Some Versions of Foucault

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I

This essay began as a review of David Hoy's anthology on Foucault, but after reading it I decided that it might be useful to try to cover some of the other recent critical material. The Foucault industry is burgeoning: I read everything I could get hold of in English, but there are doubtless books I've missed, and doubtless others will have come on to the market since this review was completed. With the exception of Habermas's two essays in *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (which should shortly be available in translation) I decided to ignore foreign-language materials — including, for example, the Foucault issue of *Critique* and Deleuze's recent collection of essays.

Some of the books on Foucault can quickly be discarded. One of the worst is J.G. Merquior's *Foucault*, in the Modern Masters series. Merquior's book makes a token effort to be fair to his Modern Master but then quickly yields to antipathy; it is not much more than a display of prejudice — about 'Paris' and its 'fashions', about European philosophy in general (Merquior characterises everything from Bergson on as 'literary', a term of abuse which assumes unproblematic genre distinctions), about historical method (which has to do essentially with factual correctness), and about the assault on liberal values that Foucault's work is supposed to represent. The import of Foucault's oeuvre is said to be nihilistic; it is hostile to the Enlightenment; it denigrates the rule of Reason. All of this is written in a rollicking polemical style; it's all either untrue or ungenerous; and it's a depressing demonstration of how easy it is, in one's irritation with some aspect of Foucault's work, not to listen to what he is saying.

Other books you needn't buy include Alan Sheridan's *Michel Foucault: The Will To Truth*, which has been around for a couple of years now. Sheridan, who translated most of the earlier books, delivers a good plot summary but doesn't ever engage with the hard issues. Pamela Major-Poetzl's *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Western Culture: Toward a New Science of History* was recommended by Mike Gane a few years ago as one of the more interesting secondary texts, but I didn't find it so myself: it sets
up an elaborate and rather clichéd comparison between the principles of Foucault’s archaeological method and field theory physics; a curious Epilogue, clearly added at the publisher’s insistence to bring the book up to date, notes that ‘since completing The Archaeology of Knowledge Foucault appears to be engaged in yet another methodological experiment’ (the word ‘genealogy’ is here mentioned for the first time).

Like Major-Poetzl’s book, and also the text by Dreyfus and Rabinow that I’ll discuss shortly, Charles Lemert and Garth Gillan’s Michel Foucault: Social Theory and Transgression comes out of that history of ideas tradition which is so damagingly prevalent in American graduate schools and which of course Foucault’s own work has done so much to undermine. It goes in for the large summary, the sweeping judgement. Without ever actually being wrong, it’s marked by woolly thinking and a deadening sort of second-hand glibness. Barry Smart’s two books on Foucault (Foucault, Marxism and Critique and its rewrite Michel Foucault) assess his work in the light of a Marxist political problematic; they’re both rather pedestrian. Mark Poster’s Foucault, Marxism and History takes the leap into using Foucault’s work as a replacement for Marxism; this seems to me vastly to overestimate its importance, and in any case Poster’s substitution of the concept of mode of information for that of mode of production is simplistic and unsubstantiated. Making grand historical gestures on the basis of Foucault’s work is precisely a way of missing the point of his refusal of generality and historical synthesis. Mark Cousins and Athar Hussain’s Michel Foucault, finally, is a book that should have been a good deal better than it is. Cousins has written interestingly on Foucault before, and certainly there are moments of insight here; for the most part, however, the book limits itself to exposition (that is, to commentary — again, a concept that Foucault’s work has rendered problematic); and it is so poorly written and subedited as to be at times almost unreadable.

II

This brings me to David Hoy’s collection Michel Foucault: A Critical Reader. Half of the essays here were commissioned, the rest are reprinted; and it seems a shame that Hoy hasn’t made better use of the opportunity to reprint some of the really important essays on Foucault’s work — those, for example, by Michel de Certeau, Peter Dews, Monique Plaza, John Rajchman, Beverley Brown and Mark Cousins, David Carroll, Dana Polan, or Leo Bersani. What we get instead is a mixed bag, but mostly a set of more or less rigid defences of American liberalism.

