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The State as the Great Classifier

Abstract

Based on data collected through focus group interviews within the project “Social and Cultural Capital in Serbia”, this paper aims to analyze how “the state” is constructed in discourses by ordinary people in today’s Serbia. Starting from a Bourdieuan theoretical platform that introduces the concepts of social classifications and classification struggles, it is argued that in spite of the many criticisms the state in Serbia is subjected to by the citizens, it still remains in their eyes the only really legitimate classifier of people, capitals, and practices. The numerous negative judgments of the state’s failures and malfunctioning in a wide variety of areas ironically result in a confirmation of “the State” as a kind of Leviathan which perhaps should be tamed and reeducated, but which no one wishes to remove or replace with an alternative set of social arrangements. The ambiguous political potential of this attitude is discussed in the concluding section.

Key words: state, politics, Serbia, transition, Pierre Bourdieu

The research project “Social and Cultural Capital in Serbia”, exemplified in a number of contributions to the present volume, also involved a segment based on the method of focus group interviews.¹ Starting from Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of “social classifications” and “classification struggles” (Bourdieu 1979, 1987, 1997), the aim of this part of the project was to record, and analyze, discourses of social classification operative in today’s Serbia: to reconstruct ways in which people in Serbia see, value, and rank themselves and others; to identify types of social groups being rejected or accepted; to examine how such classifications are justified; and to explore whether,

¹ Eight focus group interviews were conducted in March 2011, in four Serbian cities (Novi Sad, Belgrade, Novi Pazar, Niš). In each site two groups were set up distinguished by educational level, one consisting of participants with secondary education or less, and the other of participants with college degrees. The number of participants was 5-9 per group, 57 altogether (29 men and 28 women). They came from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, professional experiences and personal situations.

and how, these classifications are connected with the speakers' differential possession of various kinds of capital – in other words, whether “classification struggles” in the strict Bourdieuan sense have been instantiated.²

In this framework, political topics, or the state specifically, were not an explicit focus of study. The questions used to launch the discussions concerned primarily the criteria the participants used in evaluating and ranking people around them, and the criteria they felt predominated as the prevalent “rules of the game” in current Serbian society. Yet political issues imposed themselves immediately, by the very way people discussed the questions that were posed. Rather unexpectedly, instead of any recognizable social stratum or class, defined in the usual sociological (and Bourdieuan) terms of wealth, occupation, cultural distinction, or symbolic capital, a specific group was singled out as the main winner in the current situation: politicians. These were, at the same time, the chief collective “Others” for most respondents – people they shun and would rather not socialize with. Political topics in general came up repeatedly in the citizens' accounts, as the apparently inevitable source of explanation of any and all social processes in Serbia today, especially those processes that deserve criticism and condemnation. Within such heavily politicized discursive framework, “the state” was mentioned very often, and in widely varying contexts; it was invested with so many affects, charged with so many powers and responsibilities, and rendered as the bearer of so many fears and hopes, that it deserves to be spelled with a capital S: *the State*. Stretching between an all-powerful super-agent that can save us and a villain that destroys all that is worthy and virtuous in Serbia nowadays, the State emerged in the discussions as a pivotal point deserving special analysis.

Hence this paper sets out to analyze images of the State in the discourse of our research participants: the traits attributed to it, the functions and roles ascribed to it, the ways it is perceived to act – and how it ought to be acting, in an envisaged normative mode. Given that the theoretical background of the project was Bourdieuan, it is only proper that we begin by theoretically resituating the topics of politics and the state within Bourdieu's sociology.

Bourdieu on politics and the state

Bourdieu conceptualizes politics in ways significantly different from the receptions customary in political science and the more conventional po-

2 Main findings of this analysis have been reported in: Spasić, Birešev (2011).

litical sociology. Basically, he undertakes a reframing of politics that goes in two apparently contrary directions: towards a stronger independence, and away from it. Differently put, it is a simultaneous re-socialization and de-socialization of politics as a sphere and practice.

