

Mary Wollstonecraft, Social Constructivism, and the Idea of Freedom

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This article considers Mary Wollstonecraft as a theorist of freedom for women through the lens of social constructivism. Previous republican readings of Wollstonecraft as promoting a vision of freedom as independence or non-domination are compromised by their underpinnings in liberal individualism. Instead, we suggest her theory displays elements of positive liberty and particularly what we call “subjectivity freedom.” Reading Wollstonecraft as an early social constructivist, we show her grappling with how women’s subjectivity is constructed in patriarchal societies such that they desire the conditions of their own subordination. This troubles the very notion of domination and its putative opposite, freedom-as-independence. Paradoxically, while noting how women’s sense of self was profoundly and intimately shaped by the patriarchal structures they inhabited, Wollstonecraft’s own argument was limited by these same constructions. Nonetheless, she struggled to conceive a radically emancipatory vision of women’s lives, aspirations, and desires from within the confines of a context and discourse premised on their devaluation. A social constructivist approach shows that Wollstonecraft sought not simply to change women or specific structures of male dominance, but rather the processes within which men and women defined gender, the family, and personal identity: in short, their subjectivity.

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Mary Wollstonecraft, when she is recognized at all as a major figure in the modern political theory canon, is usually read as a theorist of equality, particularly promoting women's equality with men in terms of education, employment, marriage, and property rights (Abbey 1999; Gunther-Canada 1996; Sapiro 1992). Equality is certainly important to her argument, particularly equality of liberty, but we contend that freedom should be the central value underlying Wollstonecraft's demands for equality, situating her among the canonical freedom theorists Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill. Accordingly, we read *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as first and foremost a call for expanding women's freedom. Taking up eighteenth-century ideals of liberal individualism and applying them to women — insisting that they, too should have rights to control their own lives and property, rather than depending on marriage for economic and social survival — Wollstonecraft's most famous treatise can be seen as an attempt to answer Mary Astell's scornful question to Locke a century earlier: "If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves?" (Astell 1986, 76). Her response moves beyond liberal individualism, however, fingering the ways that external manifestations of male privilege construct the subjectivities of men and women such that men's social advantages are made to seem natural, inevitable, and even often invisible to both the men they assist and the women they neglect.

In Wollstonecraft's preceding work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, she often appears to be a standard liberal theorist, defining freedom in "negative liberty" terms of natural rights and civil rights. Writing against Burke's opposition to the French revolution, she stresses the tyranny of a monarchy structured by wealth and war, and she insists on property rights for those who were often denied them, namely the poor. "The birthright of man . . . is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact" (Wollstonecraft 2008b, 7) she says, echoing the liberal social contract tradition. But she qualifies her statement, saying that she here uses liberty in the "simple, unsophisticated sense," and proceeds to identify the ways in which these principles are invoked in the name of only the powerful and wealthy, thereby contradicting them for most of mankind. She excoriates Burke for this failure to exercise reason and quickly ties freedom to reason, as well as to equality. She further asserts that reason frees one from oneself as well as from others: one can be

bound not just by restrictions placed by others, but by how one thinks of oneself, one's goals and ambitions, one's abilities — in short, characteristics generally associated with “positive liberty” (Berlin 1971).

Such arguments are further developed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The liberal, negative liberty elements of her theory remain there in her critique of the barriers women face, particularly their exclusion from educational institutions, denial of property rights, and the ways they are prevented from earning their own living. But Wollstonecraft marshals positive liberty ideals in ways that are underappreciated even here, weaving them into her well-recognized critique of the restraints on women's action. Women will never assume their proper rank “till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men” (2008a, 250), she says; let them “share the advantages of education and government with man” and see if they do not “become better, as they grow wiser and become free” (252). Following Hirschmann's (2008) argument that many canonical freedom theorists complicated the negative–positive liberty divide that Berlin popularized in the mid-twentieth century, we argue that Wollstonecraft demonstrates a similar complexity.

A number of scholars have recognized various republican threads running through Wollstonecraft's thought: Kerber (1986), Landes (1988), Sapiro (1992), Gunther-Canada (1999), Taylor (2003), Berges (2017). However, only a few Wollstonecraft scholars have argued that her understanding of freedom is distinctly republican. Lena Halldenius (2007, 2015) and Alan Coffee (2013, 2014) stand out in this regard, both invoking Phillip Pettit's (1997) republican theory of freedom as non-domination as the overarching principle guiding Wollstonecraft's emancipatory ideal. While their work makes an important advance, particularly in its appraisal of the importance of community to Wollstonecraft's thought, we believe that the principle of non-domination is inherently problematic due to its primary orientation toward negative liberty, neglecting the positive liberty ideals that are crucial to Wollstonecraft's argument.

This is most apparent in moments in which Wollstonecraft gestures toward the idea of women's “true interests,” rejecting with scorn the possibility that women who are happy with their subordinated situation are truly free, “degraded” as they are “by mistaken notions of female excellence” (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 75), or deludedly believing that the “illegitimate power” they obtain over men by overemphasizing their sexuality is something more robust (87). This entails a close alignment with the positive liberty view that we can have “desires about desires,”

realizing that some of our desires are higher or more significant than others, which we would actually be freer if we repressed in favor of our more important purposes (Taylor 1979, 184). But it also inheres in a more complicated aspect of Wollstonecraft's argument, namely her account of how women's subjectivity is constructed in patriarchal societies. These insights invoke many twenty-first-century understandings of the social construction of the subject, desire, will, and ability. Indeed, it seems as if Wollstonecraft may have indirectly anticipated many of the ideals of freedom that contemporary thinkers, particularly feminists, engage with today. We especially want to suggest that Wollstonecraft's argument lends itself to the idea that how our subjectivities are produced is essential to a more comprehensive understanding of freedom — one that recognizes that what we want is inevitably tied to who we are, or at least how we see ourselves. Wollstonecraft's attention to the crucial role of social formations in creating and understanding one's "self," which we are here identifying as her particular concern with the production of subjectivity, however, leads us to see in her work an ideal that we call "subjectivity freedom."

