

The Socialist Tradition: From Crisis to Decline. By Carl Boggs.
New York: Routledge, 1995, 287 pages.

Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy.
By Kim Moody. New York: Verso, 1997, 342 pages.

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Introduction

Pronouncements of the demise of socialism and Marxism are not uncommon these days. As transnational corporate power intensifies, advocates of the working classes (dare I say socialists?) lament a fractured Keynesian compromise and the attendant rift in the social contract. The statistics are harrowing for the North and South,¹ while even the greatest beneficiaries of global finance forecast grim dangers of unregulated capitalism.² For all the corporate fanfare, the neoliberal agenda has not reversed the trends in economic polarization, stagnation, or poverty, nor has it furnished the tools for ecologically sustainable development. In the meantime, social democratic leaders offer little more than the rhetoric of social inclusion, lest they ward off investors and face even graver fiscal strains.

One need not be a socialist to recognize the necessity for radical change in the global economy. Yet to grapple with a beast like global capitalism is no easy trick, as nations must increasingly conform the needs of their people to the imperatives of international profitmaking. Responding to globalization requires an understanding of the many constraints faced by nations, as well as the agencies that might be able to advance desired social changes. It is with such considerations in mind that I wish to reflect on these two impressive texts of extraordinary sweep. At first glance, it may seem displaced to compare Boggs'

account of an "exhausted" socialist tradition—largely within the European orbit—with Moody's more U.S.-centered examination of working class struggles and lean international production. Boggs writes as an intellectual steeped in socialist theory; Moody, as a labor activist and director of the Detroit-based *Labor Notes*.

Yet it is not so much the object of their narratives that I wish to examine, at least not in detail, but rather their underlying assumptions regarding the effective agents for future social change. In this sense, I aim to read their works with an eye specifically to the strategic question in today's neoliberal context. I will try to show that the merit of each work is precisely the deficit of the other—as the texts embody a Marxist/postmodern divide *that should be bridged* for the sake of justice after neoliberalism.

An underlying theme in Boggs' analysis is the inadequacy of classical Marxism to provide a viable *strategic* grounding for socialist politics. Following Stanley Moore (1978), Boggs' acknowledges at least three "tactics" in Marx's writings: the "majoritarian revolution" theme of Marx's mature writings, in which the working class transforms civil society on the basis of capitalist development; the reformist gradualism of the late Marx, in which socialism might emerge out of bourgeois democracy in some advanced countries; and a brief "vanguardist" phase in the late 1840s when Marx was influenced by the French *Blanquists*. Rather than see Marx's political eclecticism as a strength, Boggs laments it as a foundational error—one which has had grave political consequences to the present day. "In the final analysis," Boggs writes, "the decline of socialism as a political phenomenon is inseparable from the crisis of Marxism as a theoretical legacy" (15). The bulk of the book is a critical examination of the three political currents within the Marxist tradition—Leninist vanguardism, Bernsteinian reformism (as the antecedent of Social Democracy), and the Eurocommunist and EuroSocialist attempts for a "Third Road"—none of which have

been able to “seriously attack” the market system or hegemonic materialist values (93). Boggs examines a wide range of Marxist-influenced and socialist leaders—from Lenin, Bernstein and Pannekoek, to Castoriadis, Togliatti, and Palme, among many others. Although his narrative is at times diffuse, his basic position is clear: Lacking an adequate strategic foundation, the socialist tradition has been forced to make the choice between principles and power. The “productivist” and parliamentary bias of the Marxist legacy has been top-down and technocratic; it has failed to nourish an ethos sufficiently resonant of the manifold identities of modern society. *The result has been either deradicalization and socialist retreat, or an ossified statism.* Tied to the very logic of capitalist rationality it aims to subvert, the “twin legacies of statism and productivism” have “rendered original socialist ideals no longer recognizable.” The socialist tradition offers “few conceptual or strategic insights in the critical issues and challenges ahead,” such as “more complex forms of class struggle, bureaucratic domination, patriarchy, racial and ethnic divisions, [and] the ecological crisis” (219).

