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Grupo de Trabalho 1 – Transparência, Governo Aberto e Participação

Deepening Reflections on Habermas' Communicative Action Theory in Public Administration: Towards Social Participation

André Luiz Mendes Athayde, Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brasil

Pablo Perón de Paula, Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brasil

Adalmir de Oliveira Gomes, Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brasil

Abstract: This dense theoretical essay boldly aimed at reaching consensus about the Communicative Action Theory of one of the most important philosophers for Public Administration: Jürgen Habermas. The referred theory is considered an important foundation upon which social participation supporters rely, so that it can be further fostered in governmental practices. As the main objective, we attempted to fill out a theoretical gap: is the Theory of Communicative Action an incremental or radical adjustment to other types of rationalities? As secondary objectives, we aimed at contextualizing the discussed theory into Public Administration, presenting its importance, challenges and criticisms that need to be taken into account by public administrators. The results pointed out that this theory for social participation is both incremental and a paradigmatic leap. Emboldened by the essence of Habermasian communicative action, the present essay dared to raise an argument worthy to be read.

Keywords: Social Participation. Habermas. Communicative Action. Bureaucracy. Public Administration.

Introducing the Theoretical Gap

Instrumental rationality, grounded in the success based on the ends and pillar of Max Weber's bureaucratic model, has not allowed the social agents of the process – administrators and administered ones - to develop their actions in an emancipatory way, despite its pretension to improve human relations through labor division and homogenization of social actions within organizations. In turn, the substantive rationality of Herbert Simon, also brilliantly discussed by the Brazilian sociologist Guerreiro Ramos, is based on the individual-rational perception of the interaction of facts at a given moment, which means that the social actors within the organizations must develop their relations according to their particular way of perceiving rational action in relation to ends (TENÓRIO, 1990).

From this encounter between the instrumental and substantive rationalities, the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas emerges with the proposition of communicative rationality, the focus of this theoretical essay. His proposal of communicative rationality (or communicative action) contrasts with instrumental rationality, suggesting a more democratic and less alienating relationship, however, Habermas does not consider that every individual's opinion should be taken isolatedly, as substantive rationality suggests, but



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he bases his proposal on the search for solutions through dialogue, best argument and consensus.

Communicative rationality, though considered to be capable of ‘unlocking the iron cage’, within which bureaucratic society lives trapped and alienated, is also criticized (IRAZÁBAL, 2009), and some of its criticisms became motivators of the present study. The present essay sought to intensively reflect about one of the criticisms received by Habermas’ communication action theory. This specific criticism points out that the supporters of Habermas theory of communicative action, despite a common basilar understanding (enlightenment and emancipation of man), end up assuming many different theoretical lines derived from this theory, not reaching a consensus. That is, the theorists who support the ‘theory of consensus’ - theory of communicative action – paradoxically are not able to reach consensus about it. For example, some of them believe that Habermas’ communicative action theory is an incremental proposition and others believe it represents a radical shift from other types of rationality.

What we want in this theoretical essay is precisely to clarify this theoretical gap: does the transition proposed by Habermas from other rationalities types towards communicative rationality constitute (and social participation) a proposal of an incremental or radical adjustment? The main motivation is to deeper reflect about one of the most important theories for social participation in Public Administration. What about, then, we try to reach consensus on the ‘author of consensus’ (Habermas)? Aiming at turning this essay even more profound, we will then attempt to position Habermas’ communicative action theory in the struggle ‘Liberal State versus Social Welfare State’. Besides, we will attempt to position it with respect to the well-known ‘New Public Management’, a very important and current theme in Public Administration.

The present essay will be subdivided into four sessions. On the first session, this brief introduction. On the second, the importance and challenges of communicative action for social participation. On the third, emphasis on the guiding question of this essay. Finally, on the fourth, conclusions made based on the raised strong evidences from the literature. It is important to emphasize that the consensus aimed in this present essay focuses specifically on Habermas’ theory of communicative action, since this author has also brought unique theoretical contributions to the study of democracy through the Theory of Deliberative Democracy and Public Sphere Theory, themes that naturally have high interface with this study, but will not be deeply discussed herein.



