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Charismatic violence and the sanctification of the super-rich

Linsey McGoey and Darren Thiel

Abstract

Drawing historical comparisons between the nineteenth century and the present, this paper describes and analyses how an elite section of the global rich, through mega-giving and a re-emerging notion of ‘noblesse oblige’ that is enshrined in the philanthrocapitalism movement, have fostered a sacred rationale for their extreme wealth. Not only do the new nobles hold the power of wealth but, through mega-giving, they generate a moral imagery akin to religious figures who ostensibly self-sacrifice for the good of everyone else. This generates a form of charismatic authority that affords the super-rich an influential space from which to spread a ‘theodicy of privilege’ – shielding growing wealth concentration from criticism and sanctifying the claim that individual mega-wealth is collectively beneficial. Through its contribution to and facilitation of the inegalitarian *status quo*, this theodicy engenders various forms of structural violence. Here we explore the mechanisms that enable wealthy donors to position themselves as apparent benefactors of humanity, including a reliance on metrics that appear to justify the claim that targeted philanthropic expenditures can and are reducing global wealth and health inequalities, but which raise unanswered questions surrounding the actual effects of the outcomes claimed.

Keywords: inequality; philanthrocapitalism; theodicy; gifts; charisma; violence.

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Introduction

In a short and neglected chapter of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville raises long-overlooked questions that are useful for understanding today's wealth elites, their philanthropy and their influence over human welfare.

Entitling the chapter 'How an aristocracy may be created by industry', Tocqueville opens with an observation that reiterates Adam Smith's earlier concerns about the corroding influence of an increased division of labour on the mental faculties of workers. Writing in the 1830s and pre-empting the work of Marx and later authors such as Braverman (1974), Tocqueville suggests that as work tasks became more intricate and specialized, 'the workman becomes weaker, more limited, and more dependent. The craft improves, the craftsman slips back ... At the same time that industrial science constantly lowers the standing of the working class, it raises that of the masters' (1966 [1835/1840], p. 556).

As a result of this process, a new and unprecedented class of nobles was emerging – something Tocqueville termed a 'business aristocracy'. Here, industrial science and organization had elevated industrial leaders to a position of superiority over labourers whereby 'One is in a state of constant, narrow and necessary dependence on the other and seems to have been born to obey, as the other was to command. What is this, if not an aristocracy?' (1966 [1835/1840], p. 557).

Even within a society that is democratic, or, as Tocqueville identified, *particularly* within a society that is democratic and where citizens have formal equality of opportunity before the law, he sensed that the rapid rise of industrialization had already generated an unprecedented type of social hierarchy. Tocqueville labelled this form of domination a 'monstrosity' because the industrial overlords were indifferent to their direct role in immiserating their workers:

The territorial aristocracy of past ages was obliged by law, or thought itself obliged by custom, to come to the help of its servants and relieve their distress. But the industrial aristocracy of our day, when it has impoverished and brutalized the men it uses, abandons them in time of crisis to public charity to feed them. (Tocqueville, 1966 [1835/1840], p. 558)

Tocqueville urged the new industrial aristocrats emerging in the United States, England and France to reinvent and re-apply feudal notions of duty towards the less advantaged, and, today, his call for an enhanced sense of personal obligation among the new rich is being revived. Hailed across the left and the right as a way to channel the exceptional resources of the super-rich in order to 'solve' the world's most pressing problems, philanthrocapitalism has come to ostensibly fulfil this obligation and also take on an almost sacred position in contemporary sermons on human progress.

This paper explores the rhetoric and growing political influence of contemporary exponents of Tocqueville's vision of a duty-bound elite class – the new philanthrocapitalists whose enormous personal fortunes have become

legitimated partly by giving some of those fortunes away. We suggest that the new philanthropists both resemble and differ from Tocqueville's nineteenth-century vision of wealthy donors in important, unacknowledged and violent ways, particularly when it comes to their different positions on the compensatory rationale for philanthropic giving.

We have four aims. First, we consider the notion 'noblesse oblige', situating its history in a discussion of what is and is not distinctive about today's philanthrocapitalism movement. Second, we compare Tocqueville's writing on charity to what Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu called 'theodicies of the privileged' – self-legitimizing narratives that individuals in different social positions are compelled to use to explain and justify their relative status. Third, we develop the concept 'charismatic violence' in order to conceptualize various forms of epistemic and actual injury that are connected to the super-rich and their mega-giving. Lastly, we use the examples of a number of philanthrocapitalist foundations and the growing 'effective altruism' movement to explore how charismatic violence functions in practice. Our argument is that the growing salience of new and purportedly more efficient forms of private philanthropic giving obscures key mechanisms through which the power of wealth elites – and their accompanying legitimization – has increased and consolidated inequality.

Tocqueville on the industrial aristocrats: elite duty in historical context

Tocqueville is occasionally seen as a critic of democracy, as someone who feared and resented the growing power of an ill-informed public. The reality is more nuanced. He was strongly in favour of democratic rule and the decline of inherited privilege. But he was also wary of new sources of tyranny that were, as he put it, 'immaterial' in nature – that could not necessarily be directly traced to physical forms of restraint or prohibition but which nonetheless hindered the scope for freedom of thought among individuals in democratic nations.

One of these potential sources of tyranny was the rise of industrial 'masters' who felt no responsibility for the brutal working conditions and injurious livelihoods of their own workers. Business elites were free to cultivate their intellect and compound their own personal fortunes, while the typical labourer was 'assigned a certain position in society which he cannot quit. In the midst of universal movement, he is stuck immobile' (Tocqueville, 1966 [1835/1840], p. 556).

Tocqueville had two main concerns about the growing inequality between manufacturers and workers. Firstly, the new rich themselves, despite becoming ever more powerful, had no common link among themselves – in Tocqueville's words, 'there [is] no solidarity among the rich' (1966 [1835/1840], p. 557). Secondly, he suggested that there was no longer a sense of the mutual interdependency between the poor and the rich, leading him to state that the

‘manufacturing aristocracy which we see rising before our eyes is one of the hardest that have appeared on earth’ (1966 [1835/1840], p. 557). Although he does not expand on what he means by ‘hardest’, the context suggests he means ‘hard’ in the sense of being particularly indifferent or uncaring towards the plight of the poor. He then quickly adds a caveat. In the same paragraph he states that the new manufacturing aristocracy is also ‘one of the most restrained and least dangerous’ (1966 [1835/1840], p. 557).

