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THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ECONOMIC CLASS INCONSISTENCIES\*

by

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## ABSTRACT

Five indices measuring economic class situation were compared to identify persons occupying inconsistent positions on different dimensions. In the aggregate, inconsistency on "pure" economic class variables produced no partisan preference while inconsistencies on mixed status-class dimensions tended to prefer the Democratic party. Among persons under 45, class inconsistency did produce a preference for the Republican party, a partial confirmation of Wiley's hypothesis of American political behavior. An explanation for the differential effects of status and class inconsistency was proposed in terms of shifting arenas of political competition from class to status struggles.

## INTRODUCTION

American political behavior has proved notoriously unyielding to economic interpretation. Marxian notions of class conflict in industrial society do not account for the radicalism of agrarian populism and relative political passivity (but economic militancy) of the trade union movement. Economic determinism, it has been argued, does not explain American political behavior since the rhetoric of economics has served politicians only as a "conventional shorthand" for issues fundamentally political or moral (Drucker, 1968). Research seeking to relate economic self-interest to political involvement also failed to show significant relationships, while another study showed basic sociological variables account for more variance in partisan identification than do economic variables (Lindenfeld, 1964; Segal and Knoke, 1970). The position in this paper is that class and class conflict in the United States must be viewed apart from a rigid economic determinism. We will compare theoretical class concepts of Marx and Weber and propose a third concept taking into consideration variations in class and status.

## THE CLASSICAL CLASS CONCEPTS

Karl Marx's concept of social class is not presented systematically in any single work; the brief review here is gathered from several sources, acknowledged where appropriate. For Marx, economic production provides men with definite relationships both indispensable and independent of their will.

Economic ranking criteria such as property, income, and source of income are the result of the structure of economic conditions, ultimately devolving from participation in production. (Dahrendorf, 1959: 11). The relations of production constitute the economic structure of society out of which grow legal and political superstructures (Marx, 1904: 291-292). While Marx recognized that the basic condition behind production in the abstract is property, he sought to understand property in bourgeois society as the opposition of capital and wage labor (Dahrendorf, 1959: 12). The stratifying principle is ownership or exclusion from ownership of the means of production; the social consequences are fundamentally two and only two classes--the owners and the laboring class.

There is a constant tendency in capitalist societies for capital to separate from labor and concentrate into increasingly larger aggregates:

"The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labor is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relation of domination and servitude... Upon this basis, however, is founded the entire structure of the economic community, which grows out of the conditions of production itself, and consequently its specific political form."  
(Bottomore, 1956: 99).

Class formation thus arises out of the division of labor, and the antagonism between dominant and subordinate classes takes the form of struggle in the labor market over the price of labor. The struggle becomes political when wage-workers in large-scale industry, finding themselves in a common situation (class in itself), organize and unite to defend their

class interests (class of itself) (Bottomore, 1956: 186-188).

While Marx largely confined his analysis and discussion of the class conflict to the labor market, Max Weber sought to broaden the scope of economic interpretation of political action. He not only broadened the concept of stratification to include non-economic factors, but also demonstrated that class conflict is not confined solely to relationships in the labor market but occurs as well in commodity and credit markets (Weber in Mills, 1960: 121-135).

Weber conceived classes as occurring among persons with a specific causal component of their life chances which is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and income opportunities. In all three markets, the class stratification principle is the properties-non-propertyied relationship.

The simple determinism of the economic market principle in class actions is complicated by the existence of status groups. These groups are normally communities in which the chief component is life fate determined by specific positive or negative social estimations of honor. Status rank may be knit to economic class situation, but property is not a definitive relation since both propertyied and non-propertyied individuals may belong to the same status group.

"With some over-simplification, one might thus say that 'classes' are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas 'status groups' are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special 'styles of life'." (Weber, 1960: 128).

The political results of stratification by both class and status are more complex than in Marxian analysis; party interests may be determined either through 'class' or 'status' situations and party composition and goals will vary according to the type of communal activity they hope to influence.