We recognize the anachronistic flavor of such a proposition: how can Wollstonecraft be read as offering an ideal that was not even named until 200 years after she wrote? Moreover, given her frequent suggestion that women have a true nature that patriarchy is distorting, how can she be advocating social constructivism, which rejects such naturalism? We are not proposing that Wollstonecraft would have used the terminology of subjectivity or social construction, nor that she had a complete vision of such a project. Yet, as Hirschmann (2008) has argued about Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, among others, despite famously subscribing to versions of natural law, they anticipated many of the central ideals about the production of subjectivity that many theorists engage with today. For instance, though these social contractarians are known for grounding their theories in men's natural freedom, expressed via consent, they were "equally concerned with what such free individuals might choose," Hirschmann explains. This led them to prescribe institutions, laws, and practices that would "coerce and socialize" them into making the right kind of choices (2008, 19). Social constructivism may thus have gained critical purchase (and a terminology) only in the later twentieth century, but on Hirschmann's account, it was always already there in the major canonical theories of freedom.

Unfortunately, however, Hirschmann fails to take up one of the leading female political theorists — and one whom we today consider "feminist" — that is, Wollstonecraft. By arguing that she, too, deserves recognition as

a theorist of freedom and that she, too, deploys theoretical moves that can be seen to anticipate the social constructivist perspective, we seek to use the contemporary analysis of social constructivism as a radically different way of reading Wollstonecraft that is nonetheless well suited to her work. Indeed, a case can be made for seeing in Wollstonecraft's critical confrontation of female subjectivity a heightened exemplar of early social constructivism: she theorizes new institutions and practices of womanhood with the precise aim of producing a different kind of female subject, while her Enlightenment contemporaries more ambiguously seek to reinforce status quo elite masculine ideals of freedom. We thus maintain that social constructivism offers a fitting and productive framework for understanding Wollstonecraft, as well as one that helps to make sense of the tensions and inconsistencies in her argument in ways that improve upon other recent attempts to do so, particularly those based on the theory of non-domination.

FREEDOM AS NON-DOMINATION

For Halldenius, a “republican conception of liberty — the freedom from subordination under arbitrary power — is at the heart of Wollstonecraft's feminist philosophy” (2015, 19). This vision of freedom “does not stand for freedom from interference,” but rather for “freedom from subordination to the arbitrary power of another,” Halldenius explains, citing Pettit's theory of freedom as non-domination (Halldenius 2015, 3). Coffee similarly proposes “freedom understood as the absence of arbitrary power,” as the “central organizing principle” of Wollstonecraft's “observations and arguments about the oppression and domination of women” (Coffee 2014, 908). Also drawing on Pettit, Coffee emphasizes that unlike the classic negative liberty mandate of noninterference, Wollstonecraft's republican ideal of freedom “is judged only in respect to the *arbitrary* exercise of power” (Coffee 2014, 910–11).

Halldenius and Coffee both further read Wollstonecraft's ideal of freedom to entail two interrelated aspects, which we consider the “material” and the “mental.” As Halldenius puts it, “liberty is the same as independence”; hence, she calls the material aspect of freedom “independence in relation to others” and its mental counterpart “independence of mind” (2015, 24–25). “To the extent that a person is subject to the whim of others, she is not in a position to be guided by her own judgment,” as living in material conditions of unfreedom will bend a woman's will to the dictates of those on whom her livelihood

depends, Halldenus suggests (26). Material unfreedom manifests in economic dependence, as well as in “all laws, customs and ways of organizing life” that combine to subordinate women to men’s arbitrary rule. These, too, corrupt women’s minds, for “psychological habituation to subordination is a strong force” (26). Material freedom is thus a prerequisite for developing mental freedom, Halldenus explains. Moreover, and just as crucially, material freedom is also a “status,” the lack of which renders one’s life lived in an “unfree mode,” regardless of actual opportunity or restraint (27). Hence, even if a woman finds herself “able and allowed to do all that she wants to do” (21) thanks to lenient superiors and fortuitous circumstances, she is still “disabled from acting freely,” as her lack of restraint results from luck rather than right (27).

Coffee similarly concludes that for Wollstonecraft, “[t]o be free was to be independent in the sense of having the capacity to act in one’s own name without having to . . . rely on the goodwill of others” (Coffee 2014, 910). He, too, reads Wollstonecraft’s ideal of freedom along interrelated material and mental lines, which he identifies, respectively, as “civil independence” and “independence of mind” (912). For Coffee, like Halldenus, economic security and a full range of civil rights and protections form the material foundation for “independence of mind” (913–14). “We are not independent until we are in a position to act on our decisions,” he explains, nor can a woman be guided by the dictates of her conscience until she can count on equal protection of the laws that allow her to act in her own right (914). Moreover, beyond individual rights, it was essential for Wollstonecraft “that all our relationships [be] securely grounded in social equality,” as inequality in both private and public spheres begets dependence, Coffee writes (915). Lacking such a foundation, the women of Wollstonecraft’s time were “slaves, literally, because the power that men had over them in all areas of social life was arbitrary” (Coffee 2014, 908).

Both Halldenus’s and Coffee’s interpretations work from Philip Pettit’s conception of “freedom as non-domination.” Pettit argues that freedom consists “not in an absence of interference,” but “in an absence of mastery by others,” an idea he attributes to the republican tradition (Pettit 1997, 22). Such mastery or domination is “exemplified by the relationship of master to slave or master to servant,” wherein the “dominating party can interfere on an arbitrary basis with the choices of the dominated . . . at will and with impunity” (22). Pettit contends that non-domination, understood as the absence of subjection to such arbitrary power, offers “a persuasive articulation of the central feminist

claims,” as well as one offered by Wollstonecraft, whom he cites as influentially propounding the “ideal of a woman’s not having to live at the beck and call of husband or father . . . of not having to beg their leave or curry their favour” (Pettit 1997, 139, 140; see also Pettit 2017). If the problem is that cultural and legal institutions combine to put women “under the thumb of men,” he reasons, then the ideal of freedom for women “is precisely that of being secured against arbitrary interference” (Pettit 1997, 61).