The defensiveness means that many of the writers just aren’t paying attention. When Richard Rorty asks us to reject ‘all the
anarchist claptrap about repression and all the Nietzschean bravura about the will-to-power' (47), or when David Hoy complains that 'as archaeology gives up the contrast between true and false, genealogy remains peculiarly silent about the distinctions between liberty and power or the just and the unjust' (12), it's clear that there are some pretty fundamental misunderstandings going on: in Rorty's case because he hasn't noticed that the concept of repression undergoes an extensive and important critique in Foucault's later work, and because he's refusing to attend to the work done by the concept of will-to-power; and in Hoy's case because he misses the point that the distinctions he mentions aren't 'given up' or passed over, but rather are relativised to particular discursive formations and particular orders of power (that is, they cease to have an absolute and universal force).

Politics, power, and truth: these are the categories around which nearly all of these essays revolve, and in most cases what the discussions register is a sense of disturbance at the perceived lack of a set of stable general principles. Thus the editor's introduction claims that 'Foucault's continued refusal to specify either a prescription or a prognosis for the social illnesses he diagnoses suggests to some readers that genealogy is as unserious and irresponsible as archaeology' (7) ('unserious' is a loaded word in this collection - it's often a code-word for Derridean deconstruction). The problem is whether Foucault's work can provide a point of political leverage, since Foucault 'criticises the present without suggesting how the future could be better' (138). Many critics, according to Hoy, feel that 'critical principles can be developed only from a standpoint independent of the social one being criticised. By denying the possibility of an independent standpoint, Foucault appears to such critics to be not simply a functionalist, but a nihilistic, fatalistic one' (10).

The central political argument against Foucault is made by Michael Walzer. Fifteen years ago, says Walzer, I too was writing about the society of surveillance, the increasing bureaucratisation of life, the 'disciplinary' control of individuals. Now Foucault has cornered this market by virtue of his superior powers of dramatisation: his books are 'rhetorical statements of great power, though often ineffective in what we might think of as scholarly law enforcement — the presentation of evidence, detailed argument, the consideration of alternative views' (56).

This kind of back-handed praise and this reduction to sameness constitute fairly typical strategies of refusal. In this case, they gloss over the fact that Foucault is precisely not theorising disciplinary control as a simply repressive force, and is therefore not merely producing a libertarian argument about surveillance (although that's certainly part of it). But because Walzer understands Foucault to be saying that discipline is repressive and totalitarian, he can then envisage only two political consequences to be
drawn from his work: either a minor and irrelevant reformism, or the anarchist alternative of a wholesale abolition of the carceral society. In support of his contention that there is a fundamental political pessimism, a lack of any vision of transcendence, in Foucault’s work, he cites a phrase from a 1971 interview: ‘I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present’ (60). This sentence (spoken in the context of an interview with Maoist lycée students) seems to me, however, to be somewhat more complex than Walzer is willing to allow. It means either that utopian thought is a ruse of the present which entraps one even further in complicity; or that it is only possible to construct the future by working on and within the limits of the present; or, better, both of these at once: the sentence suggests a dialectic between complicity and transformation which avoids the simple negativity of either pole.

At the heart of Walzer’s critique is the complaint that Foucault refuses to provide ‘some positive evaluation of the liberal state’ (62). There are a number of aspects to this. One involves the lack of any ‘principled distinction . . . between the Gulag and the carceral archipelagoes’ (62): that is, between arbitrary and despotic regimes of imprisonment, and regimes based in guaranteed human rights and a clear distinction between guilt and innocence. At a different level, this means that Foucault treats ‘the constitution of the law’ and ‘the actual workings of the political system’ as relatively unimportant (indeed, as superstructural) in relation to the workings of disciplinary power. Finally, and as a consequence, Foucault slights those ‘conventional truths of morality, law, medicine and psychiatry’ that ‘regulate the exercises of power’, setting limits to its abuse and providing the framework within which dissent and protest are possible (65); thus, for example, ‘the truths of jurisprudence and penology . . . distinguish punishment from preventive detention. And the truths of psychiatry distinguish the internment of madmen from the internment of political dissidents’. In short, Walzer insists on a clear opposition between ‘authoritarian and totalitarian states, on the one hand, and on the other the liberal rule of law’ (66).

