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FEMINISM AND SOCIOLOGY: 
CURRENT DEBATES AND ISSUES IN BRITAIN

DIANE RICHARDSON

Background

In order to examine feminist critiques of and contributions to sociology it is first necessary to say something about feminism in Britain. Although there existed women’s groups and organizations who were concerned with women’s equality throughout this century, from the end of the 1920s, after the Suffragette movement, there was no coherent feminist movement in Britain. This was to change in the late sixties with the emergence of the women’s liberation movement. This was a new style of feminism, which went much further and asked for far more than had feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Prior to 1970, feminists in Britain had campaigned for a better deal for mothers, to help make work within the home less tiring and stressful for women. Very few feminists earlier this century ever questioned that childcare and housework were women’s responsibility. They challenged the social conditions in which women had and looked after children, and did the work within the home—seeking protection for motherhood. For example, feminists wanted governments to provide better housing and nursery schools to relieve the stress and strain on tired mothers. They also demanded greater respect for mothers and wider social recognition of the value of women’s domestic role in the care of the home and the family. This has since been termed welfare feminism (Banks, 1981).

Women’s Liberation

In the late 1960s/early 1970s feminists began to challenge these assumptions, claiming that it was precisely women’s traditional role in the home as wives and mothers that was the key to understanding women’s unequal position in society. Feminists in the early seventies were very critical of the traditional family structure, in which the responsibility for housework and childcare is assumed to be the woman’s. It was argued, and still is by most feminists, that gender equality is dependent on women being able to participate on equal terms with men in paid employment outside the home. For this ever to become a reality women first had to be relieved of their traditional responsibilities for looking after children and the home (and men).

The campaigns of the women’s liberation movement reflected this. The first four demands agreed upon at the first women’s liberation conference in Britain, in Oxford in
1970, were free 24 hour nursery provision, equal pay, improved education for women and free contraception and abortion on demand.

**Feminism in the Nineties**

In the years since then the assumptions and principles of contemporary western feminism have changed dramatically. Feminism in Britain in the nineties is very different from feminism in Britain in the early seventies. What it means to say you are a feminist has also changed, it is much less specific than it once was as the feminist movement has become diffuse and fragmented. For example, in the 1970s feminism assumed that it was possible to identify a cause of women’s oppression. There was disagreement among feminists as to what exactly this cause might be, maybe the answer could be found by analysing women’s position in the sphere of work, the family, motherhood, economic structures, male control over women’s sexuality and reproduction, and so on. However, the question *What causes women’s oppression* was seen as fundamental.

Much early feminist work emphasised ways in which women in all cultures had less power than men, and looked for evidence of this in continuities in women’s position throughout history as well as in cross-cultural analysis. (A good example of this was the political concept of Sisterhood.) In the past decade there has been a shift away from trying to find a general explanation of women’s oppression, which presumes a commonality between women and their interests.

This overlaps with the debate about similarities/differences between women. Some of the early feminist works have been criticised for the ways in which theories were based on a particular view of ‘woman.’ In particular they have been challenged for failing to pay sufficient attention to differences between women, especially along the lines of race, class and sexuality. Feminist theories have been criticised for focusing on white, middle class, heterosexual women, and failing to address issues affecting Black women, lesbian and working class women. Current debates about differences between women can be understood as a response therefore to the earlier emphasis within feminism on what women have in common.

Such shifts have been influenced not only by recent changes within feminist thinking, but by the post structuralist impact in the social sciences and cultural studies. Many feminists have endorsed post-structuralism’s rejection of essentialist theoretical categories such as ‘woman’ and ‘man’ and claims to universal explanations (e.g. Weedon, 1987). This is reflected in a move away from analysing the men/women opposition, towards an analysis of the category woman (and man) as problematic and unstable. The category ‘woman,’ it is suggested, means different things in different historical periods and cultural contexts. Therefore we cannot talk about the shared experience of ‘being a woman’ (or of ‘being a man’), without specifying the historical and cultural context. A new concern with difference (between women) has emerged, as I have indicated, alongside a closer examination of specificity of different aspects of inequality and their inter-relationships (see, for example, Walby, 1990).