How can the new, burgeoning aristocracy that Tocqueville identifies among nineteenth-century US manufacturers be the ‘hardest’ and yet the *least* dangerous? His reasoning is both complex and instructive. On the one hand, he was glad that class solidarity among the rich was waning: ‘what is most important for democracy is not that great fortunes should not exist, but that great fortune should not remain in the same hands. In that way there are rich men, but they do not form a class’ (Tocqueville, quoted in Himmelfarb, 1997, p. 11; see also Storey, 2013).

Tocqueville was hopeful that their *lack* of class solidarity prevented industrial elites from becoming an irremovable set of unelected industrial masters. Yet he also saw a social cost to their lack of organization: he was worried that the new rich would underestimate their own direct role in creating and compounding their workers’ suffering, hence why he appeals time and again to the new rich to honour their obligations to the poor.

At first glance, it seems as if Tocqueville’s appeal to the rich has been realized today, at a time when many philanthropists are adamant that the wealthy have some form of duty to share at least some of their fortunes. However, in many ways, this is a sense of duty divorced from a sense of liability or obligation – and more about the personal choice of the ‘good’ super-rich. By contrast, in feudal times, the injustices of birth position – the perception that an elite few were born to lead while others were born to serve – fostered a philanthropy of recompense. This earlier, feudal ethos is captured by the phrase ‘noblesse oblige’, conveying the belief that those who have been bestowed honours or wealth through hereditary privilege owe a debt to those on which their advantage relied upon.

The term ‘noblesse oblige’ is believed to have been coined by the novelist Honoré de Balzac in 1835 – the same year that Tocqueville published his first *Democracy* volume. Balzac introduces the phrase in a novel, *The lily of the valley*, where he calls it ‘an old idea’. The phrase is written in a letter to a young aristocratic man who is imparted ‘two old-fashioned words, “Noblesse oblige”’ – and the young man is told that with noble privileges comes the obligation of service to others. Balzac was an explicit monarchist and defender of the French nobility; his coinage of the term ‘noblesse oblige’ suggests that notions of elite obligation remained entrenched in early nineteenth-century aristocratic circles even despite or, because of, the ebbing of feudal privileges following the French revolution.¹

The notion of noblesse oblige was clearly influential on Tocqueville’s thought, and, in a different form, it is resurgent today in the philanthrocapitalism

movement. Writing during the 1890s, Andrew Carnegie was one of the earliest modern philanthropists to popularize a neo-feudal notion of noblesse oblige, insisting in essays such as ‘The gospel of wealth’ that the rich have a duty to gift their wealth to others. In Carnegie’s oft-cited words, ‘the man who dies rich dies thus disgraced’ (Carnegie, 1996, p. 12). Today, Carnegie’s call of duty has become spectacularly enshrined in initiatives such as the ‘Giving Pledge’, a movement established by the philanthrocapitalist nobles, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, which by 2016 had attracted over 200 billionaires to commit to giving away large proportions of their wealth in their lives.²

Despite its importance, the concept of noblesse oblige does not figure prominently in contemporary analyses of the increasing centrality of philanthropy in debates about human suffering and disadvantage.³ Yet we see it as essential for understanding the increasingly powerful discourse on private giving as a solution to suffering and inequality in contemporary societies that, at face value, seem to have dispensed with aristocratic privilege – even as such privileges are re-emerging in a different form under the canopy of the ‘new’ philanthrocapitalism. To understand what is unique about the new noblesse oblige, it is first useful to see what is unique about the ‘new’ philanthrocapitalism.

Philanthrocapitalism and the legitimization of rich-to-rich giving

Philanthrocapitalism is defined in two key ways. Firstly, it is upheld as ‘a new way of doing philanthropy, which mirrors the way that business is done in the for-profit capitalist world’. Secondly, the notion is seen as encapsulating the belief that ‘capitalism itself can be philanthropic, working for the good of mankind’ (Bishop & Green, 2008).⁴

Now over 10 years old, the term has attracted growing scholarly attention (see Birn, 2014; Eikenberry & Mirabella 2017; Fridell & Konings, 2013; Harman, 2016; Kish & Leroy, 2015; Kohl-Arenas, 2015; Kuldova, 2017; Rogers, 2011; Thorup, 2013), but only a handful of observers have emphasized a notable point about this supposedly ‘new’ concept – that it is not actually new. As Edwards (2010) and McGoey (2012, 2015) have pointed out, the ideas underpinning philanthrocapitalism echo a core tenet of eighteenth-century political economy: the debatable and much-contested idea that ‘enlightened’ self-interest helps to fuel an economic dynamism that inevitably improves collective living standards.

Although the ideas behind the term have a long history, what is notable today is that philanthrocapitalist enthusiasts have managed to successfully rebrand an eighteenth-century notion as a radically new idea. By positing the concept as ground-breaking, the new philanthrocapitalists have attracted considerable media attention and enrolled influential adherents as ‘believers’, including eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg, who, like those other billionaires that signed up to the Giving Pledge, have embraced the idea that large-scale private wealth-creation is inevitably beneficial for

humankind. These believers have, in turn, spearheaded a number of influential policy and legislative changes that *are* indeed different from the past (see Dowling, 2017; Rogers, 2011), and which have yielded significant power and influence to the new super-rich as a result.⁵

The assumption that extreme private wealth is, in itself, a public good was widely derided in Carnegie and Rockefeller's time. Yet, this is no longer the case today, and comprehending this change is key to understanding what is new about contemporary philanthrocapitalism. Indeed, today, philanthropy is increasingly hailed as 'the new risk capital' for private companies, with growing calls to direct grants to the 'companies that need it the most' (Braemer, 2015; see Aschoff, 2015, and Jenkins, 2011, for criticisms of this trend).

