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Civil Society/Public Sphere: History of the Concept

The closely related concepts of civil society and public sphere developed in the early modern era to refer to capacities for social self-organization and influence over the state. Civil society usually refers to the institutions and relationships that organize social life at a level between the state and the family. Public sphere is one of several linked terms (including 'public space,' simply 'public,' and the German *Öffentlichkeit*, or publicness) that denote an institutional setting distinguished by openness of communication and a focus on the public good rather than simply compromises among private goods. Located in civil society, communication in the public sphere may address the state or may seek to influence civil society and even private life directly. Key questions concern the extent to which it will be guided by critical reason, and how boundaries between public and private are mediated.

1. Civil Society and Self-organization

The distinction of 'civil society' from the state took its modern form in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Prior to this separation, political and social realms were seldom clearly distinguished. When they were, the social was exemplified by the family and often subordinated as the realm of necessity or mere reproduction to the broader public character and possibilities for active creation that lay in the state. The Greek conception of the *polis*, for example, usually referred to both, but when a distinction was made, it clearly favored the state.

Roman law contributed the idea of *civitas* and a stronger sense of relations among persons that were neither narrowly familial nor specifically about constituting the political society through the state. Medieval political and legal theory developed this theme, especially in relation to the freedoms claimed by medieval cities but also in relation to the Church. Some strands juxtaposed the notion of legitimacy ascending from 'the people' to the eventually dominant idea of divine right of kings, with its notion of legitimacy descending from God. Also influential was the distinction of civil from criminal law (in which the former governs relations formed voluntarily among individuals and the latter the claims of the whole society against malefactors). Nonetheless, it was only in the course of early modern reflection on the sources of social order that civil society came to be seen as a distinct sphere.

A crucial step in this process was the 'affirmation of ordinary life' (Taylor 1989). Whereas the Greek philosophers had treated the private realm—including economic activity—as clearly inferior to the public realm associated with affairs of state, many moderns placed a new positive value on family and economic pursuits. They argued that both privacy and civil society needed to be defended against encroachments by the state. In this context, it was also possible to conceive of a public sphere that was not coterminous with the state but rather located in civil society and based on its voluntary relations. In this communicative space citizens could address each other openly, and in ways that both established common notions of the public good and influenced the state.

Social contract and natural law theories—especially as joined in the work of John Locke—contributed to this shift by suggesting ways in which the creation of society conceptually preceded the creation of government. From this it was only a short step to say that the legitimacy of government depended on its serving the needs of civil society (or of 'the people'). Thomas Paine and other advocates of freedom from unjust rule advanced an image of the freedoms of Englishmen which was influential not only in England and America, but in France, notably in Montesqueiu's account of the 'spirit' of laws which combined an appreciation of English division of powers with an older tradition of republican (and aristocratic) virtue. From Rousseau through Tocqueville, Comte, and Durkheim, this French tradition developed an ever-stronger account of the autonomy of the social (resisting not only the claims of the state but the Cartesian postulate of the primacy of the individual subject).

A crucial innovation was to understand society as at least potentially self-organizing rather than organized only by rulers. If there was a single pivotal intellectual source for this, it lay with the Scottish moralists. In

Adam Smith's (1776) notion of the invisible hand, the market exemplified this self-organizing capacity but did not exhaust it. In his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), Adam Ferguson presented human history as a series of social transformations leading to modern society. This prompted Hegel (1821) to treat civil society as a field in which the universal and particular contended; their reconciliation depended on the state. The idea of civil society also shaped classical political economy and ideas of social evolution, and informed Marx's account of the stages of historical development as combinations of productive capacity and (conflict-ridden) social relations. Marx also challenged the notion that markets were neutrally self-organizing, emphasizing the role of historical accumulations of power.