This reflects a major paradigm shift within feminist theory or, to put it another way, feminist theory is not what it used to be. The founding assumptions of feminist theory
in the seventies and the nineties are clearly very different. As I have illustrated above, contemporary feminism has questioned what has been central to so much feminist theory and practice in the past, the assumption that there is a shared collective identity amongst women as a group who have certain set of interests in common (Stacey, 1993).

There are fears among some feminists that this theoretical shift will have important and negative political implications; that the question of how women as a group are oppressed will disappear. These are important questions. If we destabilize the concept of woman can we still unite in political struggle as women? Can we establish communality/sisterhood across difference? Can we no longer make any kind of generalizations about women?

Theoretical Perspectives

Feminism in Britain is not one movement or theory, there are many different approaches. All argue that women are oppressed in British society, but there are differences between feminists in their explanations of Why women are disadvantaged compared to men and, related to this, their suggestions about How to change women’s position in society.

Within the range of feminist theories that have made important contributions to British sociology there are four main perspectives: liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism and socialist feminism. I shall begin by giving a very simple summary of these different perspectives. In doing this I am very much aware that I am oversimplifying, and that much feminist thinking does not fall neatly into one or other of these categories.

1. Liberal

Liberal feminism is concerned to identify forms of discrimination against women in Britain and ways in which changes in the law and education would give women equal rights to men. The focus tends to be an analysing women’s subordination in terms of prejudice and sexist attitudes, rather than social structural explanations (e.g. Martin and Roberts, 1984). Equal opportunities are seen as the goal to achieving social change—give women an equal chance.

2. Radical

Radical feminists (and as we will see socialist feminists) argue that the problems lay in a social system that benefits from women’s oppression. They analyse gender inequality in terms of the ways in which men as a group dominate women as a group, claiming that men are the main beneficiaries of the subordination of women (e.g. Delphy, 1984). Women are a social class in conflict with another social class, men. This system of male domination over women, called patriarchy, is seen as separate/independent from other systems of social inequality, such as capitalism. (The concept of patriarchy has not been used in any simple or unified way within feminist accounts, and there are different interpretations of the term. Here I am using the term patriarchy to refer to a complex system of male domination which pervades culture and social life.)

In support of their position, radical feminists point out that women’s oppression pre-
dates capitalism. Thus, women's oppression cannot be regarded as secondary to or as less important than class oppression. Gender inequality is not seen as the result of capitalism, though it is recognised that within capitalism women's oppression will take a particular form. In other words, that there is an important relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, between gender inequality and class inequality. But significantly radical feminists stress that gender impacts upon class relations within capitalism.

Radical feminists have investigated ways in which men as a group dominate women in all spheres of life, including personal relationships. In particular, sexuality is seen by radical feminists as a major site of male domination over women, while some writers also highlight male violence against women as a major cause of gender inequality.

In this sense, radical feminist writers have introduced a range of issues into social science which have not traditionally been thought to be part of sociological analysis. For example, heterosexuality is seen as a social institution, rather than as a sexual preference that an individual is born with or that is fixed as a result of early childhood experience.

3. Marxist

Marxist feminism differs from radical feminism in considering gender inequality to derive from capitalism. An example of Marxist feminists accounts is Barrett (1980). The major reason women are oppressed in British society is seen as a by-product of the capitalist exploitation of labour, which oppresses women in a particular way as a result of their exclusion from waged work and their role in domestic sphere caring for the labour force and rising the next generation of workers. Class relations are seen as the central features of social structure, and these are seen as determining the nature of male/female relations.

4. Socialist

In some accounts, socialist feminism and Marxist feminism are distinct from one another. Marxist feminists emphasise the role of capitalism (the class system) as the most important factor in explaining women's oppression, while socialist feminists argue that both patriarchy and capitalism combine to oppress women. Writers differ as to whether they see patriarchy and capitalism as one system, of capitalist-patriarchy (e.g. Eisenstein, 1981), or whether they are considered to be two separate systems which interact with one another (e.g. Hartmann, 1979). This position is often referred to as 'dual systems' theory, because it gives equal weight to the class and sex/gender systems in explaining the position of women in modern British society. Could see this as a synthesis of Marxist and radical feminist positions. However, whereas radical feminists have focussed primarily on sexuality and violence, socialist feminists have tended to focus upon analysing housework and waged work (paid employment).

