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RETHINKING RESISTANCE IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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**Biopolitics, Resistance and the Neoliberal
Development Paradigm¹**

1. Introduction

The study of resistance has become popular in social and political sciences. Recently, concepts such as ‘everyday resistance’ and ‘counter-conduct’ have drawn quite a lot of attention, which is due to the growing popularity of Michel Foucault’s theory of *biopolitics*. Biopolitics refers to a mode of politics located and practised at the level of life, taking populations as its objects while aiming at (re)producing all aspects of social life. As a technique of governance, it controls “unproductive” or “dangerous” population groups by enhancing and fostering “the life of a certain part of the population through disallowing the life of another” (Selmeczi 2012: 25), separating between “what must live and what must die” (Foucault 2003: 255). It involves not only discouraging and uprooting the ways of living deemed unproductive but also efforts to “modernize and enhance” populations groups (Odysseos 2011: 444).

The biopolitical approach has also gained more relevance in development studies. Development is considered the main technology for governing “surplus population”, a population that is “superfluous” to the demands of the market and whose “skills, status or even existence are in excess of prevailing conditions and requirements” (Selmeczi 2012: 45; Duffield 2007: 9, 18). A growing number of scholars argue that instead of helping developing countries, many international development projects are implemented and designed with the unstated, yet explicit aim of securing the dominant system, of keeping it stable (e.g. Chatterjee 2004; Baviskar 2004; Duffield 2007). Due to the pressure to ‘develop’, many developing countries have become indebted to foreign capital, and often social and

political rights in these countries are weakened as a result of Structural Adjustment Programs required by international institutions. While trying to demonstrate to foreign creditors that it can repay its debts, the state has to “play an increasingly repressive role, keeping the working classes in line and preventing social unrest” (Baviskar 2004: 36).

In many developing countries, such as India, national political and economic elites, together with foreign capital, have appropriated natural resources such as land, forests, minerals and water for commercial purposes (Baviskar 2004: 36). Although development projects are justified by referring to the public interest, often they diminish poor people’s possibilities to use natural resources (Baviskar 2004: 32, 36f, 224). The struggle for land lies at the heart of neoliberal development (Roy 2009: xiv). In rural India lands are forcefully grabbed from peasants, many of whom, after losing their livelihoods, are forced to move to metropolitan cities where they end up living either in legal or illegal slums (Mohanty 2010: 245). Displaced people living in slums often also encounter the neoliberal state “in the form of eviction notices or in the form of bulldozer” (Jha 2011: 1, 3). This new form of ghettoisation, or “new urban apartheid”, takes place in the name of development (Jha 2011: 1f; Roy 2009: 122). Indeed, development projects are the main cause of forced migration and internal displacement. While 25 million people are displaced due to conflicts, over 200 million are displaced due to development projects (Jha 2011: 4). India has the largest number of internally displaced people in the world (Basu 2011: 17).

Given the social, political and ethical problems generated by the neoliberal development paradigm, it is not surprising that an increasing number of social movements in developing countries have started to resist it (Mohanty 2010: 239). Often the poor and low caste women, who suffer the most from large-scale development projects, are active in forming movements, many of which “construct identities that often cut across a number of particular identities” (Mohanty 2010: 244, 254). In many places resistance has become ‘feminised’. Alliances between the feminist movement and movements struggling against land grabbing and forced displacement are also increasing (Motta/Nilsen 2011: 16; Mukherjee et al. 2011: 15).

Some movements co-operate with state authorities and political parties while others completely refuse to collaborate with them (Mohanty 2010: 239). In India, the relationship between social movements and the state has

always been ambivalent. The state strongly disciplines and punishes social movements and activists, trying to marginalise them and to represent them as being against progress and reform (Roy 2009: xiv). Direct violence is used regularly – there are countless examples of the police beating, abusing, raping and killing activists (Baviskar 2004; Roy 2009; Mohanty 2010: 242f; Nilsen 2011: 116; Mukherjee et al. 2011: 175; Roy 2012b: 41). Yet, even violent struggles are not simply destructive for movements because they, as Sara Motta and Alf Gunvald Nilsen (2011: 16) point out, simultaneously involve “the construction of new subjectivities and social relationships that reinvent a development beyond developmentalism and against neoliberalism”. This is perhaps why the political and economic elites of the neoliberal state not only resort to coercion but seek to establish ‘clientelistic’ relationships between the elites and subaltern groups in order to “create dependency of the latter upon the former and thus undercut popular mobilization” (Motta/Nilsen 2011: 18f). New kinds of technologies of rule that emphasize “participation and good governance” (Nilsen 2011: 109) are also utilised with the aim of transforming certain population groups into responsible, self-governing subjects.