Wollstonecraft surely envisions a world in which women are freed from the mandates of male whim. But Pettit’s prescription of non-domination seems an inadequate antidote for the women she famously describes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, who “hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel” over their masters (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 155), seeming freely to embrace their servitude. On the non-domination account, this is a matter of appearances, as the dominated know they are at the mercy of the dominating party, leading them to adopt just this servile demeanor. Indeed, Wollstonecraft was a keen observer of the “‘littlenesses’ and ‘sly tricks’ and ‘cunning’ to which women were driven because of their dependency on their husbands,” Pettit claims (1997, 61). But this argument misses that one may be aware of her limitations as a practical matter — knowing she is unable to work outside the home or control her own property, for instance — without recognizing such limitations as vestiges of the arbitrary exercise of male power, much less as features of a regime of male dominance that may not be the natural and inevitable order of things. This is the reality Wollstonecraft seeks to expose when she assails women for enabling their own subordination by adhering to societal norms of femininity. Again comparing women to “dogs” who “at first kept their ears erect,” she notes that “custom has superseded nature, and a token of fear is becoming a beauty” (2008a, 155).

While the implications of this phrasing — that women have a natural desire for freedom of a certain kind that male domination has suppressed — attest to Wollstonecraft’s naturalism (Botting 2016, ch. 2), they also provide a window onto her positive liberty leanings. Most evidently, Wollstonecraft suggests that if women properly appraised their competing desires and prioritized their more important purposes, they would make different life choices, consonant with their truer, higher selves. More subtly, Wollstonecraft’s complex understanding of the internalized mechanisms of women’s subordination is also on display here, particularly her appraisal of the way women may not recognize their subordination as such, and indeed, may even seem to welcome the object conditions of

their lives as satisfying and fulfilling. This crucial feature of Wollstonecraft's account is one that non-domination cannot capture. For how is a feminist concerned with freedom to respond when women embrace choices that seem self-defeating? How can "domination" be the explanation if women like what they choose?

Part of the problem seems to be that the "republicanism" to which Pettit, Halldenius and Coffee subscribe is greatly indebted to liberal individualism. As Pettit says, "the dominating party will always be an agent" (not a "system or network") and his dominating behavior will always be "intentional in character" (1997, 52). This brings non-domination closely in line with classic negative liberty theory's understanding of restraint as intentional agentic interference (Benn 1988; Flathman 1987; Hirschmann 2003, 28). Pettit stresses, and Halldenius and Coffee consistently echo, that non-domination differs from the negative liberty view of freedom as noninterference in that one may experience domination without ever actually being interfered with at all (Coffee 2014, 910–12; Halldenius 2015, 3, 20–21, 27; Pettit 1997, 22–23, 63–64). In Pettit's words, "I suffer domination to the extent that I have a master; I enjoy noninterference to the extent that that master fails to interfere" (1997, 22). Yet, as Hirschmann has argued, the very concept of domination presupposes the ever-present ability to interfere, which forms a systematic feature of the power structure. Without any material instances of interference, a master's dominating power will weaken, "the vigilance and self-restriction of the dominated will wane, boundaries will be tested and stretched" — and unless the master meets such tests with resistance, "domination can no longer be said to exist" (Hirschmann 2003, 27). Pettit's insistence that domination carries a valence beyond interference, while in a sense a welcome departure from negative liberty's simplistic conception, thus seems to fail on its own terms.

Wollstonecraft's argument, on the other hand, can be read as expanding and complicating the notion of interference, forcing us to consider how gainful self-actualization is both enabled and constrained by social context. For Pettit and Wollstonecraft alike, individual men are perpetrators in a regime of male dominance, but Wollstonecraft pushes further, suggesting that such a regime cannot *simply* be reduced to a string of actions by particular agents or to the intentions of particular men. Indeed, in Wollstonecraft's writing, male dominance cannot even be reduced to "men," per se, particular or collective, at all. Rather, the social context of patriarchy, in which men operate even as they perpetuate it, gives men's dominating behavior purchase, disguising its

partiality as the unfolding of a natural order in which men are superior and women subordinate, and yielding a reality in which both sexes not only play out their roles as such, but form their self-conceptions in these terms. Thus, contra the attempts of Pettit, Coffee, and Halldenus to distinguish domination from interference, Hirschmann suggests that domination “is often effective precisely because the interference that power makes possible is not noticed,” despite always being present. Indeed, the more a society succeeds in molding “subjects who conform to restrictive norms . . . the less aware of interference individuals, both the dominated and dominator, will likely be” (2003, 27).

Halldenus at times appears to see this point, stating that for Wollstonecraft, women’s oppression “is complete when they do not even regard themselves as unfree anymore” or when they “‘hug’ their chains of dependence,” seeming to contradict Pettit’s intentionality-driven account (2015, 7). She also identifies “patriarchy and structural subordination” as key targets of Wollstonecraft’s feminist republican critique, which would also seem to contravene Pettit’s agent-centric view (24). However, she simultaneously asserts that Wollstonecraft is able to critique patriarchy “while keeping and developing the conception of liberty as non-domination, or the freedom from subordination to masters” (24), directly reiterating Pettit’s central claims, which are based on both intentionality and interagent relations. She offers no comprehensive reconfiguring of what “domination” means, thus falling prey to the same objections made to Pettit. In a comparable gesture, Coffee credits Wollstonecraft with the prescient understanding that beyond their legal and political exclusion, women were dominated in an “especially subtle, pervasive and powerful form” by the prejudicial “customs, traditions and opinions” about things like women’s natures and men’s and women’s proper roles, “which made up the background culture in which Wollstonecraft lived” (2013, 123). This, too, might seem to acknowledge domination as a social force that transcends conscious, interagent relations. But Coffee shortly follows with the proviso that “domination, as a master–slave relationship, always represents a relation between agents, either individually or acting in concert” (124). To call women “slaves in virtue of their social background is not to imply that they are controlled in some abstract way by an impersonal system or force,” he continues; rather, “individually women were dominated” and “individual men possessed a controlling power over women” (124).

In short, attachment to Pettit’s frame of non-domination seems to confound some of Coffee’s and Halldenus’s most promising insights.