These four approaches are the main strands of feminist analysis in contemporary Britain, although there are other strands which intercut these, such as Black feminism. Black feminists, in particular, have been critical of the lack of attention given to issues of racism in feminist theory and research. The neglect of racial difference and inequality in much white feminist writing have led to the development of analyses which examine the particular ways in which race and gender inequality interact (e.g. Carby, 1982). This has had important theoretical implications. For instance, the social structural models of society that had been organised around the two systems of sex and class, 'dual systems' approach, were
challenged for ignoring a third category of inequality: race. As well as challenging white feminist theory, Black feminists have also documented the experiences of Black women in British society (e.g. Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1985).

Another recent strand, is the connection for some feminist writers between feminism and the new post-structuralism and postmodernism. This is a theoretical movement which is having an increasingly important influence on sociology in Britain more generally. Such a position challenges traditional forms of feminist theory, which emphasize the commonalities shared by women as a social group as distinct from men. Postmodern feminism (e.g. Nicholson, 1993) rejects what has been one of the most fundamental aspects of early feminist theory, the idea that it is legitimate to talk about ‘women’ as a socially oppressed group with shared interests in common with each other. The category ‘woman’ is problematised and the emphasis placed on analysing differences between women, rather than identifying common struggles and difference from men.

**Feminist Critiques of Sociology**

Feminists have drawn attention to the need to critique many of the basic assumptions of modern western social, political and cultural theory. They are deeply suspicious of theories which generalize and make universal claims and here there is some overlap, as I have indicated, with post-structuralist and post-modernist critiques of modern sociology.

I do not aim to provide a summary of all the critiques that feminists have made of sociology. Rather, in the time I have, I have selected some of the major points that demonstrate the kind of contribution that feminism has made.

1. Sociologists have ignored women

Much sociological research has focussed on men and boys and ignored the experiences of women and girls. A great deal of what counts as sociological knowledge is derived from research findings based on all-male samples. Another way of saying this is that, despite its claims to scientific neutrality, sociology has traditionally examined the world of men and not the world of men and women. Why is this?

Feminists have suggested that one reason is that sociologists have not seen issues of concern and interest to women as important or serious enough to be worthy of study. In other words, it is not simply an omission of women, that women have been left out from samples in research, but that sociological theories do not ask certain questions or conduct certain kinds of research. Sociologists have concentrated on studying the public sphere, in particular the workplace, which is associated with men. They have tended to ignore the private sphere of the home, which is associated with women.

Sociological theories have often taken for granted the view that it was natural for women to be in the home, that women’s role in the private sphere as wives and mothers was determined by their biology and not by social factors. This also helps to explain why sociologists have failed to ask certain questions or do research in areas of concern to women. For example, why ask the question *Why do women have children?* as a sociologist if you accept the view that the desire for children is based on a natural, biological maternal instinct in all women. A view that has been very dominant in the social sciences in the past.
It seems irrelevant, and consequently it is hardly surprising to find that this is a question which has rarely been written about or discussed by sociologists. It is only relatively recently that sociologists—many of them feminists—have investigated the social and psychological meanings to women’s choice to have—or not to have—children (Richardson, 1993).

In this sense sociology has ignored not just women, it has also ignored a major part of the social world—the private sphere of domestic relationships.

2. As a result, sociologists have produced theories of the social world which are partial/male-biased/ and inadequate.

In developing theories, sociologists have tended to generalize from research carried out on men to the whole of the population. For example, theories of retirement have tended to rely on studies carried out on male samples but are not entitled Male Retirement studies. There has, in the past, been little recognition that women’s experience may not be same as men’s and that if one included women in the research and/or certain issues affecting women this might affect the explanations and theories one came up with. (I’ll highlight this later in relation to the concept of work.)