On one hand, against the artificial autonomization of politics as a specialized subject of specialized scholarship, cut out of its social milieu, Bourdieu reembeds politics within the social (especially stratificational, hierarchical, inequality-ridden) context. Especially innovative is his forging of, and insistence on, what Wacquant (2005b: 14) calls the “culture-politics link”, and his constantly reminding us of the importance of symbolic dimension in domination, whereby he sought to found, again in Wacquant’s words, “a generative anthropology of power in its most diverse manifestations” (Wacquant 2005c: 133). On the other hand, he builds new concepts to theorize the specificity of the political, seeking ways to grasp at once the stabilizing structural effects and the processual dynamism of political life in real, empirical societies. He thus views politics through three kinds of “fields”, caught in a complex web of mutual relations of demarcation, difference, and intertwining: the political field, the bureaucratic field, and the field of power.

The “political field” is the semi-autonomous microcosm within which parties and politicians compete to offer their services to the citizenry (Wacquant 2005a: 3). It emerges during the 19th century, when the relations between individuals and institutions involved in political work through parties and elections became stabilized, the structure of the field was outlined, and the specific “philosophy” and behavioral codes (political culture) came gradually to regulate political action. Politics thus became synonymous with competition among professionals for winning positions (administrative and representative), for defining legitimate roles (political capital or reputation), and for imposing a particular worldview (Pinto 2002: 217). The relative autonomy of the political field is reflected in its operation independently from centers of economic, religious or other kinds of power, as well as in the fact that during their tenure politicians are engaged in a struggle with their political opponents, and their strategies are determined by the strategies of their competitors in the field rather than by the expectations or demands of their constituency. Still, the strength of parties and individual politicians depends on the degree of acceptance of their ideas and the relative strength of the social groups supporting them, as well as on the capacity of political agents to enlist support, if necessary, from outside the field. This aspect makes political field different from

other kinds of field, especially the scientific and the artistic ones, where turning to non-professionals is considered useless, even counterproductive (Thompson 2001: 46).

The concept of “bureaucratic field” is used by Bourdieu to reframe the state as an arena of struggles over the definition and manipulation of public goods (Wacquant 2005a: 3). The historical roots of this field are found in the gradual historical autonomization of court lawyers from the Crown (the state was initially identical with the king’s household) and their espousal of the principles of disinterestedness, impartiality, generality, calling – in a word, *universality* (Bourdieu 1994: 99-133). The bureaucratic state was thus “constituted as a field of forces and a field of struggles oriented towards the monopoly of the legitimate manipulation of public goods” (Bourdieu 2004: 16). The gradually emerging social role of “civil servant” was, at the same time, creating the state it was supposed to serve – by producing a modern theory of the “state” as we know it today (*ibid.*). The history of the state is, hence, marked by the conflict between bearers of bureaucratic power and representatives of administrative bodies over various policies of accumulating and principles of redistributing the capital flowing into government coffers.³ On the other hand, the role/image of “independent agency” and arbiter which “after all, is less opposed to the interests of the dominated and to what we may call justice” (Bourdieu 1997: 151) has been inscribed into the history of the state. This two-pronged image of the state – as a battleground of the struggle for power, and as the service of all its citizens – may also be recognized in the discussions of our research participants.

The “field of power” was developed through the differentiation of forms of capital and the corresponding social microcosms and mechanisms. Bourdieu elaborated the concept in his studies of the genesis of the artistic field (Bourdieu 2003), and of institutions such as the Catholic church, judiciary, state apparatus, elite schools (Bourdieu 1989) and corporations. Seeking to escape the substantialism and misplaced realism of concepts such as the “ruling class”, “Bourdieu sketches the interlinked institutions within which the holders of various species of capital (economic, religious, legal, scientific, academic, artistic, etc.) vie to impose the supremacy of the particular kind of power they wield” i.e. the “dominant principle of domination”, which results in shifting balances in the sharing of powers (Wacquant 2005b:16). Unlike Foucault, power for Bourdieu is not diffuse

3 Bourdieu in *Contre-feux* (1999) distinguishes between the state’s “left hand” which redirect resources into agencies in charge of welfare, culture, and education, and its “right hand”, which reinvests resources in instruments of domination – judiciary, economy, military, police.

and spreading through the capillaries of the social body but rather “concentrated in definite institutional sectors and in given zones of social space: the field of power is precisely this arena where the ‘social energy’ constitutive of forms of capital accumulates and where the relative value of diverse species of power is contested and adjudicated” (Wacquant 2005c: 145). Or, in Bourdieu’s words: “The field of power (which must not be conflated with the political field) is not a field just like any other: it is the space of the relations of force between different forms of capital or, more precisely, between the agents that ... dominate specific fields, and whose struggles intensify each time the relative value of various forms of capital is brought into question” (Bourdieu 1994: 56).