Neither acknowledges the tension between understanding women's subordination as acts of domination consciously meted out and recognized as such, and as a complex social and ideological phenomenon operating both consciously and unconsciously. This tension seems to beg the question: if women are dominated, often without knowing it and sometimes even seeming to revel in it, how are we to know they are dominated, and by whom? Might it be that Wollstonecraft's prescient understanding of the interaction of restraint and opportunity with desire, self-conception and preference formation does not fit these terms? We suggest instead that Wollstonecraft's ideal of freedom develops and anticipates more nuanced theories of self-realization generally associated with positive liberty, which non-domination cannot capture. We call it "subjectivity freedom," wherein "subjectivity" indicates an understanding of the self as a choosing subject situated in a specific time and place that produces it. Through this ideal, Wollstonecraft attends to obstacles to self-conceptualization and desire formation that the subject herself may not be able to recognize in current conditions of oppression.

WOLLSTONECRAFT'S VISION OF FREEDOM

To clarify, we do not reject the notion of freedom as independence that Halldenus and Coffee each promote: Wollstonecraft clearly argues that women are restrained and repressed by the male privilege of specific individuals, who prevent them from doing many of the things that they would like to do if left to choose for themselves. Wollstonecraft identifies many desires that women could and do have that are thwarted by patriarchal power. And she makes repeated use of the term "slavery" to describe women's situation, suggesting strong support for the notion that dependence is among the worst forms of restriction. All of these features link her to a standard "liberal" account of negative liberty as the absence of interference, as well as to certain republican visions, such as those Halldenus and Coffee offer, of non-domination.

Yet, viewing freedom as independence or the lack of arbitrary interference is an inadequate frame for Wollstonecraft's thought. First, she maintains that women are prevented not only from doing what they *do* prefer and even what they *would* prefer if their restraints were removed, but also from doing what they *should* prefer. Wollstonecraft severely criticizes women for tolerating their subordination, barely hiding

her contempt for their vapidty, foolish choices, selfishness, and passivity. She often seems to express more scorn than understanding for women who are “[p]roud of their weakness” and make themselves “insignificant and contemptible” (2008a, 230); such women enable their own subordination, acting not just as slaves, but as “despots” themselves, when they have the opportunity (e.g., Wollstonecraft 2008a, 124–125, 136, 260–61). Women who devote all their energies to making themselves attractive to men and “thoughtlessly adopt . . . the sentiments of these polite men . . . *who never* insult their persons,” precisely “deserve the contempt and obloquy” that these very same men “have pointedly levelled at the female mind” (177). Similarly, she condemns the coquette for ensnaring herself in the trap of femininity and the mother who ignores her children to consort with her would-be lovers (90, 126), and she more broadly condemns the all-too-commonly-found mother who “either neglects her children, or spoils them by improper indulgence” (233). In these moments, Wollstonecraft seems to blame women for their own situation: they have abetted their subordination, they have freely given up freedom. She displays a moralistic impatience for women who do not share her views; as Moira Ferguson says, “she has resisted these norms and short-circuited her own social construction, she deplores women who have not followed suit” (Ferguson 1992, 90).

However, Wollstonecraft vacillates between such condemnation and lamenting women’s victimization in having their desires and preferences distorted to such a degree that they themselves do not really know their own minds, or at least their best interests. She notes that the ideal of female modesty, which she considers a “natural” virtue that women would, absent their oppression, be able to realize, is only “a sickly hot-house plant, whilst the affectation of it, the fig leaf borrowed by wantonness, may give a zest to voluptuous enjoyments” (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 204). And in her critique of women’s being taught to think of themselves as primarily sexual beings, “creatures of sensation” (131) for whom “pleasure [is] the main purpose of existence” (130), she repeatedly stresses that women’s nature has been distorted, having “acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit” (130). “[M]ade by this amiable weakness entirely dependent..on man,” women’s training produces “a degree of imbecility which degrades a rational creature in a way women are not aware of” (131).

These latter aspects of Wollstonecraft’s theory, attesting to the ways in which women’s desires and even their identities are constructed by systems of male dominance, go beyond the liberal republican ideal of

independence to echo the ideals of positive liberty. This is evident in her demand for the positive resources women require to enact their negative liberty to do as they wish — such as education (esp. ch. 12), rights to control property, despite what she considers its corrupting influence (221–22), and career opportunities (228–31). More problematically, Wollstonecraft's naturalism permits her to claim to know what is best for women. Her language of vice and virtue similarly evokes positive liberty theory's penchant for "true interests" and forcing people to be free, for which Rousseau is particularly criticized, although more modestly, she might be charged with what Charles Taylor (1979) called "second guessing," declaring that women's professed desires for husbands and fine clothes are not reflective of what they would want if they were better able to discriminate among their competing goals.

These features of Wollstonecraft's argument, however, are a byproduct of a more complex aspect of her conception of freedom that comes from a positive liberty orientation, namely "subjectivity freedom," which bears on the desiring subject and the construction of her desires. As we see it, subjectivity freedom recognizes obstacles to self-conceptualization and desire formation that the subject herself may not apprehend, given her current conditions of oppression. But rather than declare what the subject's "true desires" ought to be, subjectivity freedom instead focuses on the conditions surrounding the creation of subjectivity and on maximizing the possibilities that subjects have for self-imagining. On this line of thinking, when Wollstonecraft critiques women's denial of education, property rights, and rights to employment and financial independence, we see her as not simply identifying blockages to action, but rather identifying forces that have constructed women's subjectivity so that they come to desire the conditions of their subordination.

Subjectivity freedom does not adopt the simplistic idea that women are merely socialized or "brainwashed," but it employs a notion of deep social construction in which everyone's subjectivity is inevitably produced by custom, ideology, law, language, and other social formations. Understanding desire and subjectivity as socially constructed in this way poses a paradox in terms of being able to break free of repressive conditions — indeed, even in terms of being able to differentiate between what is considered oppressive and what is not. Given that we are inevitably constructed, these constructions always influence the way that we see ourselves and the alternative possibilities we can imagine; we can never fully place ourselves outside of them to

imagine alternate subjectivities.¹ The quest for subjectivity freedom, then, is not to try to find a way to keep women from being constructed, but rather to define and implement the conditions that will enhance women's power and thereby maximize the possibility that they can "participate in the terms and processes of social construction" (Hirschmann 2003, 206).

