

# Preliminary reflections on an eco-social civilization model for the 21st century\*

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## Resumo

*O texto examina as implicações das mudanças da ordem mundial para a Europa. As alternativas para esse continente em crise são ou a defesa de sua posição e das instituições contemporâneas de desenvolvimento desigual ou a necessidade de adaptar-se a um papel mais modesto, a outro tipo de desenvolvimento, internamente orientado, socialmente inclusivo e dirigido aos recursos disponíveis internos à própria Europa. Este último modelo implicaria ruptura com o atual modelo exclusivista e externamente orientado, baseado no capital financeiro e nas exportações. Ele implicaria ainda inovações sociais, unidade na diversidade, de forma a garantir uma boa vida, promovendo laços de solidariedade.*

## Palavras-chave

**Crise; Europa; civilização eco-social.**

## Abstract

*The text examines the implications of a changing world for Europe. The alternatives for this continent in crisis are or the defence of its position and the current institutions of uneven development or the necessity to adapt itself to a more modest role, an another type of development, inward oriented, socially inclusive and geared toward using the resources available within Europe itself. This last model would imply a rupture from the the current outward oriented and exclusionary model based economically on finance capital and exports. This new model would imply in social innovations, unity in diversity to enable a good life by fostering bonds of solidarity.*

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## ***Key words***

***Crisis; Europa; eco-social civilization.***

**Classificação JEL: o52.**

# **1 All that is solid melts in the air**

A new world is emerging, one that will be different from the hierarchical centre-periphery relationship based on the hegemony of the West. This new world, however, emerges out of an order shaped by five centuries of imperialist and capitalist modernization and the respective paths followed by nations and regions over the last centuries. It will not emerge overnight, without backlash and without efforts by the still dominant USA to maintain as much control as possible. And it will not necessarily be a better world. The concrete outcome of these transformations will be shaped, as has always been the case in the past, by social and political struggles, by violence and force as well as competing efforts of antagonist interests to win the hearts and minds of the people for different socio-economic and cultural visions and models.

The inspiration for the following reflection comes from my studies on Brazil (Fernandes; Novy, 2010; Novy, 1994, 2001a), a nation state composed of diverse cultures, but profoundly shaped by European dominance as well as by intellectuals who were deeply entrenched in the best of political and intellectual heritage Europe can offer (Fiori, 1995; Furtado, 2007; Oliveira, 1987; Tavares, 1969). Brazil, a country that ten years ago was enmeshed in neoliberal depression and suffering from widespread frustration about democracy (Fiori, 1995a; Sampaio Júnior, 1999), is now experiencing dynamic transformations. Political and social changes taking place in Brazil resemble the golden age of European development after World War II: Raising wages as well as increasing social security nets together with the utilisation of national production capacities. Policies implemented by ex-President Lula and Dilma Rousseff, his successor, show that a socially inclusive form of democracy is not only possible, but leads to positive results and broad popular support (Barbosa, 2010), similar to what happened in Europe during the 20th century. Unfortunately, this rich social and cultural heritage is currently dismantled in Europe. This article is a reflection on my own perplexity about the lack of enthusiasm in Europe about the ongoing transformations in Brazil — 30 million people less who are poor, 15 million new formal jobs created in eight

years — as well as the astonishing lack of respect for one's own past struggles and institutions in Europe — the tremendous achievements of the workers movements and citizen initiatives, as well as our passivity facing the destruction of social cohesion and solidarity at home.

I will focus on the implications of a changing world order for Europe, a continent in crisis, being aware that what is good for Europe is not necessarily good for the world. To give due importance to the specific context of Europe as one of many different world regions is the opposite of Eurocentrism, as the latter uncritically assumes Europe to be the — ethically superior — norm and reference for analyzing and evaluating development in other parts of the world. Europe is still one of the richest regions of the world. Although it has adapted to the role as junior partner of the US, it has not — as we are currently witnessing in Libya — overcome its colonial inclination to help, police and control the rest of the world. Adapting to a more modest role will pose crucial challenges and require broad conscientisation. Will Europe try to defend its position and the current institutions of uneven development, be it via NATO, World Bank or the IMF? Or will it perceive the necessity and potential to shape another type of development, one which is more modest, inward oriented, socially inclusive and geared towards using the resources available within Europe itself? This would imply a rupture from the current outward oriented and exclusionary model, based economically on finance capital and exports and politically on arms and the mission to spread the European model of democracy, markets and human rights.