3. Sociology has failed to theorize gender inequality.

In addition to ignoring women as research samples, sociologists have also tended to ignore gender inequalities in society. In part, this reflects the influence of functionalist thinking, which accepted unquestioningly that there were different and distinct roles for men and for women and saw these as functional to both the individual and society. Despite the fact that classic functionalist accounts of the family as developed by Parsons (1956) and others have been discredited in modern sociology, one important aspect of functionalist thinking which is still commonplace in sociological analyses is the notion that within the family women and men are different but equal. In this conception there is no space to theorize inequality between men and women—it simply disappears. Another reason why sociologists have failed to pay sufficient attention to inequalities between men and women, is the dominance of class analysis. Class is the main concept used within sociology to theorize social inequality. Traditionally class analysis has ignored gender relations, and only recently has it even tried to justify ignoring the relationship between class and gender. However, most feminists would argue that women’s oppression cannot be regarded as less important than class oppression, and have challenged the assumption that class is the fundamental division in society. It is necessary for sociologists to develop theories that can adequately explain gender divisions.

Feminist Contributions to Sociology

Feminist theory and research has made an important contribution to British sociology and has argued that sociological theories, methods and explanations need to be reconceptualized. Here, I will highlight some of the key areas.
1. New Knowledge

Feminists have suggested that previous theories have failed to consider certain questions or, if they have considered them, have provided inadequate answers. One of the significant roles of feminist theory has been to try to adequately account for women's subordination. Instead of accepting that gender inequality is natural, feminists have sought to explain how and why women have less power in society than men.

In response, feminists have asked new, different questions and produced new knowledge. Questions such as 'Why do women want children?' become issues to be researched and explained. Feminists have focused on issues which have conventionally not been seen as part of sociological analysis: the question of who does the housework, the question of increasing violence against women, of reproductive choice, etcetera.

2. New Theory

Feminists have argued that theories and research that ignore the experiences of over half of the population are inadequate. However, it is not simply a case of adding women into the picture, by doing more research on women. It is more fundamental than that. We need to rethink our theories and develop new concepts. Many feminists would argue that what is needed is a radical reformulation of sociology. This is because feminist research actually challenges many of the assumptions and generalizations of traditional sociology.

To give one example, let's take the concept of work. Traditionally sociologists have used this concept to refer to paid employment in the public sphere. Feminists have pointed out that this model of work does not recognize domestic labour as work and have argued that we should extend the concept of work to include both paid and unpaid work. This fits better with women's experience as workers. Ann Oakley was the first British feminist sociologist to analyze seriously the division of labour in the household and to look at domestic labour—the work women do in the home—as work (Oakley, 1974). She also recognized that to understand social and economic positions of women and men it is necessary to examine the sexual division of labour in the domestic sphere of the home as well as in the labour market, and the relationship between the two. Feminist research, then, has challenged assumptions about the division between the public sphere and the private sphere, as if they are distinct worlds, by theorizing the relationship between the public and the private. It is this relationship that helps us to understand the positions of men and women in paid work.

Similarly, feminists have examined the issue of gender and class. Instead of asking how we fit women's oppression into class analysis, some feminists have asked the question the other way around. They have asked how can we use the concept of class to help understand gender inequalities. This has led to a re-evaluation of definitions of class.

Feminism then should not be regarded as one theoretical strand within sociology, which is integrated into existing sociological theory. It is seeking to do more than that. It is seeking to reconceptualize the production of knowledge. It does not want to reform sociology, by adding women in, it wants to radically alter it. The reason this is seen as necessary, is that sociological knowledge is based on assumptions and generalizations which are developed from a male-biased position which helps to maintain women's subordinate position. Sociology, in this sense, is part of the problem, and the production of feminist knowledge part of the solution to seeking social change for women.
3. Feminist Research Methodologies

There has been an ongoing debate within sociology, concerning whether feminist research is significantly different from other research in sociology. Harding (1987) has suggested that what makes feminist research different is not so much the methods used as the methodology—the theories of how research should proceed—as well as the purpose of the research. Feminism seeks not just to account for women's position in society, but to change it. Thus, it is also concerned with using research to highlight how this situation might be changed. Feminists aim to produce work which is directly relevant to improving women's position in society. In this sense, feminist research assumes a particular relationship between the researcher and the subject: the 'knower' and the 'known.' Feminism is concerned to establish a sociology which helps women to understand their everyday lives, and the ways in which they are structured and established. Related to this, feminists have tended to advocate the use of qualitative methods for carrying out feminist research because they allow the viewpoint of the researcher to be taken into account.