Our reading of Wollstonecraft through this interpretive lens recognizes that she herself was not entirely able to "break free" of patriarchal constructions. This is particularly evident in her remarks about motherhood, such as her assertion that "whatever tends to incapacitate the maternal character takes woman out of her sphere" (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 263). Despite her brief and passing attention — only a few pages, without any engaged discussion (228–29) — to various careers women could pursue, her primary emphasis is on making women better wives and mothers, a tension with her educational goals that Virginia Muller (1996, 55) has also noted. Wollstonecraft devotes much of her essay to the perils of current mothering practices in conditions of subordination, in which she accuses the typical mother of failing "either to take reasonable care of a child's body ... or, to manage its temper so judiciously that the child will not have, as it grows up, to throw off all that its mother ... taught" (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 263). The advantages of the improved mothering that would result from women's equality are thus crucial to her account. "The management of the temper, the first, and most important branch of education, requires the sober steady eye of reason," she instructs (139), "yet men are unwilling to place women in situations proper to enable them to acquire sufficient understanding to know how even to nurse their babes" (263). She also stresses the importance of motherhood to women's citizenship, saying "nor will women ever fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens" (250), and that the "care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character," providing "many forcible arguments for strengthening the female understanding" (233). Even her strong advocacy of coeducation in national schools is based in part on the argument that it will promote early marriage, from which she believes "the most salutary physical and moral effects naturally flow" (254). All of these suggest a very idealized conception of what "natural" choices women should make.

1. Virginia Sapiro notes, although not in the context of social constructivism, that Wollstonecraft was troubled by the dilemma of how the mass of people, shaped by their "unenlightened society," might be able to envision new, uncorrupted social arrangements (1992, 235; see also 1996, 37).

This remarkable tension — between viewing women as oppressed victims, condemning women as colluding in their own oppression, and finding women naturally suited to motherhood, as long as they do it the right way — is, we argue, in part due to the fact that Wollstonecraft's dependence on the language of liberalism and individualism, particularly her recourse to terminologies of legal and economic independence, slavery, and individual rights and duties, sits in tension with her goals, which require a collective ethos and political effort. Hence, the temptation to read Wollstonecraft through a republican lens is understandable; it may seem like a way to reconcile the demands of individual freedom with community. Republicanism does not completely resolve this tension, however, because what is problematic about women's situation is not just domination or dependence — that is, that women have to serve others, or have their choices made for them because they lack the resources, legal and economic, to make choices for themselves. More systemically, it is that such dependence creates a set of practices, norms, and rules that prevent women from thinking and developing a critical perspective on what they observe around them. This, in turn, means that women are unable to choose lives that reject the existing framework and to imagine desires that extend beyond the boundaries of their existing context.

Wollstonecraft seeks and struggles to imagine such alternative realities for women. Though the ostensible purpose of her novel, *Maria: Or the Wrongs of Woman*, was to illustrate, in gothic fashion, the evils under which women live, it also fantasizes about a world in which the title character's hopes and imaginings — that she can save her daughter's life, claim control over her property, leave her husband for her lover, have sex out of wedlock without repercussion, and count on other women for solidarity and assistance — might come to fruition. But alas, most of these things do not: her daughter has (presumably) died; her husband remains a menace and she is unable to regain control of her property; the landladies on whom she relies betray her; and in various of the possible endings that Godwin resurrected from her drafts, her lover turns out to be unreliable and even deceptive. In one of these alternate endings, in fact, Maria commits suicide. In another, however, Jemima finds Maria's daughter alive after all, and they live together as a family. On a more concretely promising note, chronicled in *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, Wollstonecraft celebrates Norway as “the most free community I have ever observed,” with a remarkably egalitarian ethos (2009, 41). Yet the corrupting influence of wealth and

sexism remain even there, such as restrictions on women's inheritance rights. Wollstonecraft concludes that while these are the "least oppressed people of Europe," they will remain misguided "till politics, becoming a subject of discussion, enlarges the heart by opening the understanding," a prospect she tenuously pins on the French Revolution (42, 45).

Thus, although Wollstonecraft seeks an alternate reality, the reality with which she is faced leaves her unable to follow through and see where such imaginings might end. It is hard to fault her for this. Moreover, subjectivity freedom does not actually require that women reject the existing framework and pursue imagined alternate futures. But it does require that this be a realistic possibility, as otherwise, the choice to maintain the status quo cannot reliably be considered free. Freedom for Wollstonecraft is thus internal as much as it is related to one's external circumstances, the mental as much as the material, with these two dimensions mutually constituting and constantly reforming each other. It is not an absolute status, as advocates of the non-domination position claim, but a malleable power or potential — to imagine different desires, to want different things and to see them as appropriate to the self, which is as important as the lack of restriction on pursuing them, and this power is crucially related to social context. As Wollstonecraft suggests throughout her works, a woman's social context can equip her to play an active role in creating her own subjectivity, or, alternatively, it can deprive her of the resources necessary for this project so completely that she will not even be able to recognize their absence, rendering her part of a system that naturalizes her subordination and propounds it as truth.

Indeed, it is precisely because of the oppressive conditions in which they are brought up and through which they come to subjectivity that women cannot possibly determine their own paths, Wollstonecraft points out, for what reference point do they have other than their own constrained context? "Can dignity of mind exist with such trivial cares" as household duties or choosing material for a dress (2008a, 130)? "Women . . . are degraded by the same propensity to enjoy the present moment; and, at last, despise the freedom which they have not sufficient virtue to struggle to attain" (121). If women's subjectivity is produced to lead them to endorse the current social order, they will never be able to grasp, let alone challenge, the injustices and restrictions to which they themselves are subject. They will not see them, in fact, *as* injustices and restrictions. This goes beyond domination to social constructivism.