## **2 Europe: Capitalism's latest victim**

Past transformations have always taken place without changing the profoundly uneven character of capitalist development. Current challenges of Western supremacy and a potential shift in geoeconomic power must not be confounded by a terminal crisis of capitalism. What is emerging in parts of the Global South are varieties of capitalist development, more or less liberal, inclusive, democratic and competitive. Different from the political liberation of the colonized territories and the block-free movement of the 1950s and 1960s, current geopolitical changes are backed by increasing economic power. Industry is moving to the Global South and with it power, technology, capital and control (Arrighi, 2008).

While the European vision of the good life for all in a capitalist consumer society, the social democratic aspiration of a car for everybody or at least every household, inspires the creation of welfare capitalism in emerging countries, Europe and North America are confronted with a different political and economic situation. The North Atlantic West is, for the first time in its 500 year old world dominance, faced with a situation in which

the rules of the capitalist world economy are, slowly but steadily, turning themselves against their creators (Arrighi, 2005, 2005a). While there were shifts of hegemony over the last 500 years, they remained within the West itself: From Genova to Holland, Britain and in the 20th century to the US. Finally, world gravity might change in this century beyond the “West”.

This conjuncture is profoundly different in the West and the “rest” — to use a distinction from Stuart Hall: Europe and the USA, the dominant Centre, are suffering from financialisation, the spread of a speculative mood, and the difficulty to find productive investments for excessive capital. This turns them into “rich, but indebted countries”. In many of the emerging countries of the Global South, growth rates and accumulation of productive forces remain high. Without denying the dangers of climate change and the constraints imposed by ecological destruction which results from spreading the American way of life to the world, there is a potentially emancipatory future for the Global South moving towards welfare capitalism, imitating and innovating the consumerist way of life of Europe and North America (Dunford; Yeung, 2010; Fernandes; Novy, 2010). This model of capitalist development creates a world middle class and spreads a way of life which until recently was limited to Europe, North America and a few other islands in the world economy. The result is a massive reduction of poverty in countries like Brazil and China, while inequality and insecurity increase within most of the nations — Latin American countries are an exception — and huge segments of the Global South remain stuck in poverty and hunger. But the latter has never been an impediment to capitalist modernization.

But this is no option for Europe, a continent composed of “rich, but indebted countries”. Therefore, spatially differentiated strategies of progressive political movements are required. I may be wrong, but progressive forces in the Global South might be able to limit themselves to regulate capitalist development, so that social inclusion and ecological sustainability are achieved. Anyhow, it will not be up to Europeans to decide on this. Europe, however, has to be more radical. It has to go back to its roots, to identify feasible strategies for its civilization model in the 21st century. It faces the challenge to manage decline intelligently (Arrighi, 2009, p. 83). Will Europe, creator of capitalist modernization as the driver of a specific form of progress, be able to elaborate a less aggressive and destructive civilisational model at home, a form of civilization which is less obsessive in controlling other parts of the world and focuses more on conviviality, social cohesion and sustainability internally? This would be a paradigmatic shift in Western habitus which seems remote given the current *Zeitgeist*, ideologies, political forces and institutions. But it is not illusionary, as Europe is increasingly suffering from capitalist competition. This is the reason why anti-capitalist sentiments are widespread in populist and

extreme right political forces. Systemic changes which make Europe less vulnerable would be in its very self-interest.

### **3 A Good Life**

The starting point for my Euro-focussed search for an eco-social civilization model is philosophy and the antique Greek. The idea of a good life is an old preoccupation which already inspired philosophical deliberation in the antique Greek Polis, a public place for free citizens (Colson; Fickett, 2005). The good life, that was the common denominator, is a life that permits human flourishing and happiness. While concrete suggestions varied, there was a certain pragmatic understanding that the good life is related to the care for oneself, a happy, but moderate conduct of life (Foucault, 1989, 1989a), but one that is aware of the value of public deliberation and the common good (Arendt, 1998). The human flourishing of male property owners went, however, hand in hand with the exploitation of slaves and the subordinate position of women and foreigners: It remained a good life for the few. To this day, to construct civilizations that offer a high quality of life for segments of the population has remained the key characteristic of elitist socioeconomic systems.