Though the actual analyses differed, what had been established was the notion of society as a distinct object of analysis, not reducible to either state or individual. People formed society impersonally as actors in markets, more personally as parties to contracts. The idea of civil society hearkened back to the sort of social life that emerged among the free citizens of medieval cities because this was largely self-regulated—as distinct from direct rule by ecclesiastical or military authorities. It also suggested 'civility' in interpersonal relations. This meant not just good manners, but a normative order facilitating amicable or at least reliable and nonthreatening relationships among strangers and in general all those who were not bound together by deep private relations like kinship. Equally important, the idea of civil society included—in some versions—the notion that communication among members might be the basis for self-conscious decisions about how to pursue the common good. This notion is basic to the modern idea of public sphere.

2. *The Idea of a Public Sphere*

Rousseau (1762) famously sought to understand how social unity could result from free will rather than external constraint. This depended, he argued, on transcending the particular wills of many people with a general will that was universal. Kant admired Rousseau's pursuit of unity in freedom as distinct from mere social instinct (as in Aristotle's notion of a political animal) or imposition of divine authority. He relied implicitly on the idea of a collective conversation through which individual citizens reach common understandings. Likewise the development of representative institutions in eighteenth century England informed and anchored a public discourse directed at bringing the will and wisdom of citizens to bear on affairs of state. Finally, the idea of the people as acting subject came to the fore in the American and French revolutions. The idea of a public sphere anchored democratic and republican thought in the capacity of citizens in civil society to achieve unity and freedom through their discourse with each other.

Kant, like many eighteenth-century philosophers, lacked a strong notion of the social. This Hegel (1821) supplied, rejecting social contract theory because even in Rousseau's notion of a general will it suggested that the union achieved in the state depended not on its own absolute universality but on a development out of individual wills. Nationalism also shaped ideas of society and political community in holistic ways well matched to unitary states (Calhoun 1999). Marx's (1843, 1927) critique of politics based on bourgeois individual rights further challenged the adequacy of civil society as a realm of freedom and unity. Where Hegel thought that the state in itself might overcome the tension between necessity and freedom and the clash of particular wills, Marx held that only a transformation of material conditions including the abolition of private property could make this possible. As a result, theories stressing stronger ideas of the social were apt to offer weaker notions of public life. The Marxist tradition denigrated 'mere democracy' as an inadequate means of achieving either freedom or unity.

The ideas of public sphere and civil society developed primarily in liberal theory. These were not always seen in the manner of Hegel as merely 'educative' on the way to a more perfect latter unity. Nor was political unity necessarily left to the workings of an invisible hand or other unchosen system, but freedom was treated commonly as a matter of individual rather than collective action. This accompanied the rise of relatively asocial understandings of the market (Polanyi 1944). In addition, the emerging notion of the public sphere was not clearly distinct from other usages of 'public.' State activity, for example, was sometimes described as public without regard to its relationship to democracy or its openness to the gaze or participation of citizens. This usage survives in reference to state-owned firms as 'public' regardless of the kind of state or the specifics of their operation.

More important was the overlapping concept of 'public opinion' (see *Public Opinion: Political Aspects*). The dominant eighteenth-century usage emphasized open expression and debate, contrasting free public opinion to absolutist repression. At the same time, it generally treated public opinion as a consensus formed on the basis of reasoned judgment. 'Opinion' was something less than knowledge, but especially where it had been tested in public discourse, it was not simply sentiment and it gained truth-value from reflexive examination. Various euphemisms like 'informed opinion' and 'responsible opinion,' however, reflected both a bias in favor of the opinions of elites and an anxiety about the possibly disruptive opinions of the masses. During the nineteenth century, this anxiety came increasingly to the fore. Tocqueville (1840) and Mill (1859), thus, both contrasted public opinion to reasoned knowledge; Mill especially worried about 'collective mediocrity' in which the opinion of debased

masses would triumph over scientific reason. While advocates of the public sphere saw rational-critical discourse producing unity, critics saw mass opinion reflecting psychosocial pressures for conformity. Implicitly, they associated reason with individuals rather than any collective process. The distinction between 'public' and 'crowd' or 'mass' was lost in such views (Splichal 2000). Early positivist research into public opinion approached it as explicable on the basis of social psychology rather than as a species of reasoned argument. Toennies (1922) sought a way to discern when each approach ought to apply.

