nothing Nussbaum asserts would be in the least bit controversial among the well-educated urban elites of any political affiliation, for they expect their progeny to be the beneficiaries of the best American pedagogical innovations.

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Nonetheless Nussbaum's characterization of liberal arts education for democracy seems therapeutically correct but academically empty. In the face of "bad" behavior, she is confident that liberal arts education can be an adequate and therapeutic palliative: "This story of narcissism, helplessness, shame, disgust and compassion, lies, I believe, at the heart of what education for democratic citizenship must address" (40). Nussbaum's idealizing account of Humanities and liberal education is essentially of a piece with the civilizing ethos that drove Progressive Era elites to try to reform students and masses: against this overweening ambition to tame the hearts and minds of unruly immigrant, working-class, and status-anxious ethnic minorities, many different American constituencies have been in full-fledged rebellion and reaction. Indeed the reactionary denunciation of social welfare systems as partaking in the pacifying activities of a "nanny state" seem confirmed rather than contradicted by the genteel maternal condescension of many liberal thinkers and do-gooder academics. In response, the fetishization of private life and radical libertarianism produce private experience as the true site of consumer hedonism and/or ecstatic religiosity in reaction against the dull reasonableness of some well-meaning and "understanding" Humanities educators. The pivotal idea of judging the moral worth of an action by how it contributes to the greatest good for the greatest number of people appears all but forgotten. Of course, the playing field for arguing the public good is not exactly level if the essentially non-profit sector of higher education is expected to compete for the attention of those temporarily elected to offices that are increasingly about fund-raising for the next election.

As the industrial and intellectual output of the 21st-century knowledge society becomes increasingly abstract, money lets the social character of labor appear. No matter how much some may lament that in an age of spectacular speculation, money is the only way to keep score in sports, culture, business, and education, the winner-takes-all ethos has elbowed other modes of competition out of the way. Globalization makes us ever less assured about commonly shared values, but it was not always thus. The Humanities engage in scholarly study of human artifacts and documents so as to enable a better understanding of what it is to be human in the world, now and in the past; they produce "a form of knowledge in which the knower is revealed" (Commission on the Humanities 1980, 2). Eclectic self-understanding may be desirable in forming one's mind, but what of the seething rage that seems periodically and spasmodically to grip a vocal minority of the American populace? Are they angry simply because they are ignorant, as Nussbaum seems to suggest? Although it is clear that we are in the midst of a full-on class war that uses the threat of economic catastrophe to loot public goods in the name of competition and business-friendliness, moderates like Nussbaum wield 1980s chestnuts like "difference," "awareness," and "understanding" as

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rhetorical weapons when their adversaries respond with explosive terms like “exploitation” and “enslavement” to describe the state of oppression they wish to portray as their relationship to politics and the federal government. It is not hard to imagine why liberals and moderates have been less willing than the Tea Party and Fox News to use the escalating rhetoric of class war and revolution. Decades after the end of the Cold War, the American Left is still terrified of using the stark terms of economic analysis associated with the allegedly wrong-headed Karl Marx. During the 1980s and 90s, culture wars allowed academics to escape from the realities of class formation in a period of rapid de-industrialization. “Elitism” became a popular target for alleged materialists who had to contend with Allan Bloom and William F. Buckley, conservative humanistic dilettantes, ready to decry the philistines of the age. In contemporary times, anti-elitism continues to resonate with the politically outraged, but as Thomas Frank and others have illustrated amply, the tables have been turned. According to Right-wing pundits, there is a conspiracy between parasitic “have-nots” and Liberals, with their healthcare reforms and “entitlements,” public pensions and other soul-sapping “scams” that they contend are “attacking” America. At least Right-wing talking heads aren’t afraid of the word “class.” Liberals, Leftists and Progressives seem about as eager to talk about class as they are to undergo voluntary root canal surgery. The “haves” are much more aggressive than the “have-nots” about guaranteeing that the calf of Mammon should be able to sup upon the national treasure; all the while the increasing number of “have-nots” are accused of personal and individual lack of self-control. The “haves” continue to militate against public inefficiencies while economists and analysts on the Left have tried to show that the diminished powers of the state and the financialization of global economic activity are responsible for our slow-burn crisis and the concomitant loss of consumer and political confidence. The “haves” may have lost a few skirmishes after October 2008, but they clearly remain aggressive about their long-term agenda. On a federal level, the “haves” have targeted social and public services of every sort, from after-school care to Social Security and Medicare. At the state level, they relish the idea of privatizing public universities, whose successes have been based on decades of general taxation and spirited public investment. How do we come to terms with the astonishing rejection of the fundamental principle that any elected government should be judged by whether its policies benefit the majority that elected it? Anti-tax rhetoric now permeates budgetary discussions at every level of American politics, even though collective investment in public goods has been shown to raise the standard of education and health for the majority of Americans. Anti-government interests have also succeeded in securing profitable arrangements between privately owned testing companies and secondary schools; and they are mounting an effective

