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Lessons of the *Longue Durée*: The Legacy of Fernand Braudel[✉]

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Abstract: In 1958, in response to what he considered a general crisis in the human sciences and as a plea for their *rapprochement*, Fernand Braudel clarified his idea of time as a social construct, rather than a simple chronological parameter. This article begins by looking at the lessons of the idea of a plurality of social times, grounded in the concept of Braudel’s the *longue durée*, for social analysis. The first lesson was that we live in one singular “world.” His insight led to the basic premise of world-systems analysis that historical social systems come into being as a unique and indivisible sets of singular, *longue durée* structures with a beginning and an end, that is, recognizable over the long term, but not forever into the past or into the future. As Braudel observed, the reproduction of these structures —according to world-systems analysis, the axial division of labor, the interstate system, and the structures of knowledge— exhibit secular trends and cyclical rhythms that may be observed over the life of the system. Eventually, however, the processes reproducing these structures run up against asymptotes, or limitations, in overcoming the contradictions of the system and the system ceases to exist. The second great lesson of Braudel’s *longue durée* has been to allow us to see clearly not only the singularity of our world, but its uniqueness as well, that is, a world that has now expanded to become global, a world that consists of the three analytically distinct but functionally, and existentially, inseparable structural arenas, as never before existed. The third great lesson of the *longue durée* was to allow us to interpret crisis as the possibility for fundamental structural change. Finally this article examines the ethical and methodological consequences of the simultaneous exhaustion of the processes insuring endless accumulation and containing class struggle taking place contemporaneously with the collapse of their co-constitutive intellectual structures.

Keywords: Author: *Fernand Braudel; longue durée; Structures of Knowledge; World-Systems Analysis.*

Lecciones de la *Longue Durée*: El legado de Fernand Braudel

Resumen: En 1958, en respuesta a lo que consideró una crisis general en las ciencias humanas y en un intento de *reconciliación*, Fernand Braudel replanteó su idea del tiempo como constructo social y no como un simple parámetro cronológico. El presente artículo comienza con las lecciones de la idea de pluralidad en tiempos sociales, con base en el concepto de Braudel de la *Longue Durée* para el análisis social. La primera lección fue que vivimos en un “mundo” singular. Su enfoque derivó en la premisa principal del análisis sistema-mundo que dicta que los sistemas sociales históricos surgen como un grupo de individuos únicos e indivisibles, *Longue Durée* de la larga duración dentro de un comienzo y un fin que son reconocibles a largo plazo pero no para siempre en el pasado ni en el futuro. Como observó Braudel, la reproducción de dichas estructuras —según el análisis de sistema— mundo, la división axial del trabajo, el sistema interestatal y las estructuras de conocimiento- muestran tendencias seculares y ritmos cíclicos que se pueden observar durante la vida del sistema. Sin embargo, en algún

[✉] This article is the product of a personal research agenda pursued for the past three decades, but it was not the specifically funded.

momento, los procesos que reproducen estas estructuras entran en confrontación con asíntotas o limitaciones para superar las contradicciones del sistema, causando que el sistema deje de existir. La segunda gran lección de la *Longue Durée* de Braudel fue permitirnos ver con claridad no solo la singularidad de nuestro mundo sino también su carácter único. Braudel muestra un mundo que se ha expandido para globalizarse, que está conformado por tres escenarios que son analíticamente diferentes pero funcionales, y existencialmente son inseparables a nivel estructural como no habían existido antes. La tercera gran lección de la *Longue Durée* fue permitirnos interpretar la crisis como una oportunidad para generar cambios estructurales fundamentales. Por último, este artículo estudia las consecuencias éticas y metodológicas del agotamiento simultáneo del proceso de aseguramiento de la interminable acumulación y contención de la lucha de clases que se presenta hoy en día tras el colapso de las estructuras intelectuales co-constitutivas.

Palabras clave: Autor: Fernand Braudel; *longue durée*; estructuras del conocimiento; análisis sistema-mundo.