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Importance and Challenges of Communicative Action for Social Participation

We have seen in the previous session that Habermas' ideas of communicative action start from the assumption that consensus is possible from the understanding of actions, even though there are diffuse interests between individuals (HABERMAS, 2002). His ideas based on solidarity, best argument and consensus are important to Public Administration specially because they can be considered ways through which society can be guided towards democracy, social integration and social participation (LIMA; RIVERA, 2009).

Sanderson (1999) gives us practical examples of attempts to apply communicative action in Public Administration, especially in government practice. He highlights the example of the United Kingdom government which, from 1997 on, has sought to renew its local democracy through more direct forms of participation, empowering citizens and making their views heard in decision-making. At the time in this scenario, communicative rationality was seen as an alternative to solve the problems of instrumental rationality of bureaucracy based essentially on professional and managerial power. The author also presents the well-known 'medical model' as a critique of instrumental rationality. According to this model, the mastery of professionals, managers and specialists, preached by bureaucracy, is similar to a doctor who holds all the knowledge - equivalent to the technocrat - to cure the patient's illness - equivalent to the population. The citizen, therefore, would play the role of an elderly patient, compliant, tired, fragile and dependent. This context is not ideal for social participation and is not according to the communicative action theory, since the opinion of the citizens is not taken into account in the solution of the problem. Still further detailing the metaphor, the doctor would be interested in knowing what the patient is feeling and not their opinion on how best to cure the disease.

One of the key expressions to understand how Habermas' communicative action theory can be put into practice in Public Administration is 'social negotiation'. It refers to a participatory approach that seeks to identify and take into account the views of all relevant stakeholder groups. However, different stakeholders will have different points of view on an issue and will need, through dialogue, to negotiate differences and build shared meanings (SANDERSON, 1999).

Another key expression to understand how communicative action theory can be put into practice in Public Administration is 'collaborative government', which conceives forms of participation, disseminates information, shares responsibilities, and even serves as a defender of marginalized citizens. This concept is closely linked to what is known as the



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discretionary power of the public administrator, contrary to a mere obedience of the law (KELLY, 2004). The author also raises an important criticism to the tricks used in the participation practice. As administrators use one type of rationality and citizens (administered) another, the former become frustrated with the latter and begin to systematically exclude them from public discussion. This is done, for example, through public hearings held in places and at times that hinder citizen participation.

For Habermas (1987), some typologies of problems such as the nuclear threat, prejudice against minorities and misery in the third world are not merely technical problems and cannot be solved, therefore, only with bureaucratic administrative power based on instrumental rationality. The decisions must be born of a process of reflection where the free discussion of the themes and proposed solutions are assured, simultaneously guaranteeing effectiveness and responsibility of the participants for the decisions taken (HABERMAS, 1991). Communicative rationality preaches that our greatest authority must be a good argument and that, therefore, our fellows (“the others”) are our main source of guidance.

However, public administrators need to consider some significant challenges that come along with when it is attempted to put communicative action theory into practice, especially because the success of communicative action demands a deep knowledge of the field, the rules and elements that make up the ‘world of life’ (COUTO; CARRIERI, 2017). Moreover, we believe that public administrators need to be familiar with some of the existent criticisms on Habermas’ ideas of communicative action, which can offer deep reflections about the praxis of this theory on social participation. We will try to summarize some of them hereafter.

An important critique to be taken into account by public administrators was done by Deleuze (2014) and Foucault (2008). Their main criticism is focused on the possible power asymmetries between individuals. They believe that consensus, a pillar for Habermas’ communicative action, will always be permeated by asymmetries between the involved subjects. According to them, these subjects will strategically elaborate intersubjectivity in order to achieve their own wills, representing a power dispute.

Another key critique to be taken into consideration by public administrators was done by Dussel (1998), Mignolo (1993) and Escobar (1988). Their main criticism is based on the fact that Habermas’ ideas of communicative action present a premise that all individuals have the freedom, equality and dignity to participate, jointly, in the space of dialogue, which is something that, according to the referred authors, has never been guaranteed in any



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historical moment. They believe that, in the political praxis, only a few groups are indeed heard by public administrators (State), while the others are ignored.