Conversely, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a new field of public opinion research developed that approached public opinion as an aggregation of individual opinions. The shift was based largely on the development of empirical polling methods. It brought a renewal of attention to differences within public opinion, and thus to the distinction between public and crowd (Blumer 1948, Key 1961). It also focused attention on patterns of communication among members of the public rather than the more generalized notions of imitation or emotional contagion. New media—first newspapers, and then broadcast—figured prominently in efforts to understand public communication. While Lippman (1960) and a variety of social psychologists worried that the new media would produce the descent to a lowest common denominator of public opinion that liberals had long feared, Dewey (1927) and other pragmatists defended the capacity for reason in large-scale communication. In this, they hearkened back to the eighteenth-century hopes of Kant and Rousseau.

Even before the apotheosis of the opinion poll, Cooley (1909) had argued emphatically that public opinion ought to be conceived as 'no mere aggregate of individual opinions, but a genuine social product, a result of communication and reciprocal influence.' A key question was whether this communication and reciprocal influence amounted to the exercise of reason. Peirce (1878) had argued that among scientists the formation of consensus on the basis of openness and debate was the best guarantee of truth. Could this view be extended into less specialized domains of public discourse? This has been an enduring focus for Jurgen Habermas, the most influential theorist of the public sphere.

3. *Habermas*

In the context of some cynicism about democratic institutions, Habermas (1962) set out to show the unrealized potential of the public sphere as a category of bourgeois society. He challenged most directly the tendencies in Marxism and critical theory to belittle democratic institutions—and also the collapsing of public into state characteristic not only of Hegel but of actually existing socialism. Habermas celebrated the emancipatory potential of a collective discourse about the nature of the public good and the directions of state action. This could be free insofar as it was rational—based on the success of argument and critique rather than the force of either status or coercion—and could achieve unity by disregarding particular interests—like particular statuses—in favor of the general good. The best version of the public sphere was based on 'a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether.' It worked by a 'mutual willingness to accept the given roles and simultaneously to suspend their reality' (Habermas 1962, p. 131).

The basic question guiding Habermas' exploration of the public sphere was: to what extent can the wills or opinions guiding political action be formed on the basis of rational-critical discourse? This is a salient issue primarily where economic and other differences give actors discordant identities and conflicting interests. For the most part, Habermas took it as given that the crucial differences among actors were those of class and largely political-economic status; in any case, he treated them as rooted in private life and brought from there to the public. He focused on how the nature, organization, and opportunities for discourse on politically significant topics might be structured so that class and status inequalities were not an insuperable barrier to political participation. The first issue, of course, was access to the discourse. This was not so simple as the mere willingness to listen to another's speech, but also involved matters like the distribution of the sorts of education that empowered speakers to present recognizably 'good' arguments. Beyond this, there was the importance of an ideological commitment to setting aside status differences in the temporary egalitarianism of an intellectual argument.

The public sphere joined civil society to the state by focusing on a notion of public good as distinct from private interest. It was however clearly rooted in civil society and indeed in the distinctive kind of privacy it allowed and valued.

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people coming together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (Habermas 1962, p. 27).

This public use of reason depended on civil society. Businesses from newspapers to coffee shops, for example, provided settings for public debate. Social institutions (like private property) empowered individuals to participate independently in the public sphere;

forms of private life (notably that of the family) prepared individuals to act as autonomous, rational-critical subjects in the public sphere. But the eighteenth-century public sphere was also distinguished by its normative emphases on openness and rational political discourse. Habermas' concern focused on the way later social change brought these two dimensions into conflict with each other.

The idea of publicness as openness underwrote a progressive expansion of access to the public sphere. Property and other qualifications were eliminated and more and more people participated. The result was a decline in the quality of rational-critical discourse. As Habermas later summed up:

> Kant still counted on the transparency of a surveyable public sphere shaped by literary means and open to arguments and which is sustained by a public composed of a relatively small stratum of educated citizens. He could not foresee the structural transformation of this bourgeois public sphere into a semantically degenerated public sphere dominated by the electronic mass media and pervaded by images and virtual realities (Habermas 1998, p. 176).