But this opposition, of course, rather than representing a pre-existing state of affairs, works actively to construct it as a discursive reality. It’s the level of generality of such oppositions that Foucault would reject. A regime of incarceration will serve a number of different functions; most of the disciplinary functions will be common to both ‘liberal’ and ‘totalitarian’ states, and incarceration can’t simply be divided between a set of positive ‘liberal’ functions and a set of repressive ‘totalitarian’ functions. Further, even if we were to establish that in a liberal regime of incarceration it is the formative and ‘rational’ functions that predominate, this wouldn’t constitute a simple proof of superiority — since one of the arguments of Discipline and Punish is that
'liberal' forms of discipline represent in many ways a more powerful form of control than direct coercion.

Indeed, one could characterise much of Foucault's work as a kind of critique of liberal reason — and this means that the critique can't be refuted simply by an appeal to this reason. Walzer's insistence on the importance of political forms is something like a defence of intentionality — an argument that it is the conscious rationality of the state that produces disciplinary effects. Thus 'the Bolsheviks created a new regime that overwhelmed the old hierarchies and enormously expanded and intensified the use of disciplinary techniques. And they did this from the heart of the social system and not from what Foucault likes to call the capillaries, from the centre and not the extremities' (63). But the example of the course of the Russian Revolution surely tends rather to prove Foucault's point: that power operates despite, not because of, political intention.

Walzer's defence of liberalism similarly involves a belief in the ability of the disciplines of knowledge to control the workings of power. This is to say that knowledge is, or can be, external to power rather than shaped by it; and this in turn rests on the supposition that particular knowledges have an external, adjudicative function in relation to the structure of reality, rather than being intricated in the constitution of this structure. Thus those 'truths of psychiatry' which 'distinguish the internment of madmen from the internment of political dissidents' (and so resist and contain the arbitrary exercise of power) (66) are thought of as confirming a real and universal difference. But this is clearly not the case: these 'truths' are internal to psychiatry and the field of its influence; these categories, and the opposition between them, are constructed by and within this discourse.

Note that to say this is not to reject the opposition and its political consequences; if discipline is productive as well as repressive, then there will be forms of discipline and forms of disciplinary knowledge that we will want to promote for particular political ends. We may well choose, for example, to work with the distinction between arbitrary punishment and the rule of law; but the point is that, rather than being absolutised, these will be understood as categories constructed within a historically limited discursive formation. Walzer's generalised distinction, by contrast, is used to ward off criticism of the liberal state and to locate the principle of all evil in its totalitarian Other.

It will be apparent that there is a close and consistent link between the question of the political implications of Foucault's work and questions of epistemology. Charles Taylor is representative of many others when he focusses on Foucault's apparent refusal of a politics based in 'the idea of liberating truth' (70). He cites this passage from Power/Knowledge.
Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true. (70)19

What Taylor takes this to mean, I think, is that the worldliness of truths disqualifies them for political uses. Later, citing this passage at greater length, he writes that 'the regime-relativity of truth means that we cannot raise the banner of truth against our own regime. There can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it be that of another. So that liberation in the name of 'truth' could only be the substitution of another system of power for this one' (94). Truth would be no more than 'the truth of power that our society demands'.20 Not only can Foucault envisage no liberatory transformation of power relations, he also cannot imagine what makes possible the truth of his own critique. And this is linked to Foucault's further failure 'to recognise the ambivalence of modern disciplines, which are the bases both of domination and self-rule' (95).

The perspective of the posthumous books on ethics perhaps makes it easier for us now to realise that 'self-rule' was in fact always understood by Foucault as a central component of discipline. Taylor is simply wrong in ascribing a wholly negative value to the concept of discipline in Foucault's work, and this means that he is also wrong about the consequences of relativising truth to regimes of power. It is only if we envisage power as homogeneous and monolithic (that is, as repressive) that we will expect the 'truths of power' to be singular and free of conflict. If, on the contrary, we understand power to be dispersed and contradictory, then it will be productive both of truths that support a regime and of truths that work against it. It is this thoroughgoing ambivalence of power — at once repressive and formative, ubiquitous and localised, totalising and fractured — that gives the conditions of possibility for critique, and for a transformation of social relations that never transcends them.