At last, an interesting critique has been raised by Chambers and Kopstein (2001). They argue that, even when a consensus is satisfactorily reached, it will not necessarily imply the good and progress of civil society, which means that consensus, one of the pillars of Habermas' ideas of communicative action, will not always result in something positive for society.

Even though some criticisms exist regarding the communicative action theory, they do not deny the importance of the same to Public Administration, especially when it comes to municipal councils and participation in public management, something that has been gaining more and more relevance in Brazil (COUTO; CARRIERI, 2017; MARTINS, 2015), by the creation of Managers Councils of Public Policies, for instance the 'Municipal Council of Sustainable Rural Development of Viçosa-MG', analyzed by Mucci and Mafra (2016).

Communicative Action: an Interparadigmatic Theory or a Paradigmatic Leap Proposal?

Having understood the main ideas related to communicative action, and having discussed how communicative action theory can be put into practice in public social participation, its importance and challenges, we will now try to deeper look at the guiding question of this essay, raising the direct and indirect thoughts of relevant authors about the meaning of the Habermasian proposal of communicative action. By 'direct thoughts', we mean the explicit opinion that some authors bring on the Habermasian proposal and, by 'indirect thoughts', we mean the possible inferences based on their statements on the subject.

When we read the writings of authors who stood out in the discussions about the theory of communicative action, we come across some as Freitag (1995), who considers Habermas's proposal of communicative action as a radical paradigm shift from subjectivity to intersubjectivity, from monological reason to dialogic reason - which is metaphorically paraphrased in this essay as a 'paradigmatic leap'. We also come across other authors with different opinions, such as Siebeneichler et al. (2007), who understand that Habermas's communicative rationality can only be constructed on a discursive coherence between distinct theories, a point of view that acknowledges the interparadigmatic character of this proposal. This is precisely the dilemma (and theoretical gap) guiding this essay: is



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Habermas' communicative rationality the proposal of a paradigmatic leap - radical adjustment - or is it a catch-all that takes advantage of other types of rationality and paradigms - incremental adjustment?

Rossetti (2010, p.4) understands Habermas's proposal of communicative rationality as a paradigm shift. "This paradigm shift brings new foundations of reason, human being and society, leaves aside the paradigm of the conscience and proposes that the rationality does not depend directly on the subject, but on intersubjectivity".

Freitag (1995) considers that the conceptualization itself of communicative rationality already presupposes a radical change of paradigm, once reason is jointly implemented, through a dialogical process. Silva (2011) corroborates this idea of a paradigmatic leap by stating that Habermas, by performing the substitution of the paradigm of consciousness for the language paradigm, emphasizes that language must be seen as an expression of understanding in a normative and evaluative context.

In contrast, Pinto (1995) states that Habermas constructs his theory of communicative action in a permanent dialogue with authors from a wide range of theoretical lines, such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead, Lukacs, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Parsons. In this way, Habermas incorporates a series of themes and contributions that have been developed by functionalism, phenomenology, Marxism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Habermas' main origin, which can be considered as incremental features of his theory of communicative action.

Another author who corroborates the incremental trait of Habermas' theory of communicative action is Barreto (1993). In analyzing various types of rationality, he comes to the conclusion that the conceptions of Habermas - communicative rationality - and of Guerreiro Ramos - substantive rationality - in relation to the proposition of non-oppressive and imposing behaviors, are not contradictory but complementary, that is, the proposals of Habermas and the Brazilian sociologist are not exclusive but incremental, since both highlight the subject. The complementarity between the two theories in question is further evidenced by the fact that both consider rational debate an essential requirement for the harmonization of associated human life.

According to Mílovic (2002, p. 196), "Habermas follows Searle's theory of speech acts. The act of speech is the first unit of communication, that is, all communication presupposes acts of speech". "With his speech act, the speaker seeks to achieve his goal of achieving communication with the listener about something" (Habermas, 2002, p.193). This



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is one more evidence from Habermas's proposal that indicate an incremental character, since it follows an already existing theoretical line.