In other words, while the notion of philanthrocapitalism is old, claims of its novelty have generated real effects, leading to institutional changes within the non-profit sector that are entirely without precedent. These include both Omidyar and Zuckerberg each establishing *for-profit* limited liability companies (LLCs) to purportedly 'gift' their wealth – a move that enables them to sidestep government laws regulating more traditional private philanthropic trusts (Singer & Isaac, 2015). While other donors such as Gates and Buffett have not formed LLCs to disburse their fortunes, they are engaging in other forms of 'rich-to-rich giving' whereby large sums of money are donated directly to some of the world's largest credit companies and for-profit education publishers, including Mastercard and Scholastic – a practice that interprets current US charity regulations in very creative and possibly illegal ways (McGoey, 2015).

US legal duties incumbent on traditional philanthropic trusts are rooted in two long-standing legal principles. The first is that organizations that receive tax exemptions must ensure their giving contributes to general and not private welfare, hence limits on what is known as 'self-dealing' – any conduct that enables a trustee or a founder of a philanthropic entity to exploit his or her position for private gain. The second is underpinned by the idea that private fortunes should not be used to subvert government policies enacted by public officials who have a democratic mandate to act on behalf of a general public; hence restrictions on partisan lobbying. Both principles are premised on the belief – that is deeply rooted in Western notions of good governance – that public welfare and the private interests of different stakeholders do not inevitably or naturally align (Barman, 2017; Cullman & Madoff, 2016; Goss 2016; Parmar, 2012; Reich *et al.*, 2016; Vogel, 2006; Zunz, 2011).

Today, while regulatory restrictions against 'self-dealing' are still formally in place, some influential philanthropic donors are creatively skirting them. For example, by establishing an LLC, Zuckerberg legally avoids the need to publicly disclose the names of the recipients of his philanthropic investments, a requirement that more traditional trusts such as the Gates Foundation must comply with. It also means he can give all his 'philanthropic' grants to for-profit companies or other private individuals, including to himself. Yet, in establishing a

for-profit company rather than a traditional foundation, Zuckerberg elicited global praise while simultaneously avoiding US laws aimed at deterring the very thing that he is now able to do with legal impunity: to profit financially from philanthropic giving (Eisinger, 2015).

This marks a significant change from the past. Until very recently, scholars of philanthropy tended to presume that a gift's self-serving objectives must be strategically veiled in order to be achieved (Schrift, 1997). This perception is visible for instance in studies exploring the role of twentieth-century US philanthropic foundations in furthering US foreign policy and commercial objectives abroad (see Fisher, 1983; Parmar, 2012). Here philanthropy is seen as deriving its cultural salience through its ability to obscure the capacity for private gain.

The need for veiling national and personal interest has, however, shifted in the early years of the twenty-first century, a period when the capacity to merge financial gain with charitable ventures is explicitly hailed as the superior, distinguishing characteristic of the 'new' philanthropy. Today's philanthrocapitalists defend private wealth augmentation as 'naturally' beneficent in a manner that dispenses with even the need for obfuscation. Indeed, many of today's influential mega-donors denigrate philanthropic gifts that *do not* generate for-profit returns as inefficient and therefore wasteful; hence the growing calls to offer more 'charity' directly to private companies – both explicitly and implicitly devaluing the worth of individuals who are unable to position themselves as 'deserving' recipients of either private or governmental financial aid (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Boland & Giffin, 2016; Thiel *et al.*, 2015).

The advent of philanthrocapitalism has thus signalled a new entrenchment of what Barnett (2000; see also Littler, 2013) calls 'corporate populism' whereby the equivalence of corporate interests with public welfare is upheld as obvious and unchallengeable, as natural to the new philanthrocapitalists as a religious theodicy – and increasingly adhered to by less-affluent constituents who receive few obvious benefits from subscribing to the orthodoxy. Below, building on Weber and Bourdieu, we explore the 'theodicy of privilege' that has been augmented by and encapsulated in the philanthrocapitalist turn.

Theorizing theodicy and the sanctification of the super-rich

The term theodicy was first coined by Leibniz in the seventeenth century, who braced the prefix of 'theos', or 'god', against 'dikē' to coin a word for a long-standing social practice: the effort to explain and justify why God permits human suffering to endure. Defined crudely, theodicies are belief systems that seek to understand God's willingness to tolerate pain and worldly suffering.

Building on Weber's analysis of religion, theodicy and social stratification, Bourdieu (1971) extended Leibniz's idea, adding the insight that the problem of theodicy remains acute even in secular times – indeed, if anything, it becomes even more acute when theological explanations for the persistence of

suffering wane. Moreover, Bourdieu (1971, 1990; Bourdieu *et al.*, 2011) insists that theodicies are, above all ‘sociodicies’, in that they offer adherents a way to make one’s relational position in a social hierarchy not simply palatable, but exceptional – and therefore worthy of self-respect. He argues:

If there are social functions of religion and, consequently, if religion is amenable to sociological analysis, it is because laypeople do not – or not only – expect from it justifications for existence capable of freeing them from the existential anguish of contingency ... but also and above all justifications for existing in a determinate social position and existing as they exist. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 16)

It is hardly an unfamiliar point to sociologists that theodicies-cum-sociodicies furnish a justification for determinate social positions ‘existing as they exist’, but it is a notion that affords a more radical interpretation of social hierarchy than has been acknowledged. Bourdieu hints at, but does not fully reach, the logical extreme of his argument: the way in which a theodicy’s power rests in the ability to offer the solace of personal transformation – and with it the hopefulness of collective transformation – to those whose actual social position need not change in order to experience that transformation.

At the same time, when it comes to dominant groups, Bourdieu sees that theodicies also function to legitimate their privilege – through providing culturally acceptable justifications for the dominant’s elevated status. Explicitly rejecting a narrow reading of ‘class interest’ for understanding this form of social control, Bourdieu suggests instead that a ‘demand for compensation’ among groups with ‘negative privilege’ imbues certain specialized figureheads with the authority to dispense religious ‘goods’ – and this authority tends to accord with and entrench existent social hierarchies. He argues that social stratification is often perpetuated by individuals who do not necessarily have a conscious aim to subjugate others or to accept subjugation but who nonetheless entrench existent inequalities through collective misperception of the ways that certain practices conform to and replicate an existent order.

One of Bourdieu’s better-known examples is his suggestion that the current educational system helps ‘to provide the dominant class with a “theodicy of its own privilege”’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 133).⁶ The ostensible inclusiveness of Western education systems fuels ‘misrecognition’ of less tangible forms of capital that can hinder access to formal educational credentials, thus granting the privileged classes their self-belief that their own status is hard-earned, rather than reflecting inherited advantages.