FREEDOM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SUBJECTIVITY

In the social constructivist model through which we read Wollstonecraft, she can be seen to anticipate what Hirschmann (2003) calls three “levels” of social construction: ideology, materiality and discourse. Wollstonecraft most obviously attacks patriarchal ideology’s claims about women’s weakness and irrationality — that women “were created rather to feel than to reason,” as she puts it (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 132). She maintains that women are not “naturally” this way but have been produced by the legal and social constraints placed on them. As she sarcastically notes, men have great time and expense laid out upon their acquisition of rational capabilities, yet are seen as naturally rational, while women are actively denied access to education, forced to learn embroidery and engage in gossip, and are deemed naturally irrational. She thus immediately sees the link between ideology and materiality, for ideology produces its own concrete reality, forming the second layer of social construction: “materialization” (Hirschmann 2003, 79). That is, ideological distortions produce concrete practices and conditions that make the distortions real, reinforcing the ideology and “materializing” it as the lived reality of women’s lives. In Wollstonecraft’s argument, the denial of education thus guarantees that most women will not have their rationality developed, ensuring that they live up to the reigning ideology.

This is particularly evident in her scathing critiques of contemporary male writers. Wollstonecraft scorns “Rousseau’s remarks, which have since been echoed by several writers, that [girls] have naturally, that is from their birth, independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking” as “so puerile as not to merit a serious refutation.” Instead, she points out that girls are simply responding to the conditions laid out for them: “That a girl, condemned to sit for hours together listening to the idle chat of weak nurses, or to attend at her mother’s toilet, will endeavor to join the conversation, is, indeed, very natural; and that she will imitate her mother or aunts, and amuse herself by adorning her lifeless doll, as they do in dressing her, poor innocent babe! is undoubtedly a more natural consequence” (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 109). Similarly, she condemns Fordyce’s “delusive flattery” of girls, which leads only “to vanity and folly,” asking bitterly “must [women] be taught always to be pleasing?” (169). The material denial of alternative means of economic livelihood requires women to focus on attracting husbands, generally leading to motherhood and confining them to the domestic domain. Hence ideology shapes the material conditions of women’s

lives, and those conditions in turn validate the ideology. “All our attainments, all our arts, are employed to gain and keep the heart of man” (176).

In these biting critiques, Wollstonecraft challenges the reasoning of her Enlightenment contemporaries, pointing out that if we carry Enlightenment principles of natural freedom and equality to their logical conclusions, we can see that the arguments against women’s equality are based not on logic or principle, but on sexist bias backed by power. What we would today call patriarchal ideology is false, a misrepresentation of who and what women are, yet it endures. Indeed, such distortions can persist despite empirical evidence to the contrary, and the more powerful the ideology, the less we are able to see these distortions as such. Moreover, even seeing them as distortions does not necessarily lead to their abandonment, as more than 200 years after Wollstonecraft wrote, women are still valued for their sexual attractiveness to men, childless women are often viewed as unwomanly aberrations, and women still earn lower wages than men for doing comparable work.

Wollstonecraft’s critique thus highlights the ways that patriarchal ideologies distort women’s lived experiences and truncate their abilities to imagine different lives. But her argument goes further still, suggesting women’s — and men’s — deep internalization of the discursive constructions of femininity, which the interaction of ideology and material relations produces. People inevitably “catch the colour of the atmosphere they breathe” (2008a, 140), Wollstonecraft explains, and even “men of the greatest abilities have seldom had sufficient strength to rise above the surrounding atmosphere” (109). This more complex layer of social construction intensifies the relationship between ideology and materiality, while at the same time holding the potential for its disruption: namely, the “discursive production of social meaning” (Hirschmann 2003, 81). At this stage, the materialization of ideology can be seen to produce a broader effect on language and cultural understandings of gender such that the very meaning of “woman” comes to be tied up with these ideological distortions and the material realities they have wrought. The power of these linguistic understandings feeds back into the ideology, furnishing its vocabulary and conceptual framework, as the relation between language, ideology, and materiality comes full circle, making it virtually impossible to imagine the word “woman” without also imagining the desire to marry and have children, or to think of femininity as consistent with a desire to become a chemist or a mathematician.

Thus, for example, although it is true that women seek husbands because they are desperate to survive economically (material unfreedom), and because they seek to fulfill romantic desires, no matter how delusional those may be (mental unfreedom), such behavior cannot simply be reduced to these terms. Rather, Wollstonecraft suggests, women desperately seek husbands because they have come to see their entire feminine identity, their value as persons — their subjectivity — as dependent on their sexual attractiveness to men and their ability to achieve the status of wife and mother. The “understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love,” she writes; the possibilities for a future in which women “cherish a nobler ambition” (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 71) have become severely circumscribed by a closed loop of ideology, materiality, and language.

This is a deeper layer to Wollstonecraft’s argument that freedom as independence, or freedom as non-domination, cannot reach. It is not just that women are encouraged to form one set of desires to which they have adapted; if that were the case, then changing material conditions would allow women’s “true” or “natural” desires for independence to manifest. It is plausible to read this as the case that Wollstonecraft makes on one level, but her vision is both more nuanced and more systemic. Women too, “in acquiring power . . . act as men are observed to act when they have been exalted by the same means,” she warns, becoming “capricious tyrants” (113). Hence even when women gain power, far from developing salutary self-regard, they tend to act like the men who have subordinated them, leaving the broader framework of normalized subordination intact. Accordingly, instead of an “adaptive preferences” account in which individual women adjust to the conditions of their subordination — which is the philosophy underlying arguments like Pettit’s, Coffee’s, and Halldenius’s — Wollstonecraft points to the deeper process by which women come to understand sex-based devaluation as intrinsic to their identities, their self-conceptions, and their orientation toward knowledge and relations with the world. As Kathy Ferguson has put it, it is not just that women are socialized to want certain things and not others, the point is rather the way in which “a subject on whom socialization can do its work is being produced” (Ferguson 1993, 129).

This third level of social construction, perhaps ironically, can be seen particularly in the most conservative aspect of Wollstonecraft’s theory, her remarks about motherhood. Her argument is obviously complex, combining elements of utilitarianism that are based on state interests —

that being better mothers and wives will not only make women themselves better citizens, but will produce the next generation of better citizens — with deontological claims about what is intrinsically good for women. To this end, being a mother seems central to Wollstonecraft's vision of the good life for women and to women's freedom. Even if this reflects her belief in natural law, why that belief takes this particular form, why it translates into the reiteration of the oldest and most common excuse for women's inequality and unfreedom, is puzzling. How can it be reconciled with her arguments for women's independence, formal education and access to professional careers? Despite a passing comment that women's equality, in making them better wives and mothers, will make men better husbands and fathers, she offers no vision of this better fatherhood entailing any share in primary care for children. She sometimes seems to have "women of a superior cast" (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 228) in mind when she discusses careers for women, which might minimize this conflict, but she also says that all women must "become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence" (250), and she is opposed to living with a household of servants, which others like Mill relied on to manage the combination of paid work and housework (Hirschmann 2008, 246; Mill 1991).

