

# Tribute to Maria da Conceição Tavares

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## Abstract

This article is a brief tribute to the life and work of Maria da Conceição Tavares, a leading heterodox economist and central figure in Latin American economic thought. Through a chronological narrative, it analyses her theoretical contribution from her time at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to her period as a professor at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), as well as her involvement in Brazilian politics. The article highlights her role as a pioneer of Latin American structuralism, her critical analysis of the import substitution model and her ability to link quantitative approaches with historical and social perspectives. Tavares is remembered not only for her academic contributions, but also for her political activism and her commitment to social justice. She is considered a key figure in improving understanding of the region's current challenges in inclusive development.

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## Keywords

Women, economists, biography, tributes, thinking, ECLAC, economic history, economic development, development models, Brazil, Latin America

## JEL classification

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## I. Introduction



Maria da Conceição Tavares at a debate event held in the early 1990s.  
Source: Universidad Estatal de Campinas (UNICAMP), historical archives.

*The biggest problem in Latin America is not stagnation, but income distribution, which is very bad. That's the problem. That gives way to structural heterogeneity. This poor income distribution creates a structural heterogeneity based on the point of view of consumption and production. That is our problem, the problem of heterogeneity, not the problem of stagnation. (Tavares, cited in Fernández, 2021)<sup>1</sup>*

Maria da Conceição de Almeida Tavares, a Portuguese citizen and nationalized Brazilian, was born in Anadia on 24 April 1930 and died on 8 June 2024 in her adopted homeland, in Nova Friburgo, Brazil, at the age of 94. Her academic career led her to be considered one of the great heterodox economists of the twentieth century and the most important woman economist in Brazil and all of Latin America (Arestis and Sawyer, 2000; Pereira de Melo, 2019). Her eloquent theoretical contributions to critical Latin American and global economic thought are rooted in the work of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Tavares arrived in Brazil in 1954 with the clear goal of contributing to the development of a “tropical” country.<sup>2</sup> After training in mathematics and graduating from the University of Lisbon in 1953, the economics programme at the University of Brazil — now the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) — allowed her to expand her academic training and to learn new tools that would lead her to develop the first studies and assessments of the economic and social reality of Brazil, focusing on the country’s extreme income and wealth inequality.

Tavares joined the Brazilian public service as a statistical analyst in 1955, after passing the competitive exam of the National Institute for Immigration and Colonization. Between 1958 and 1960, she worked as a mathematical and statistical analyst at the National Economic Development Bank (BNDE). During that period, she also helped to develop Juscelino Kubitschek’s Targets Plan, as a member of the Executive Group of the Heavy Mechanical Industry. In 1960, she obtained a bachelor’s degree in Economic Sciences, graduating *summa cum laude* and receiving the University of Brazil’s Viscount of Cairu Award. In 1961, she resigned from the Institute to begin her teaching career as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Economic Sciences of the University of Brazil, working under her professor, Otávio Gouveia de Bulhões, one of the leading figures of orthodox economic thought in Brazil.

<sup>1</sup> Part of this interview, which was conducted on 25 May 2019, was published in Fernández (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Her own words, as conveyed in the documentary by José Mariani (2018).

During that period, she became interested in what she perceived to be the main problem of the Brazilian economy, since in 1958 she conducted her first analysis on income distribution in Brazil for BNDE and was shocked by the country's extreme income inequality. That experience drove her to try to understand the root of the problem and seek solutions. The proximity to Bulhões also enriched her training, as it provided her with comprehensive knowledge of quantitative theory and the models of the marginalist school (known as the neoclassical tradition), which she would later counter with solid arguments using both quantitative methods and theoretical frameworks incorporating history, sociology, politics and social sciences in general.

Between 1961 and 1974, Tavares was employed at the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA)<sup>3</sup> of the United Nations, which was dedicated to reflecting on economic issues and preparing assessments and public policy proposals to foster development in the region. She joined the ECLAC office in Rio de Janeiro in 1961, where she worked with Osvaldo Sunkel and Aníbal Pinto before being transferred to the Santiago headquarters in September 1968. During her time in Rio de Janeiro, she worked on the first studies on Brazil and Latin American structuralism with Antonio Barros de Castro and Carlos Lessa, her closest Brazilian colleagues. Tavares assumed the role of Deputy Director of the ECLAC-BNDE Economic Development Centre when Pinto returned to Santiago (Pereira de Melo and Moraes da Costa, 2019, p. 47).