The concept of communicative action, in spite of exposing a significant rupture from individualism to collectivism, which reinforces one of the proposals discussed in this essay on radical adjustment (paradigmatic leap), was constructed by Habermas based on the symbolic interactionism of Mead, the concept of language games of Wittgenstein, Austin's speech acts theory and Gadamer's hermeneutics (PINTO, 1995). This strengthens the other proposal analyzed in this article, which understands the interparadigmatic character of the Habermasian proposition, constituting an incremental adjustment of other theoretical lines. At this point, we perceive that the dilemma seems to intensify even more, since the concept of communicative action itself conveys the idea of paradigmatic leap and, by its foundation, radiates its interparadigmatic character. Let's move on.

Serva (1997) states that, from the 1980s on, Habermas turned sharply against Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment and proclaimed the need for a radical paradigm shift in the approach to rationality, viewing the emancipation of man in the face of the constraints imposed by bureaucratic society, constraints that affect even the academia (TEIXEIRA et al., 2009).

Habermas criticizes the influence of money and power on society, classifying them as discretionary and reifying means of communication, the former harming the private sphere - the egocentric functioning of the market - and the latter the public sphere - dysfunctions of the bureaucracy. In his words: "Just as the private sphere is sloped and eroded by the economic system, so is the public sphere by the administrative system" (HABERMAS 1987, p. 325). For Freitag (1995), the process of reification of the components of society, called by Habermas 'colonization of world of life', was exactly what Weber called 'the loss of men's freedom', what Lukacs called 'alienation', and what Marcuse called 'unidimensionalization'. It is valid to observe that Freitag (1995), even explicitly defending the paradigmatic leap of communicative rationality, implicitly accentuates its interparadigmatic nature by exposing the similarities of communicative action with other authors' approaches.

By now, one apparently paradoxical reflection we can raise is that, despite Habermas' criticisms of money and power as colonizers of the 'world of life', one of the main points of his proposal for communicative rationality is the maintenance of the economic and administrative systems guided by the mechanisms of the market and bureaucratic administration, but all of them submitted to external control. This reflection leads us to reinforce the idea of the incremental or interparadigmatic character of the Habermasian theory. It does not, therefore,



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propose the extinction of bureaucracy and the market, but it emphasizes the importance of citizen participation and control over governmental decisions through, for example, nongovernmental organizations, popular councils, discussion forums and the valorization of deliberation mechanisms that stimulate understanding and not merely the conquest of power.

In the words of Pinto (1995, p.93-94), Habermas does not propose the destruction of the state-bureaucratic apparatus, or of the market. Basically, what he suggests is “a procedural democracy, a ‘sovereignty in procedure’ in which the mechanisms of market action and administrative power will be controlled within the framework of popular councils”. It is, therefore, another argument about the incremental trait of communicative rationality, since for Habermas the bureaucratic foundations must be maintained, but subject to greater external control, that is, to a greater participation of the administered ones (citizens, in the context of Public Administration). We can firmly understand here that the communicative rationality of Habermas proposes an incremental adjustment both on instrumental rationality and on substantive rationality.

Aiming at turning this essay even more profound, we can go deeper with another reflection: on which side is exactly positioned the communicative action theory of Habermas in the struggle ‘Liberal State versus Social Welfare State’? Is there a radical positioning or a middle ground? The fact that we have already presented in this essay that Habermas criticizes the influence of money on society as a means of undisputed and reifying communication could lead us erroneously to the conclusion that this theorist opposes the Liberal State, which is based on the laws of the market, on relationships geared towards ends and individual success. That seems to be, for the given reasons, a valid conclusion. However, a special care is needed in this analysis. Habermas’ opposition to the Liberal State can lead us to the heedless conclusion that it automatically supports the Welfare State for all the social benefits it brings to society, especially in countries of advanced capitalism, as highlighted by Pinto (1995). This is the key point: in spite of the advantages derived from the Welfare State as the reduction of social inequalities, this State is also in opposition to the Habermas communicative rationality, since it is based on an interventionist government that controls corporate actions. In other words, the interventionist state (Welfare State), which ultimately brings benefits to the administered ones (citizens), does not take their views into account as it should, not favoring dialogue or consensus, pillars of the communicative action theory.