Boggs is certainly not alone in criticizing Marxism for such issues, particularly its blindness to race, gender and other categories. Calls for a Marxism more attentive to issues of identity and diverse modes of oppression are well-nigh ubiquitous in critical left circles. Much of the critique has merit, as considerations of subjectivity and identity are vital for understanding how people conceive their needs and expectations. Yet Boggs, like many with a postmodern bent, unduly privileges the emancipatory potential of the “new social movements” without offering concrete grounds for such. Boggs sees in such movements a “momentous shift” toward a “postmodern consciousness” long averted by traditional socialist and social democratic parties. He emphasizes that a unifying movement in the future will need to “emerge within the *subjective* realm, around the motifs of ideology, culture, collective identities, and politics, rather than around imputed sociological categories of class, status or material

interests” (182; emphasis his). One cannot read such statements—interspersed liberally throughout the text—without at least a hint of incredulity. Is Boggs suggesting that traditional socialist and social democratic parties evolved *outside* the subjective realm, divorced from the ideological and cultural currents of the masses? Have people’s “imputed” material concerns for secure employment and income to feed their families become less personally salient in today’s postmodern age? Surely Boggs would not suggest such. Yet it is difficult to understand the liberatory primacy that Boggs attributes to the ecological and feminist movements, as he fails to offer suggestions about how such movements might subvert the imperatives of capital accumulation.

Boggs looks at the Italian student movements, the American New Left, the various Green parties, feminist groups, and others, as manifestations of an unfolding “post-Marxist” current of “collective empowerment.” Unlike traditional socialist politics, which are “unlikely to survive as a legitimate alternative to bureaucratic capitalism,” these radical democratic trends hold the most promise of resisting the inherent deradicalization and ideological depletion elicited by normal institutional politics (217-220). To be sure, even the more promising movements will have difficulty resisting the pull of capitalist bureaucratic rationality; one need look no further than the ideological absorption of the German Greens into the SPD, who by the early 90s had lost the “radical side of ecological politics” (241). Yet, for Boggs, the only hope is for such movements to forge a common political strategy of “multiple discourses and sites of conflict.” Boggs is rather murky about the specifics of such a political strategy. He poses it as a postmodern dilemma. It seems the only certainty is that will not be socialist.

A related irony of Boggs analysis is that it is weakest in terms of political economy. He underscores throughout the book the inadequacy of the Marxist theoretical tradition with its “familiar

emphasis on class forces, parties, vanguards and universal discourses” (212). Yet it is clear that he has a rather narrow conception of Marx’s theoretical legacy, as evidenced by his surprising lack of attention to the *political-economic constraints* faced by socialist leaders. It is one thing to argue that political movements that call themselves socialist are in decline at this historical moment; it is quite another to assert their decline. One would think that such a grand claim would be at least partially based on an analysis of the changed economic landscape that purportedly vitiates socialist objectives. Yet Boggs offers little in this regard—merely alluding to how dependence on Keynesian stimuli and economic growth represent “external factors” that played a role in the various Eurocommunist and Eurosocialist retreats since the 70s. Boggs speculates that Eurosocialist leaders’ lack of a viable “alternative economic model” undermined their broad-based political support, which drove them “into the arms of private capital” (163). Yet he does not probe deeply into the economic side of such retreats—preferring to focus on the lack of vision among socialist leaders.

Consider the French socialists under Mitterand. Boggs underlines the ambitious reforms of the Mitterand government in 1981-1982, such as its extensive nationalizations of diverse industries, including computers, electronics, and banking; the substantial increase in minimum wage and welfare benefits; and the well-known Auroux Laws giving workers some voice in the workplace (155). With considerable optimism, the socialists hoped that such steps would lead to a “rupture with capitalism,” as they announced their aim to go beyond social democracy. Of course, *within a year* they began reversing all their priorities, and by the mid-80s they started instituting a series of regressive austerity measures. Boggs briefly touches on various economic factors involved in the retreat—including the worldwide recession, the fear of capital flight, and the need for France to modernize its high-technology industries to compete in the global economy. He points out that competitive pressures led the

Mitterand government to eliminate thousands of jobs in the auto, rail and steel sectors (159). Despite such details, Boggs provides little depth of the severity of the economic constraints faced by the French socialists. In the end, after recounting the various aspects of Mitterand’s *plan de rigueur*, he comes to the conclusion that the French theorists and leaders “never really formulated an alternative economic model consonant with their (socialist) ideological aims. Not surprisingly, once in power they lost the capacity for political imagination that had won them so much electoral support prior to 1981” (163).