Her contact and intellectual proximity with Raúl Prebisch, Celso Furtado and Aníbal Pinto at ECLAC were central to her career. However, that influence was reciprocal. From her early years as an economist, these men, who were at the forefront of the ECLAC theoretical approach, had a notable influence on her professional training. At the same time, Tavares' analytical creativity, her vast knowledge of mathematics, political economy and economic theory, as well as her great sensitivity and commitment to income distribution issues, quickly led her to become the first woman to participate in the development of ECLAC structuralist thought and, subsequently, to carry out a critical theoretical review, whose results served to develop economic theory at the international level.

During her time in Chile, in addition to her intellectual contact with structuralism at ECLAC, between 1968 and 1972 she was a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Latin American Economic Studies —a postgraduate programme of the Faculty of Economic Sciences of the University of Chile— and of the Latin American School of Sociology of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences. Both schools promoted robust critical training on Latin American affairs and became forums for dialogue among a wide range of social science professionals (including economists, sociologists, political scientists and historians), as well as spaces of political resistance for Latin American exiles in Chile. They formed a community of intellectuals whose ideological and political commitments had kept them in exile from their home countries for many years, but somehow, they were welcomed in Salvador Allende's Chile. Against that background, in 1971–1972, Tavares contributed to the public sector as an economic advisor to the Government of Chile (Pereira de Melo, 2019).

Upon her return to Brazil in 1972, she resumed her teaching activities at UFRJ (formerly the University of Brazil). She was immediately licensed to coordinate the Postgraduate Programme in Economics at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), and remained in that role until 1974. During that period, she played a fundamental role in the establishment and consolidation of the postgraduate centre, which was founded with the clear intention of becoming an academic centre of excellence, with theoretical rigour and critical, heterodox training on issues related to Brazil and Latin America as a whole. She was also a visiting professor at the University of Paris VII in France, the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Economic Research and Teaching Centre in Mexico. In 1974, she moved definitively to Brazil, where she worked as a professor at both UFRJ and UNICAMP, undertaking various coordination, management and representative positions. She was central to defining the training profile for economists in both higher education establishments and, more specifically, in their respective Institutes of Economics.

<sup>3</sup> At that time, the Commission did not yet include the countries of the Caribbean.

Tavares also contributed to the development of institutions representing economists, serving, for example, as president of the Institute of Economists of Rio de Janeiro in 1981–1982 and 1992–1994. She received countless awards and decorations from various institutions —such as the University of Buenos Aires, UFRJ, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, Ministry of Labour of Brazil, National Council for Scientific and Technological Development of Brazil, National Bank for Economic and Social Development, and the Jabuti Award for Economics, Management, Business and Law— and government agencies —including the Pedro Ernesto Medal of the Municipal Chamber of Rio de Janeiro, the Medal of Honor of the Inconfidência Mineira<sup>4</sup> of the Government of Minas Gerais, Order of Merit (Commander) of the Government of Portugal, and the Order of Bernardo O’Higgins of the Government of Chile.

Through her political activism, she answered her calling to help transform reality. She was initially affiliated to the Brazilian Democratic Movement party, serving as a member of its national executive body between 1980 and 1988, and played a fundamental role in advocating for the democratization of Brazil. She later joined the Workers’ Party and was elected federal congresswoman for the State of Rio de Janeiro from 1995 to 1999. Regarding her time as a congresswoman, she said that even in that environment, her most important role was that of teacher, critic and questioner of the status quo.<sup>5</sup> It was a complex time, with liberal ideas gaining strength in the country and worldwide. Democratization had arrived, along with neoliberal policies that sought to shrink the size of the State, which to Tavares was the most appropriate mechanism to steer the country towards a new development model following the abandonment of developmentalism; that is, one that was more suited to the characteristics of global capitalism in the late twentieth century.