Weber recognized that while class situations is created from unambiguous economic market interests, "class-interest" is much more ambiguous; class action does not occur unless the facts and results of the class situation are made distinctly recognizable to persons in a particular class situation. Historically, he believed, class conflict has shifted from consumption credit to competitive struggles in the commodity market to the price wars in the labor market; this last conflict was the one upon which Marx had concentrated a single-market notion of class behavior.

With the more complex analysis of economic class behavior that Weber's theory provides, we are now able to make a further penetration of the political consequences of economic structure in the United States.

#### THE CLASS INCONSISTENCY HYPOTHESIS

If the economic class bases for political organization are more complex than the dichotomy posited by Marx, the class situation of each individual may not be identical from market to market. Wiley (1967) has suggested that American political history is resistant to rigidly determinist interpretation because class conflict occurs along three major axes--Weber's

labor, commodity and credit markets.

Anyone who participates in all three markets is a member of three distinct economic classes and may participate in class conflict in each class situation. Wiley focuses upon inconsistency in the class categories: an individual may be propertied in some markets and non-propertied in another. Such an inconsistency in class situations is presumed to involve a conflict of economic interest for the person (Wiley, 1967: 532). Wiley believes inconsistencies in individual class attributes in all three market-classes may become so widespread and structured in such a way as to produce inconsistencies in the class-situations of major socio-economic groups.

An historically inconsistent class structure in the United States has produced different subordinate classes along the three axes of conflict. The American workers' aversion to socialism and the farmers' militant populism are different responses by groups with inconsistent class attributes, thus diluting their radicalism and preventing class action. The workers' wage conflict in the labor market was alien to the farmers who were debtors in the credit market and sellers in the commodity market (Wiley, 1967: 533-535).

Wiley's investigation of modern political protest, particularly the radical right, leads him to identify supporters of Sen. Joseph McCarthy as occupying inconsistent positions in class attributes. Small businessmen, manual workers with a stake in capital property, retired persons and even the



salaried middle class he shows may be mixed types like the farmers. These circumstances lead him to formulate as a general hypothesis:

"People with inconsistent class attributes are especially prone to support right-wing groups."  
(Wiley, 1967: 536).

Similar consequences have been empirically observed among socially mobile persons from the working-class into the middle-class (Lopreato, 1967; Bendix and Lipset, 1960: 64ff). Such mobility processes represent class inconsistencies over time; there is reason to believe that simultaneous inconsistencies in class situations may show the same political effects.

#### STATUS INCONSISTENCY AND CLASS INCONSISTENCY

The concept of class inconsistency introduced by Wiley and to some extent by Landecker (1960) parallels the concept of status inconsistency which has occupied many writers on stratification over the last 15 years. Status inconsistency may be conceived as a non-vertical configuration involving several dimensions--occupation, education, income, race, religion, and ethnicity--some of which are directly related to economic class attributes. Research in recent years has focused on the interaction effects of two or more inconsistent status dimensions upon patterns of behavior (Lenski, 1954; Jackson, 1962). An individual holding inconsistent status across several dimensions is likely to experience ambiguous, unclear and conflicting "normative expectations": wishing to

be honored and granted deference for his higher status, instead he often finds himself judged in the community by his lower status. Several studies have suggested that a main consequence of such normative conflicts within the individual is psychological stress arising from cross-pressures to behave in discrepant ways. The frustration and uncertainty of not being able to satisfy the expectations of others, of oneself and of oneself by others may lead to social isolation (Lenski, 1956), psycho-physiological symptoms (Jackson, 1962), and desire for change in the power distribution of society (Goffman, 1957).