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and concerted attack against public higher education as well.

Kevin Phillips, Barbara Ehrenreich, Naomi Klein, Thomas Frank, and Chris Newfield have all been making the argument about the war against the middle class. It's time to understand the "crisis in the Humanities" in the context of this class struggle. As usual, Stanley Fish delights in being able to provoke his readers with the flip argument that the Humanities don't do any good but should be supported nevertheless; when he makes such deflationary statements in his *New York Times* column, Fish appears both tough-minded and pragmatic. According to Fish's numbers, the Humanities may be profit centers in high-tuition private Universities, but not in many low-tuition public ones. Our experience teaching both at the Universities of Minnesota and California indicates that Fish is most likely wrong about the ratio of enrollment-derived revenues to expenditures on research and education in the Humanities: with a far lower salary base, and no need for transgenic mice, fume hoods, or grant administration staff, the Humanities are far cheaper to run than their sister schools. But like Fish we also would like our colleagues to stop whining about how much good we do in the Humanities; Fish urges us to appeal instead to the historical mission of research universities to support the integrity of authentic research. Industry partnerships must not lapse into industry dictates that then ignore and eliminate any academic specialties that are not delivering cheap corporate R&D. Scientific as well as Humanities research must be conducted as open-ended enterprises, and should thus be measured by the internal standards of specialists: as any historian of the modern university knows, preserving autonomous research values is vital to any institution that aspires to the status of a true "university."

Moreover, Fish offers an important counterpoint to the consensus that has formed around Nussbaum's do-goodnik defense of the Humanities. Fish hates it when the Humanities are defended as an instrument of social and self-improvement, and instead seeks to separate the project of the Humanities from the Progressive Era civilizing process, which was routinized by federal programs. One hopes that university administrators read Fish's *New York Times* column and take his arguments seriously, especially the appeal to their better historical sensibilities. But there is also a danger that readers come away with the impression that it is acceptable to preserve and even nurture the Humanities in expensive, private institutions, because it is in these institutions that the Humanities are more economically viable. At private institutions, gifted and well-heeled students prosper like well-tended orchids in the hot-house environment of boutique education; but Fish sows the doubt that perhaps some large public institutions cannot afford to maintain the conditions where Humanities are taught: he seems to be suggesting that heartier, less rarefied students should be taught to survive in less climate-controlled conditions. Despite our suspicion that Fish does not have

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the necessary facts to support his argument here, it is undeniable that some leaders in higher education have tried to create administrative efficiencies by implementing more rational means of sorting students while reserving the study of the Humanities and Liberal Arts for an economic and cultural elite.