In a related but somewhat less widely known argument, Bourdieu (1990) also points out that meritocratic systems in general tend to rely on charisma-based explanations emanating from their specialized figureheads in order to justify the fact that nominally ‘inclusive’ realms such as public education and commerce are often markedly exclusive in practice. He even uses the words ‘meritocratic’ and ‘charismatic’ interchangeably so as to underscore his view that, by necessity, meritocratic societies tend to sanctify the illusion of

personal ‘gifts’ in order to rationalize gross differentials in social and economic outcomes:

This is true, for example, of the charismatic (or meritocratic) ideology, a particular form of the giving of ‘gifts’, which explains differential access to qualifications by reference to the inequality of innate ‘gifts’, thereby reinforcing the effect of mechanisms that mask the relationship between qualifications obtained and inherited cultural capital. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 133)

Bourdieu and Weber’s insights into charisma have been considered extensively in the sociology of religion (see Joosse, 2014; Mellor & Schilling, 2014; Stolz, 2008; Turner, 2013), but there is less literature exploring the relationship between charisma and contemporary philanthropy, a sector where the charismatic exceptionality of a new generation of mega-donors is helping to entrench a debatable assumption: the belief that extreme wealth inevitably signifies personal ‘giftedness’ and therefore an acumen for ‘solving’ global problems, rather than reflecting structural advantages afforded by family connections, cultural and symbolic capital and extensive government welfare in support of corporations and ‘high-worth’ individuals.

This tendency is particularly acute in the United States, where, as Tocqueville suggested, there is a long-standing cultural tendency to see wealth as a sign of distinction – and where therefore it is not surprising that individuals who made their fortunes in entrepreneurial industries are particularly hailed for their problem-solving talents. Perhaps more so than in Europe, great wealth in the United States is seen as evidence of an individual’s ‘natural’ exceptionality, signifying the polar contrast to inborn privilege (Fourcade, 2011).

While belief in the divine right of kings and their aristocracy has slowly eroded over the past millennium, the notion of personal giftedness – a notion embedded in religious symbolism whereby it is God who disburses worldly gifts (see Weber, 1993, 2001) – continues to furnish the dominant with a justification for their own elevated status and good fortune. Combined with the notion of noblesse oblige, it also becomes a mechanism that makes the superior status of the rich palatable to the excluded – bolstered massively by the ‘gifted’ sharing some of their ‘gifts’ with the less fortunate.

What is remarkable today is that even when so-called ‘gifts’ are *not* necessarily shared with the less fortunate – such as when the Gates Foundation gifts its money to Mastercard executives and shareholders at a time of dramatically rising US poverty levels; or when Zuckerberg structures his giving so that he alone can legally profit unrestrictedly from his ‘gifts’ – the semblance of personal self-sacrifice still fosters public regard and even reverence for their actions. This reverence signals an acceptance among the ‘laity’ of the righteousness of the new super-rich’s ‘theodicy of privilege’. Thus, today, the idea that the pursuit of private financial gain is ‘naturally’ synonymous with the collective betterment of humanity is largely uncontested – even as poverty levels rise dramatically in nations like the United States and the standard of living for most

people living in other highly neoliberal nations, like the United Kingdom, continues to decline.⁷

The re-emergence and entrenchment of the notion that self-interest and public welfare are interchangeable has been underpinned by what we term ‘charismatic violence’: the mechanism by which the super-rich position themselves as transformational agents of change while functioning in practice as vanguards of an injurious *status quo*, fomenting rationales for extreme wealth concentration in a manner that is subtly different from what either Bourdieu or Tocqueville could foresee.

Charismatic violence and proof of ‘success’

In the United States, the super-rich’s proportion of wealth has increased massively in the last 30 years (Galbraith, 2008; Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Piketty, 2014), and many can be seen to have used some of that increased wealth to reinforce the Tocquevillian sanctity of their position in the world order. Not only does their wealth in itself signify their exceptionality, but that exceptionality is amplified by giving away large proportions of their wealth – ostensibly to individuals or groups whom the donors do not know nor expect anything back from in return. This form of mega-giving has generated a symbolic value so exceptional that it has helped to cement a new form of secular theodicy driven by forms of quasi-religious authority and legitimation.⁸

Generating charisma through exceptional giving was, of course, not an unfamiliar practice to earlier elites performing, for example, potlach ceremonies – where their sacrificial offerings demonstrated their own exceptionality and godliness to their communities and to God itself. Nor is it an alien practice to the majority of organized religions where charity and assistance for the needy is enshrined in their liturgies and scriptures. Religion is also frequently bound into actual and symbolic representations of extraordinary giving – Jesus’ giving of his life for ‘us’; the monk or sadhu’s giving of their material effects and comfort for austere devotion to God; Mother Teresa’s gift of her life to help the poor; and, ultimately, God’s gift of life itself.

Today’s extraordinarily gifted – the super-rich who are celebrated in scriptures like *Forbes* and *The Times* rich list and countless other media streams and outlets – are, of course, not generally understood or purported to be God’s representatives on Earth. Yet, due to their apparent exceptional gifts and their exceptional giving, they are granted an almost sacred status. In a classic Durkheimian formulation, what is godly is that which is given to humanity from the outside – and giving is itself godly. Personal gift-giving echoes God’s own sacrifice and is thus upheld as a sanctified activity that has worth far beyond any profane economic value. In this way, mega-giving by today’s philanthrocapitalists produces a form of charismatic authority – and moreover, contra Bourdieu, this giving no longer needs to be separated from private economic advantage in order to be glorified as exceptional.

Philanthrocapitalist mega-gifts provoke awe not simply from those in receipt of the gift but also from most of those watching. The power of today's mega-giving is thus much broader than enrolling the direct receivers of gifts into a moral relationship, as Mauss posited, particularly through his discussions of the difficulty of rejecting a gift (1990, p. 41). Mega-giving produces symbolic power – and symbolic costs – that affects recipients and non-recipients alike. One major aspect of its symbolic costs is the way that voluntary gift-giving dissipates obligatory and collective demands for wealth redistribution, even while, paradoxically, elite donors speak of their 'duty' to give through extravagant gestures like the 'Giving Pledge'.