For Bourdieu, the state is the “central bank of symbolic capital guaranteeing all acts of authority”, situated at the center of the field of power (Wacquant 2005b: 17). Its historical emergence is tied to the process of unification of various social fields (economic, cultural, scholastic, political) and of the gradual establishment of the state’s monopoly of legitimate physical *and* symbolic violence. Due to the fact that it concentrates a multitude of material and symbolic resources in its hands, the state is capable of regulating the functioning of various fields (Bourdieu 1994: 55). The state is therefore “the arbiter of the conflicts between contending capitals”, ultimately vouchsafing the complex circuits of legitimation (Wacquant 2005c: 145).

The state defines the framework in which diverse constructions of reality emerge and in which the principle for measuring their legitimacy is determined. By the same token, the state influences the course and content of struggles for symbolic power in all fields: “the state as the possessor of the monopoly over legitimate symbolic violence, by its very existence, sets limits to the symbolic war of all against all for this monopoly” (Bourdieu 1997: 222). In pursuing this, the state employs a variety of means, the most important of which is institutional regulation of the activities of social agents, especially by recourse to legal acts. In this process of delegation of authority, competencies are transferred to institutions of the system (legal, educational, scientific, academic, artistic). In addition, the state prescribes who and what officially exists (this is the performative power of speech in the name of the state); secondly, through naming and classifying the state establishes the identity of people and things (e.g. ID cards); thirdly, by issuing certificates, confirmations, titles etc., it ascertains who is, and who isn’t, entitled to what (welfare, permission to engage in a profession etc.) (*ibid.*, 222–223).

Yet, Bourdieu believes, although the state has an overarching position in symbolic production the political discourse can break through the limits

it imposes. The political field is for Bourdieu the “high place of symbolic dominance”, where legitimacy of a certain relation to the social world obtains official confirmation in the form of electoral results and the number of voters standing behind it. In other words, political struggle is essentially a cognitive struggle for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world, that is, the power to (re)make reality by preserving or altering the categories through which agents comprehend and construct that world (Wacquant 2005a: 3).

In studying politics in modern democracies, Bourdieu finds that the key antinomy of political process is the act of *delegation*, whereby professional politicians are entrusted with expressing the will of their constituents, while they largely pursue strategies oriented towards each other, within the political field (Wacquant 2005b: 14; Bourdieu 1984). This is a good initial description of what is going on in Serbian political life, in the eyes of our citizen-respondents. It is only that the dilemma built into the very nature of democratic politics manifests here in an exacerbated and destructive form.

The state as Leviathan: the bad, and the good, but a Leviathan nonetheless

Let us return to our focus group data, with the foregoing theoretical instructions in mind. Talking about construals of “politics” and “the state” in the accounts of our respondents, the first thing to be noted is that professional politicians, and politics as an activity, are painted in extremely dark colors. Almost consensually, they are designated as the main evils of transitional Serbia. Politicians are seen as a class apart, a closed, self-serving, egotistical group increasingly detached from ordinary people and their interests and concerns; parties and incumbents in power are described as worrying incomparably more about positioning themselves as against their rivals in the world of politics than about making a difference in the real social world.

As for the state, the participants relate to it in a way that is deeply paradoxical. On one hand, the state as it is *hic et nunc*, as a set of concrete institutions animated by living and breathing people – from the bureaucratic rank-and-file to the leaders – is described in extremely negative terms. Its performance in virtually all areas, from political efficiency, to quality of policies, to services it provides to the society, to interface with the citizens, is judged as very bad. Yet on the other hand – and in a sense precisely because of the former – this miserable, skewed “actually existing state” is seen as just a bad edition, a counterfeit version of the idea of

“State”, the state as it should be. This idea-ideal does not suffer at all as a result of previous negative judgments: on the contrary, it is still the same State which is considered to be the *solution* to the many problems cited, and the target of many hopes and expectations.