Habermas (1987) corroborates this idea by noting that, despite the process of state intervention having proved very efficient in guaranteeing the survival of the capitalist system,



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it has unleashed crises of legitimization of the administered ones (citizens), removing their emancipatory potential. In addition, Pinto (1995) reinforces that the strong presence of the State has a harmful psychological effect in the sense of discouraging investments and limits the role of the citizen to a mere voter with restricted political decision-making power. The more the Welfare State expands its care network on the spheres of private life, the greater the pathological side effects of a juridification that involves both bureaucratization and monetization of central spheres of the 'world of life'. In short, we conclude this specific reflection acknowledging that communicative rationality takes no side in the struggle 'Liberal State vs. Social Welfare State', which strengthens the idea that the Habermasian proposal is incremental.

The complementarity between communicative and substantive rationalities is also evidenced by Serva (1997). For him, Guerreiro Ramos stresses that substantive rationality is the substrate of action and theory that seeks to promote the proper regulation of associated human life. For the same purposes, Habermas says that the rational orientation of communicative action lies in the attainment of understanding among men. We find here another point of non-radical distinction from the Habermasian proposition when compared to other types of reason.

Even making the proper distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality, Cavalcante (2001) understands that the latter includes the former. He justifies that the instrumental reason is reduced to technical knowledge and that communicative reason takes into account a plurality of knowledges, including the technical one. It is, therefore, one more author who shows that the Habermasian proposal of communicative rationality has an incremental character, since it does not claim the total abandonment of technical knowledge.

In addition to the dialogue between communicative action (social participation) and the struggle 'Liberal state vs. Social Welfare State', discussed previously, we can make our reflections even more robust by making a dialogue of communicative rationality with the well-known 'New Public Management', a very important and current theme in Public Administration. Some authors, like Sanderson (1999), position Habermas' communicative action theory before the New Public Management. Going straight to the point, according to these authors, communicative rationality opposes this 'Managerialism' approach because its main focus is not democracy, but control, evaluation and efficiency. In addition, Sanderson (1999) emphasizes that corporate statutes and regiments, which are not very clear to all administered ones (private and public employees) - too technical -, also constitute barriers to their participation in the decision making of private and public companies. At this point, we



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can perceive a more radical opposition of the communicative rationality with respect to other theories, in this case the 'New Public Management'.

Moving towards a conclusion, we can clearly see by the many interwoven views of the authors presented so far - who obviously do not exhaust the discussions already made in the academia about communicative action - that the Habermasian theory proposes an incremental adjustment to other types of rationality and that, at the same time, represents, in fact, a radical leap from other types of rationality and theories. In order to further intensify the dilemma presented in this paper and finish our thoughts on the current session, what about we focus now on evidence brought by the communicative action theory's author himself? What does he say about it more directly?

The idea of radical adjustment – paraphrased as 'paradigmatic leap' in this essay - is reinforced by Habermas himself. "I intend to argue that a shift from paradigm to that of communication theory will make possible a return to the task that was interrupted with the critique of instrumental reason" (HABERMAS, 1984, p. 386). This change presupposes the abandonment of relations 'subject-object' to relations 'subject-other subject', that is, the components of society cannot be seen as simple things (reification), but they must have their opinion taken into account in the search for mutual understanding.

Later, Habermas (1990, p.276) reaffirms his proposal for radical adjustment by saying that "the paradigm of object knowledge must be replaced by the paradigm of mutual understanding between subjects capable of speaking and acting". In addition, Habermas affirms that a paradigm only loses its force when denied by another of definite form. For him, the work of deconstruction, however enthusiastic it may be, "can only have definable consequences when the paradigm of self-consciousness, of self-reference of a subject who knows and acts alone, is replaced by another, by the paradigm of intercomprehension" (Habermas, 1990, p. 288).