How can then this kind of biopolitical governance be challenged? In this article, I reflect on this theme drawing on a case study of mine which examines resistance to the *Rajarhat New Town Project* in the city of Kolkata. This is a project which has displaced hundreds of families and deprived local peasants of their lands and livelihoods since the mid-1990s. The material was collected via ethnographic methods during my six month field visit in Kolkata in 2011–12. It consists of in-depth interviews and shorter discussions with 26 activists, peasants, fishermen and villagers involved in local anti-land acquisition and anti-eviction movements. Most in-depth interviews were conducted with female activists who had organised protests and mass mobilisations against the government and helped victims of forceful land acquisition and displacement. Here, my aim is to reflect on different conceptualisations of resistance by discussing the understandings of social movement activists that partly support, and partly challenge, theoretical discourses that have become popular in current development studies.

I start the article by discussing the Foucauldian framework, introducing shortly afterwards the perspective of ‘resistance’ as well as that of ‘counter-conduct’. Thereafter I proceed to critiques that the Foucauldian approach has confronted in post-colonial contexts, especially in South Asia,

and that emphasise the need to develop genuinely movement-relevant theories of resistance. This is followed by an analysis of the case study, concentrating on activist perspectives on autonomous resistance, their views on the political system and co-optation efforts by the state, NGOs and (Western) academics. The paper concludes by discussing the relevance of main findings from a broader theoretical perspective.

2. Resistance and counter-conduct

In Foucault's works, there are two partly overlapping frameworks for addressing the question of how to resist and challenge governance. Firstly, there is the broader framework of 'resistance', an integral part of Foucault's theory of power. Resistance means literally to stand against. As a form of refusal or disobedience, it can be considered reactive by nature, which inevitably invites the question as to what extent it is possible to challenge power relations by following this perspective. Indeed, Foucauldian resistance must be theoretically understood in "its complex and intimate relationship with the art of governing, rather than assuming a simple opposition to it" (Odysseos 2011: 452). Even when resisting, subjects are governed because "dissenting practice itself 'disciplines' the conduct of subjects" (Odysseos 2011: 439f). The risk of power "creeping into" resistance, configuring, disciplining, and normalising it, is thus constantly present (Vinthagen 2009: 171).

Secondly, there is the concept of 'counter-conduct', defined as a "struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others" (Foucault 2007b: 201). More specifically, counter-conduct is about "how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them" (Foucault 2007a: 44). Counter-conduct does not aim at influencing policies or political institutions – it questions normality, produces and embodies difference, constructs utopias, and creates and experiments with new subjectivities.

Counter-conduct is non-linear, diffuse, diverse, a concept rich in contradictions. One reason why the concept has not gained as much attention as that of resistance is that in taking place as a spontaneous or an everyday form of resistance, counter-conduct is not as spectacular as revo-

lutionary resistance. Counter-conduct seeks to transform the very relations of power by doing things ‘differently’. In the context of biopolitics, where biopower mainly functions through ‘productive’ mechanisms, counter-conduct signifies a refusal to act as a responsible, self-governing subject.

Viewed from a more general or collective perspective, the Foucauldian approach suggests that a “‘daily ethico-political struggle’ ensues to create the conditions in which resistance can emerge in opposition to domination”, and that transformation “requires overcoming disciplinary power rather than accepting its shaping of the subject” (Richmond 2011: 422f, 433). Here, the distinction between ‘population’ and ‘people’ is crucial. The people, Foucault (2007b: 43f) explains, “comprise those who conduct themselves in relation to the management of the population, at the level of population, as if they were not part of the population as a collective subject-object, as if they put themselves out of it, and consequently the people are those who, refusing to be the population, disrupt the system”. Foucault also talks about evading power “by disengagement, by *not* resisting” (Vinthagen 2009: 171). In order to challenge biopolitics, a subject must assume an “attitude of indifference no longer to the threat of power, but to its loving embrace” (Prozorov 2007: III).