4. The Feminist Classroom

Feminism has not only influenced what is taught within sociology, it has also influenced how it is taught. In particular, feminists have analysed the concepts of power and authority associated with the relationship between teacher and the student, and the negative aspects of those dynamics. For a fuller discussion of feminist pedagogic issues see Robinson, 1993.

Having outlined in general terms some of the debates and issues concerning the relationship of feminism and sociology, I want to briefly examine a particular area of feminist study which has been central to feminist debates in Britain in the last ten years, and one that also relates to my own research interests.

Sexuality

Over the last twenty years feminism has politicized sexuality. Feminists have emphasised how sexuality, which is commonly regarded as something that is private and personal, is a public and a political issue. They have challenged traditional assumptions about sexuality, for instance the notion of women as sexually passive, and proposed new ways of understanding sexual relations. In particular, feminist theory has problematised heterosexuality and redefined lesbianism.

As well as giving new meaning to these sexual identities, feminists have engaged in a whole variety of debates and campaigns around sexuality. As part of the desire for greater knowledge and control over our own bodies, feminists have campaigned for access to free contraception and abortion, as well as better sex education for women. Sexual violence has been placed on the public agenda largely as a result of the efforts of various feminist groups who have campaigned for changes in the law, over rape in marriage for example, as well as for changes in policy and practice. Feminist services have been developed: refuges for women who have been sexually abused, rape crisis lines, and self help groups for women who are survivors of sexual violence. Feminists have also campaigned against pornography, for the rights of lesbians, and an end to sexual violence, as well as the right
to sexual pleasure. They have drawn attention to issues such as sexual harassment at work and in education, and to the fact that many of women's health concerns are closely connected to sexuality.

Look at a few of these issues in more detail.

Social Constructionism

The view that sexuality is socially constructed is central to most feminist analyses of sexuality. To say that sexuality is socially constructed means that our sexual feelings and activities, the ways in which we think about sexuality, our sexual identities, are not biologically determined but are the product of social and historical forces. In this sense, feminist theories of sexuality have challenged dominant essentialist explanations of sexuality which perceive sexuality as a 'natural' phenomenon, universal and unchanging, part of the biological make-up of each individual. Various other perspectives, such as discourse analysis (e.g. Foucault, 1979); symbolic interactionist (e.g. Plummer, 1975) and psychoanalytic (e.g. Mitchell, 1974), also adopt this view.

But feminist theories of sexuality are not just concerned with describing ways in which our sexual desires and relationships are shaped by society. They are also concerned to identify how prevalent notions and beliefs about male and female sexuality may serve to encourage certain kinds of behaviours which are oppressive to women and help to maintain gender inequalities.

What is the Relationship between Sexuality and Gender Inequality?

Feminists differ on this question. Many radical feminists, for example, argue that the way sexuality is constructed is not merely a reflection of the fact that men have power over women in other spheres; rather it is constructed the way it is because it helps keep women in their place. It is an important, some would say the most important, means of maintaining male power and control over women (Jackson, 1984). From this perspective the concern is how male dominated sexuality constraints women in various aspects of their lives. For instance, it may influence the way we feel about our bodies and our appearance, the clothes we wear, the work we do, our health, the education we receive, as well as the relationships we feel able to have with both women and men. Women's social lives and leisure opportunities are also affected by fears of sexual violence, especially around being out alone after dark (Green et al., 1990).

Others, especially some socialist feminists, are reluctant to attribute this significance to sexuality (for example, Segal, 1990). They prefer to regard the social control of women through sexuality as the outcome of the inequalities of a capitalist society, rather than its purpose.
Sexuality and Power

Feminists have directly challenged traditional taken-for-granted assumptions about sexuality. For example, linked with the idea that sex is a natural force, and the concept of sex drive, is the belief that to a certain extent sex is outside of conscious control, but most especially for men. The message is that men have powerful sexual urges which they find difficult to control. Women, who are not so troubled, should be aware of this and should not provoke men to a point where they can no longer be held responsible for their actions.

Feminist research has challenged such assumptions, pointing out how these ideas serve to ‘naturalize’ certain forms of male behaviour that are oppressive to women and function as a form of social control. They also influence how women ‘define, resist, cope with and survive their experiences.’ (Kelly, 1988). For example, it is not uncommon for women who have experienced sexual abuse or violence to blame themselves. Feminists have highlighted how the ‘common-sense’ view that women are responsible for men’s violence enables individual men to deny responsibility and allows men to insist that they were misled or ‘provoked’; victims of women, or their own sexual ‘natures.’