Yet it is clear that the French launched a most humane economic program under severe political-economic constraints.³ As Michael Harrington indicates, almost immediately after Mitterand was elected, he faced intense opposition from the national and international banking community. *Two billion francs* were leaving the country daily, while the world economy faced the “worst recession in half a century.” To make matters worse, the nationalized airline and steel industries were more inefficient than the French anticipated, and as such they were unable to turn a profit in the globally competitive environment. Contrary to Mitterand’s hopes, economic growth was too sluggish to pay for his administration’s quite decent goals, which not only included increased wages for the traditionally least paid, but also more vacation time, early retirement benefits and a reduction in the work week. Faced with an ongoing balance-of-payments deficit, the French had little choice but to embrace austerity.

Boggs recognizes, albeit briefly, the crucial limits that the global economy placed on Mitterand and the other Mediterranean socialists. Yet rather than see such limits as a dramatic illustration of the law of value—underscoring en route the current *relevance* of Marxist theory—he largely ignores Marxist political-economic categories while lamenting the shortsighted political visions of left-wing leaders.⁴ To be sure, Boggs recognizes the need to get

beyond the traditional Social Democratic and Eurosocialist dependence on Keynesian, growth-oriented measures. Yet he offers no insight into alternative economic models, and his emphasis on movements independent of the corporatist state and labor unions largely ignores the imperatives of capitalist reproduction. Boggs' insufficient attention to the imperatives of the global economy is compounded further by his neglect of the entire Third World, which merits but passing comments in the text.

The 20th century illustrates that the classic struggle between capital and labor is all too alive and well. What the Eurosocialist retreats demonstrate more than anything is the profound obstacles that class power and the exigencies of profitmaking place on creating socialism in one country. The leverage of the capitalist class cannot be underestimated—and pace Boggs—nor can the working class.

It is here that Moody's analysis is refreshing. Echoing Boggs, Moody acknowledges that "few things seem more remote today than socialism" (293). Yet rather than focus principally on the decline of socialist parties and the defects of their political imaginations, Moody probes the shifting balance of class power in the changing economic landscape. Contrary to Boggs, Moody sees the working class as the pivotal agent in fighting the corporate neoliberal agenda of deregulation, privatization and state austerity. From a Marxist perspective, Moody situates contemporary corporate strategies of lean production within the framework of uneven capitalist development and the ceaseless decline in the rate of profit.

Moody argues cogently against popular accounts of globalization—what he calls "globaloney"—that treat modern corporations as supermobile actors shifting most industrial production to the Third World. Contrary to the image of the globetrotting textile firm packing up shop at the first sign of labor militancy,

most large transnational companies keep their production facilities in the North.⁵ Furthermore, capital itself tends not to be so much global as *regionalized*. Given the continued importance of proximity to markets, corporate outsourcing by the United States, Europe and Japan tends to be concentrated in free trade zones or the like in Mexico, Eastern Europe and East Asia, respectively. This triad of production areas has been part of a broader corporate effort to reduce costs in the context of intense international competition and accumulation crisis.

As Moody shows, capital responded to the crisis of accumulation in the early 70s the old-fashioned way—by *squeezing* workers. Corporations used a number of strategies successfully to drive down incomes and keep workers relatively insecure and quiescent by the late 70s and 80s. Efforts to increase output included the explosion in casualized labor, outsourcing, and downsizing, as well a cluster of lean techniques such as just-in-time delivery, job rotation, quality circles, and performance-related pay schemes. Contrary to corporate hype, Moody sees such techniques as nothing more than the latest recrudescence of classical Taylorism. He cites research by Parker and Slaughter (1995) to show the exploitative thrust of lean production: "Whereas the assembly-line worker at GM's old mass-production plants worked (was in motion) 45 seconds of each minute, today's NUMMI workers...work the standard Toyota 57-second minute" (88).