Sanctifying extreme individual wealth and privilege inevitably anoints unequal social and economic relations and, thus, inequality. Echoing Tocqueville's concerns about the poverty and brutalization resulting from the 'immobility' of the nineteenth-century labouring classes, social anthropologist Johan Galtung argues that 'when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations' (1969, p. 168) this constitutes what he calls 'structural violence'. For Galtung, activities that sustain or increase inequality, whether intended or not, fuel suffering by limiting the equitable distribution of resources and 'lowering the level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible' (1990, p. 292). It may also be suggested that, while buttressing the renewed power of economic liberalism, the sanctification of the super-rich also works to maintain its supporting state systems. As has been observed by many, such states are fundamentally violent – constructing the life and death of their subjects (Farmer, 2004; Mbembe, 2003) and locking weaker states into dependence (Galtung, 1971). The sanctification of privilege and its ensuing inequality underpin both structural and actual violence.

One process through which structural violence is sustained is what Galtung terms 'cultural violence' – different forms of obfuscation that make 'reality opaque, so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent' (1990, p. 292). In Galtung's view, the roots of cultural violence can be found most saliently in organized religion's use of cultural symbols and meanings that 'make direct and structural violence look, even feel right – or at least not wrong' (1990, p. 291), i.e. the process of theodicy. Adding to this, an aspect or subset of the power of cultural violence not identified by Galtung is the quasi-religious authority generated through charisma. Charisma – here buttressed by mega-giving – grants the super-rich a place on the social pulpit through which their activities and sermons empower the inegalitarian *status quo* and facilitate continued structural violence.

Thus, philanthrocapitalism – a notion that asserts that capitalist expansion, if left apparently unfettered by governmental restrictions, will yield universal benefits – is a fruitful narrative trope legitimating the imposition of domestic austerity measures and rising wealth transfers to corporations and affluent individuals, both domestically and internationally. However, the philanthrocapitalist's claim to their own inherent beneficence must, at least in theory, be

embraced by a laity that needs reassurances that philanthrocapitalism has a purpose: that its gods or God wield legitimate authority. While part of this authority is generated through the charisma of almost other-worldly acts of mega-giving, it is also bolstered by philanthrocapitalist worldly reliance on the forceful rationality of apparently scientific ‘proof’.

This proof is largely inculcated through careful efforts to delineate and disseminate a specific form of evidence of effectiveness, an effort that resonates with Weber’s suggestion that individuals imbued with charismatic authority must furnish repeated proof of their grace in order to command allegiance:

If proof of his charismatic qualification fails him for long ... above all, if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear. This is the genuine charismatic meaning of the ‘gift of grace’ ... charismatic authority is thus specifically outside the realm of everyday routine and the profane sphere. (Weber, 2012, pp. 360–361)

Weber’s emphasis on the importance of charismatic proof helps to underscore the symbolic importance of the panoply of metrics and indices that are utilized by philanthrocapitalists to legitimize their practices (Adams, 2016; Fejerskov, 2015; Herrick, 2017; Kelly & Beisel, 2011; Reubi, 2013; Storeng & Béhague, 2014; Street, 2015). Yet, the apparently scientific and objective ‘truth’ of such metrics is bolstered by the sacred and symbolic power of the mega-givers – hybridizing rational and sacred authority. It also raises new insights into the instrumental value of the host of new platforms that enable today’s mega-donors to publicize their good deeds to global audiences, and how these platforms differ from the major benefactors of the past.

One difference is the tendency for today’s super-rich to insist that their philanthropy contributes to narrowing wealth and health inequalities. In contrast to this, early benefactors such as Carnegie were famously sanguine about growing inequality levels; in Carnegie’s words, ‘much better this great irregularity than universal squalor’ (Carnegie, 1996, p. 1). Some of today’s super-rich such as Peter Thiel, a libertarian and, somewhat paradoxically, an explicit monopolist, adopt a similar anti-egalitarian moral stance on growing inequality. However, mega-donors with the biggest media presence, including Gates and Zuckerberg, have long made equality a pillar of their public mission statements. ‘We believe all lives have equal value’ is a phrase used by both Zuckerberg and the Gates Foundation repeatedly, with identical wording.

This creates an empirical quagmire: how to furnish proof of the effectiveness of private philanthropy at a time of global instability and rising inequality. We suggest that organizations such as the Gates Foundation accomplish this in two chief ways, both of which hinge on the ability to selectively exploit advantageous metrics when it comes to data gathering and data dissemination. Firstly, these donors rely on the usefulness of what we term ‘low-hanging metrics’; and secondly, they often deliberately blur the line between the public and the private sectors, obscuring public understanding about which of those sectors are

financially contributing to and profiting from new giving schemes that direct tax dollars and philanthropy bequests to private companies. In our final section below, we discuss these two points and consider their implications for understanding the persistence and worsening of social and economic inequality.

Low-hanging metrics

The new super-rich's ability to uphold themselves as global saviours with the clout and ability to 'end poverty' hinges on a new, muscular reliance on metrics that appears to confirm that large-scale philanthropy 'works' in saving lives and narrowing wealth and health inequalities – but which upon close inspection reveals the opposite: that increasingly top-heavy philanthropy and new 'Giving Pledges' over the past 20 years have, at best, left global and national health and wealth inequality unaltered and, at worst, have exacerbated those inequalities (see Collins *et al.*, 2016; Hickel, 2017; Reich, 2006; Reid, 2015).

This seeming inconsistency – the ability of a new class of donors to insist on the efficacy of their philanthropy despite the evidence on growing wealth and health inequalities that contradicts their claims – can be explained through closer attention to the way that powerful donors like the Gates Foundation strategically draw on evidence of varying quality to defend their insistence that 'the world is getting better'.

The majority of the Gates Foundation's giving over the past 15 years has gone to global rather than domestic causes, a focus that is in line with an increasingly dominant ethical paradigm within global development known as 'effective altruism' (EA). Taking inspiration from nineteenth-century colonial utilitarian thinkers such as J.S. Mill and more contemporary thinkers like Peter Singer, contemporary EA advocates maintain that all philanthropic dollars should be targeted at areas where a fixed amount of money can create the most 'good'. Because gifts donated in dollars or euros purportedly 'save' more lives when spent in non-Western regions, the EA movement asserts that citizens of Western states have a moral duty to donate abroad rather than domestically.