With the economic downturn, it makes less and less economic sense for middle-class students who do not qualify for financial aid to pursue expensive college degrees while saddling themselves with ballooning student loans. Congress now grapples with a \$10. Seven-billion shortfall in the Pell Grant program, while students rely more than ever on loans to finance their undergraduate degrees. As the Pew Research Center observes, National Center for Education Statistics data show “[g]raduates who received a bachelor’s degree in 2008 borrowed 50% more (in inflation-adjusted dollars) than their counterparts who graduated in 1996, while graduates who earned an associate’s degree or undergraduate certificate in 2008 borrowed more than twice what their counterparts in 1996 had borrowed” (Hinze-Pifer and Fry 1). According to Equifax, there are now 69 million student loan accounts in the U.S., a 29% increase in the past two years; in all, students have borrowed \$527 billion to pay their way through higher education. President Obama’s focus on community colleges does nothing to challenge the assumption that while some students will be able to study for pleasure and curiosity, the majority will be consigned to pursuing higher education as a form of job training. Obama’s educational policies have replicated the managerial ethos of accountability and global competitiveness, because this language is more or less legible to business leaders around the world. If in fact Fish and Obama find themselves arguing for and enacting policies that would enforce restricted access to Humanities education to the highest bidders or the most economically and academically privileged segments of American society, they are merely affirming what has been the status quo in secondary and higher education in the U.S. since 1945, all gestures toward democratization notwithstanding. Even Henry Ford understood the necessity of paying his employees well, though he was no bleeding-heart do-gooder: he merely prized loyalty and also wanted his workers to be able to afford his products.

Policies that produce higher salaries for working-class and middle-class families, better support for public education, especially in urban areas, and more social and economic support for the poor probably do more for larger numbers of young people in terms of providing stable environments than any number of diversity scholarships that reward a pre-selected middle-class minority student. It could be argued that a strong publicly funded system of social welfare reduces social exclusion better than punitive educational reforms designed to further victimize public education and public employees in general. Schmitt and Zipperer found that Europe’s strong social welfare policies improved overall social and economic mobility, while U.S.-style

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market deregulation in favor of flexible labor policies undermined wages and the health and well-being of the employed. In spite of exceptional students whose stories of social and economic betterment through education are more inspiring than representative, higher education is functioning as an efficient sorting system that allows for the rationalization of entrenched inequalities. Furthermore, conservative politicians harping on global competition may need to be reminded that the Humanities offer language and cultural skills. While the U.S. and the U.K. keep cutting education, EU countries have agreed to a goal of spending 3% of GDP on research and development; they are producing a considerably larger number of graduates per year than the U.S. (3 million vs. just over 2 million); and they have an even greater advantage in the number of doctorates awarded (85,000 vs. 44,000). The Asia-Pacific region is catching up, and may soon rival or surpass the U.S. in scientific publications (where it currently ranks 3rd with 25%, behind the EU with 38% and the U.S. with 33%). Asian and European countries set ambitious goals for their public universities. In an environment of global competition, the message is clear: a repressive public policy that reduces state support for education is weakening the U.S. and the U.K.

This global-competitiveness argument for funding the Humanities is believable and not the weakest in the arsenal of our defensive armory, but it is aimed squarely at technocrats. Arguments against anti-intellectualism and in support of academic/intellectual goals are not persuasive or even applicable in most other contexts. In fact, *Academically Adrift* (2011), a controversial study by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa that attempted to measure student learning during the first two years of university study, has provoked a great deal of soul-searching and criticism. Arum and Roksa find that while the majority of American college students have high ambitions, they have little idea of how to achieve their goals. Arum and Roksa took a representative group of about 2500 college freshmen attending a variety of institutions of higher education, asked their home institutions to administer the College Learning Assessment Examination to them at the beginning of their freshman years and then once again at the end of their sophomore years. The ones who choose ostensibly “practical” and pre-professional majors, such as business, start out and end up more academically adrift than their Arts and Sciences peers. Students majoring in the core disciplines—that is, the Humanities, Social Sciences, Math and Sciences—tended to show greater improvement on the CLA after two years of university enrollment; and in fact, the Humanities showed relatively strong results in this study, a noteworthy fact that sadly has not generated nearly as much journalistic coverage as it deserves. Predictably and lamentably, Arum and Roksa’s study finds that students from academically and economically privileged families are likelier to get more out of higher education, and that students who attend selective