At the risk of being overly simplistic in attempting to briefly summarize Tavares’ career, it makes sense to highlight her intellectual contribution on three main fronts: (i) theoretical, through the development of an economic theory in the context of ECLAC; (ii) educational, through her role as a professor and mentor of great Brazilian intellectuals and politicians at the Institutes of Economics of UFRJ and UNICAMP, which she founded; and (iii) legislative, for her engagement in Brazilian politics as a federal congresswoman for the State of Rio de Janeiro.

However, these three areas were simply a means of building a convincing, robust and contemporary narrative through which to present proposals for State action —i.e. public policies— aimed at transforming the reality of dependent developing countries and, in particular, improving the conditions of extreme income and wealth inequality among the Brazilian and Latin American working class, through the structural reforms needed to change the heterogeneity of consumption and production. The challenge of overcoming the structural heterogeneity of the countries of the region stemmed from Brazilian capitalism’s subjection to the interests of national and international financial capital. In addition to capital accumulation, that form of dependent capitalism included other political, social and historical elements that increased its dependence endogenously.

## II. Tavares’ stages of thought

Tavares’ vast body of written work has well-defined moments linked to the academic and institutional spaces in which she was active throughout her life: ECLAC, UNICAMP and UFRJ. Bielschowsky (2010) defines a historical (structural) periodization that divides her intellectual output into two stages: developmentalist (until approximately 1980), which aimed to understand the logic of Brazilian growth; and post-developmental (with the rise in neoliberal ideas), which focused on studying the causes of stagflation and lack of economic growth.

<sup>4</sup> Awarded annually in honour of Joaquim José da Silva Xavier, martyr of the eighteenth-century independence movement known as Inconfidência Mineira (Minas Gerais Conspiracy).

<sup>5</sup> See Mariani (2018).

Using these two major stages as a basis, her theoretical contributions can be classified according to her place of work, without losing sight of the common thread running through her work, which was to understand, explain and attempt to change the peripheral underdevelopment of Brazil and Latin America; the inner workings of the process of industrialization through import substitution; linkages with the endogenous elements of capital accumulation, consumption and income distribution; and the capitalist dynamics of a dependent and peripheral country like Brazil. Building on these themes, her later work addressed changes in global capitalist dynamics stemming from the international economic (dis)order, the return of North American hegemony<sup>6</sup> and the dominance of the financial economy over the real economy.

With reference to the developmentalist stage, the publications produced during her time<sup>7</sup> at ECLAC and, subsequently, at UNICAMP stand out. The first work that positioned her in the Latin American structuralist debate was “The growth and decline of import substitution in Brazil” (Tavares, 1964), in which she characterized and criticized industrialization as a process of import substitution in Brazil and Latin America, and described the model's operation, expansion, rise and fall. She argued that industrialization would not necessarily solve the problem of foreign currency shortages in peripheral countries and, particularly, in Brazil. While the process of import substitution would transform the production structure of some of the more qualified sectors, it would be limited by bottlenecks in the balance of payments, since production for the domestic market (inward) implied a demand for foreign capital assets, which ended up maintaining the disparity in the balance of payments, a structural characteristic of the countries of the region. That revealed a structural dependence that perpetuated underdevelopment.<sup>8</sup> Thus, industrial growth in peripheral countries would reflect a particular trend, in which the absorption of labour and consumption accompanying the import substitution process would eventually change the composition of imports, without reducing them (Bielschowsky, 2016, p. 15).

The second work that placed her at the centre of discussions at ECLAC was “Beyond stagnation: a discussion on the nature of recent development in Brazil”, co-authored with José Serra during her time at ECLAC in Santiago and published in Spanish in 1971 (see Tavares and Serra, 1973). That work was pivotal, as it helped to formulate arguments for interpreting the possible development “models” of the countries of the region, which was the analytical focus of ECLAC in the 1970s. It also provided solid arguments against the stagnation thesis, prevalent throughout the 1960s, on the attrition of the substitutive model in the region; in particular, the thesis of Celso Furtado, one of her great teachers, who published “Development and stagnation in Latin America: a structuralist approach” in 1965. In “Beyond stagnation: a discussion on the nature of recent development in Brazil”, Tavares analysed and interpreted the Brazilian economic crisis and recovery of the mid-1960s and, on that basis, highlighted particular aspects of the Brazilian economic development model that have given rise to a capitalist economy whose growth and development are extremely unequal. There are processes of expansion, diffusion and incorporation of technical progress and, at the same time, income concentration and a widening gap in consumption and productivity which, paradoxically, function as internal stimuli for the growth of the system. That publication launched a debate between concentration-oriented growth and the stagnation thesis, which remains active today.<sup>9</sup>