Recently, this kind of a “resistant, critical subjectivity” has been discussed in the context of an emerging post-colonial civil society (Richmond 2011: 420). The attention has shifted towards the unorganised, *subaltern* domain of politics, analysing how (biopolitical) governance influences subaltern resistance, and how the subaltern domain could function autonomously (Roy 2012a: 36f; Roy 2012b; Roy/Banerjee 2012). Subaltern mentality is characterised, on the one hand, by submissiveness to authority, and by defiance and resistance, on the other (Bhadra 1997: 63, 95). It is argued that it is fruitful to study resistance in developing countries through the Foucauldian perspective, since it “enables thought-provoking interrogations in post-colonial localities” where liberal, neoliberal and colonial governmentalities exist at the same time (Odysseos 2011: 441).

Many South Asian scholars particularly praise Foucault for rethinking power and helping to realise its transformative aspects (e.g. Giri 2009: xxvii). From the perspective of resistance it is important that, in the Foucauldian framework, subaltern groups “can re-establish human practices and institutions from their own perspective” (Mahadevan 2009: 101). At the same time

Foucault, coming from a continental tradition, is criticised by South Asian academics and activists for his Euro-centrism, elitism, and preoccupation with power (Giri 2009: xxvii). For some, Foucault advocates an atomistic perspective because the choices are “either losing to the other or maintaining permanent struggle” (Mahadevan 2009: 117). Hence, it is necessary to “go beyond the trappings of power and counter-power” (Giri 2009: xxviii).

How is this then to be done? One possibility is to pay more attention to post-colonial theory, where Western political theory is criticised for presuming that all projects of emancipation have to come from within its own worldview (Clammer 2009: 563; Giri 2009: xxx). John Clammer (2009: 573) argues that the concept of resistance “which has become the leitmotiv of much progressive social theory” must be supplemented with the notion of self-realisation, not in its individual but rather in its social and collective form, thus aiming at “mutual co-creation”. In Asian traditions self-cultivation is not considered a personal, egoistic project but a process of “becoming more fully human” in a particular social context, giving priority to ethics and “dialogic modes of being” (Clammer 2009: 573). Asian traditions can be fruitful in helping to overcome “the human, ecological and political impasse” generated by classical Western theory (Clammer 2009: 573). This would mark, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008: 46) puts it, a step towards a situation in which “the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous”.

What is also required is a critical examination of the broader context of knowledge production. Many difficulties arise when trying to translate resistance in the global South “into Western-based understanding and theory, or using situated theories to understand practice” (Otto/Terhorst 2011: 216; Mukherjee et al. 2011: 150). Too often research segregates “the knowledge from people, from its contexts and local histories” (D’Souza 2011: 236f), and runs the risk of regarding subalternity as a ‘symptom’ to be ‘cured’ by studying it (Otto/Terhorst 2011: 210). The position of the researcher is, paradoxically, made possible by the existing structural differences, and “depends on a hierarchical relationship between those who can give and those who can only take” (Otto/Terhorst 2011: 207, 210f).

According to Sara Motta (2011: 192), developing movement-relevant theories of resistance demands epistemological and conceptual rethinking in order to subvert academic subjectivity, destabilise academic privilege and transcend the binary opposition between theoretical and practical knowl-

edge. It should be acknowledged that besides practical and situated knowledge, movements also create theoretical knowledge (Motta/Nilsen 2011: 21f). Motta (2011: 194, 196) stresses that theory is not produced individually, but collectively, “via reflection, within political struggle, based upon the lived experiences and struggles of excluded and marginalized communities”. In this view, theory is “an open instrument, derived from and by social movements” in their efforts to create emancipatory subjectivities (Motta 2011: 196). By unlearning academic privileges, researchers can widen their understanding of movement-relevant research, learn from the practices of social movements, and reorient their own practices in a way that allows epistemology to become “a prefigurative practice of everyday life” (Motta 2011: 182, 196).