While Habermas' account of the continuing value of the category of public sphere evoked by the eighteenth-century ideal set him apart from Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) and their pessimistic turn in critical theory, he largely incorporated their critique of 'mass society' as 'administered society' into his survey of twentieth-century developments and with it many of the fears of nineteenth-century liberals. He held that the public sphere was transformed not only by simple increase of numbers but by the success of various new powers at re-establishing in new form the power to 'manage' public opinion or steer it from above. Public relations agents and public opinion polls replaced rational-critical debate; electronic media allowed openness but not the give and take conversation of the eighteenth-century coffee houses. At the same time, rising corporate power and state penetration of civil society undermined the distinction of public and private, producing a 'refeudalization' of society.

4. *Arendt*

Hannah Arendt also focused on the problem of collapsing distinctions between public and private. Arendt emphasized the capacity of action in public to create the world that citizens share in common. The term 'public,' she wrote, 'signifies two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena: It means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. … Second, the term ''public'' signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it' (Arendt 1958, pp. 50, 52). Public action, moreover, is the crucial terrain of the humanly created as distinct from the natural world, of appearance and memory, and of talk and recognition. Such action both requires and helps to constitute public spaces—spaces held in common among people within which they may present themselves in speech and recognize others. Public action is thus a realm of freedom from the necessity—notably of material reproduction—that dominates private life.

Arendt's usual term, 'public space,' leaves the 'shape' of public life more open than the phrase public sphere. Public action can create institutions, as in the founding of the American Republic, but as action it is unpredictable. Its publicness comes from its performance in a space between people, a space of appearances, but it is in the nature of public action to be always forming and reforming that space and arguably the people themselves. This conceptualization offers clear advantages for thinking about the place of plurality in the public sphere. As Arendt wrote of America, 'since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it' (1972, p. 232).

Arendt saw this plurality threatened not just by mass conformity but by the reduction of public concerns to material matters. A focus on sex as much as on the economy threatens the public–private distinction. It not only intrudes on intimacy and private life but impoverishes public discourse. Arendt (1951) saw this problem as basic to totalitarianism, which could allow citizens neither privacy nor free public discourse. Totalitarianism is distinguished from mere tyranny by the fact that it works directly on private life as well as limiting public life. This is not just a matter of contrasting intentions, but of distinctively modern capacity. Modern sociological conditions offer rulers the possibility to reach deeply into the family in particular and personal life in general, to engineer human life in ways never before imagined.

This potential for collapsing the public and private realms is linked to Arendt's unusually negative view of civil society. 'Society,' she writes, is 'that curious and somewhat hybrid realm which the modern age interjected between the older and more genuine realms of the public or political on one side and the private on the other' (1990, p. 122). Civil society is first and foremost a realm of freedom *from* politics. But public freedom is freedom *in* politics. This calls for action that creates new forms of life, rather than merely attempting to advance interests or accommodate to existing conditions. This distinguishes Arendt's view, and republicanism generally, from much liberal thought: 'Thus it has become almost axiomatic even in political theory to understand by political freedom not a political phenomenon, but on the contrary, the more or less free range of nonpolitical activities which a given body politic will permit and guarantee to those who constitute it' (1990, p. 30).

The founding of the United States was a favorite example of such action for Arendt. The American

Founders imagined and created a new kind of society, a new set of institutions. This relied on citizens' public commitments to each other rather than assumptions about human nature or mere external application of law. The Founders 'knew that whatever men might be in their singularity, they could bind themselves into a community which, even though it was composed of "sinners," need not necessarily reflect this "sinful" side of human nature' (1990, p. 174). Arendt's vision of public life as central to a moral community shares much with a republican tradition that deplores the modern decline of the public sphere—generally associated with the rise of particular interests at the expense of concern for the general good, the deterioration of rational public discourse about public affairs, or outright disengagement of citizens from politics (see *Public Sphere: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century History*). Republican accounts of the public sphere place a strong emphasis on the moral obligations of the good citizen; recent scholarship has often questioned whether citizens lived up to significantly higher standards in earlier eras (Schudson 1998).