Lições de *La longue durée*: o legado de Fernand Braudel

Resumo: Em 1958, em resposta ao que considerou uma crise geral nas ciências humanas e uma tentativa de *reconciliação*, Fernand Braudel reestruturou sua ideia do tempo como construto social, e não como um simples parâmetro cronológico. Este artigo começa com as lições da ideia de pluralidade em tempos sociais, com base no conceito de Braudel da *longue durée* para a análise social. A primeira lição foi que vivemos num “mundo” singular. Seu enfoque derivou na premissa principal da análise sistema-mundo a qual refere que os sistemas sociais históricos surgem como um grupo de indivíduos únicos indivisíveis, em estruturas de *longue durée* dentro de um começo e um fim que são reconhecíveis em longo prazo, mas não para sempre no passado nem no futuro. Como Braudel observou, a reprodução dessas estruturas —segundo a análise do sistema-mundo, a divisão axial do trabalho, o sistema interestatal e as estruturas de conhecimento— mostram tendências seculares e ritmos cíclicos que podem ser percebidos durante a vida do sistema. Contudo, em algum momento, os processos que reproduzem essas estruturas entram em confronto com assintotas ou limitações para superar as contradições do sistema, causando que o sistema deixe de existir. A segunda grande lição da *longue durée* de Braudel foi permitir-nos ver com clareza a singularidade do nosso mundo, mas também seu caráter único. Ele mostra um mundo que se expande para globalizar-se, que está formado por três cenários que são analíticamente diferentes, mas funcionais, e existencialmente são inseparáveis no âmbito estrutural como não tinham existido antes. A terceira grande lição *longue durée* foi possibilitar interpretar a crise como oportunidade para gerar mudanças estruturais fundamentais. Por último, este artigo estuda as consequências éticas e metodológicas do esgotamento simultâneo do processo de garantia da interminável acumulação e contensão da luta de classes que se apresenta hoje, após o colapso das estruturas intelectuais coconstitutivas.

Palabras clave: Autor: Fernand Braudel; *longue durée*; estruturas del conocimiento; análisis sistema-mundo.

The plurality of social times grounded by the concept of the *longue durée* is already explicitly described by Braudel in *La Méditerranée et le monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*.¹ The book immediately established Braudel's reputation in the *Annales* tradition, a movement that exhibited an interdisciplinary embrace of all the sciences of humankind. Attention broadened from the political and the diplomatic to the economic and the social and the *longue durée*, the

1 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Editorial Armand Colin, 1949).

time of the long-term structures of social reality, the duration of one historical system, was privileged over the time of events, which were only “dust” for Braudel.

In 1958² however, in response to what he considered “a general crisis in the human sciences”³ and as a plea for their *rapprochement*, Braudel clarified his idea of time as a social construct, rather than a simple chronological parameter. He reiterated his conception of time as *durée*, duration, and his differentiation of a relational plurality of social times —the short term of events or episodic history (for instance, political history), the medium term of *conjunctures* (such as, among others, economic cycles), and the long term, the *longue durée*, of structures (the organizational regularities of social life). Here, however, he notes a fourth time, that of the very long term (*la très longue durée*, such as that found in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss), “which knows no chance occurrences, no cyclical phases, no ruptures” and limits “us to the truths that are a bit those of eternal man”.⁴ Thus, the *longue durée* is not itself eternal —it has a beginning and an end— and this conceptualization avoids the problem of ahistorical generalization in nomothetic social science as well as the ephemeral quality of the event privileged by traditional idiographic history.

The consequence was Braudel’s first great lesson: that we live in one singular “world”. His insight led to the basic premise of world-systems analysis that historical social systems come into being as a unique and indivisible sets of singular, *longue durée* structures with a beginning and an end, that is, recognizable over the long term, but not forever into the past or into the future. As Braudel observed, the reproduction of these structures exhibit secular trends and cyclical rhythms that may be observed over the life of the system. Eventually, however, these processes run up against asymptotes, or limitations, in overcoming the contradictions of the system and the system ceases to exist.