The numerous functions, purposes, tasks and causalities ascribed to the state may be illustrated by excerpts from focus group discussions. The state is blamed for all sorts of social ills, and its responsibility is identified in a whole range of social and political issues besetting Serbia today. For instance, the State is seen as responsible for the pervasive vulgarity of media contents where, research participants claim, reality shows and populist entertainment dominate, lowering the general cultural and moral level of society:

The state allows this. If it didn't suit them, they wouldn't allow.

It's the same in the developed countries, they have the same crap on TV. The problem here is that we don't have a system that would try to prevent it, that would act as a counterweight. The state, as the most powerful apparatus, should take charge of it. It should take pains to save the people of all that.

It is also the State's fault that young people choose wrong role models:

For the young, Arkan and like characters are idols. They brag about all these bad things. And why? Because the state has brought this in.

The State is responsible for the protection of the Cyrillic alphabet and national tradition:

If the state doesn't take care of the preservation of language, heritage, culture, no one will. All this will simply disappear.

for keeping public parks tidy:

Why do people root out fir trees in parks? Because the system doesn't work. In the Fruska gora National Park, visitors just come and take what they want, and nobody gives a damn. The keepers are not doing their job.

and for the future of sports:

Such a great deal of support is needed on the part of the parents, to take kids to all the trainings, to insist on sports, but also financially. And this, unfortunately, depends on the state.

The discrimination against the Roma minority is not a concern of their fellow citizens but of the State:

As for Roma people, this is again a problem for the state. The state should deal with it, to try to solve this problem. For, you see, I'm a citizen of this

state, I ask it to enable me to live of my own work, to sustain my family. And if the state is unable to provide for this, then I have a problem.

Also, as the foregoing phrases indicate, the State is our creditor, our caretaker, the one who decides how much money we have:

We no longer have a salary, we have a loan: the state gives us our 20,000 dinars at the beginning of a month, and immediately takes it back through the bills it collects.

The state says that 8,000 is enough to live through the month, which is nonsense. ... The state says the food basket costs 60,000, while we only have 35,000.

The state is to blame for the low quality of school education:

The state prevents you from educating these kids.

and for morally dubious business practices:

Who is creating these conditions? It's obvious: the state. For someone to sell such [low-quality] windows to a hospital – the state makes this possible.

The state is, then, seen as performing extremely poorly. There was hardly any sphere of social life where the institutional record was judged in anything but the most negative terms.⁴ This was topped by the general complaint that, simply, “the system” doesn’t work.⁵ Yet *at the same time*, the State retains a strange aura and fascination, of being the absolutely most consequential agent on the scene. For example, it is viewed as the fount and origin of any change:

In my mind, it all starts from the state.

I think that change in society ought not to start from the individual, not from the bottom up but the other way round, from the top down.

If only the system was set up in a just, hardworking way, within six months the whole people would turn around and start behaving the same.

Or even more generally, it all depends on the state:

4 Compare recent data presented by Slavujević (2010), indicating that the level of trust in institutions in Serbia is the lowest since the introduction of the multiparty system twenty years ago.

5 For instance: “In our society any system is lacking. ... We are playing at the state. We don’t have a serious state”; “The corruption comes from the state”; “When in your daily contacts you see how the state treats you, it contradicts everything you believe in, and you feel so miserable”; “An old saying goes: there is no state without a hard road and a strict court. We have neither”; “Here, the state doesn’t function. Our system, our apparatus doesn’t work”.

Essentially, it is from them that everything stems. They are the chief motor that can get people moving. Serbia is in a sort of collective depression, people have become inert. We need collective therapy. And who else, it's the state that should stop and think about it.

In one of the groups there happened a telling moment of concurrence: when one participant declared that, in order for something to change in Serbia, “the system must be changed, as it now is”, the others jumped in immediately: “I think the keyword is system change”, “In my opinion, the system is they key.” This points to a widespread view of possible social change as springing from above, “from the head” as some participants said. Collective mobilization for social change are not seen as a concern of the citizenry, of their organizations, labor unions, or grassroots initiatives. It is not, so to say, “our” but “their” business.⁶

When the prospects of Serbia's European integration was discussed, the same view of the State was transposed, so to say, one level up: the EU was viewed as a kind of “super-state” to upgrade and rectify our own little and strayed state:

I'm not very much in favor of EU, but it's still better for us to join, and get the system they have, than to have all these things coming in slowly, through the back door. ... The system is OK if I can pay for all that is required of me. Everything is regulated, but I get my salary.