Next, I will take a small step towards this direction by discussing, on the basis of my case study, social movement activists’ views concerning their resistance in relation to neoliberal development, the political system and various co-optation efforts. Through this reflection, I seek to bring forward issues that the movements and activists that I have studied consider important, or problematic, when conceptualising resistance from their perspective.

3. Resisting neoliberal development in Kolkata

A home for 15 million people, Kolkata is the capital of the fourth biggest province of India, West Bengal. One of the most controversial urban development projects in Kolkata has been the *Rajarhat New Town Project*. It started in the mid-1990s but became an object of wide public debate only in 2006 during the heated election campaign. Rajarhat used to be a vital agricultural area, providing livelihood for hundreds of families. After the project started, most farmers were compelled, duped or forced into selling their lands at very low prices. Later, when the lands were used for commercial and industrial purposes, land prices skyrocketed. By buying land cheap from the farmers and selling it to the private developers at a higher price, the West Bengal government made a good profit (Banerjee 2012: 180).

There had not been proper plans made for the rehabilitation of displaced people who lost their lands. In addition to farmers, many fishermen lost their livelihood as huge water bodies were also included in the

project. Many of them now collect, sort and sell garbage for their living. Some women have been forced to engage in prostitution. People in Rajarhat are frustrated, because they had been promised that the construction of a new township would create industry and employment in the area. Now, these promises are considered lies. Instead of building luxurious shopping malls and residential complexes for those who are already well-off, they stress that development projects should benefit the vast majority of people, the poor, who need basic things: work, food, fresh water, schools and hospitals (Interviews 4, 5).

The *Rajarhat New Town Project* has resulted in very critical views of development among the affected people and activists, who believe that it is explicitly designed for the elites and the middle-class at the expense of lower classes. From the perspective of governance, the middle-class and elites must be kept separate from the struggles of peasants. This is accomplished by actively distancing these population groups from each other with different techniques of governance, both physical and non-physical. In Foucauldian terms, it is a form of racism whereby biopower governs population “through introducing a fragmentation into the mass of governed, thus allowing the modern state to foster the life of a certain part of the population through disallowing the life of another” (Selmeczi 2012: 25; Foucault 2003: 79-84). In the words of an activist: “What kind of development [the] government wants? [They] are killing farmers and developing some buildings for rich men” (Interview 5).

The Rajarhat peasants have lost much of their independence due to the loss of their lands and livelihoods, but some of them defy the state by refusing to move off their lands, and by continuing to cultivate they also try to remain autonomous from the state and its ‘care’. This population is not unproblematic from the perspective of governance – it resists and fights back, by declining to act as expected. While governance utilises both the methods of governmentality and suppression, and sometimes ‘co-opts’ the resistance of subalterns, also the subalterns “learn to reciprocate to both the methods by corresponding techniques” (Roy 2012a: 36; 2012b: 55).

These developments are closely related to the ever-growing skepticism towards the political system and political parties. A process of de-politicisation and growing antipathy towards mainstream politics has taken place in West Bengal (Roy 2012b: 60), which is not surprising given that all

political parties support neoliberal development (Roy 2009: 38). Instead of benefiting the poor, neoliberal development serves “the rising demands of the new aristocracy” (Roy 2009: xiv), and has become “an essential governmental tool in the hands of the contemporary Indian rulers” (Banerjee/Roy 2012: 130). For the activists, neoliberalism represents a global ideology of free trade, privatisation and deregulation that aims to reduce government control of the economy but has, paradoxically, resulted in the Indian state becoming increasingly more controlled and managed by external, global forces. Consequently, from the perspective of the distribution of wealth and resources within the country, this has meant that neoliberalism has become a method of “grabbing all the resources” and “having ownership in the hands of few” (Interview 4). Hence, it is no wonder that movements are becoming more radical in their demands. Some consider a full-scale revolution with a fundamental reconstruction of society as the only alternative at a time when neoliberalism has provided development “a new source of political legitimacy” (Mohanty 2010: 247).