In the area of political sociology, in contrast to Wiley's hypothesis on inconsistent class attributes, most studies of status inconsistency have found positive relationships with political liberalism and identification with the Democratic party (Lenski, 1954, 1967; Segal and Knoke, 1968). At least one author, however, has suggested that status inconsistencies on occupational, educational and income dimensions may seek a resolution of their conflict through right-wing extremism (Rush, 1967). The existence of a theory and empirical literature on status inconsistency facilitates the investigation of the political consequences of class inconsistencies. Class situations, following Weber, can be classified according to relative standing in labor, commodity and credit markets, and the standing can be represented exclusively by "economic interests in possession of goods and income opportunities". Stratification by such "pure" economic class variables may not be entirely successful in the American case, since such class

indicators also contribute to social status through the prestige and life styles provided by differential placement in the economic markets. For example, an occupational group may approximate a class when it differentiates employers (propertied persons) from employees (non-propertied personnel). But the occupational hierarchy which reflects social honor and prestige is a status variable as well. The interdependence of status upon class must be kept in mind during the empirical test of the class-inconsistency theory.

#### METHOD

A national survey of households was conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan in 1965, sampling economic behavior of a 2213-subject cross-section of the United States. Economic data gathered included items which were grouped a priori for the present study into three categories corresponding to Weber's three economic markets: credit (auto financing, liquid assets, house values, annual income and income relative to the past year); commodity (automobiles, appliances, farm or business ownership); and labor (industry, occupation, and employment status in primary job, second job, self-employment, and criteria for getting ahead). Each item within a market was bifurcated into high and low rankings, generally on the basis of the distribution of the variable, or, in the case of labor variables on the basis of occupational status. Each dichotomized item was cross-tabulated with all others in the same market and Q values for the association

determined for each 2 x 2 table. Two principle clusters of items emerged in each market on the basis of these Q values and were combined into six additive indices. An individual's final position in each market index is the sum of values for high standing or low standing on each variable that is a component of the index. Table I presents the variables in each index and criteria for ranking and points for each rank.

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TABLE I

Construction of Economic Market Indices

1. CREDIT: Liquid Assets (has some=2; has none=1) + House Value (owns house=2; not owner=1) + Income (over \$5000=2; under \$5000=1) + Income Past Year (higher=2; lower or same=1).
  2. COMMODITY: Number of automobiles in family unit (code exact number) + number of appliances: washer, dryer, dishwasher (code twice the number).
  3. OWNERSHIP: Productive Capital (owns farm or business=2; neither=1).
  4. LABOR NICHE: Occupation (professional, managerial=3; clerical, sales and skilled workers=2; semi- and un-skilled=1) + Industry (tertiary=3; secondary=2; primary=1) + Employment Status (employed=3; retired=2; unemployed=1) + Conditional 2nd Job (if employed, having 2nd job=1, not having=2; if retired or unemployed, 2nd job=2, no 2nd job=1; second job is economic benefit in latter case, a status detriment in former).
  5. LABOR CONTROL OF LIFE CHANCES: Occupation (professional, technical and managerial=2; clerical, sales to blue collar=1) + Self-employment (self-employed=2; employed by others=1) + Getting ahead depends on (achievement criteria=2; ascriptive criteria=1).
  6. DEBT: Type of auto financing (cash or no purchase=2; installment debt=1).
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Table II shows both the univariate distribution of scores for each index and the subsequent bifurcation of each index into high and low ranks at the approximate weighted mean.

TABLE II

Univariate Distribution of Scores\* and Percentage in Ranks

INDEX	LOW RANK				HIGH RANK			
1. Credit	4 16%	5 30%			6 29%	7 25%	8 .2%	
2. Commodity	3 16%	4 22%	5 9%	6 17%	7 7%	8 14%	9 8%	10-13 8%
3. Ownership	1 86%				2 14%			
4. Labor Niche	4 .6%	5 4%	6 4.8%	7 20%	8 14%	9 25%	10 18%	11 15%
5. Labor Control	3 54%				4 29%	5 13%	6 4%	
6. Debt	1 16%				2 84%			

\*Upper number in each cell is index score.

The dichotomy of ranks on each index were cross-tabulated with the other five indices. Q values of association for indices were calculated and the resultant values were entered into a matrix which was then permuted by symmetric reordering of columns and rows to cluster the high Q values along the principle diagonal (see Table III). "Debt" was eliminated from further consideration as it showed little face validity to over-all credit standing. The "credit" index

is somewhat weakened in its failure to measure debt on automobile financing, but it was retained for its higher association with three of the other indices. Similarly, "ownership", which while showing weak association with four indices, was highly associated with "labor control of life chances", and was retained because of apparent face validation.