The one essay in this anthology that tries to come to terms with the complexity of Foucault's understanding of power is the editor's 'Power, Repression, Progress: Foucault, Lukas, and the Frankfurt School'. Hoy identifies Foucault's central problematic as the attempt to work out an analytics of power 'without relying either on the concept of the subject or on the assumption that the structural relations he is identifying are not subject to change' (128), and he uses Foucault's description of power as 'intentionality without a subject' to try to theorise the difficult questions of agency this involves. At the same time he draws a number of conclusions from the notion of the productivity of power: that 'power makes possible not only falsity but also truth'
(138); that critique thereby necessarily becomes immanent; that the dominated are as much a part of the network of power relations and the particular social matrix as the dominating; (134) and that the converse of power is not freedom but a different configuration of power (137) — that is, rather than lying beyond power (and its particular social mechanisms), freedom is in a reciprocal and 'agonistic' relation to it. (139).

Like most of the other work in this volume, however, Hoy's essay is concerned with general questions of evaluation rather than with detailed analysis (it thus compares unfavourably with, for example, Cousins and Hussain's chapter on power). The one significant exception to this is Martin Jay's very interesting essay 'In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Designation of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought'. Jay undertakes a patient and exhaustive reading of the figure of the gaze in Foucault in order to relate it to a tradition, beginning with Bergson's critique of the spatialisation of time, which reverses the immemorial privilege of the visual in Western philosophy. This reversal is part of a more general critique of the constitutive subject and its powers of rational scrutiny. It links together the primacy of vision and visual representation; the disinterested scientific gaze; and the objectifying impetus of reason. Jay traces a series of moments in Foucault's work where the visual is over-determined as the focus of a complex of power/knowledge. In the account of the development of the clinical gaze, for example, Foucault charts the emergence of an epistemic field built around the moral structure of the relationship of life to death (this field, Foucault suggests, is common to both positivism and phenomenology); Jay notices in this account a 'subterranean affinity' with Sartre's description of 'the alienating and objectifying power of the Other's gaze' (181) — and we could perhaps add Lacan to the list. In the passage in The Order of Things on Velasquez's 'Las Meninas', Foucault traces the emergence of modern humanism in 'the replacement of the absent spectator, the king, by the "observed spectator", man in a still visually constituted epistemological field' (189). And in the model of the panopticon Foucault details 'the modern course of the Enlightenment dream of transparency, and its relation to techniques of power' (192).

But what Jay also notices is the ambivalence of Foucault's own relation to the visual. Part of this, as de Certeau has observed, resides in the tension 'between his substantive critiques of the power of the gaze and his own "optical style", which drew on visual astonishment to subvert that power' (178). Jay remarks too that Foucault offers no simple 'structuralist' alternative to the privilege of sight: it is his 'awareness of the visually opaque dimension within language itself, which he called its perpetually rebus-like character, that makes it problematic to characterise him
primarily as a structuralist, even of a heterodox kind' (185). Despite this ambivalence, however, Jay argues that Foucault remains trapped within a one-sided critique of rationality. He is not concerned with vision’s ‘reciprocal, intersubjective, communicative function, that of the mutual glance’ (195); and Jay suggests that ‘it may be time to begin probing the costs as well as benefits of the anti-ocular counter-enlightenment. Its own genealogy needs to be demystified, not in order to restore a naive faith in the nobility of sight, but rather to cast a little light on the manifold implications of its new ignobility.’ (196)

III

One of the favourite exegetical devices in the secondary literature on Foucault is the construction of teleological narratives to explain the shape of the oeuvre (Foucault himself has played this game several times, claiming that his work was ‘really’ always about power, or about ethics, or about subjectification). Frequently these narratives are built around an opposition between ‘archaeology’ and ‘genealogy’. Ian Hacking writes, for example, that ‘this obsession with words [in The Order of Things] was too fragile to stand. Foucault had to return to the material conditions under which the words were spoken’ (33). Davidson distinguishes three main domains in Foucault’s work: the analysis of systems of knowledge (archaeology), of modalities of power (genealogy), and of the self’s relation to itself (ethics) (221). Implicit in this division is a model of succession. Other orderings of the work revolve around the opposition of language to practice, of language to discourse, of discourse to power, or of politics to ethics. And the trouble is that none of these teleologies work, because Foucault’s books are not ordered in accordance with a linear progression. In particular, only a misunderstanding of what Foucault means by the concept of discourse (as evidenced by its placement on either side of the divide) allows it to be separated from power or practices or institutions, at any stage of the corpus.