The fundamental structures of the *longue durée* world in which we live, the modern-world system, or capitalist world-economy, emerged in Europe at the beginning of the “long sixteenth century”. By the end of the Hundred Years’ War an axial division of labor was developing as a polarized relationship between a western European core where high-wage, skilled workers produced low-bulk, high value-added manufactures and an eastern European periphery where high-bulk, low value-added necessities were produced by a lower cost work force. The long-distance trade in these commodities resulted in the accumulation of capital in the Western-European core. The processes reproducing this structure over the long term —the “accumulation of accumulation” or profit making for reinvestment and thus more profit making— underwent periodic fluctuations. The expansion of the system to incorporate new pools of low-cost labor provided the solutions that turned periods of world economic downturn into periods of upturn.

The “endless” accumulation resulting from the extraction and appropriation of surplus produced by labor could only take place within the context of what developed as an interstate system, the second great structure of Historical Capitalism. Unlike the overlapping geographic jurisdictions of feudal “realms,” the multiple states of which this new system was composed were “sovereign” —putatively— with reciprocal rights and obligations, at least to the extent that their territorial extensions, and the monopoly on the use of force within them were recognized by other states (not

2 Fernand Braudel’s seminal article was originally published as Fernand Braudel, “Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée.” *Annales* 13, n. ° 4 (1958) : 725-753. Of the many translations, I have elected to use Immanuel Wallerstein’s.

3 Fernand Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée.” *Review* 32, 2 (2009): 171-203.

4 Braudel, “History and the Social,” 195-196.

always the case and states came and went). Fluctuating flows of goods, capital, and labor could thus be controlled across semi-permeable borders throughout the system. In practice, strong states worked to loosen controls during periods of world economic upturn and tighten controls during periods of downturn to favor accumulation and contain and defuse class conflict.

Like its economic processes, the geopolitics of this system also underwent periodic fluctuations. Competition among elites resulted in “world wars,” the outcomes of which were short-lived states of “hegemony,” a status of the system (not an attribute of a single state) during which one strong state exercised military, commercial, and financial ascendancy, before other parts of the world-system “caught up” to become once more competitive and the cycle repeated.

There was a third set of structures that were just as constitutive of the modern world over the past five-plus centuries as those in the arenas of production and distribution —the economic— and coercion and decision making —the political. It has come to be conceptualized as that of cognition and intentionality, the *longue durée* structures of knowledge; it was foreseen by Braudel in his 1958 article where he wrote: “Mental frameworks are also prisons of the *longue durée*.”⁵

During the European medieval period, knowledge in the Western world was relegated to either of two realms, the earthly or the heavenly. Although each was constituted in different ways, each dealt with both what was true or not, and what was good or not. The modern structures of knowledge emerged out of the late feudal conjuncture consisting of first, the crisis of the framework of knowledge production as practiced by the “schoolmen” (e.g., in the form of the critiques by, for instance Bacon and Descartes) and second, the increasing availability of technological innovations and the modes of thought and action that they favored, especially the declining spiritual connotations afforded time and space (e.g., the equal quanta of mechanical clocks and musical notation, which resulted in the discontinuous, incremental value-neutral time; visual representations such as perspective and cartographic projections, which subjugated space to the eye of the observer; and especially double-entry bookkeeping with its “rhetorical” virtue and “bottom-line” reasoning exempt of human values). These developments took place in articulation with the geopolitical and economic transformations in act during the transition from feudalism to capitalism to define, for the first and only time anywhere, two mutually exclusive epistemologies: one in which “truth” or facts was independent of “good” or values and a second in which human values, ethics, and morals were intrinsic to statements about the world.

The long-term intellectual and institutional opposition of the sciences, the realm of “truth,” and the humanities, the terrain of “values,” was reaching a clear definition when the social sciences emerged in the nineteenth century as a medium-term solution to the tensions internal to the structures of knowledge that no longer offered practical ways of addressing the evolving geopolitics of the world-system. In the aftermath of the French Revolution it was no longer possible to imagine a static world; however, modes of interpreting social change in the human world, as differentiated from the natural world, made contradictory appeals to values. The mutually exclusive alternatives were either order achieved through the authority of tradition or chaos arising from a democracy without restraint. Neither offered a solution, on which any consensus seemed possible, to the political confrontations between conservatism and radicalism (with which, indeed, they were identified) that threatened capital accumulation. The result was the institutionalization of a

5 Braudel, “History and the Social,” 179.

set of disciplines, the social sciences “between” the two super disciplines, which would function to guarantee ordered change in the name of “progress” through “scientific” control, exercised by “experts” and based on “hard facts.” The social sciences divided the study of the human world into isolated domains separated intellectually in disciplines and institutionally in university departments. However, from the moment of the greatest intellectual and institutional success of this structure in the period immediately after 1945, the scholarly legitimacy of the premises underlying the separation the disciplines and the practical usefulness of the distinctions became less and less self-evident, and after 1968 were hotly contested.