5. *Differentiation in the Public Sphere and Civil Society*

Habermas' account of the public sphere has been enduringly influential (see Calhoun 1992). Its delayed translation into English in 1989 ironically contributed to an invigorating new reading shaped by both the fall of communism and widespread projects of privatization in the West. Critics within communist societies had revived the notion of civil society (as distinct from simply 'society') in order to speak of the realm outside state control and its relative absence in communist societies. Likewise, transitions away from right-wing dictatorships were often treated in terms of a 'return of civil society' (Perez-Diaz 1993). In the US, the idea of civil society was linked not only to democracy but to reliance on voluntary organizations and philanthropy (Powell and Clemens 1998, Putnam 2000).

What civil society signifies in contemporary political analysis is the organization of social life on the basis of interpersonal relationships, group formation, and systems of exchange linking people beyond the range of intimate family relations and without reliance on direction by the government. As a number of scholars of Africa have noted, it incorporates an unfortunate understanding of family privacy that underestimates the positive and supraprivate social roles that African kin organizations can play (see essays in Harbeson et al. 1994). Even more basically, references to civil society often fail to distinguish adequately between systemic capitalist economic organization and much more voluntary creation of social organization through the formation of civic associations, interest groups, and the like—a distinction Habermas has sought to stress. This has sometimes been a source of confusion in use of the public sphere concept to analyze distinctive institutional developments in diverse political and cultural settings (Calhoun 1993).

Civil society has been important to defenders of free market economics because it suggests the virtues of an economy in which participants' choices are regulated by their interests rather than their official statuses. In principle, such an economy is able to effectively produce and circulate goods on the basis of prices rather than government direction. Civil society has been equally important to advocates of democracy because it signifies the capacity of citizens to create amongst themselves the associations necessary to bring new issues to the public agenda, to defend both civil and human rights, and to provide for an effective collective voice in the political process. This involves both a free press and political mobilization on the basis of parties and interest groups (see Cohen and Arato 1992 for the most detailed review; also Chandhoke 1995, Seligman 1992, Alexander 1998, Keane 1999). Habermas (1992, p. 367) summarizes the recent usage: 'civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres.' Habermas' work more generally, however, reveals this to be a minimally theorized as well as optimistic usage. It highlights one aspect of civil society but does not make clear the most basic issue.

While part of the heritage of the idea of civil society has been the effort to organize society through public discourse, an equally influential part has been the claim to privacy, the right to be left alone, the opportunity to enter into social relations free from governance by the state or even the public. The idea of business corporations as autonomous creatures of private contract and private property thus reflects the heritage of civil society arguments as much as the idea of a public sphere in which citizens joined in rational-critical argument to determine the nature of their lives together. Civil society refers to the domains in which social life is self-organizing, that is, in which it is not subject to direction by the state. But this self-organization can be a matter of system function or of conscious collective choice through the public sphere (Calhoun 2001).

Habermas' account of the public sphere drew a variety of important critical responses. One of the first focused on the extent to which he focused on the bourgeois public sphere and correspondingly neglected nonbourgeois public life and failed to clarify some of the conditions built into the bourgeois ideal. Negt and Kluge (1972) responded with an account of the

proletarian public sphere. Clearly, workers have at many points built their own institutions, media, and networks of communication, and entered into contention with bourgeois elites and other groups over the collective good. But if this is a discursive competition—that is, if workers and bourgeois argue over what constitutes the collective good rather than only fighting about it—then this implies an encompassing public sphere, albeit an internally differentiated one.

Nancy Fraser (1992) has influentially emphasized the importance of 'subaltern counterpublics' such as those framed by race, class, or gender. Some publics—even very partial ones—may claim to represent the whole; others oppose dominant discursive patterns and still others are neutral. Not all publics that are distinguished from the putative whole are subaltern. As Michael Warner (2001) has suggested, the deployment of claims on an unmarked public as *the* public sphere is also a strategy, generally a strategy of the powerful. Yet, it is important to keep in mind both that the existence of counterpublics as such presupposes a mutual engagement in some larger public sphere and that the segmentation of a distinct public from the unmarked larger public may be a result of exclusion, not choice. Feminist scholars especially have drawn attention to both the gender biases within family life that disempower women and the historically strong gender division between public and private realms on which male political freedom has generally rested (Elshtain 1993, Young 2000).