Moody cites a variety of data to show that lean international production, and the neoliberal agenda broadly, have not slowed the increasing North-South gap, global unemployment, poverty, nor upward worldwide income redistribution.⁶ *Yet working people have not remained dormant*. While union leaders and social democratic parties have succumbed to the neoliberal "competitiveness" agenda, workers everywhere burst on to the world scene in the 1990s with a wave of strikes and solidarity efforts. Moody highlights the mass strikes of the Firestone,

Caterpillar and Staley workers in the “war zones” of Decatur, Illinois; the thousands of union workers on the picket lines at the Detroit Newspaper Agency; the GM strikes in Dayton and Flint, and myriad others. On the international front, the “new unionism” was crucial in confronting authoritarian regimes in El Salvador, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa and Taiwan. Mass political strikes swelled in countries as diverse as Haiti, Colombia, Greece, France, Indonesia, and South Korea. In France, public sector rail, metro and airline workers struck for weeks in November-December 1995, while militant general strikes broke out in Ontario (9ff.).⁷

Of course, Moody’s goal is not simply to *survey* the myriad struggles of the working class in the 90s. He also champions an agenda—what he calls “social-movement unionism” (SMU)—that goes beyond the “partnership” mentality of the US and global labor bureaucracies. Moody envisions SMU as:

an active strategic orientation that uses the strongest of society’s oppressed and exploited, generally organized workers, to mobilize those who are less able to sustain self-mobilization: the poor, the unemployed, the casualized workers, the neighborhood organizations (276).

Moody emphasizes that SMU is not simply a union-centered form of coalition politics, whereby labor leaders put pressure on the more progressive political parties. He asserts repeatedly the necessity for a democratic movement with “membership control and leadership accountability.” Although unions will provide much of the economic resources—as other social-movement organizations generally lack consistent funds—SMU will fail if it does not activate broader grassroots constituents.⁸ Groups must unite from the bottom-up to combat the market forces that threaten an ongoing race to the bottom in terms of wages and living standards.

The process of forging an international SMU entails building on the links already being made between unions across the globe. Moody is highly skeptical of the official labor federations and trade secretariats in moving toward such goal, as they are generally nationalistic and remain captive to the “social partnership” ideology. And given that most transnational firms are still US-based, US unions would need to take the lead in advancing an internationalist agenda—something not likely to occur any time soon.⁹ To be sure, a number of positive international efforts have been launched by union leaders, such as the official border alliances of the NAFTA region and the European Works Councils.¹⁰ Yet on the whole, “official labor” at “all levels” is inadequate to the challenges labor faces in an increasingly global economy.

Moody sees the most positive signs of an incipient social-movement unionism in the rank-and-file efforts of the late 80s and 90s by activists in the North and South. He highlights numerous organizations that foster an international class outlook critical of the exploitative nature of lean production and the nationalist “competitiveness” agenda of the corporate elite. Such organizations maintain global communications via the internet, coordinate worker exchanges, and plan conferences.¹¹ Moody also touches on the role of various independent research organizations that publicize and advocate international labor rights,¹² as well as the growth of labor-activist publications throughout the world, including his own, *Labor Notes*.¹³

Despite the increasing power of transnational firms, Moody emphasizes that lean production, with its ballyhooed just-in-time delivery, makes the strongest corporations vulnerable to organized labor at any point in the production chain. Yet such weaknesses are meaningless if workers do not think and act as a class internationally. Moody recognizes that the rank-and-file activists are not strong enough to do much more now than deepen the internationalist outlook among union members,

distribute information, and so on. Yet in the context of ongoing capitalist crises and the “enormous economic and social pressures...pushing workers and their unions to act,” he contends that international working class power will grow:

[I]n situations where a workplace union is part of the transnational worker network, they can go beyond education and symbolic actions actually to influence management decisions....Common cross-border actions by local unions in different countries can cripple even the largest TNCs in their major markets. As the perception of this possibility becomes widely recognized, the rules of the game will change (282).

In the final analysis only social movement unionism can contest the power of transnational capital and its neoliberal agenda. As capital drives down working class living standards, “relief will come at the hands of the working class pulling itself together both ‘at home’ and abroad.” (226).

Stepping back from Moody’s extensive narrative, one might ask if he gives too much weight to the working class as the prime mover for social change. No doubt Boggs would think so. He would view Moody’s analysis as anachronistic—out of step with the multiple agencies for change and radical democratic consciousness that stretch far beyond the more progressive union halls. It is important to assess the validity of such a critique: Is Moody’s privileging of the working class justified?