The idea of autonomous resistance has become increasingly popular among farmers, low caste people and the urban poor. They believe that problems generated by neoliberal development must be solved by struggle in the streets, villages, and forests. In line with the Foucauldian concept of counter-conduct, activists emphasise the significance of independent forms of political engagement, instead of merely resisting the government, or allying with political parties. They believe that social movements can allow people to create new forms of participation, and make up new rules and alternatives on their own, a process which enables transformative practices. Local organisation and autonomous decision-making are emphasised as essential forms of people’s democracy (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5).

While a growing number of people are leaving the existing political groups, including those on the established left, the ‘traditional’ civil society approach is also considered inadequate. As NGOs are based on humanitarianism, they are not believed to challenge the logic of development but rather to act as ‘safety guards’ of the neoliberal system and state power. (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 6) Indeed, some South Asian scholars who consider the ‘NGOisation’ of civil society a process of de-politicisation which makes developing countries “dependent on aid and handouts” (Roy 2009: 41), emphasise the need to pay special attention to “new global technologies

of governmentality that claim to ensure that the benefits of development are spread more evenly and that the poor [...] do not become its victims” (Chatterjee 2004: 67f).

Many activists stress that *the politics of development* should be brought into the forefront. Yet, there are also more ‘traditional’ views concerning political organisation and political power: some activists believe that movements “cannot shy away from taking power” because “to be able to make changes you need political power” (Interview 2). Theoretically, the extent to which social movements can advance their oppositional projects through established forms of political engagement is a source of extensive debate. Some argue that by not engaging with state power, movements give up the possibility of a “counter-hegemonic contestation of neoliberalism”, which can only be accomplished by “popular forces taking state power *and* transforming the state in the process” (Boden 2011: 90, 95). Some others assert that there are “structural limits to how far popular emancipation can advance via the capitalist state”, and advocate radical counter-hegemonic projects that challenge “the social foundations of state power as such” (Motta/Nilsen 2011: 21; Nilsen 2011: 110, 121).

The same divide applies among the activists in Kolkata – they often have mixed views concerning the two domains of politics, the autonomous domain of subaltern politics and the state-led, elite-controlled organised politics. The struggles taking place in West Bengal indicate that there is both increasing interaction and conflict between the domains (Roy 2012b: 63). While some argue that it is impossible for movements to have any autonomy (Roy/Banerjee 2012: 87), others maintain that the distinction between the organised and the unorganised domains of politics should not be overly polarised (Roy 2012c: 157), since movements can adopt “multiple strategies in relation to the state according to the nature of conflict in which subaltern groups are embroiled” (Nilsen 2011: 105). It is unfortunate that these two last points have not gained enough attention in the biopolitical approach, although Foucault (2000: 455f) himself argues that “[w]orking with a government doesn’t imply either a subjection or a blanket acceptance. One can work and be intransigent at the same time. I would even say that the two things go together.”

In this context, it must be stressed that many activists criticise (Western) academics in very straightforward terms for maintaining that they “know better than the people”, and for representing their views as

“the voice of the people” (Interview 4). Some argue that Western feminists, in particular, have a problematic tendency to conceptualise not only oppression but also women’s resistance from their own particular, Eurocentric perspective (Interviews 3, 4, 6). It is always a major challenge for social movements to fight government repression and co-optation efforts (Sitrin 2011: 270), but having to struggle against science, too, can become very arduous. Another source of critique is that social movement scholars coming from the global North tend to be more interested in advancing their own academic careers than collaborating or becoming partners with social movements (Interview 5), and that, while criticising neoliberal development, many academics themselves enjoy “all the benefits of modernity” (Interview 3). Hence, increasingly often the importance of refusing privileges and living an ‘activist life’ is stressed, not only by the activists but in the theoretical debate as well: “Because to be and not merely to know is the real thing [...] all revolution and paradigmatic departures should be accompanied by a personal revolution also” (Das 2009: 582).