The most authoritative narrative of development is given by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow in Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics.²¹ It’s an immensely irritating book, in part because of the mixture of deference and condescension with which they treat Foucault. They validate their own argument by appealing, in all seriousness, to the personal opinion of the Author (‘This time we were on the right track. Foucault told us that the real subtitle of The Order of Things was An Archaeology of Structuralism’), at the same time as they then turn this ‘personal’ text against the public text of Foucault’s books. Foucault is now said, for example, to admit having been wrong in distinguishing statements from speech acts (45) — and this ‘admission’ (which would seem to make a mockery of one of the
central arguments of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is made in a personal letter to John Searle (who happens to be another good friend of the authors). Again, consider the way a solidarity with Foucault against his own earlier texts is constructed in this passage: in *The Order of Things*,

under the influence of the structuralist enthusiasm sweeping Paris, he sought to justify and retain just those formal aspects of his work which now seem most dubious both to us and to him. That is, he played down his interest in social institutions, and concentrated almost exclusively on discourse, its autonomy and discontinuous transformations. (16)

The opposition here of a formal analysis of discourse to an interest in ‘social institutions’ (an opposition which derives from the paradigm of the social sciences) is part of a chain of oppositions which build up the narrative of Foucault’s supposed epistemological break. The general form of this narrative is the story of a passage out of the ‘illusion of autonomous discourse’, a passage which is in fact the correction of a deviation in Foucault’s career. Foucault

does not deny that during the mid-sixties his work was deflected from an interest in the social practices that formed both institutions and discourses to an almost exclusive emphasis on linguistic practices. At its limit this approach led, by its own logic and against Foucault’s better judgement, to an objective account of the rule-like way discourse organises not only itself but social practices and institutions, and to a neglect of the way the discursive practices are themselves affected by the social practices in which they and the investigator are imbedded.

Foucault is said to propose that ‘the archaeologist can study the network of discursive practices and treat it as an ensemble of interconnected elements while bracketing what Foucault will later call the ‘thick tissue’ of nondiscursive relations which forms the background of intelligibility for those actually speaking’, he ‘insists on the purely linguistic character of his subject matter and accordingly on the autonomy of the field of stability and the field of use’ (57-58). An important consequence of this formalism is that Foucault fails to ‘explain just how discursive relations interact with primary and secondary ones’ (63); instead, he ‘simply names the problem by telling us that “the field of statements is . . . a practical domain that is autonomous (although dependent), and which can be described at its own level (although it must be articulated on something other than itself)” ’ (64). The autonomisation of discourse is also, finally, a form of theoreticism, whereas in the later, genealogical works ‘practice, on all levels, is considered more fundamental than theory’ (103).

All of these descriptions are based on serious misconceptions of the argument of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. It is wrong to
equate the analysis of discursive formations with the analysis of 'linguistic practices' or to posit the 'purely linguistic character of [Foucault's] subject matter', because for Foucault discourse and language are quite distinct objects (discourse may or may not be linguistic in form; there is no necessary connection between the two). It is wrong to set discourse in opposition to 'social practices' because it is itself a social practice. It is wrong to oppose 'discursive practices' to 'nondiscursive relations' because the implication of Foucault's theorisation of discourse, both early and late, is that there can be no relations which are properly external to discourse. It is misleading to say that the later work privileges practice over theory, because this assumes that in Foucault's work the isolation of the one from the other is ever possible. And it is at least unproductive to demand the 'articulation' of discourse with 'primary' and 'secondary' relations (this distinction is Foucault's gesture towards Marxism) because at its best, although still unsatisfactory, Foucault's work — certainly from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* onwards — suggests a quite different kind of relation between social practices, and attempts a radical deconstruction of the concept of totality on which the notion of articulation is predicated.