I would argue, yes and no. Yes, because Moody’s basic Marxist insight holds true today as it did two centuries ago: only the working class¹⁴ has the collective power to transform capitalism in a socialist direction. So long as people’s access to their basic needs is mediated by the money form and driven by the imperatives of profit, workers have no choice but to submit to an anarchic productive system not responsive to basic human needs or ecological balance. Nation states and, indeed, capitalists are not free of the law of value. The dictates of profit have greater

authority than the most humane values, as Mitterand’s and other socialist retreats demonstrate.

And no, because although working class material interests are the *necessary foundation* in the struggle for socialism, they are by no means *sufficient*. While Moody acknowledges the need for the working class to reach out to broader social-movement constituencies, he simply does not pay enough attention to values and the shift in consciousness that Boggs identifies. The new social movements show more than anything how often people experience oppression and conceive their interests in racial, gendered, religious and other “non-class” terms. Moody hopes that organized workers will harmonize their interests with those of the unorganized, unemployed, marginalized, etc.—yet he provides little grounds for such beyond the expectation that economic pressures will eventuate it. And his own analysis shows that radical democratic and internationalist currents within the labor movement have not reached the union leadership, nor even most of the rank-and-file. Clearly people need to be engaged in ways which include, yet transcend, their material interests.

Perhaps symbolic of Moody’s inadequate attention to issues of consciousness, the ecological crisis receives but one or two passing *mentions* throughout his book. This is a serious gap, as ecological struggles strike at the root of capitalist production. Workers, students, professionals, and others continue to join in interesting alliances to contest economic expansion in their communities, as talk of “smart growth” enters mainstream political discourse. Although ecological concerns are often framed in parochial terms (e.g. “nimby”), such sensibilities should be seen as *integral* to building international working-class solidarity.

It is useful to consider the ecological crisis further in assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of Boggs’ and Moody’s analyses. Neither author takes on concretely one of the most

salient issues of the day: the question of jobs “versus” the environment. Both writers call for broad-based coalitions of labor and new social movements (with Moody giving special place to the former), yet they do not problematize the extent of conflict between workers’ need for employment and their desire for clean air, safe drinking water, and so on. Perhaps Moody’s silence on the issue reflects a deeper unease about an underlying contradiction in his vision—that the call for increased organization among workers premises the very economic growth responsible for ecological decay. Just witness the reluctance of organized labor to take strong environmental stands if jobs (and dues) are to be jeopardized. Yet despite this contradiction, labor intellectuals must increasingly integrate ecological concerns into their solidarity efforts. Ecology is one “postmaterialist” value that the working class cannot ignore.

As for Boggs, he surprisingly only touches on the issue, despite his conception of a post-Marxist “ecological framework” for today’s social conflicts. Although he repeatedly asserts the incompatibility between economic growth and ecological sustainability, his focus on localized movements rather than the working class neglects the fundamental realm of *production*. Clearly if ecological sustainability is to be achieved, the class that actually produces the world’s material things will need to play the central role. Boggs apparently thinks otherwise, skirting the question by merely affirming distinct values:

In contrast to Marxism, ecological theory breaks with the Enlightenment impulse to conquer and domesticate nature: development entails adaptation rather than control, dispersion rather than centralization of power and hierarchy, sustainability rather than endless plunder (232).

Apart from the problem of likening the Enlightenment and Marxism to such a view of nature domination, Boggs’ statement here is too facile. With an ecological outlook informed by Bookchin, Boggs equates Marxist “productivism” with capitalist

growth and decries the traditional dependence of socialist and social democratic leaders on capitalist expansion. Such a view, central to ecological critiques of Marxism, has a certain moral resonance; yet it remains too abstract and divorced from the structures of production that people must participate in to produce and reproduce their lives.¹⁵ It is easy to assert in the abstract the values of adaptation over control, or dispersion over centralized power. Yet for such ideals to have material force they must be seized by the masses—the very same masses that are vying worldwide to sell their labor (and lives) to quite controlling and increasingly centralized transnational corporations.