Despite striking many as a laudable claim, effective altruism has faced robust criticism, including a recent paper from political theorist Georgina White who points out that ancient philosophers such as Aristotle conceived of the duty to give wisely in very different ways from that proposed by EA enthusiasts today. Aristotle stressed the need to give to those in one's personal community so that the impact of the gift could be observed directly (White, 2018). Aristotle was concerned that a gift should not make a recipient *worse* off – and close proximity was necessary for holding givers accountable to the recipients of their gifts.

Aristotle's point is instructive for thinking about new philanthrocapitalism movements and their lack of accountability to different global publics, especially

to publics in poor regions with fewer resources to challenge the imposition of new policy measures (Hickel, 2017; McGoe, 2015), even when new initiatives do not reduce poverty and even exacerbate it, as in the case of microfinance initiatives (Gabor & Brooks, 2017).⁹ But there is also another, different epistemological implication to local/global giving practices, which is the way that directing one's philanthropy at distant recipients confers a *perceptual* advantage that local giving efforts may not enjoy. If local giving can make it possible for both givers and recipients to judge and observe the effects of giving close at hand, the opposite is also true in the case of global giving.

Distant donations make the direct effects of overseas aid and philanthropy usefully opaque and difficult to measure for donors and their spectators alike. The difficulty of tracking and measuring the effects of overseas aid is hardly a novel point: this reality has underpinned a massive recent increase in government, academic and philanthropic funding aimed at doing a better job of measuring aid effectiveness. But what is less discussed is that the drive for better data collection has facilitated the appearance of metrics that appear to show significant gains in, for example, health or nutrition, but which on closer inspection are more attributable to introduction of the new metric itself.

New forms of measurement and data collection often yield 'low-hanging metrics': evidence that is easy to interpret in ways favourable to an underlying political or organizational objective. This appears to be particularly true of global health metrics, where almost any purported gain in global health is interpreted as evidence that private philanthropy is 'working'. To be clear, we are not suggesting that donors such as the Gates Foundation do not crave precision when it comes to measuring their impact – they do. Rather, our point is that even, or *especially*, in cases where precise measurements are difficult or impossible to achieve this lack of certainty furnishes useful epistemological advantages for donors – advantages that help to reinforce perceptions of the validity of their 'theodicy of privilege'. This is the case in a number of situations where the seeming health gain is clearly an artefact of a new form of measurement rather than evidence of an actual health improvement.

The case of malaria reduction demonstrates this problem. Since the Gates Foundation began contributing approximately \$1–2 billion annually towards global health, the Foundation, and Gates personally, has made regular pronouncements about the 'miraculous' success of their efforts to reduce deaths from malaria. In 2016, for example, Gates hailed the results of a report from the Institute for Health Metric and Evaluation (IHME) which seemed to demonstrate that malaria death rates in sub-Saharan Africa had dropped 57 per cent since 2000. Gates described this purported drop as a 'miracle' and one of 'the greatest success stories in the history of global health'.¹⁰

While it is true that there has been considerable improvement in malaria control over the last 20 years, Gates's claim exaggerates the scale of recent gains. For example, over recent years, a new malaria parasite resistant to artemisinin combination therapy (ACT) has appeared, leading to concern over

spreading epidemics in Southeast Asia, and to fears that mass drug administration programmes have compounded drug resistance. It is also the case that even when it comes to regions that have reported a large drop in malaria transmission rates, a close investigation of individual country reports can indicate that changes in diagnostic protocols – rather than clear evidence of lowered transmission rates – produced the appearance of a more dramatic decline in new infection rates than had actually occurred. For example, over 10 years ago, Senegal issued health guidance that heightened and tightened the requirements for officially recording malaria incidence rates. As anthropologist Marlee Tichenor (2016) describes, this change in protocol meant that, following 2006, only *laboratory-confirmed* cases of malaria incidence were officially recorded. As a result, the rate of transmission seemed to improve more than it actually had. A 2012 Global Fund report on malaria reduction in Senegal makes this problem clear, stating:

Reported cases of malaria in Senegal fell from more than 1.5 million in 2006 to 174,000 in 2009. The main reason was a change in the case definition, with only laboratory-confirmed cases reported after 2008. *There was some evidence of a real decrease in malaria incidence, although it was difficult to confirm.* (emphasis added; see also Tichenor, 2017)¹¹

In other words, a seemingly large drop – 1.5 million to less than 200,000 in three years – was an artefact of how incidence rates were recorded. The Global Fund could not determine whether there was any significant decrease in actual transmission during this period.

When organizations such as IHME report their findings, they are often careful to make it clear when their evidence base is weak. Yet Gates's much-publicized media pronouncements of a 'miraculous' decline in malaria rarely acknowledge the uncertainty over just how reliable the data are. The charisma of mega-donors like Gates also adds a level of credibility to the data, and the new philanthropists come to benefit from the impression that their philanthropic organizations are playing a 'miraculous' role in saving lives.

The Gates Foundation also tends to claim primacy for health gains that multiple actors working in global health helped to bring about, deliberately blurring the question of whether private philanthropy or government spending is most responsible for a particular health outcome. For example, in sheer dollar terms, Gates Foundation giving towards global health is negligible in comparison to what wealthy nations spend on overseas aid programmes. The Foundation's contribution of approximately \$2 billion to health and agriculture each year may seem like a lot of money, but it pales next to total overseas aid from OECD governments, which amounts to about \$130 billion annually. The Gates Foundation's spending even pales in comparison to what most developing countries spend on social welfare and infrastructure building. Contrary to public perceptions in Western nations, most of the revenue that developing countries spend on health comes from their own domestic revenues and not

from development aid or private donors like the Gates Foundation. As a recent IHME report has emphasized: 'In most developing regions, government health spending that is financed by countries' own revenue is much larger than DAH [development assistance for health]'.¹¹

Although Gates Foundation staff do occasionally acknowledge that its expenditures are tiny compared to what poor and rich nations devote to global health, publicity material from the Foundation tends to convey a different message, often claiming erroneously to have played a major role in achieving global gains such as improved levels of absolute poverty – even when those gains are attributable to factors entirely outside the remit or influence of the Foundation. Recent improvements in global poverty reduction, for example, are more attributable to China's state-led economic growth over the past 30 years than to any philanthropic bequests from the Gates Foundation or other private donors (Hickel, 2017).