The best answers to Dreyfus and Rabinow's misunderstandings are given — to anticipate for a moment a later section of this essay — in Minson's treatment of the relations between discourse and language and between discursive and non-discursive practices and relations. Minson usefully separates out two different questions about language in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: first, 'are discursive formations like language?', and second, 'how does language operate in discursive formations?'. He suggests that the brief answer to both is that for Foucault 'discursive formations are not like language because language (in the form of statements comprised of signs) operates within them in non-linguistic ways'. It is this that, *pace* Dreyfus and Rabinow, sets *The Archaeology of Knowledge* apart from a structuralist problematic. Foucault's argument here involves both a theory of language and a metaphoric extension of the linguistic model to other semiotic domains.

As a further consequence of this, it becomes impossible to set up a single general relationship between the discursive and the non-discursive, since 'for Foucault, discourse is not a general ("linguistic") domain against which may be posed an equally general domain of reality (events, fact, etc.)' In Brown and Cousins' concise formulation, which Minson here quotes:

> What falls outside a particular discursive formation merely falls outside it. It does not thereby join the ranks of a general form of being, the Non-Discursive ... no general relation may exist between 'external events' and discourse. This makes it possible to investigate what in
particular external events (which may include other discourses) can be
given as an object of particular discourses, of what the connection
between a discourse and those events can consist.

The point is that Foucault thinks discourse not as a linguistic struc-
ture but as a complex and ontologically mixed formation made up
of conditions, sites, statuses, and practices. This is to say that it is
composed both of semiotic functions (the formation of discursive
objects and of positions of enunciation) and of 'material' (institu-
tional, spatio-temporal, practical) conditions of possibility — al-
though these in their turn are always discursively organised. Insofar
as it is possible to separate functions within this complex, we could
distinguish between two senses of the word 'discourse': as a set of
practices amongst others, and as the site of representation (forma-
tion) of entities and practices. This double functionality of discourse
(at once structural and epistemological, practical and constitutive)
means that, according to context, it is both situated on the same
level as other practices and entities, and logically superordinate to
them. When Foucault talks of the 'autonomy' of discourse, he refers
to the latter, representational or formative aspect; but he never
believes that this function can properly be abstracted from the
structural relation of discourse to other practices.

Dreyfus and Rabinow's narrative, which posits a break occur-
ing after The Archaeology of Knowledge, thus seems to me
profoundly implausible — although they do at times recognise
that the oppositions they construct aren't so simple: they write, for
example, that there is no temporal break between 'archaeology'
and 'genealogy', since 'from his earliest days Foucault has used
variants of a strict analysis of discourse (archaeology) and paid a
more general attention to that which conditions, limits, and in-
stitutionalises discursive formations (genealogy)'(104).

Despite my general disagreement with the terms of their argu-
ment, however, I find one part of their critique of Foucault's con-
ception of discursive autonomy accurate and damaging. This con-
cerns the concepts of rule and regularity in The Archaeology of
Knowledge. The argument is as follows: in describing the force of
the rules which structure discursive formations, Foucault trans-
forms the formal regularities that he observes into formal
conditions of existence of discourse. It was in fact quite unneces-
sary for him to claim that discourse is not only regular but is
governed by rules, but 'since at this stage he is committed to the
view that discursive practices are autonomous and determine their
own context, Foucault cannot look for the regulative power
which seems to govern the discursive practices outside of these
practices themselves'. This means, then, that

he must locate the productive power revealed by discursive practices
in the regularity of these same practices. The result is the strange
notion of regularities which regulate themselves. Since the regularity
of discursive practices seems to be the result of their being governed, determined, and controlled, while they are assumed to be autonomous, the archaeologist must attribute causal efficiency to the very rules which describe these practices' systematicity. (84)

This criticism still treats discourse as an effect of other social domains, or relates it as an 'inside' to a determinant contextual 'outside'; but it does suggest the extent to which The Archaeology of Knowledge remains indebted to a structuralist ontology.

(The second part of this essay will be published in the June issue.)

NOTES

3. Alan Sheridan, Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth, Tavistock, 1980.
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