In one passage in the second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft offhandedly refers to the help of servants: "I have then viewed with pleasure a woman nursing her children, and discharging the duties of her station with, perhaps, merely a servant maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business" (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 223). Where do such servant girls come from in her new egalitarian, middle class society? Who will do the "servile part of the household business" if some level of social and economic inequality does not exist? Is she assuming that there are some in society who will inevitably fall short in natural talents and be fit only for menial labor like household service? Or is she imagining professional child care workers or cleaning crews as Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1898) did 100 years later? Even if she was, Wollstonecraft's breezy reassurance does not match the labor-intensive household economy of her day (Hill 1994). Perhaps she envisions this role for Jemima in the alternate ending to *Maria* — but how would this alter her characterization of such labor as "servile"? This casts an odd shadow over Wollstonecraft's argument. Just like her male counterparts in Enlightenment philosophy, the freedom of one group seems to be obtained at the cost of unfreedom for others (Ferguson 1992, 97–98).

We read this inconsistency in her work — between seeking an alternate reality of women’s freedom and yet replicating a moderated but idealized vision of the patriarchal family — as an awkward attempt to resolve the paradox of social construction. Wollstonecraft is struggling to come up with a truly new and different way of imagining women’s lives, aspirations, and desires, despite inhabiting a context and a discourse that has the destruction of those lives, aspirations, and desires at its core. Reading her in this way leads to an understanding of freedom that gets beyond liberal and republican ideals of independence, non-domination, and noninterference — though those remain important elements of her argument — to the social construction of subjectivity. To realize the “revolution in female manners” (2008a, 266, 281) that Wollstonecraft urges, the equality that other theorists maintain is most important to her theory needs to be extended to the processes of social construction. The paradoxical question of how to imagine radically different conceptions of femininity from the ones that define us in our contemporary moment, when that defining denies women access to the resources necessary to such imagining, is one that captivates Wollstonecraft. Yet, as we have noted, she is not entirely clear how to accomplish this transition.

THE SOCIAL SELF AND THE SPACE OF FREEDOM

Wollstonecraft’s approach to addressing this dilemma is generally seen to be the typical liberal-republican one, in which education is key: “one cause of this barren blooming” of women’s “conduct and manners . . . I attribute to a false system of education” (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 71). Education produces the ability to think rationally, and reason is key to humanity. On this line of thinking, again, the notion of freedom as independence seems fairly self-evident: education will help women learn how to reason, reason will lead them to independent thought, and independent thought will lead them to resist and fight restrictive customs and laws and eventually lead them to autonomous control of their own lives (88).

But despite her devotion to expanding Talleyrand’s proposal for national education to include girls alongside boys, Wollstonecraft also engages a more subversive project. She seeks to unmask the truth to women who resist acknowledging what they see (73). Just as Rousseau sought to cut through the seductive myths of contemporary society to reveal to men that they lived an illusion of freedom but were in fact enslaved by the corrupt influences of society, wealth and private interest, so does Wollstonecraft seek to reveal to women that the “illegitimate power,

which they obtain, by degrading themselves, is a curse.” And in Rousseauist tones, she recommends, “They must return to nature and equality, if they wish to secure the placid satisfaction” (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 87) of knowing who they are: of realizing their own subjectivity.²

Indeed, despite Wollstonecraft’s tendency to suggest that women’s true “nature” must be allowed to shine through, her argument has shown that women’s (as well as men’s) subjectivity is created through a social process. Even when a woman *is* able to pursue what she wants, that “self” who wants always exists within and is constantly being shaped by the surrounding context, such that her wants are never solely “her own” but are rather products of her individual situation within specific social relations. The issue of freedom, then, comes down to neither whether one is “mentally free” nor whether one is socially constructed, since we all always are constructed. It relates to *how* power constructs women in ways that either afford or foreclose space within which an oppositional consciousness like Wollstonecraft’s can operate. Her works, in fact, were crucial to creating such spaces for women, with their relentless critique of the inconsistencies in her contemporaries’ thinking about women.

As we accordingly read her conception of freedom — albeit at points belied by the liberal republican language of her day — unless women are active players in the processes of social construction, they will be less free than those who are active players, that is, men. No one, male or female, can simply “create” themselves *ab initio*; rather, we are all “always, already” constructed and constructing. But different valences of power enhance and decrease the potential for action in and control over those processes. As Wendy Brown puts it, “freedom neither overcomes nor eludes power; rather, it requires for its sustenance that we take full measure of . . . the powers that situate, constrain, and produce subjects, as well as the will to power entailed in practicing freedom” (Brown 1995, 24). Hence, in *Maria*, the wrongly imprisoned Maria must win over Jemima in order to get Jemima to leave her door unlocked (1975). The fact that Jemima has herself experienced severe sexist oppression is an important factor in Maria’s ability to connect with her. Jemima’s sympathetic response is made possible by their mutual experiences under patriarchal institutions; her

2. Wollstonecraft’s phrasing is “the placid satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart,” which she says in the context of despairing that women will be unable to reject “the regal homage that they receive” from men, which “is so intoxicating,” “till the manners of the times are changed” (2008a, 87). Her point is that the intoxication of male flattery blinds women to the ways in which their true interests and “natures” are subverted by their subordination, hence they will only be able to realize themselves in a differently ordered world.

story enables her to hear and understand Maria's. The commonality of their social situations — the abuse of men who have power over them — creates the mutuality of their sympathies. Building on this shared sensibility, together they formulate a plan to leave the asylum for a life of significantly greater empowerment, obtained through a cooperative relationship of interdependence, as particularly suggested by Wollstonecraft's second alternate ending in which the two live together, raising Maria's child. By contrast, despite tactics of resistance ranging from appeasement to buying him off to escaping and hiding, Maria is virtually powerless against her husband, who committed her and stripped her of her inheritance and child.