It was up to the French Revolution to question class and political privileges: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity became the slogan of an historical inflection of democracy, the government by the people. The idea was so revolutionary that it was not digested immediately, but led to ongoing discrimination by class, gender and ethnicity (Canfora, 2006; Klinger; Knapp; Sauer, 2007; Klinger, 2010). Olympe de Gouges was decapitated by the guillotine, the struggle for slave liberation in Haiti combated by European powers with all means. However, the vision of Enlightenment, the joint flourishing of equality and freedom, started to challenge the idea that a few have the privilege to conduct a good life while the rest is born to serve. It was a concern that is best summarized in the creed that “[...] the flourishing of everybody is the condition of the full human flourishing of all”, a dictum that resonates more a biblical psalm than a slogan from the Communist Manifesto. But it was written by Marx and Engels (Marx; Engels, 1986).

The 19th century took up the idea of liberty, more precisely the freedom of the propertied classes, the successful citizens, who were able to accumulate and to consume. They obtained civil rights which protected them from state arbitrariness. As they had money, they were able to consume what was manufactured. “Social wealth appears as a formidable collection of goods”, with this words Karl Marx opened his opus magnum (Marx, 1986). But it remained a divided class society and a consumer society for the few. And it went hand in hand with colonialism and imperialism, exploitation and

discrimination (Hobsbawm, 2003). For decades, popular struggles for civic and social rights, strikes and the organization in mass parties challenged the existing order. Although defeated temporarily, the correlation of forces changed positively after the world depression in the 1930s and World War II.

The 20th century was a period of huge innovations in the macro institutions of modern societies. Red Vienna, like many other innovative forms of municipal socialism at the beginning of the 20th century, fostered a political culture against class privileges and authoritarianism (Novy; Hammer; Leubolt, 2009). The New Deal and other innovative responses to the World Economic Crisis of the 1930s legitimized a socially inclusive form of democracy. After the war, the constitution of social citizenship, conceding social rights to all citizens, turned out to be the most effective policy to strengthen liberal democracy and the rule of law. Civic, political and social rights went hand in hand (Marshall, 1950). The result was a dramatic shift of huge parts of the population from marginalized workers to consumers and citizens during the 20th century. The welfare state was the pillar on which the middle class society of the 20th century was erected in the Global North: Cars for everybody is the emblematic expression of this credo. It was a unique realization of the good life for all who were part of a certain territory and people, famously expressed by the Swedes as “people’s home”, understood as full employment and generalized social security (Esping-Andersen, 1990). For a few decades it became the leitmotif of an anti-Fascist consensus: To avoid social unrest undermining the pillars of liberal democracy, society has to offer a good life for all. A socially inclusive form of democracy was perceived as the key ingredient of social peace, cohesion and individual flourishing (Bowles; Gintis, 1986; Canfora, 2006a). Even limited to a national power container and the respective repressive handling of outsiders, foreigners and migrants, it was a huge progress in relation to exclusionary liberal capitalism. Nevertheless, it remained within the constraints of capitalist consumerism, a labour regime based on exploitation and its focus on commodities for the satisfaction of human needs.

Egalitarian achievements were undermined by neoliberalism as a deliberate class project in favour of the concentration of power in the hands of a few, apparently the fittest (Harvey, 2005a). Inequality is a main trait of current supply-side policies to enhance competitiveness. Neoliberalism undermines the national power container, shifting power towards corporations and the finance sector within nations and on the world market. The hollowing out of the welfare state results in raising inequality (Perrons; Plomien, 2010; Wilkinson; Pickett, 2010) and increasing insecurity of the middle classes (Herrmann, 2010). The fringes of the continent — from Ireland to Portugal, from Greece to the Baltic countries — are already abandoning the prospect of welfare capitalism, increasing class cleavages and social disintegration. Currently, it is pure decline without emancipatory

perspectives. Social inequality increases and the fruits of welfare are harvested by less and less (Becker, 2010; Hadjimichalis; Hudson, 2007).