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institutions also show greater improvement in their skill sets. Arum and Roksa argue that the majority of American students are academically adrift, participating in empty credentialism to fulfill their hopes, but unable really to commit to academic work to achieve those ends. Reforming higher education in the name of political justice in a social and economic vacuum seems to be a Sisyphean task—as Arum and Roksa put it after noting that only 4% of African-American students attend selective institutions, in comparison with 31% of white students, “success may thus be a product not simply of students’ individual backgrounds or what they bring to higher education, but also of the context in which they are embedded. Given the patterns of institutional attendance, we can expect higher-education experiences to contribute to—or even exacerbate, as opposed to eliminate—the observed patterns of social inequality” (53).

During the past decade, for-profit universities exploded onto the higher-education scene, boldly claiming to provide higher-education credentials to underserved minorities and non-traditional students. Largely unregulated under the Bush administration, these for-profit training institutions were able to capture enormous amounts of federal funding through Pell grants and student loans while offering their students diplomas of ambiguous professional and academic value. In Frontline’s “College, Inc.” (May 4, 2010), Martin Smith investigates this profitable business sector. For-profit universities and the shell corporations that run them saw an incredible bull market during the last years of Bush’s presidency. Richard Blum, Chairman of Blum Capital Investments and husband of U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, made a tidy profit from for-profit higher education: according to the *Los Angeles Times*, Blum once held \$700 million dollars worth of stock in for-profit higher-education corporations, Career Education Corporation and ITT Educational Services, Inc. (Hiltzik 2010). Until recently, the stock values of both corporations were climbing steadily, making a handsome profit for their investors by promising to retrain recently laid-off employees and low-performing students who are eligible for generous federal student loans. In some cases, for-profit recruiters are alleged to have coerced homeless people into signing student loan applications. Will Parish details Blum’s ability to use opportunities produced by “strong nation-state interventions” to generate massive wealth for his hedge fund. Peter Byrne has written about Blum’s conflict of interest for the *Berkeley Daily Planet*. Blum’s investment behavior would seem to be a glaring case of conflict of interest since he has also been a UC Regent during a time of dramatic cuts to public higher education in the state of California: in fact, as the UC cut back on its admissions and the Cal States and community colleges lay off instructors, overflow might be filling the seats of Blum’s for-profit universities. Channeling federal dollars into private coffers and saddling students with crippling amounts of debt have been

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extremely profitable business practices in the shady world of for-profit higher education.

As Teresa Sullivan, Elizabeth Warren and Jay Westbrook demonstrated in their 2000 study of bankruptcy patterns in the U.S., the American middle class used debt to maintain their way of life even as their economic standing eroded: Warren's study took place before the real-estate bubble had inflated and her findings were striking. As the real social safety net was shredded by ideological strife, middle-class Americans were using bankruptcy as a kind of backup social safety net: they found themselves drowning in debt because there was always a usurious credit-card company or bank ready to lend them the money that would lead them down a rabbit hole of financial instability. After the rise of Bush's "ownership society," deregulation of the banking sector and the emergence of Credit Default Swaps, mortgages were made available to poor and working-class Americans in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Student loans are a special kind of debt: they are not dischargeable through bankruptcy and are guaranteed by the federal government. The smoked-glass office buildings of for-profit universities line major freeways throughout the state of California, their physical location revealing their focus on advertising and marketing; operating with limited accountability and transparency, their customer base is the growing number of underemployed and desperate citizens left in the wake of economic upheavals since 2008. For-profit universities offer vocational training and make promises to their customers that they do not have to keep: and in the ultimate irony of the rampant abuse of the student-loan system, for-profit on-line courses are in fact now touted as models for traditional public universities that are accused of not using their resources efficiently.