It is also debatable whether data on poverty are calculated in accurate ways, and thus whether they are a useful measure of global welfare from which to claim any improvements. As Jason Hickel points out, efforts to measure global poverty reduction have shifted significantly since 1990, when the World Bank adopted the world's first international poverty line (IPL), which was then set at just over \$1 a day. As the World Bank acknowledged in its 2000 annual report, based on this figure, global poverty was on the rise. During that same year, the World Bank changed the IPL from \$1.02 to \$1.08 per day. This seemed like an increase in what the World Bank saw as a minimum threshold but, in reality, the World Bank's new IPL was not increased in line with the declining purchasing power of the time. Indeed, in real terms, the figure of \$1.08 was lower than the \$1.02 figure. The effect, Hickel argues, was that 'The poverty headcount fell literally overnight ... even though nothing had actually changed in the real world' (2017, p. 41). The figure later rose to \$1.25 and, as of 2015, was raised again to \$1.90. But this number is still seen as too low. Lant Pritchett, an economist based at Harvard, has called for the introduction of a new type of 'upper bound' poverty line that more fairly reflects the resources needed for a minimal level of well-being, and he places the figure at \$10 per day at least.

Global poverty reduction figures also say little about rising absolute inequality between nations. On this score, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been periods of gross divergence between nations. Economist Joseph Joyce points out that, in 1870, average per capita income in the world's richest nations in Europe and North America is estimated to have been \$2,419, while the average in African nations was \$500, a ratio of 5:1. By 1950, the gap had risen to 13:1. By 2003, the ratio was 18:1 (Joyce, 2008). More recently, the gap between the world's wealthiest countries and some very poor countries has narrowed slightly, but most of the gains are attributable to economic growth in Asia. In most regions of the world, as a 2015 report from the UN stated, the gap between wealthy nations and poor ones has not improved.¹²

The erosion of obligation

Extraordinary and often misleading claims from philanthrocapitalists also arise when it comes to their stance on corporate and wealth taxes – something that contrasts with concerns that Tocqueville raised about industrial manufacturing elites in the early nineteenth century.

As we have suggested, Tocqueville directed his appeals at industrial ‘masters’, exhorting them to consider the livelihoods of the working classes who were directly ‘impoverished and brutalized’ through industrial practices that restricted their capacity for personal growth and upward mobility. This form of violence, in Tocqueville’s mind, required recompense for the injuries and injustices directly inflicted through wealth extraction. Yet, today, the idea that philanthropy should serve as such a form of expiation is largely rejected by the new philanthrocapitalists, who deny that they should be obligated to part with their wealth through measures such as taxation.

Zuckerberg’s Facebook, for example, is embroiled in long-standing efforts to minimize tax obligations. In the autumn of 2016, Facebook informed the IRS in a court ruling that it would refuse to assume a federal tax liability of approximately \$3 billion (Kravets, 2016). Notably, the figure was the exact amount that Zuckerberg had promised a month earlier to devote to medical research in order to, grandiosely, end or manage all human disease by the close of this century.

Other leading philanthropists have also upheld their philanthropy as a reason for rejecting tax obligations, including Bill Gates. Although Gates sporadically tells the media that he thinks his own taxes should be higher, he has consistently objected to policy efforts to actually raise taxes on the rich. Some of his clearest statements on this topic were made in the wake of the publication of Thomas Piketty’s (2014) *Capital in the twenty-first century*, when Gates wrote a commentary rejecting Piketty’s call for a global wealth tax. Gates offered a hypothetical picture of three people: ‘One investing in companies, one in philanthropy, and one in a lavish lifestyle’, adding that ‘There’s nothing wrong with the last guy, but I think he should pay more taxes than the others’ (Gates, 2014).

Remarkably, Gates appears to view the first two hypothetical figures as commensurate – those investing in ‘companies’ and those in ‘philanthropy’ – implying that these very distinctive practices are equally beneficial, and thus either approach should obviously offset tax burdens. Yet the claim that investing in ‘companies’ is intrinsically socially valuable fails to either understand or to acknowledge Piketty’s primary concern: that financial returns to private investors and private companies are exceeding national economic growth rates at alarming rates (Piketty uses the ratio of $R > G$ to symbolize this problem). Gates ignores Piketty’s main premise, which is that rapid and disproportionate increases in private wealth are the root cause of growing inequality. Gates also objects to Piketty’s concerns over the growth in ‘rentier’ wealth gains. In Gates’s words:

I fully agree that we don't want to live in an aristocratic society in which already-wealthy families get richer simply by sitting on their laurels and collecting what Piketty calls 'rentier income' ... But I don't think America is anything close to that. (Gates, 2014)

Gates associates 'rentier' wealth with wealth that is inherited from family estates. But this is an erroneously narrow definition of 'rent' (Birch, 2017; Hudson, 2011; McGoey, 2017; Sayer, 2014). For instance, rentier returns can be obtained through intellectual property protections; through well-positioned real estate; through debt financing; in short, through a range of economic activities that leading mainstream economists such as Robert Solow (2015) have suggested require better regulation to ensure that returns to private investors are not grossly disproportionate to the services or products offered.

Through his narrow conception of economic rent, Gates is able to convey an influential notion of philanthropic munificence that is highly distinctive from the type of obligatory contract with the poor that Tocqueville called for. Indeed, the type of philanthropy extolled by figures such as Gates, Buffett and Zuckerberg is a form of giving without admitting ever having first taken, and it thus affords them, through the charisma that mega-giving generates, immunity from criticism that even Balzac's nobles could not claim. It is a sense of *assumed* rather than *imposed* duty that denies responsibility for the condition of the poor to begin with; a duty rooted in fortunes that hail from such a diverse array of business practices that to suggest any singular 'class' connection seems almost conspiratorial – despite the fact that new strata of business elites are clearly exerting global influence on tax policies and austerity measures that reinforce a self-serving approach to 'solving' global challenges.

The rejection of a legally enforceable obligation to relinquish one's wealth is clearly advantageous for individual donors and the super-rich more broadly, as it enables them to withstand mandatory redistributive measures such as higher corporate and wealth taxes, even while figures such as Gates and Buffett publicly profess that inequality troubles them.