However, the author himself also reveals the incremental character of his theory of communicative rationality in seeking a middle ground. Habermas (1997) criticizes the political reduction to an individualistic and competitive logic - questioning the instrumental rationality - but also questions the exacerbated and even utopian idea of a robust and integrated collective will of people. This clearly shows that he seeks, therefore, to find a balance between these polar positions, articulating both. Moreover, in presenting the tripartite theory of rationality that includes the epistemological, teleological and communicative roots, Habermas shows that communicative rationality is not a radical leap from the other two typologies of rationality, but an additional component, which reinforces the idea of



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incremental adjustment. “Communicative rationality remains at the same level as epistemological and teleological rationality, not constituting the dominant structure of rationality, but rather one of the three nuclear structures” (HABERMAS, 2002, p. 185).

After our journey through so many ideas related to communicative action theory, and after deeply reflecting about its importance and challenges to social participation and Public Administration as a whole, we acknowledge here that the guiding dilemma of the present essay still remains. Surprisingly as it may be, we have just found our precious conclusion. Let us present it.

Conclusions

By raising and intersecting the ideas of various authors about Habermas’ communicative action theory, we have come to the conclusion, based on strong literature evidence, that the answer is ‘yes’ to both hypotheses confronted as the guiding question of the present essay, which indicates that they are not excluding whatsoever. This means that the Habermasian proposal presents several incremental characteristics compared to other typologies of rationality and other theories, but also constitutes a paradigmatic leap. Some authors have been adept at the understanding that communicative rationality is the proposal of a radical adjustment by its own concept, while others have emphasized the incremental character of this theory. We have also brought thoughts from authors who have revealed, directly and indirectly, that communicative rationality is, simultaneously, a proposition of a paradigmatic leap with interparadigmatic characteristics. This was noticeable even when the author of the theory (Habermas) was focused, which ended up reinforcing our conclusion.

The robust discussion made allowed us to understand that the fact that we consider the theory of communicative action as possessing an interparadigmatic character does not mean that this theory consists of a mere summary of several other theoretical lines, but a theory that surpasses many others with which it dialogues, something that has been also reinforced by McCarthy (1984). It was our purpose in this essay to foster the validity of our arguments. The strength of an argument, in a given context, is measured by the pertinence of the reasons and manifested, among other ways, “by the ability to convince the participants of the discussion, that is, to motivate the listener to accept the claim of validity in discussion” (Habermas, 1987, p.37).

Habermas brought a substantial contribution to contemporary society and Public Administration, proposing a rationality based on reason open to dialogue and communicated



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in a consensual way. However, in the dialogical process, individuals' wills differentiate from the will obtained by consensus and representing the group in the end, to a greater or lesser extent. At this point, we leave here the following reflection, which can be approached theoretically and empirically in future studies: what degree of inequality between the individual's will and consensual results is 'acceptable', since complete equality is unlikely?

The communication action was discussed in this paper in a macro-level approach (theory). This naturally leaves the opportunity for future studies to analyze it from a micro-level perspective (methodologies), as Mucci and Mafra (2016) successfully did by evaluating the methodological practices of 'action research' and 'dialogical mediation'. Besides, even though the focus of this essay has fallen onto public administrators, we believe that this theory has the potential to be deeper explored in private organizations given its social nature, since they are comprised of relations of both the public sphere and the private sphere (COUTO; CARRIERI, 2017; TEIXEIRA et al., 2009).

Finally, it should be pointed out that this article, although motivated by the search for consensus on the incremental or radical character of Habermas' theory of communicative action, did not, of course, aim at exhausting any other discussion on the subject. The main purpose, therefore, was not the achievement of an absolute and universal consensus, but the promotion of consensual and dialogical practice, "a consensus that is set as an infinite task, a constant process of its realization" (DUTRA, 2005, p. 10). Thus, emboldened by the essence of Habermasian communicative action, we dared to raise an argument worthy to be read.

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