These elements suggest that Wollstonecraft is torn between the negative liberty elements associated with her liberalism and republicanism and a positive liberty vision that situates free subjects in relationships and recognizes the social construction of desire and preference. We propose that subjectivity freedom can help us understand and reconcile this tension by recognizing the need for individual selfhood and difference while simultaneously situating those selves in community. Indeed, we suggest that the theme of the social self is what rescues Wollstonecraft from her tendency to stress "the right sorts of desires," such as reason, virtue, and maternalism, and moves her from advocacy of positive liberty's vision of a "higher self" per se to the more complex conception of subjectivity freedom. For when Wollstonecraft speaks of "independent thinking," the "selves" that do this thinking and for whom "they" think are essentially social.

Freedom as non-domination recognizes the importance of community to Wollstonecraft's vision, but the notion of the social self goes beyond shared responsibilities like collective childcare, basic income, and other entitlements that would give individual women more material freedom, and even beyond calls to accord women a voice in public debate (as suggested by Coffee 2014, 917–19). Instead, it addresses how subjectivity is constructed. For a free subjectivity to be constructed by and for women, particular social relations must be developed, and those are the relations that Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication* is struggling to define. She insists on equality and respect for women, undeniably, but within the context of mutual interdependence, what we might call "recognition," for that is the only framework in which women share in the power and ability to participate in the processes of social construction necessary for subjectivity freedom. This not only entails but commends a kind and degree of dependence on others. For instance, the prominence of the theme in both *Vindications* that while reason may be natural, it has to be developed

and learned, implies that reason requires a certain degree of dependence on teachers and an educational system. Similarly, while in encouraging the families in which many women will be involved to take a more democratic, egalitarian form, Wollstonecraft argues for women's individuality, and in that sense, condemns their dependence on men, that is to establish new familial orders, not their end altogether. Thus, after she states that women can only "become free by being enabled to earn their own living, independent of men," in an effort to "prevent misconstruction," she goes on to paint a picture of mutual interdependence as opposed to the one-way dependence of women on men (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 250). So too, her heroine, Maria, is dependent on Jemima to help her escape; on her uncle for money and refuge; on her imaginings and memories of her child to keep clear in her mind the depravity of her husband and the urgent need to fashion a better future.

Indeed, all of Wollstonecraft's arguments for greater independence and individuality for women encode an ideal of situatedness in community, as advocates of a republican interpretation have noted (Coffee 2013, 2014; Halldenius 2015). But the social self involves a more comprehensive reconfiguring of the individual than merely one with a stronger valuation of community, as on the republican line. Accordingly, when Wollstonecraft advocates for the "rights of woman," she is arguing that women are part of a larger discourse and project about the rights of humans, as Botting has rightfully argued (Botting 2016). As she maintains, Wollstonecraft believes that women's rightlessness hurts the social fabric and that everyone will be freer in a world of equality. Likewise, she advocates educating girls and boys, rich and poor, all together (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 252–53). Equality is the foundation for respect (241, 259–60), but it is not equality per se that motivates her: it is the amelioration of sexual and economic difference, which reinforces the idea that we all participate in a shared understanding of the world, bound by reason, virtue, and duty toward one another. It is this participation that makes freedom possible, for even a so-called independent mind depends on many other people and on an appropriate social context.

Finally, and most significantly, Wollstonecraft's emphasis on mothering is also tied up with an argument that women's work as mothers is important to shaping the political and social context. As Botting argues, Wollstonecraft understood the family as the "affective space within which citizens are effectively formed," making it intensely political as well as social; the revolutions begun in America and France would thus not be complete until the oppressive patriarchal structures of the family were

overturned (Botting 2006, 131–32). Women, and the children they bear and raise, are not the property of individual men, but participants in a process through which individuality and humanity are produced, formed, and reproduced. This recognition of women's participation entails the further reimagining of freedom not as the ability of a disconnected individual to do what she wants, but rather the ability of a connected individual to develop her talents, potential, and abilities in concert with others in a shared social context. As such, it is not just that women need to fulfill their potential as individuals; the issue is for what end, and the end she seeks is a free society, to which all members give shape.

THE TRUE REVOLUTION

Wollstonecraft's "revolution in female manners" is thus not only about changing women as individuals so that they can stand up to men and gain their independence. Rather, it aims to "separate unchangeable morals from local manners" (Wollstonecraft 2008a, 113), separating natural principles of freedom and equality from the sexist attitudes that prevented their extension to women, to the detriment of society as a whole. This requires reshaping the social context that establishes the parameters and possibilities women have for imagining their lives and defining their subjectivity. In this, one might argue that Wollstonecraft has solved the ultimate Enlightenment problem of the tension between freedom and equality. For extending freedom equally to women requires the repudiation of strong individualism and the recognition that subjectivity — the essence of who we are as individuals — can never be divorced from social context.

Yet, in the process of this achievement, Wollstonecraft struggles with what later postmodernists were to identify as the paradox of social constructivism. Women have been constructed to be subordinate, to make themselves dependent on men, to eschew reason in favor of sexuality. But simply getting rid of these oppressive forces — this "domination" — is not enough for women's freedom, because their subjectivity has already been established in these ways, which severely constrains their ability to imagine themselves in any other way. New contexts, institutions, relations, laws and practices, as Wollstonecraft recommends, are necessary to create a different kind of subjectivity — but achieving them requires pushing back on the existing contexts, norms, and discursive practices that bound our very conception of reality.

Wollstonecraft confronts this paradox in the short term by laying out very particular ideals for what her “liberated” female subjectivity will look like: virtuous, rational, productive, modest, temperately sexual, and most importantly, maternal. These ideals, rather than breaking free of existing frameworks, often seem to replicate them in moderated form. We have argued, however, that contained within her texts is a vision of more systemic change, achieved through attending to processes of social construction, through which selves are produced and come to subjectivity. In this account, an understanding of freedom can be found that simultaneously extends the logic of Enlightenment principles and reveals their inadequacy. This sophisticated and nuanced vision of freedom both anticipates and offers a useful and important framework for thinking about freedom in the twenty-first century.

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