During that period, Tavares also dedicated herself to studying development financing. Influenced by the work of Ignácio Rangel, who saw the need to incorporate financial variables in the analysis

<sup>6</sup> In her essay “The resumption of North American hegemony” (1985), Tavares refers to the strong dollar policy implemented by the United States, which enabled the country to regain its economic and political hegemony.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the periodization of Tavares' work, Andrade and Silva (2009) define three phases (ECLAC, UNICAMP and UFRJ) and delimit them according to different theoretical reviews and contexts. Possas (2001) and Robilloti (2016) also present three phases (ECLAC, theoretical review and international political economy) and relate them to her most prominent publications.

<sup>8</sup> Prebisch (1950 and 1963) had already expressed his concern regarding the sustainability of imbalances in his foundational written work at ECLAC, but he considered that that situation would end once the import substitution process was completed.

<sup>9</sup> This debate was also taken up by Anibal Pinto in 1976, when, in “Styles of development in Latin America”, he made clear that industrialization through import substitution could occur without any improvement to the structural heterogeneity of the region's economies.

of Latin American structuralism, in 1967 she presented the paper “Notas sobre el problema del financiamiento de una economía en desarrollo: el caso de Brasil” at the Seminar on Short-term Monetary and Financial Programming (see Tavares, 1967); in 1972, she published “Natureza e contradições do desenvolvimento financeiro recente” (Tavares, 1972); and in 1978, as part of the selection process to become a tenured professor at UFRJ, she presented her thesis *Ciclo e crise: o movimento recente da industrialização brasileira*, whose fourth chapter was entitled “O sistema financeiro brasileiro e o ciclo de expansão recente” (see Tavares, 1998b). That research represented a novel effort at ECLAC to connect the analysis of the movement of the real economy, the movement of financial capital and peripheral capitalist dynamics.

With respect to the works published during her time at UNICAMP, her interests centre around capitalist dynamics, capital accumulation and income distribution. That period was marked by her theoretical revision of Latin American structuralism and of her own work, as well as a critical dialogue with political economists, especially Marx, Kalecki, Keynes, Schumpeter, as well as Steindl, Bain and Labini. She used Marx’s reproduction schemes divided into departments (producers of capital goods, capitalist consumption goods and mass consumption goods) to study the capitalist dynamics of the Brazilian economy. That phase of her intellectual career produced the idea of an “endogenous cycle” for the Brazilian economy (an early version of which was presented in “The growth and decline of import substitution in Brazil” and in “Beyond stagnation: a discussion on the nature of recent development in Brazil”), which was now supported by the theoretical use of Kalecki’s three-department scheme, inspired by Marx.

That represented an important turning point in Tavares’ work. As Nogueira da Costa (2019, p. 17) points out, Tavares’ publications of the 1970s and 1980s break with the ECLAC view of external determinants and turn to the sectoral analysis schemes developed by Kalecki to understand the developing capitalist economies. That rift was significant, as it sparked a critical discussion of the main theoretical foundations of ECLAC. It also led Tavares to a theoretical discussion that enabled a broader analysis of capitalism, through abstraction, while also gathering historical structural elements to understand a particular case. That is the type of analysis she applied to Brazil.