In the final analysis, Boggs and Moody speak two different languages. Boggs speaks as a postmodern cultural theorist who views both capitalism and socialism as complicit in our contemporary ills. As such he sees the most promising signs of progressive change in the unfolding forms of consciousness of the new social movements, particularly ecology. Moody, on the hand, is a classic Marxist, viewing capitalism “pure and simple” as the main culprit. Thus he examines and advocates developing forms of international working-class solidarity, while maintaining hope in a democratic socialist alternative to capitalism. Yet both writers overlap their hands. Rather than viewing radical democratic and ecological consciousness as a necessary component of socialist consciousness, Boggs eschews the socialist tradition. And rather than grasping ecological sensibility as a building block of international working class solidarity, Moody disregards it. Clearly a convergence is in order. The destructiveness of capitalism demands more than ever a working class socialist transformation. Yet such a transformation will need to be as cultural as it is political and economic.

Notes

¹See note 6 below.

²See billionaire philanthropist George Soros' much discussed cover story "The Capitalist Threat" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (February, 1997).

³I draw heavily here from Michael Harrington's analysis of Mitterand's retreat in *The Next Left* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986; chapter 6).

⁴Boggs refers to Marx's *Capital* twice in the text, while mentioning the internal contradictions of capitalism in the parentheses of a single sentence! (35).

⁵Moody points out that only 4 percent of total world manufacturing output has shifted from the North to South since 1970 (80).

⁶The *United Nations Development Report* of 1996 indicates: "Between 1960 and 1991 the richest 20 percent rose from 70 percent of global income to 85 percent—while that of the poorest declined from 2.3 percent to 1.4 percent" (54).

⁷To get a sense of the enormous wave of working class militancy in the 90s, Moody (21) provides the following list of general strikes against neoliberal policies: Nigeria (1994); Indonesia (1994); Paraguay (1994); Taiwan (1994); Bolivia (1995); South Africa (1996); Brazil (1996); Greece (1996, 1997); Spain (1994, 1996); Argentina (twice in 1996); Venezuela (1996); Italy (1996); South Korea (1996-1997); Canada (1995-1997); Haiti (1997); Colombia (1997); Ecuador (1997); and Belgium (1997).

⁸Citing research by Seidman (1994), Moody shows the crucial role played by neighborhood-based and women's organizations in the social-movement unionism of South Africa and Brazil since the mid-80s (210).

⁹Even Sweeney's increased commitment to organizing is grounds for only partial optimism, as it remains "well within the tradition of American business unionism." Moody chides "One day [the new AFL-CIO leaders] would be telling the world that they would organize the unorganized and 'take on corporate America.' The next they would be addressing businessmen and pleading for cooperation" (200).

¹⁰Moody provides an overview of various cross-border initiatives, such as the San Antonio-based *Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras*, the relationship between the *Communications Workers of America* and the *Telecommunications Union of Mexico*, as well as the alliance between the *United Electrical Workers* and the independent *Authentic Labor Front* in Mexico City (239-248).

¹¹A few of the organizations that Moody discusses are the Transnational Information Exchange (TIE), the US-Guatemala Labor Education Program, and the alliance between UAW Local 879 and the Ford Workers' Democratic Movement of Cuatitlan, Mexico.

¹²Such as the Washington, D.C.-based Internal Labor Rights Education Fund and the International Centre for Trade and Union Rights in London.

¹³Similar publications have grown in Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, Taiwan, New Zealand, Sweden, Germany and France.

¹⁴By the working class, I refer to the vast majority who have no choice but to sell their labor for a wage. This is not limited to the industrial working class, but includes as well service workers who do not act as "agents of capital" by primarily giving orders and hiring and firing at the workplace. See Callinicos (1987) for a conception of the working class consonant with my own.

¹⁵As eco-socialists emphasize, capitalist competition necessarily pits people against nature as the survival of industries depends on consistent access to (cheap) raw materials and energy sources. Thus the problem is not industrialization per se, but rather the undemocratic and unplanned (on the macro-level) nature of *capitalist* industrialization; capitalism forces people to choose between their job (if they have one) and a healthy environment. The issue is certainly more complex than I can touch on here. See O'Conner (1998, especially chapter 14); the interesting debate between Bellamy Foster and Harvey in *Monthly Review* (April, 1998); and the ongoing discussion in the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*.

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