Thus, returning to Tocqueville: the actions of contemporary philanthrocapitalists can be seen as a renewed embrace of an odd kind of elite duty. The question of what obliges them to give is not as clear today as it was when aristocrats were so closely and clearly reliant on their 'subjects' and obligated by law or custom towards them. Instead exceptionally 'gifted' individuals like Gates or Zuckerberg appear to choose to give away almost impossible amounts of wealth – imbuing them with ever greater exceptionality. This voluntary nature of their giving plays an important role in legitimating their elevated social and economic position, positioning them to withstand calls for redistributive policy measures even as they appear to embrace the onus to surrender their privilege.

What unites today's global wealth elite is not their (post)industrial practices, which are so varied and complex that patterns of orchestrated exploitation are often hard to criticize or prevent, but their emerging faith in a neo-feudal

form of ‘noblesse oblige’ which, rather than being seen as a frightening return to a class-conscious aristocracy acting in unison to perpetuate their advantage, is viewed as an almost other-worldly action. Zuckerberg and Gates do not have to save the world, but they plan to anyway, an act of wilful largesse that makes their giving seem super-human.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have suggested that benefactors such as Gates, Buffett and Zuckerberg function as specialized, sanctified figureheads of the market system. We are *not* claiming that they represent a permanent, immovable stratum of business aristocrats in the specific manner that Tocqueville was concerned about. Rather, out of their desire to morally justify their extreme wealth – through giving – they are effectively beginning to act in concert, and thus become more like a self-anointed collective of leaders, contributing to and solidifying the contemporary theodicy of privilege.

Moreover, in today’s iteration of the ‘new’ philanthrocapitalism, we can see almost a complete reversal of Balzac’s conception of ‘noblesse oblige’. In Balzac’s time, noblesse oblige conveyed the idea that those who were conferred privileges at birth have a moral onus to serve others. Today, this responsibility is wilfully assumed by individuals such as Gates and Zuckerberg, but it is clearly and strategically upheld as a voluntary responsibility – partly or largely because these fortunes are deemed to have been generated through individual skill and hard work.

Yet, if the super-rich were compelled to hand over larger proportions of their wealth to the rest of a social community through taxation, their contribution to addressing disadvantage would remain within the domain of the profane – they would be just like their congregants. Instead, through upholding philanthropy as a legitimate reason for withstanding obligatory tax liabilities, they are provided the space to appear exceptional by apparently choosing to give vast amounts away for the purported betterment of the world. Through their elective giving, mega-donors come to constitute themselves as new nobility – while not necessarily conceding that parting with their wealth is something they ‘must’ do – in the same way that most individuals must, for example, pay tax. Thus, the new business aristocracy represented by philanthrocapitalism suggests the emergence of a novel phenomenon that surpasses the entitlements and duties that nineteenth-century thinkers such as Tocqueville and Balzac attributed to a waning feudal aristocracy.

Whether the new industrial masters are more ‘restrained’ or ‘dangerous’ than earlier feudal lords requires more investigation. The question itself has been dormant for too long, obfuscated by a theodicy of privilege which makes the outlandish seem reasonable: that it is laudable and even dutiful for immiserated workers to salute the donor class for directing its philanthropy at itself.

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Notes

1 Balzac's appeals to the righteousness of aristocratic rule were not, of course, merely nostalgic or symbolic: he wrote during the 1820s to 1840s, a time when aristocratic rights were rekindled under the reign of Louis Philippe before all formal aristocratic privileges were abolished during the Revolution of 1848.

2 The number of current 'pledgers' is derived from the Giving Pledge website, <https://givingpledge.org/>. This website lists profiles of individual pledgers, and includes copies of their 'pledge letters' (many addressed to 'Bill' personally). Having the funds to become a pledger is important: mere centi-millionaires are not welcome; the website emphasizes that the pledge is 'specifically focused on billionaires or those who would be billionaires if not for their giving'. Information about how much money has actually been given is not publicly available.

3 One of the few contemporary scholars to mention the term is Benjamin Soskis in a compelling paper on the historical origins of modern foundations (Soskis, 2014).

4 Quoted excerpts are available at: <http://philanthrocapitalism.net/about/faq/>.

5 That the Gates Foundation has strongly influenced domestic education policy in the United States, for example, is beyond dispute (see Erickson, 2015; Ravitch, 2010; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). For further discussion of the growing power and social implications of wealth elites, see Mears (2015) and Hickel (2017).

6 Bourdieu takes the concept of 'theodicy of privilege' directly from Weber's notion of '*Theodizee des Glück*'. German sociologist Peter Wehling indicates (personal communication) that Weber intends '*Glück*' to encompass things like honour, power, wealth, health and pleasure.

7 Government data in the United Kingdom indicate that living standards in Britain have experienced the longest decline since records began (Allen, 2014). In the United States, most wage levels have been stagnant in real terms for over 30 years.

8 One recent example of the religious tones of homage paid to the new mega-philanthropists stems from Bill Gates's 60th birthday in October 2015. To mark the occasion, a school in Chennai, India organized a voluntary tribute to him. Over 1,000 students gathered in a school yard in military formation. They were each given a life-sized colour cut-out featuring a picture of Gates's face, which they raised above their heads in a coordinated salute. Amongst the rows of beaming children, a few volunteers held aloft a giant, 40-foot-high billboard featuring Gates's face and a slogan: 'Grow Rich. Help Others'.

9 White is right to suggest today's effective altruists underestimate the moral importance of accountability for one's philanthropic actions. But she underestimates the centrality of Aristotelean notions within ethical positions *outside* of EA movements. Indeed, the ethical imperative to act 'locally' underpins longstanding conservative criticisms of foundations like Ford and Gates throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (see Schambra, 2012).

10 <https://www.gatesnotes.com/Health/Mapping-the-End-of-Malaria>

11 https://www.theglobalfund.org/media/2717/oig_gfoig11007auditsenegal_executivesummary_en.pdf?u=636488964650000000 (last accessed February 2018).

12 http://www.healthdata.org/sites/default/files/files/policy_report/2011/FGH2011/IHME_FGH2011_Chapter3.pdf

13 http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess_dev_issues/dsp_policy_05.pdf

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