This is evidenced in the way that women often get blamed if men sexually harass them, and in the way men’s sexual violence against women has often been seen as an understandable, if not acceptable, reaction to female ‘provocation.’ Common myths are that women provoke men by the way they dress, by leading men on, and by saying no when they really mean yes.

Heterosexuality as a Social Institution

The idea that heterosexual and homosexual are natural and universal categories has also been challenged by feminists as well as other social theorists more recently. Work on lesbian and gay history has provided support for this view that these sexual categories are socially constructed. Although there is some disagreement between writers as to precisely when the idea of the homosexual person emerged, the general belief is that, in Europe at least, the use of the term ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ to designate a certain type of person is relatively recent, having its origins in the 17th to 19th centuries, with the category lesbian emerging somewhat later than that of the male homosexual (Foucault, 1979; Faderman, 1980; McIntosh, 1981; Weeks, 1990; Baum Duberman et al., 1991).

Within feminist theory the idea that heterosexuality is a social construction has been further developed. Heterosexuality is seen not as an individual preference, something we are born like or gradually develop into, but as a socially constructed institution which structures and maintains male domination, in particular through the way it channels women into marriage and motherhood (Rich, 1981). Similarly, lesbianism has been defined not just as a form of sexual practice, but as a way of life and political struggle; a challenge to the institution of heterosexuality and a form of resistance to patriarchy. (In some ways this compares with the strategy of those 19th century British feminists who advocated voluntary celibacy and spinsterhood as a form of resistance to the sexual subjection of women.)
The anti-pornography movement, which emerged in the United States in the late 1970s, was a dominant issue for feminists in the west during the eighties. Feminist opponents to pornography object to the sexist and misogynist (woman-hating) nature of most pornography which frequently depicts women as 'commodities' for male consumption, who enjoy being dominated and humiliated. Most feminists would agree on this, where disagreements arise is over how important an issue pornography is for feminism.

Another longstanding debate within feminism is whether there is a direct link between pornography and men's violence against women. A number of feminist writers have argued that pornography is a direct cause of sexual violence towards women (Brownmiller, 1976; Dworkin, 1981; Everywoman, 1988). Others claim that the evidence for this is unclear and unconvincing (Segal, 1990). Even if it is not easy to prove conclusively a direct connection between the reading or viewing of pornography and specific acts of violence, it can be argued that pornography has an indirect effect by shaping male attitudes towards women and sexuality.

More contentious is the suggestion by some that what is needed is more women ‘pornographers’. It is argued that we need to create a new ‘pornographic discourse,’ in order to produce a feminist pornography/erotic which expresses women’s sexuality in words and images of our own choosing, and transforms the meanings and power relations typically manifested in pornography and other representations of sex in the process (Myers, 1989; Smyth, 1990).

Conclusion

In this paper I have only been able to give a brief account of some of the debates within feminism and the social sciences in Britain. I am very conscious of the fact that there are many other issues I could have mentioned, such as the possible implications of labelling contemporary British society as post feminist, the increasing interest within sociology in analysing men and masculinity, the influence of French feminism and especially psychoanalytic writers, the rise of men’s liberation movements, and the growing use of (negative) terms such as ‘political correctness’ within British culture as a way of silencing feminism.

Although I have illustrated what in Britain is seen as a major issue sexuality and violence towards women, I am also aware that I have not discussed changing patterns of family life which are already having, or are going to have in the future, a significant impact on women’s lives in Britain, such as the high divorce rate (one in three marriages in Britain now ends in divorce) the increasing number of women who are bringing up children on their own, often in poverty (approximately one in six families and Britain has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe) or the increasing numbers of women with young children in paid employment (41% of women with children under 5 work outside the home) or other social changes such as the raising of the retirement age from 60 to 65 for women.

Nor have I discussed the rapid expansion, since the eighties, of the teaching of feminist
theory in the social sciences, humanities and the arts, as well as on interdisciplinary degree courses in Women’s Studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. (See Robinson, 1993 for a fuller discussion of the development of Women’s Studies in Britain.)

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