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TABLE III  
Q Values of Association for Indices

	CONTROL	NICHE	COMMODITY	CREDIT	OWNERSHIP	DEBT
CONTROL						
NICHE	.65					
COMMODITY	.37	.54				
CREDIT	.39	.77	.61			
OWNERSHIP	.80	.11	.12	-.12		
DEBT	-.18	-.41	-.44	.05	-.04	

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Three of the indices finally accepted, "credit", "commodity" and "ownership" are based almost exclusively on "pure" economic variables--the rank a person occupies depends only on the quantity of goods owned, that is, property. These indices, following Weber, most clearly represent class situations in three markets, although the dichotomies in the first two cases

are between more and less propertied persons, rather than between propertied and non-propertied. Wiley's hypothesis says that inconsistencies in rankings on these three indices should result in political preferences for the right. Presumably such preferences will be related to identification with the Republican party.

The remaining indices, "labor niche" and labor control are composed of more ambiguous economic items. Both reflect status and class components, particularly social honor attached to occupational hierarchies and perceived criteria for getting ahead. The partisan identification of inconsistent individuals on these indices should not be as strongly right-wing as for the other three; if the status-components are the more powerful, inconsistency should result in partisan preference for the left. Following Lenski, we shall define left partisanship as Democratic preference.

Lenski (1967) has developed a simple method for testing the influence of inconsistency factors. If two independent variables have an interactive effect on a third, dependent variable, it can be detected by taking the difference in the sum of inconsistent cells from the sum of consistent cells in a 2 x 2 table. If the main effect of the independent variables is simply additive, the sums should be equal and their difference be zero. If, however, the interaction effect accompanied by a stress is due to inconsistency and the dependent variable is an indirect measure of this stress, the sum of inconsistent cells should be higher than the sum of consistent cells.

Each pair of dichotomized indices was cross-tabulated with political partisanship, and the percentage of Republican partisans entered in each cell of the 2 x 2 table.<sup>1</sup> The differences in the sums of diagonals were computed and are presented in Table IV.

TABLE IV

Effects of Inconsistency on Party Identification

	Economic Markets Confounded by Status		Pure Economic Markets		
	CONTROL	NICHE	CREDIT	COMMODITY	OWNERSHIP
CONTROL					
NICHE	-1.0				
CREDIT	-5.4	-4.1			
COMMODITY	-6.1	+1.5	2.9		
OWNERSHIP	-3.8	8.4	0.7	0.0	

1. For example, if the following entries represent levels of variable C in each cell of the cross-tabulation of variables A and B, the difference in sum of consistent cells (high-high and low-low) and the sum of inconsistent cells (high-low and low-high) shows the effect of inconsistency upon variable C:

		Variable A		
		High	Low	$(60 + 20) - (30 + 40) = +10\%$
Variable B	High	60%	40%	effect of inconsistency is increase of variable C in consistent cells
	Low	30%	20%	



## RESULTS

A positive sign for an entry in Table IV indicates a surplus of Republicans for inconsistent cells while a negative sign indicates a Republican surplus for consistent cells and surplus of Democrats in inconsistent cells compared to consistent cells. In the aggregate, the three "pure" economic class indices show a slight but probably insignificant tendency for Republican preference among class inconsistent. Wiley's hypothesis does not gain confirmation from these data.

The interaction of the two mixed status-class indices (quadrant two) shows a similar slight but opposite effect of preference for the party of the left.

Where the "pure" class and mixed status-class variables intersect (quadrant three), the trend is less clear. The index of control of life chances appears to exercise a decisive influence on persons with inconsistent standing in that dimension and the "pure" class dimensions to identify with the left. The interaction of labor niche and the "pure" class variables seems to be less consistent than control.