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have reflected on biopolitics, governance, neoliberal development and different conceptualisations of resistance and counter-conduct from the Foucauldian perspective. I have also discussed some critiques that the Foucauldian approach has encountered in post-colonial contexts, especially in South Asia, emphasising the need to develop genuinely movement-relevant theories of resistance. I have reflected on these topics by drawing on my empirical case study in Kolkata, showing that social movements not only resist and oppose, but aim at transforming existing power relations by ‘not engaging’, as well as by actively creating new practices. By refusing to act as ‘good liberal citizens’, activists seek to challenge normalising practices and also constitute new kinds of subjectivities. Transformed power relations simultaneously both restrict and enable certain practices and subject positions. Since counter-conduct is always linked to the power that conducts, viewed from the Foucauldian perspective, movements can never be fully external to the forces and power relations they seek to counter.

When theorising resistance, it is important to note that movements may not only consider co-optation efforts by the neoliberal state a threat: the role of (Western) academics is also criticised. If we are to take this critique seriously – and we should, because we know that power co-opts knowledge – the foundations of Western political theory and traditional social movement research must be critically evaluated. Not only the dichotomy between power and resistance, oppressor and oppressed but also that of theory and practice needs to be challenged. In this task the Foucauldian perspective, although often rightfully criticised for theoreticism, elitism and Eurocentrism, can prove to be helpful as it always compels us to think beyond binaries.

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List of interviews

- Interview 1: Kolkata, 14 January 2012. Activist, politically uncommitted, university teacher, male.
- Interview 2: Kolkata, 8 February 2012. Activist, politically uncommitted, university teacher, male.
- Interview 3: Kolkata, 1 March 2012. Activist, politically uncommitted, documentarist, male.
- Interview 4: Kolkata, 17 March 2012. Activist, engaged in a political party, student, female.
- Interview 5: Kolkata, 18 March 2012. Activist, politically uncommitted, secretary, male.
- Interview 6: Kolkata, 26 March 2012. Activist, trade union leader, female.
- Interview 7: Kolkata, 27 March 2012. Activist, university researcher, female.

Abstracts

The Foucauldian approach of biopolitics has become popular in current development studies because it is considered fruitful for studying resistance, especially in developing countries. Studying social movements in post-colonial localities through the Foucauldian perspective, it is argued, makes it possible to conceptualise new kinds of resistant, critical subjectivities capable of challenging the dominant, neoliberal development paradigm. Although a valid argument from the perspective of theoretical discussion, viewed from the grassroots level it can be criticised for theo-

reticism and elitism, qualities that, as pointed out in postcolonial theory, characterise much of the Eurocentric social movement research. This article reflects on these themes by drawing on an empirical case study that explores resistance to neoliberal development in Kolkata, India, introducing also some critiques that the Foucauldian approach has encountered. Based on critiques presented by both South Asian scholars and social movement activists, the article highlights problems in Western theory and knowledge production, while discussing the possibility of crafting genuinely movement-relevant theories of resistance that transcend the separation between theory and practice.

Der Foucaultsche Ansatz zu Biopolitiken erfreut sich heute zunehmender Beliebtheit in der Entwicklungsforschung, weil er für die Widerstandsanalyse (insbesondere in Entwicklungsländern) als besonders ergiebig angesehen wird. Es wird argumentiert, dass die Untersuchung sozialer Bewegungen in postkolonialen Kontexten mittels einer Foucaultschen Perspektive die Konzeptualisierung neuer Formen von Widerstand und kritischer Subjektivitäten ermöglicht, die imstande sind, das dominante, neoliberale Entwicklungsparadigma herauszufordern. Auf der „Grassroots“-Ebene wurde hingegen berechtigte Kritik geübt hinsichtlich einer „Übertheoretisierung“ und einem Elitismus in der eurozentrischen Forschung über soziale Bewegungen – eine Kritik, die auch von Seiten postkolonialer Theoretiker_innen geteilt wird. Der Artikel reflektiert solche kritischen Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Foucaultschen Zugang anhand eines empirischen Fallbeispiels, in dem der Widerstand gegen neoliberale Entwicklung in Kolkata (Indien) untersucht wird. Auf der Basis kritischer Interventionen seitens südasiatischer Wissenschaftler_innen und Aktivist_innen, die in sozialen Bewegungen aktiv sind, beleuchtet der Artikel Probleme in der westlichen Theorie- und Wissensproduktion und diskutiert zugleich die Möglichkeit einer genuin bewegungsrelevanten Widerstandstheorie, welche die Grenzen zwischen Theorie und Praxis überwindet.

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