Thus, the second great lesson of Braudel’s *longue durée* has been to allow us to see clearly not only the singularity of our world, but its uniqueness as well —uniquely, a world that has now expanded to become global, a world that consists of the three analytically distinct but functionally, and existentially, inseparable structural arenas, as never before existed.

A third lesson of the *longue durée* is that of allowing us to reinterpret crisis. A principle characteristic of, or crisis in, the world today is that there no longer exist significant pools of labor outside the system to be incorporated at the bottom of the wage hierarchy to take the place of previously incorporated workers who have militated and succeeded in negotiating higher remuneration. The result constitutes a challenge to capital in maintaining the world-scale rate of profit. Indeed this is only one of an interrelated set of mechanisms —implemented through state action— through which accumulation has been guaranteed over the past five centuries by keeping costs of production down. Others include the externalization of the costs of infrastructure and ecological degradation, and control over transfer payments resulting in higher taxes. These too have run up against their limits resulting in rising costs of production at the world level that can no longer be offset locally. Geopolitically, the exhaustion of the economic processes of capital accumulation has also eroded the ability of states to contain political activity on the part of the “dangerous” classes.

Completing the picture from the perspective of the *longue durée*, within the structures of knowledge the process of rationalization, as described by Max Weber, has entered into crisis as well. The manifestations of this crisis are already changing the way we view the world from one of autonomous, but interacting, units to one of relational systems which create their elements as actors and observables. The effect will eventually be to open up the possibilities for human action that we are able to imagine as effective and legitimate. The structuralisms drew attention to the shortcomings of both European humanism and positivism, and from the late 1960’s, developments at the level of theory were paralleled on the ground of practice. Those groups who had lacked a “voice,” gained admittance to the academy and began to transform it from the inside by applying their differently situated knowledges of the workings of the social world. One group disputed essentialist categories of gender and situated the female body as a pivotal site positioning women in society through scientific discourse. Similarly, scholars and activists working in the area of race and ethnicity have, in the production their own empirical studies, built up theories of difference that challenged (Western) universalism and objectivity. Their work too highlighted the essentialism of received status categories and how difference could be used to subordinate entire groups.

Over the same period, the very premises of science have been undermined from the inside. It took the better part of four centuries for what we now think of as the scientific model to dominate our common sense view. That model included the discrimination between the true and the false in a world of independent, “objective” elements. It included the idea that explanations should be brief and simple and at their best could be expressed in laws that allowed for predictions to be made. These

are exactly the notions which have lost their unquestioned legitimacy. They continue, however, to regulate our everyday thinking. Their great force resided not only in their very real accomplishments, but also in their naturalized, universal and trans-historical character.

Thus, the hierarchical structure of the superdisciplines of knowledge production is collapsing. Contingency, context-dependency, the collapse of essentialisms, and multiple, overlapping temporal and spatial frameworks are closing the gap between the humanities and the historical social sciences. Likewise, the indivisibility of chance and necessity that gives rise to irreversibility and creativity in natural systems⁶ is moving the sciences back toward “human studies.” The ontology itself underpinning the legitimacy and authority of knowledge constructed on the “scientific” model, which is at the foundation of the hierarchy of the structures of knowledge as we have known them, but invisible without the *longue durée* perspective, is undergoing a transformation: the vision of the natural world as composed of independent, interacting units —billiard balls or nation-states or independent, autonomous individuals suitable for comparison— is giving way to an emerging sense of the world as made up of fundamentally deterministic but unpredictable systems. In the social world, these take the form of systems of relations, relational systems, which fabricate their members through process of interaction and reproduction rather than incorporating existing elements through, for instance, webs of communication.