Her first work under that new approach was a theoretical article, published as part of a series analysing the debate on income distribution and development in Brazil, at a time when data from the 1970 national census in Brazil were being disseminated and the perception was that, after decades of rapid economic and industrial growth in the developmentalist stage, the concentration of income had worsened in Brazil. While the book was published in 1975,<sup>10</sup> Tavares’ theoretical article was presented at the first annual meeting of the National Association of Postgraduate Programs in Economics of Brazil in 1973. The original essay, entitled “Distribuição da renda, acumulação e padrões de industrialização: um ensaio preliminar” (1973), served as the basis for her teaching dissertation *Acumulação de capital e industrialização no Brasil* and her full professorship thesis *Ciclo e crise: o movimento recente da industrialização brasileira*, presented in 1974 and 1978, respectively (see Tavares, 1975, 1998a and 1998b). Therefore, although the texts were written and discussed with her colleagues at Campinas —Luiz Gonzaga de Mello Belluzzo, João Manuel Cardoso de Mello, Luciano Coutinho and Carlos Lessa (also a professor at UFRJ)—, they were presented at UFRJ and at a time when her connection with ECLAC was still active.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In the book *A controvérsia sobre distribuição de renda e desenvolvimento*, coordinated by Ricardo Tolipan and Arthur Carlos Tinelli, the first two papers are theoretical with a Marx-based methodology, the first written by Luiz Gonzaga Belluzzo and the second by Maria da Conceição Tavares. A review of both articles suggests that they were developed out of a joint effort or discussion. Belluzzo and Tavares undertake a high level of theoretical abstraction to intertwine the distributive variables with those of the production structure and the dynamics of accumulation in Brazil. In the remaining chapters, authors with critical perspectives and diverse political leanings present and discuss the 1970 census data. Fernando Henrique Cardoso wrote the preface of the book.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, in her 1974 thesis, Tavares thanks Fernando Fajnzylber, who was at the Economic Research and Teaching Centre in Mexico, for his contributions on oligopolistic accumulation in large companies, particularly international companies (see Tavares, 1998a, p. 19).

Regarding that period, Bielschowsky argues that Tavares' ingenious way of applying Kalecki's cyclical analysis to the Brazilian economy has two components. First, in the context of Brazil's "late capitalism", cyclical booms are intense, but short, and doomed to rapid decline because the size of the sectors producing capital goods and capitalist consumption goods is small compared to the economy as a whole. Second, the industrial sector and, in particular, the sectors producing capital goods and capitalist consumption goods, are both the fastest-growing sectors of the economy and those with the highest profit margins. That implies an increase in the share of profits in income and, consequently, the requirement that investments accelerate continually in order for profits to "materialize", which cannot continue indefinitely (Bielschowsky, 2010, pp. 198–199).

The post-developmental stage (rise of neoliberal ideas) occurred primarily during her time at UFRJ, from 1985 onward. That new stage of thought, which began with the publication of "The resumption of North American hegemony" (Tavares, 1985), lasted from her time at the Institute of Industrial Economics at UFRJ and continued up to her final written works. While it was characterized by discussions on the international political economy and transformations of the world economic order (or disorder), presenting a geopolitical vision to better understand how hegemonic centres are formed (Nogueira da Costa, 2019, p. 17), it also analysed the corresponding impacts on national economies and the macroeconomic adjustments or maladjustments in key variables such as inflation, interest rates, exchange rates and the relationship between those variables and wages and income distribution (Bielschowsky, 2010). Lastly, the 1986 publication "Problemas de industrialización avanzada en capitalismo tardío y periférico",<sup>12</sup> which was published by the Institute of Industrial Economics of UFRJ but belongs to the body of theory developed at UNICAMP, completed her discussion of the endogenous cycle.

### III. Continued relevance of Tavares' work

Tavares' thinking, her theoretical development and her invitation to reflect on the path of inclusive development in Brazil and in other Latin American countries remain fully valid today. The reflections drawn from a close and active reading of her written works, which became classics while she was still alive, point to the ongoing challenges of Latin America's dependent and peripheral development, as well as their potential solutions. Her work remains relevant to current challenges in at least three areas: the barriers to sustained improvements in distribution, subjugated to structural heterogeneity; the debate regarding concentration-oriented growth as a development model for the region, as opposed to the stagnation thesis; and the new multipolar global environment, which questions but does not delegitimize North American hegemony.