A further analysis was made by splitting the sample into two groups based on age (those below and those above 45 years) and replicating the table. The results for comparison of similar indices, shown in Table V, indicate markedly different preferences depending upon position in the life cycle. Among those persons under 45 years, inconsistent standing in the "pure" markets produced a marked preference for the party of the right, apparently confirming Wiley's hypothesis. In the

same age group, inconsistencies on the mixed class-status indices also strongly preferred the Democratic party, also apparently confirming Lenski's hypothesis on status inconsistency. For the cohort group over 45, there was a slight but evident tendency to the opposite effects; since the bulk of the sample (about 60 per cent) was in the latter group, the weight of numbers had influenced the total sample in the direction of older groups. For the interaction of class indices with mixed indices, the effect of inconsistency in both age groups was in the same direction as the total population.

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TABLE V  
Effects of Inconsistency by Age Levels

INTERACTION TYPE	BELOW 45	OVER 45
Control by Niche	-10.7	+ 4.2
Credit by Commodity	+ 2.6	+ 3.2
Credit by Ownership	+10.7	- 2.5
Ownership by Commodity	+ 4.9	- 4.7

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An attempt was made to relate individual inconsistencies to partisanship by creating profiles of individual class configurations. Where previously two indices at a time were compared for the effect of inconsistency, an individual score for each sample subject was created by summing high and low ranking values for the two principle clusters of indices discovered in the previous step. Table VI shows the univariate

distributions for both individual class profiles and the percentage of Republican partisans in each configuration.

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TABLE VI  
Individual Profiles of Partisanship

"Pure" Class Indices				
	Consistent Low	Two Low One High	One Low Two High	Consistent High
% Republican N	23% (728)	29% (756)	34% (625)	37% (104)
Mixed Status-Class Indices				
	Consistent Low	Mixed	Consistent High	
% Republican N	24% (499)	26% (828)	34% (886)	

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The class inconsistency effect does not appear to operate in the individual cases. Rather, a simple additive rule seems to apply: as economic standing increases, it is accompanied rising Republican affiliation. However, a comparison of the aggregate numbers in each configuration suggests that more persons in "pure" economic markets are of inconsistent class situation than are persons in the mixed class-status situation.

#### DISCUSSION

The two principle index clusters that emerged and the differing political effects of inconsistency interaction have implications for a comprehensive theory of social ranking inconsistencies. The cluster of "pure" economic attributes--involving credit, commodity and labor markets--on the aggregate

show a tendency to right identification among young class inconsistencies. Both of the indices which involve components of a status and class nature show an effect of preference for the party of the left. The predominant preference for the Democratic party among inconsistencies where the two clusters intersect may reflect the impact of the status aspect of the mixed indices, particularly the socio-psychological aspects of control of life chances. It remains to develop an explanation why economic class inconsistency has one political consequence and social status inconsistency promotes another.

One explanation for the different consequences of status- and class-inconsistency would emphasize the motivations for change aroused by each type. In a study of mobility, Lipset and Bendix write:

"Because a person's self-evaluation reflects the ranking he receives from his fellows, he will either try continually to increase his prestige rank as an individual, or he will seek group support for his claims to prestige. In either case, it may be said that people like to protect their class positions in order to protect their egos and improve their class position in order to enhance their egos. (Bendix and Lipset, 1960: 61).

A distinction should be made on the principle of stratification to which this striving is supposed to apply. In the terminology of the present paper, "class" has been used to mean a ranking according to quantities of economic goods and income opportunities; "status" applies to ranking systems only where social honor is involved. A case will now be made for the hypothesis that inconsistencies in status dimensions are psychologically more disturbing and hence more likely to

elicit response than are class imbalances and that, further, resolution of status conflicts is sought through political activity more readily than is resolution of class inconsistency.

Social mobility in American society, while generally the same level as other Western industrial nations (Bendix and Lipset, 1960: 13), because of an historical confluence of political and social democratic institutions has the appearance of being more open and achievement-oriented than in other nations. The consequence for persons in consistently low or ambiguous class situations is a belief in the availability of class change, for oneself or one's offspring. Improvement of one's standing in the three "pure" economic indices involves only the achievement of more consumption-production goods or attaining more education and thus improved occupation-income chances. An examination of the distribution of "pure" class configurations in Table VI suggests that few (about 5%) individuals in American society occupy a highly crystallized position. The mixed class situation is dominant. Some individuals will be in the process of assembling households, improving life chances and eventually moving to more consistent class standing. Anticipation for moving to greater economic security undoubtedly has the effect of influencing political persuasion in conservative directions. As a general rule we might suggest that any improvement of class situation will in probability result in identification with the party of conservatism and the status quo, in America, the Republican party.