What is changing is the overarching structure itself. Thus, areas of study will not be segregated and opposed to one another according to their supposedly contradictory epistemological premises, but will be recognized as participating equally in the production and reproduction of the human condition. Coinciding with these developments, the intellectual sanctions and practical justifications for independent disciplines in the social sciences, where epistemological ambiguities were never put to rest, are disintegrating too. But what conclusions are we to draw from the simultaneous exhaustion of the processes ensuring endless accumulation and containing class struggle taking place contemporaneously with the collapse of their co-constitutive intellectual structures?

Science now provides us with alternative models of physical reality in the form of relationally constituted self-organizing systems and fractal geometry, and of change and transition, complexity theory and chaos theory. These all defy the law of the excluded middle that has been fundamental to the production of legitimate knowledge, and basic to common sense, for the past five centuries. The recognition of the indeterminacy of meaning in the humanities and the “alternative knowledges” that found a home in the social sciences with the expansion of faculty and student body after 1968 to include those speaking from marginalized subject positions have brought into sharp focus the political dimension of knowledge production and undermined the idea of scholarship as a perfectly disinterested activity amenable to time-independent, objective evaluation. These developments notwithstanding, we have not reached the end of responsibility; indeed, social agendas have become more important than ever.

In this is secular crisis, a contemporaneous crisis of all of the overarching structures of the system, like that which brought it into existence in the first place, the medium-term future is decidedly one of transformation and thus full of possibilities. Arguably, we are already experiencing the transition,⁷ however, not all of the futures we can envision are equally desirable, or even

6 See Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

7 See Terence K. Hopkins, Immanuel Wallerstein *et al*, *The Age of Transition: Trajectory of the World-System 1945-2025* (London: Zed Books, 1996).

possible. The direction of fundamental change is unpredictable, but intimately dependent on our choices among the real historical alternatives, as differentiated from impossible futures, that we can imagine for a more egalitarian world, if indeed that is what we want.

Thus we are presented, both analytically and practically, with arguments for the reunification of “is” (the realm of facts, or necessity — the goal of science) and “ought” (the field of values, chance or now more properly possibility — the challenge of the humanities). Here Braudel’s argument for a “*rapprochement*” among the human sciences based on the *longue durée* comes to fruition.

Academics and layman alike, we have all been impacted by the advances in information technology and communications; the scholar no longer inhabits a privileged space in the world of knowledge. No literature can remain proprietary or any classification scheme claim absolute authority; academics and non-academics alike can and now do access multiple literatures, and intervene directly in debates, without regard for scholarly discipline or institutional status. Just as new cultural communities and political constituencies are being created around issues previously segregated in non-communicating areas of knowledge, the consequences of rethinking the false opposition between ideas and action (as between scholar and citizen) are already having an impact on political practice as well as in an expanded conception of market interactions. An emerging historical social science that includes creativity and choice and no longer at crosscurrents with a holistic experience of social relations is already under construction; and this sense of the holism of social relations is reframing the classical considerations of “who, what, when, where, why” and the “view from nowhere” as questions of “for whom, for what, for when, for where, from whose point-of-view.”

Now for those of us whose profession it is to endeavor to understand the social world in both a systematic and useful way, the question of method becomes paramount. Criticisms of large-scale work in the nomothetic social sciences (especially work based on the comparative method, such as comparative modernization) have revolved around the absence of the historical dimension and the lack of independence of “cases.” In many respects, this represents the return of a realization that agency and complexity are just as much a part human reality as the structures that constrain certain possibilities for action and promote others. The mirror image is the criticism of the idiographic social sciences as providing only non-generalizable, particularistic descriptions that offer no guide to social action. Braudel’s original conception of the *longue durée* came to grips with both problems.

But how do we proceed when our unit of analysis is singular, a *longue-durée* system, a single case, and our questions concern its future — and our observables are instances (products) of long-term processes? Analyses in terms of analogies or articulation, both of which are indicative of systemic relations, may offer an answer, that however, in no way dispenses with the meticulous research fundamental to making defensible claims and so much a part of Fernand Braudel’s scholarship. Moreover, both analogies and articulation belong to a set of methodological practices that will demand a departure from causal explanation in favor of a structural understanding of the mechanisms at work, that is, in terms of the coincident combination or fortuitous simultaneity of, especially, the lifting of sets of constraints. Conceptually, this conjunctural argument is one of determinant conditions, which admits the reality of long-term patterns of social life and the contingency of inexorable historical change, as an alternative to the classical framework of cause and effect.