6. Conclusion

Theories of civil society focus on the capacity for self-organization of social relations, outside the control of the state and usually beyond the realm of family. The basic question posed by theories of the public sphere is to what extent collective discourse can determine the conditions of this social life. Contemporary research on civil society and the public sphere turns on the breadth of political participation, the extent to which capitalist markets limit other dimensions of self-organization in civil society, the existence of multiple or overlapping public spheres, the impact of new communications media, and the quality of rational-critical discourse and its relationship to culture-forming activities. These issues also inform discussions about international civil society and its public sphere.

The concepts of civil society and public sphere took on their primary modern dimensions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Western Europe and to a lesser extent the United States. They have become important in a variety of other settings, including in conceptualizing social autonomy in relationship to communist and authoritarian states. They inform democratic projects as well as academic research in a variety of settings and are in turn themselves informed by cultural creativity and social action.

See also: Citizenship and Public Policy; Civil Society, Concept and History of; Democracy; Individual/Society: History of the Concept; Public Good, The: Cultural Concerns; Public Sphere: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century History; State, History of

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Civilization, Concept and History of

The concept of civilization is inextricably connected with the conditions of its emergence, most notably with the rise of historical consciousness in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the globalisation of this form of historical understanding and correlative forms of intellectual practice. The concept is complex and imprecise in its definition, but ubiquitous in its uses, and inextricably imbricated with other categories by which historical materials are organized, such as culture, nation, and race. Apart from designating certain morphological features of human society, particularly with reference to urbanism and urbanity, civilization has been a schema for historical categorization and for the organization of historical materials. Here it has generally taken two forms, the universalist evolutionist, and the romantic particularist. The latter was tending to regain, in the ascendant context of identity politics, a certain hegemonic primacy worldwide at the close of the twentieth century. In all, the concept of civilization forms a crucial chapter in the conceptual, social, and political history of history; it, or its equivalents are presupposed, implicitly or explicitly, in the construal and writing of almost all histories.

1. Pre-History

1.1 The Past Continuous

The mental and social conditions for speaking about civilization in a manner recognizable in the year 2000 were not available before the middle of the eighteenth century. Hitherto, in Europe as elsewhere, large-scale and long-term historical phenomena, which later came to be designated as civilizations, had been categorized in a static manner that precluded the consciousness of directional or vectorial historicity as distinct from the mere register of vicarious change.

Hitherto, the succession of large-scale historical phenomena, such as Romanity or Islam, had been regarded (a) typologically, most specifically in the salvation-historical perspective of monotheistic religious discourse, in which successive events are taken for prefigurations and accomplishments of each other; (b) in terms of the regnal succession of world-empires; (c) in the genre of regnal succession, which started with the Babylonian king-lists and the earliest stages of Chinese historical writing, and culminated in medieval Arabic historical writing. Not even the schema of state cycles evolved by the celebrated Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), where civilization (*'umrân*) was quasi-sociologically identified with various organizational forms of human habitation and sociality, could meaningfully escape from this finite repertoire of possible historical conceptions.

In the perspective of typology, the continuity of historical phenomena was expressed in the repetition of prophecies successively reaffirming divine intent and inaugurating a final form of order whose *telos* would be the end of time. Thus the Jewish prophets repeat each other and are all figures for Abraham; Jesus is at once the repetition and termination of this unique cycle of terrestrial time and is prefigured in Jewish prophecies; Muhammad is the final accomplishment and the consummation of earlier prophetic revelations, prefigured in Jewish and Christian scriptures; his era inaugurates the consummation of time with the Apocalypse. The structure of time in the Talmud, in the Christian writings of Eusebius (d. 339),

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