The preference among younger persons in inconsistent economic conditions for the party of the right may indicate such an anticipation of becoming more highly consistent and thus assuming the political style that Table VI indicates is prevalent among the highly consistent. Alternatively, for younger persons, inconsistency may not seem as excruciating and as personally insoluble as it might be for persons well into their prime who have not gained by their personal efforts a more highly integrated economic existence. For older persons in inconsistent positions, the political solution to their stress may be through support of the party of change, the Democratic party.

Status discrepancies also are often less soluble by individual achievement. Status dimensions normally involve an exchange relation between two or more individuals or groups. The basis of the exchange may be economic, but by the definition of status, such goods and services also serve a symbolic purpose for the exchange of social honor or deference, as represented by the "life style" of "life chances" individuals and groups maintain. The status dimensions represented in the present study are almost exclusively in the labor market. The psychological strains resulting from inconsistency between occupational location and perceived control over life opportunities may be sufficient to create desire for change, but the chances of doing something in the individual case appear limited. Lipset and Bendix (1960: 180) note that while much personal mobility does occur within a lifetime within the labor

market, there is "little permanent occupational movement across" the manual-nonmanual line. Given the disjuncture between status expectations and the structural limitations on eradication of inequalities, the alternative to individual mobility is group mobility. The political manifestation is identification with the party of change--the Democratic party in the United States.

When "pure" class and mixed status-class indices were crossed, the index of control of life chances exercises a decisive effect on creating left identification among inconstants. As the present study was undertaken to refute the simplified notion of economic determinism, this effect is of crucial importance to the historical understanding of American political history. Marx declared "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." (Marx, 1904: 291). The awareness of control over life chances may be based upon preceding economic structures, but as indicated by the previous discussion of life chances in the labor market, is likely to be relatively stable over a lifetime. Thus control over life chances assumes the character of an ascribed dimension; the indices with which it interacts are, relatively speaking, of an achieved dimension. Previous studies have shown that ascribed-achieved comparisons produce the greatest preference for the party of the left among status

inconsistants (Lenski, 1967; Segal and Knoke, 1969);<sup>2</sup> the same pattern is evidently the case among class inconsistants.

We can only offer a tentative hypothesis why status variables create an over-riding effect on class variables. As previously noted, Weber believed that class conflict has experienced an historical shift from consumption credit to commodity to labor markets. But the struggle in the 19th century over the price of the just wage, which occupied the attentions of both Marx and Weber, has been largely resolved with the growth of big business and labor unions. The countervailing powers have, as a consequence, rendered the class structure more consistent across all markets by squeezing out the old middle class of small entrepreneurs and farmers between business and labor (Wiley, 1967: 539). Political parties are less clearly associated with one particular class and the struggle for status has emerged as a major political battleground. Politics has become less a fight for a slice of the economic pie than an argument over the dignity with which it is served.

If the conclusions of this analysis and the historical trend are valid, the attempt to reduce American political

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2. The distinctions of ascribed and achieved status variables includes ones not utilized in the present study; these include race, religion and ethnicity (ascribed) and education, income and occupation (achieved). The distinction for class indices made here is that relatively control of life chances may appear as determined by the labor market structure, while goods ownership and credit standing may appear more amenable to individual efforts to improve.



behavior to a simple economic determinism is futile. Political interests may have a foundation in economic class situation, but they are confounded by an overlay, an increasingly important status conflict that emerges whenever basic economic problems have been solved by major social groups in a society. A clue to the formation of political partisanship and a useful tool in the investigation of such status conflicts are those persons occupying ambiguous positions along the major axes of social conflict.

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