The first theme relates to the long-standing discussion on Tavares' original concern regarding distribution, in particular the concentration of income, wealth and property, and its link to structural heterogeneity in terms of consumption and production and as a constraint to the region's development. Latin American structuralist thought, as per ECLAC, offered various structural reform proposals to overcome such problems as early the 1960s and, more recently, the publications developed for the ECLAC sessions of the 2010s underscored their continued relevance. The issue of distribution moved to the centre of the debate to guide policy through a rights-based approach, given its effects on productivity, environmental sustainability, the development of the knowledge society and the strengthening of democracy and full citizenship (Curado and Fernandez, 2019).

The second topic, concerning concentration-oriented growth as a development model and the critique of the stagnation thesis, is related to the first and is presented as a debate rather than as a counterargument, since today both phenomena are occurring simultaneously: lower growth rates (without reaching stagnation)

<sup>12</sup> This article was written for the seminar on policies for Latin American development, organized by the Development Training Centre of the Secretariat of Programming and the Budget of the Government of Mexico and held between September 1980 and June 1981 (see Tavares, 1986).

together with a greater concentration of income, wealth and property. The expansion of the financial economy to the detriment of the real economy and the concentration of global production could further reinforce this situation, and Tavares' complex and robust body of theory serves as a basis for their analysis.

The last topic refers to the discussion on North American hegemony and the unfolding of a multipolar world, where the presence of China and remaining BRICS countries (Brazil, the Russian Federation, India and South Africa) as well as of the developing economies of Asia, is becoming increasingly important for the international engagement of the countries of the region. Strong currencies, the ability to make international investments in strategic sectors and infrastructure, new demand for natural and technological resources, and the expansion of accumulation in the financial economy to the detriment of the real economy characterize this new era and restore the countries of the region to their former positions in the international division of labour. The above-mentioned points raise fundamental questions about the nature of the region's dependency and its effects on development.

## IV. Final reflections

Maria da Conceição Tavares was a pioneer of Latin American structuralist thought and played a prominent role in the foundational discussions of Latin American structuralist development theory, which emerged at ECLAC under Raúl Prebisch and her teachers Celso Furtado and Aníbal Pinto, among others. She carried out a critical review of that body of theory and consolidated the Institutes of Economics of UNICAMP and UFRJ. Tavares was a source of inspiration through her energetic, combative and dissenting voice. She was a female leader in the male-dominated field of economics; accustomed to going beyond established thought, her forceful statements were imbued with a reasoning that sought to provide a better version of the reality under analysis, both intellectually —as an economist and professor— and politically.

Tavares was not only a brilliant economist, but also a tireless teacher, a fierce critic and a visionary who never lost sight of the struggle to transform reality. Her ability to combine complex mathematics and political economy, to challenge established dogmas and to inspire generations of critical thinkers is an unmatched legacy. From her years at ECLAC to the consolidation of the economics programmes at UNICAMP and UFRJ and her courageous foray into politics, each stage of her life was marked by her passion, intellectual rigour and social commitment. Tavares not only thought of a “tropical development model”; she lived it and taught it with patience and audacity.

In addition, she not only theorized about inequalities, but also fought to reduce them, from both the academic and political spheres. As she herself said:

A formação analítica de um economista, sobretudo a de um professor e pesquisador, deve passar por todas as tradições e guardar delas a distância necessária, para não ser aprisionada, pelo seu método. Cada um deve refazer por si mesmo, com paciência e audácia, o estilo de análise que lhe parecer mais conveniente na luta pelo conhecimento, na luta por “conhecer o mundo” e “tentar mudá-lo”, na medida que lhe permitirem as suas próprias forças e as forças sociais ante as quais se situa<sup>13</sup> (Tavares, 1998b, p. 12).

Today, her work lives on, reminding us that it is possible to combine theory with action, critique with hope, and economics with humanity. Maria da Conceição Tavares was, and will continue to be, an essential teacher for understanding and transforming Latin America.

<sup>13</sup> The analytical training of economists, especially that of professors and researchers, should pass through all traditions while keeping a necessary distance to avoid being imprisoned by their methods. With patience and audacity, they should develop the analytical style they find most convenient in the struggle for knowledge, in the struggle to “know the world” and “try to change it”, to the extent that their own strengths and the social forces before them permit.

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