Europe is a continent composed of small nation states. Territorial fragmentation dates back to the Westphalian treaty in 1648. It was increased by the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire which resulted in *Kleinstaaterei*, the building of many small nation states (Hobsbawm, 1990). During the 20th century, more and more of these small states became the territorial units of institutionalized political democracy and social security. In 1957, European integration started with the Treaty of Rome. It deepened economic integration and led to a specific transnational mode of governance. Until recently, Europe was proud of this unique governance model which — so the argument — has substituted hierarchical and bureaucratically organized governments. It was a specific form of politics of scale, of mobilizing spatial arrangements and scale to shift the correlation of power. Creating a supra-national entity without a clear model for democracy, social security and sustainability, has been instrumental to implement neoliberal economic policies and has isolated economic decision making from democratic accountability (Anderson, 2009; Canfora, 2006; Leubolt; Novy; Beinstein, 2007). Thereby, it has put Europe on a neoliberal path which decision maker did not even abandon after 2008. The costs of liberalization and privatization have been borne by the public, resulting in soaring public debts and austerity measures (Klatzer; Schlager, 2011).

There is more than one reason to be pessimistic about Europe's future in a capitalist world economy. A realistic evaluation has to be pessimistic, assuming a spiral movement of decline with unpredictable results: The current efforts to substitute an already problematic compromise between social cohesion and competitiveness, as defined in the Lisbon agenda, with a "competitiveness pact" shows the radicalisation of neoliberal obsession in Europe (Apeldoorn; Drahokoupil; Horn, 2009). The outcome of this ongoing efforts to achieve balanced budgets and increase competitiveness is the opposite of the expected: Europe's economic supremacy in the world is eroding quickly (Küblböck; Jäger; Novy, 2010). Today, public debt is higher than at the beginning of the 1990s, when the Maastricht criteria were introduced as guidelines for European policy making. And they have exploded from 2007 onwards due to the rescue packages for the financial sector (Klatzer; Schlager, 2011). In Europe, secular spatial hierarchies of centre and periphery, the East — West, North — South cleavages, have dramatically increased over the last years, as the burden of unequal development and unbalanced trade and current accounts is mainly carried by the periphery (Hadjimichalis, 2011). The competitiveness pact punishes countries with a negative trade balance and increasing real wages, without problematising wage constraining policies and the growth model of the export economies, especially Germany (Becker, 2010; Unger, 2010). This

makes organized politics, social planning and coherent efforts to build solidarity and to implement ecological innovations more difficult. The only rudimentary democratic, but highly fragmented form of European governance and the absence of a viable substitute for the lack of a European government increases the problem (Leubolt; Novy; Beinstein, 2007). While the European elites, isolated from democratic accountability at the EU-level, stick to economic liberalism, there is an increasing sentiment of decay. Nostalgia of post-war welfare capitalism, of a past that shines brighter than the future, is spreading (Judt, 2010; Sennett, 2003).

## 4 Territories and social innovation

The current multiple crises which have affected Europe deeply have inspired the search for alternatives. Over the last years, the movement for another globalization has introduced a utopian and cosmopolite perspective opposing neoliberal TINA — There is no alternative (Harvey, 2000). Since 1999, a broad social movement has re-affirmed that another world is possible! This movement has always criticized nationalistic policies and exclusionary policies based on insider-outsider arrangements. Thereby, it has aimed at a new form of planetary responsibility and proposed rethinking the spatial imaginary due to globalization. But globalization has always been a rhetoric in favour of liberal reforms, more a discursive affirmation than a reality of world-wide geoeconomic dynamics (Novy, 2001). Correctly, scholars have drawn attention to the importance of a relational concept of space, be it networks, linkages or commodity chains with nodes as organizers. But, as often in the obsession with en vogue “turns”, be it linguistic or spatial, there is the danger of dualistically affirming the opposite as correct: Networks, so the story goes, instead of territories should offer the spatial imaginary to describe economic development; economic power, so the apologetes of so-called globalization, instead of political power explains world development (Castells, 1998). Thereby, the baby has been thrown with the bath water, or to use the academic language, dialectics has been substituted by dualism. But spatial analysis has to be dialectical, as the key characteristic of space is the dialectics of the fixed and the fluid, as David Harvey has remembered us time and again (Harvey, 1985, 1989, 2005). This dialectics of being and emerging, of change and stability, as expressed in the dialectics of space and place, of linkages and territories must not be reduced to a simplistic flow — and network — based conception of current spatial development (Hadjimichalis; Hudson, 2006; Sassen, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2004). There is always the search for a spatial fix which stabilizes economic and political dynamics, accomodating class struggle and



social and political conflicts in general as well as institutionalizing a new territorialized order.