In this perverted vision of higher education, intellectual creativity and critical thinking are apportioned not to the so-called bohemians of yesteryear who pursued such things for their own sake, but to wealthy counter-culturalists whose experiences of highly exclusive private higher education will stand in stark contrast to the graduates of DeVry University and the University of Phoenix. Even as SUNY Albany is cutting its Russian and French programs and the University of California allows foreign-language departments to deliquesce, the core disciplines at elite private institutions are left relatively untouched by the economic crisis gripping the world. The poaching of high-profile UC professors has already begun, as dozens of faculty members who used to be highly visible advocates of public higher education take refuge at selective private institutions. The brain drain will sharpen the very hierarchy in public/private higher education that Clark Kerr's much-lauded Master Plan sought to overturn. As President of the UC system, Kerr was working at a time when there was sufficient political will to institute policies promoting more equal distribution of wealth across geog-

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raphy, race and class: before campus revolts and conservative backlashes, Kerr succeeded in promoting public higher education with technocratic justifications for research autonomy in an atmosphere of managerial and liberal optimism. In 1963, the top federal tax rate for married couples making over \$400,000 a year was at a historic high of 91%. The capital-gains tax rate was 25%. In 2011, the highest income-tax rate in the U.S. is 35% and the capital-gains tax is at 15% (Tax Foundation 2011; Citizens for Tax Justice 2011). Between 1945 and 1972, the U.S. experienced a period of explosive economic growth. Federal investment in higher education reached unprecedented heights: the G.I. Bill sent over a million veterans into American universities. Because of Cold War-inspired fears, the National Defense of Education Act was passed in 1958. Heavy federal investment allowed American research universities to become the envy of the world: access to higher education was expanded through direct federal intervention. All this is now at risk of being gambled away under the auspices of special interests that make cynical use of populist rhetoric.

In their 2003 study of income inequality, Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez demonstrated that overall economic growth and income concentration are in fact not substantively linked. Although income concentration in the U.S., Japan and France decreased drastically during the 1940s and 50s, post-war economic growth was not hampered in those countries. However, the U.K., U.S. and Canada experienced greater income inequality and greater economic growth during the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century before the 2008 stock market crash. Piketty and Saez studied top incomes and their composition, and found that economic polarization increased because of changes in tax policy and increase in wages at the top of the income curve. Higher-education cuts truly amount to a systematic war against a tolerant, liberal world-view. But here Chris Newfield's argument that the defunding of public education in California is a major front of war against the middle class requires one historical caveat. Barbara Ehrenreich wrote *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* during the recession of the 1980s. In this book, she demonstrated how the undoing of the social safety net was changing the American middle class and making it more anxious and more conservative. In fear, the middle class clings to its own relative privileges: access to better education and safer neighborhoods. In times of economic crisis, it is a class particularly susceptible to adopting political attitudes that are ungenerous and anti-egalitarian in spirit. The more economically vulnerable the middle class feels, the more politically conservative it becomes. It is easy to see why the logic of neoliberal economics appeals to an anxious and objectively besieged middle class. Research professors and public-sector retirees are just the latest cast of characters that once featured welfare mothers and contemporary artists—the alleged “para-

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sites” that conservatives love to evoke in their simplistic morality play about ideology and social conflict. In their drama of outrage and indignation, conservatives fuel a general animus against any group of people who appear to enjoy some modicum of freedom from brutally mercurial market forces (Morris 2005). As public education and public services are hollowed out, the numbers are ever more dramatically skewed in favor of the ultra-rich, and demonstrably at the expense of the middle and working classes. The middle class that could once think of itself as part of the “haves” is finding itself in an increasingly precarious position; it is not an exaggeration to say that it is in the process of being proletarianized. Yet the populist demand for further cutting of services continues to assert, in the teeth of all evidence, that poverty and the declining powers of the middle class are merely blips on a roadmap to prosperity-producing competition and free-market entrepreneurialism. The struggle to control the terms in which Americans understand higher education is taking place across major and minor theaters of the class war: the “crisis of the Humanities” is only one front in a larger battle in which a historical mass middle class finds itself increasingly besieged, and not from below, but from above. It is pivotal to put the present budgetary crisis in public universities in the larger political and economic framework of a continuing class struggle, the terms of which have until now been controlled almost exclusively by free-market ideology and its radical anti-traditionalism.

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