When we join EU, the government will become a service of citizens, and we'll become what we are – bearers of sovereignty.

I've lived in West Europe, and what I would like EU to bring us, it is the system. There, everything is in order. The state is ordered in such a way that you don't have to worry about silly things, like here.

I don't support joining EU, but I do support their welfare program, it's much better than ours, we should get that.

In sum: although the State's current operation is described as very bad, it is still seen as the main actor, *the* place for establishing the rules of the over-all social game. Such focus upon the state as a salient feature of ordinary political discourse in Serbia has been found in other recent studies as well.⁷

⁶ True, there appeared some individual respondents who defended this more individualistic, liberal vision of social dynamics and political responsibility. They almost invariably faced united opposition from their coparticipants.

⁷ For instance, in a comprehensive quantitative study of the public opinion on Serbian transition one of the authors argues: “Our research confirms that Serbian citizens see the state as the key agency, organizer, and allocator of inducements, supports, programs and services. ... The state continues to be taken as the key distributive

The State and the effect of “social blockade”

In participants' accounts there often appears a sense of gap between what they themselves, and “people” in general, think, value, and respect, on one hand, and what is seen as currently dominant in Serbian society, on the other. We have termed this strange discrepancy “the paradox of social action” or “sense of social blockade” and discussed it elsewhere (Spasić, Birešev 2011). It points to the paradox that the respondents report on many right-minded, honest, and hardworking people living in Serbia today, including themselves, their families, and their entire social circles, while at the same time life in Serbia in general is said to be driven by a completely different set of guidelines. For example:

I want to raise my kids by instilling in them all the right values ... but I'm not sure the system would support this kind of behavior on their part.

In the people, there is this right sense. ... But thanks to the media, we've turned everything upside down. Systemically, these values, material values, are put above all else. ... We have a tradition, all the nations in this region, but we are slowly losing it.

My social circle, people I associate with, they all espouse these right values, but false values are imposed from above: money, cars, status, material things.

We have elaborated on the discursive mechanisms of this disconnect between “people” and “society” – in a different terminology, perhaps “life-world” and “system” – as well as on its negative ramifications for action potentials of Serbian society, in the previous text quoted above. Here the paradox may be rephrased in terms of Bourdieuan theory. For Bourdieu, as has been said, the state ultimately arbitrates between various contending versions of how much particular forms of capital ought to be valued, and guarantees the legitimacy of the currently stabilized (always provisory) overall scale of valuation that is dominant at a given moment. It is the state, therefore, that provides the legitimating background to classifications of social agents, their assets (capitals), and their practices stemming from the latter.

At this point, like in most other parts of his theoretical edifice, Bourdieu primarily has in mind advanced, Western societies such as France, with a more or less consensual structure of symbolic power and domination, and

agency and the chief actor in redirecting transition, managing the economy, as well as finding a way out of crisis” (Ružica 2010: 38-41).

free of deep cleavages between opposed symbolic subworlds.⁸ He had very little to say about societies that are torn apart by intense conflicts, including symbolic ones. We do not wish to continue here the critical discussion of applicability of Bourdieu's concepts of distinction and symbolic violence to the Serbian data in general,⁹ but rather to point to a perhaps surprising reaffirmation of Bourdieuan ideas in this case. Namely, when our research participants insistently claim that they and their friends still hold *the right values* – as the most frequent phrase went – it can be retranslated as them, within their private circles, embracing *legitimate* values. But as soon as they step out of these small private social worlds – it is argued – into the large, societal world, which is the only place where they can get a job (or not), earn money (or, more often, fail to do so), send their kids to school, get medical treatment, and generally succeed or fail in life, in this other, broader world, *illegitimate* value scales reign. The broader world is run by the State; it is the State. In other words, there is a chasm between “our” and “the State’s” classifications; the State classifies wrongly, using wrong criteria and doing injustice to worthy people and their endeavors. And yet: the State’s authority to perform the operations of evaluation and classification is not questioned as such. There is no attempt to alter radically the division of symbolic labor. The participants do not try to discursively justify a comprehensive alternative, parallel classification system; to displace the State – performing so poorly as it does – from its towering position, to oust it from its throne of chief arbiter, and replace it with a more decentralized, civil legitimization of classifications that would then become normatively binding throughout society.