Dominant interpretations of globalization have stressed the novelty of the current conjuncture of increasing global interdependencies, but have not sufficiently taken into consideration the long struggle of progressive movements especially in Europe and North America, culminating in the 20th century. Most of the social innovations which are discussed in academia and implemented in thousands of initiatives have a territorial base, a phenomenon reinforced if ecological concerns are taken seriously (Moulaert; Nussbaumer, 2005, 2009). Social innovations, like participatory democracy in the neighbourhood as well as participatory budgeting and planning for regional development are steps to empower citizens locally. Solidarity economy and flourishing regionalized markets as well as innovative forms of public service delivery are further means of organizing socioeconomic development with and for the people (Drewe; Klein; Hulsbergen, 2008; Leubolt; Novy; Becker, 2008; Martinelli, 2010). All this has to be organized in specific territories, from neighbourhoods to regions, and it has to be embedded in supra-local regulations be it nationally or — as in the case of Europe — on a continental scale. And territorial arrangement always lead to insider-outsider distinctions, even if social closure is defined in a more permeable and fluid way.

While theories on financial markets, global commodity chains and global cities focus on networks and linkages between sites, nodes and places, concern with the struggle for access to resources, and geopolitics, especially war and revolution, requires a more balanced perspective with respect to territories. The lessons from capitalist modernization over the last centuries, as described by Braudel and Arrighi, indicates that a territory, a power container, is a constraint as well as a prerequisite for capitalist development. Territories are important spaces in geoeconomics and geopolitics. Currently, however, the focus has shifted from the small to the big nations. This is a problem for Europe composed of small nation states. As theories of national economic development in the 19th century like List were well aware, size is a crucial element for successful national development in capitalism. With respect to inhabitants, the EU as a whole still hosts more people (502 mi) than Brazil (190 mi), but well below China (1.333 mi). The territory of the 27 member states of the EU, however, covers only 4.324.782km<sup>2</sup>, while Brazil as one nation state covers 8.514.877km<sup>2</sup>, a little behind China with 9.571.302km<sup>2</sup>. With adequate policies, as they are currently implemented, the emerging national economies are rapidly becoming bigger markets than the old European power. While China will overtake the US before 2025, Brazil is currently overtaking all European national economies with the exception of Germany.

The world is becoming multipolar, based on territories which create their context-specific forms of accommodating freedom, equality and solidarity. Common deliberation and decision making within the UN-system plays a key role in securing minimum standards of human rights, democracy and social development worldwide without simplistic and premature interventionism. But context and democracy matters. Therefore, every territory has to choose its specific socioeconomic model. Specificity has to be valorized. This is in tune with postmodernism which criticized modernization as uniformising, neglecting nature and destroying difference (Harvey, 1989). This criticism was radicalized by postcolonial and post-development views, which centered criticism on the West as dominant, oppressive, expansionist and imperial. While correct in many aspects of past and current practice and thinking of the West, it does not sufficiently grasp the internal dynamics of Western modernization and their liberating effects — from slave to women liberation — nor the creative and courageous struggles in Europe itself of those from below.

Political strategies to achieve a good life for all have to be context-sensitive and require a dialectical understanding of space and history. There does not exist a single globally valid solution. Territories have to be sovereign, democratic power containers with a set of rules valid within, while permitting the maximum of permeability to avoid discrimination and to respect universal human rights. Therefore, Europe is not the centre, but one territory in the world — which requires specific strategies to promote the good life for all in this continent. To dwell on the elaboration of an eco-social civilization model for Europe will be the focus of the final section of this article.