Indeed then, with no promise of progress, all of this constitutes the challenge for those of us seeking to understand the world in which we live and at the same time participate politically, ethically, morally in the construction of a more equitable, more humanely human world — and of course, this is the final great lesson of Fernand Braudel and the *longue durée*.

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Historia Crítica, interested in the article "Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée," and its repercussions on the study of the social sciences today, sixty years after it appeared, asked Richard E. Lee some questions about the most significant contributions of this article.

Hugo Fazio Vengoa (HFV): *Extensive research has been derived from the approach described by Fernand Braudel in his article "Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée" published in Annales. It is pertinent to reflect with this approach on whether the long duration must be assumed as a theory of social time or whether the scholars must adopt it as a source of inspiration.*

Richard E. Lee. Any theory of time implies an approach to history. Time, moreover, for Braudel is not just a chronological parameter, but rather an artefact of social relations. As I argue in the accompanying paper, his conception of time as *durée* or duration —the *longue durée* has both a beginning and an end— avoids the traps of both idiographic "chain-of-events" causation common in traditional historical accounts and nomothetic ahistorical generalizations in much social science research. It allows us to take into consideration at one and the same time that which we perceive as changing and those long-term, but not eternal structures of social relations against the background of which change occurs. The *longue durée* structure is indicative of a single, unique unit of analysis that rules out traditional comparative methods, methods which assume the independence and autonomy of cases, to be replaced by a relational view focusing on the interdependence and co-constitutive nature of the entirety of social reality. Again, as I argue in the accompanying paper, the recognition of a single unit of analysis and thus the need to find alternatives to comparative methods suggests such approaches as "articulation," "analogy," and the identification of "determinate conditions." Finally, the analyst him/herself will be called upon to participate politically, ethically, and morally, as an analyst, in the construction of a more equitably and humanely human world.

HFV. *Why did Braudel divide time into durations?*

Braudel, identified a general crisis in the human sciences in the mid-1950s. They had become non-communicating spheres of knowledge production and he felt that to be counterproductive for our understanding of the social world. His 1958 article is a plea for a *rapprochement* among the disciplines —disciplines whose proprietary methods and subject matters disappear with the

imposition of a holistic, relational approach. It is of note (see details in the accompanying paper) that recent developments in the humanities, social sciences, and even the sciences suggest that the boundaries among the super disciplines are collapsing as well.

HFV: *In one of his most quoted books, *La Méditerranée et le monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Braudel made use of the three durations he mentioned in 1958 (the long term, the conjunctural and that of the events). However, in other works, he mentioned the possibility of a greater number of possible durations. Does the Braudelian conception have a fixed number of durations?*

In his 1958 article, Braudel indeed conceived time as *durée* (duration or term, a unit of time), differentiating a plurality of social times —the short term of events (for instance, political history), the medium term of conjunctures (such as economic cycles), and the long term of structures (the ever so slowly changing regularities of social life). However, he also alludes to the eternal, or very long *durée*, in his discussion of Claude Levi-Strauss. Immanuel Wallerstein has added a further social time: *Kairos*, a time of crisis and transition, and thus the time for fundamental decisions that have consequences for social transformation and the emergence of a new set of underlying structures. This is the time that Wallerstein calls transformational timespace, when free will is possible and action has long-term effects. It is not so much the simple return of agency, but the manifestation of the fundamental relationship between agency and structure —the indivisibility of chance (change) and necessity (structure).

HFV: *Fernand Braudel also reflected on total history or global history. In that regard, is it possible that the long duration or historical time make up the structure of this form to conceive history?*

The *longue durée* refers to the temporal singularity, duration, of a single historical social system. The historical social system, the world, that we live in (a world of a specific set of unique social structures) came into being during the “long sixteenth century” in Europe and only expanded to become global in the late nineteenth century.



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