Rather than the state being disputed in its role of authorized classifier, it seems that a *reconnection* is desired between the two, that is, between “our” and “the State’s” classifications. The former, “lifeworldly” classifications, although clearly seen as the correct/right ones, are equally clearly seen as insufficiently strong and authoritative, incapable of imposing themselves on the whole of society and becoming dominant. Instead, the State should be reeducated and made to accept “our” valuations. In the end, after all the severe criticisms it is subjected to, the State remains in the eyes of our respondents the authoritative agency for ascribing relative values to

8 The problems this assumption of homogeneity causes in theorizing and researching cultural taste, as well as applying Bourdieu's concepts in societies removed in time and/or space from the society Bourdieu was analyzing in *Distinction* have already been widely discussed in the literature (see e.g. Grignon et Passeron 1989; Bennett et al. 2009).

9 An example of such discussion may be found in Spasić (2006).

capitals and agents. The state is, to put it in a more literary manner, seen as the Great Classifier.

Conclusion

For Bourdieu, the task of politics is to articulate what ordinary people, lacking sufficient political competence, cannot do. Our respondents however describe the political field in Serbia as 1) abnormally and unproductively autonomized from society, hence 2) functioning only in relation to itself, that is, self-referentially, rather than being a channel for expressing and crystallizing concerns and aspirations stemming from the society; for this reason 3) the State is expected to perform the role of the political field. This, we may add, is not its proper task in the democratic division of political labor.¹⁰ If we return to Bourdieu's "key antinomy" of democratic politics – that the politicians should reflect, or, in Eyal's (2005) words, "transpose" social processes,¹¹ but at the same time they are necessarily oriented towards each other within the political field, we may say that in Serbia the latter pole of the antinomy hypertrophied and ate up the former. No reflection is apparently at work, and the political field has gradually torn itself apart from any anchoring in society. When a research participant exclaimed: "Our state has been hijacked!", this statement can be read as describing this colonization of the State, as fundamentally relying on a more or less selfstanding bureaucratic apparatus, by the political field, which in normal conditions – and in the normative projections of our respondents as well – should be kept separate.

While politics is seen as having become the center of collective life, having penetrated all other spheres, it is at the same time received with extreme repugnance, witness the repeated mention of "politicians" as the universal *bad guys* of Serbian transition. A consequence of this revulsion has been that the bitter discontent, amply demonstrated in our respondents' accounts, has not produced an initiative, not even an idea, to launch a new political party, social movement, or any other form of collective action that would

10 Compare the discussion of the pervasive language of depoliticization and apathy in: Greenberg 2010. An earlier diagnosis of political passivization, stemming from a strong wave of post-2000 disillusionment has been offered in: Golubović (ed.) 2007.

11 In Eyal's rendition of Bourdieu's theory of politics, the concept of transposition refers to the relation between political field and social space – or, "how the oppositions and similarities between social interests are *transposed* onto the plane of political actors and their struggles" (Eyal 2005: 154). This relation, Eyal warns, should always be taken as an empirical variable rather than a category fixed a priori, and he suggests its four basic types: *reflection*, *inversion*, *condensation*, and *polarization*.

publicly voice what they complain about. Again, the State is looked upon as the solution: as a participant said in one of the discussions, “it is rather easy to improve things in Serbia – we only have to turn the switch around, and everything will fall into place”. The “switch” is, obviously, located in the State.

To conclude, what we find in these discourses is a formidable critical capacity on the part of Serbian citizens, since they prove to be rather unsusceptible to the lures of political ideologies, worldview dogmas, official discourses or other forms of indoctrination. Yet they lack the ability to articulate new possibilities, to expand the limits of the possible – and this is supposed to be the essence of politics. Viewed from this angle, in Serbia we do not really have “politics” at all, but only the “State” over which a variety of groups and forces are fighting. The democratic promise of such an attitude is, at best, ambiguous. While criticism of the wielders of power in principle speaks of civil maturity, by fiercely attacking the “system” for its many wrongdoings and failures, the citizens ironically only perpetuate the traditional reliance on the state that has long plagued Serbia’s political culture and slowed down its full democratization.

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