## 5 Towards a return home

Europe is in a deep crisis, a crisis with multiple dimensions but determined by the crisis of neoliberal capitalism and the elitist European governance. This is dramatic, but offers perspectives for systemic transformations. Looking back, it were often the disasters which led to progressive changes, be it social legislation after World War I or the consensus on social citizenship after the world depression and Fascism. In multiple struggles during the 20th century, Europeans, the masses as well as the middle class, were struggling for basic needs, dignity, democracy, social rights and a good job. For decades, Europe obtained a development model of welfare capitalism which aims at offering a good life for all inhabitants within a national power container. With all its limitations and taking into consideration the high costs at home — war, fascism, genocide and dictatorships — not to talk about colonialism and imperialism, the national

welfare regimes remain crucial points of reference for future strategies. It was the most advanced civilizational model with respect to equality and equal freedom for all, even within the straightjacket of consumerism and class cleavages. Culturally, it created a middle class society, a society dominated by universal modes of living and working. In Europe, the challenge for the 21st century consists in safeguarding these achievements, while overcoming the capitalist accumulation imperative, the cultural limitations of consumer society and the lack of awareness of the socio-ecological embeddedness of socioeconomic development.

Without denying the enormous costs of modernisation and the destiny of a much too long list of victims, there is a long and slow historical movement of European societies to offer a good life to an ever increasing part of the population. This inspires creativity, increases audacity and gives hope for future struggles. Emancipatory strategies require a path-sensitive approach, one that values past struggles and achievements. I will give a recent example. The shift from individual to collective bargaining resulted in a specific Fordist arrangement of the wage relation (Aglietta, 1987). Trade union leaders negotiated wages for a whole occupation group as a collective. Collective bargaining, the homogenous political negotiation of wages and salaries within a clearly delimited territory, is an important ingredient of human dignity and workers standard of living in the West. It was a top-down form of corporatism which led to the bureaucratization of trade unions, to corruption and a lack of internal democracy. All this was with good reason criticized by left activists and intellectuals. Unfortunately, the progressive content of a political negotiation of wages valid for a whole territory was not sufficiently appreciated until the frontal attack on collective bargaining and union power in Wisconsin, US, in 2011. This has to change, if future struggles should be successful.

In Europe, consumerism has gone hand in hand with increasing individualism, a focus on leisure and disinterest in common affairs. But conformism and resignation have never remained the normal path of European development for long. There is hope, and it lies in the West's rich legacy to struggle for a good life for all. None of the achievements of welfare capitalism, be it social rights or democratic participation, was granted due to the good will of policy makers, but were fought for in political struggles, obtained with sacrifice and blood, with revolutions and wars. And many of the revolutions were fought for with the desire to return to a past which got lost due to exclusionary, authoritarian or oppressive modernisation. In the past, the price paid for social progress was often very high. All too often, economic scarcity, crisis and war were the masters for historical lessons. It might be Europe's fate again. But this is no necessity and it should be avoided — with nearly all means.

But decline does not necessarily result in decay. Another future for Europe is possible, one based on the best European history has to offer: To permit unity in diversity, to enable individual flourishing by fostering bonds of solidarity. An emancipatory step forward in Europe will be made by struggling for a European social citizenship as a prerequisite for social cohesion in European cities and regions (Novy, 2010). This does not mean a uniform Europe — wide system of entitlements, but place — and inhabitant-based arrangements which enable everybody to conduct a good life: access to public transportation and health, good schools as well as an affordable old-age insurance. Obviously, this requires social innovations to organize mobility for all, care-taking for all as well as good and useful work for all. Democratically decided Europe-wide regulations will have to be based on the principles of a mixed and regionalized economy and markets will be freed from the monopoly power of big corporations. And all this embedded in a global governance structure based on common values and mutual respect.

This sounds utopian and it is indeed an audacious vision. But it is a vision deeply rooted in the European memory of the 20th century, in the desire for a secure and stable life in harmony with one's own village and neighbourhood. It is a revolutionary and progressive and a conservative and romantic vision at the same time. There were huge steps forward undertaken since 1789 in Europe. A European commonwealth that offers a good life for all is not an inaccessible future, but a concrete utopia in tune with Ernst Bloch, a key European thinker of the 20th century, who ended his opus magnum on the "Principle of Hope" with a plea for a radical temporal-spatial return "[...] in creating something in the world, that shines back to childhood and were nobody has yet been: Home" (so entsteht in der Welt etwas, das allen in die Kindheit scheint und worin noch niemand war: Heimat) (Bloch, 1959, p. 1628).

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