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The Symptoms of the Political Unconscious (Introduction)

Juliet B. Rogers and Andreja Zevnik, guest editors.

The unconscious world of politics has as many fissures and lacunas as any individual psyche, and perhaps more. It is not quantifiable nor does it ever arrive as fixed or stagnant. It will not emerge or eventually reveal itself. It does not fit into a progressive or linear narrative. The political unconscious cannot be put on a couch and analysed or indeed cured. It cannot be drilled for or discovered. It is always and already there. The political unconscious ‘speaks’, it displays itself in the symptoms of the political world, in the speech of policy, of decisions, of laws, of images, icons and gestures, and in protest, resistance and ordinary violences, and, insofar as it speaks, psychoanalysis can say something about it. From a psychoanalytic perspective the speech of the political world is frustrating, annoying, often as cunningly resistant to exposure or understanding as it is in the clinic. But it is these very symptoms, as performances of the unconscious, that make it so fascinating and so important to understand; perhaps particularly at this time.

On November 9th 2016 the United States of America elected Donald Trump as their next President. The commentary that followed this election elaborated a universe of affect, passions and emotions, which oscillated between elation, fear, satisfaction, triumph, hysteria, rage and disbelief. In short, it was nothing less than an environment polluted with excitements from both the right, left and in-between. In John Cash’s terms it had the affects of a ‘disaster’ (2017). The international response was no more tempered. Australians were aghast but then docile, Brexit enthusiasts in the UK were more immediately pleased. Its government saw an opportunity to chart a somewhat different relation between the ‘old allies’ and perhaps saw this as an opportunity to put to test a range of anti-immigrant policies of their own, and more firmly inhabit a rightist nationalist discourse. Russians swung too. Many countries in the Middle-East quivered, even Israel for a moment. It might have been only Italians that felt relieved – that they were now not the only western nation to succumb to the charms of rich, charismatic politicians of little substance and outrageous comment.

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There has been much ink devoted to the attraction of authoritarian leadership in particular, in times when nations (or significant proportions of the population) feel at threat (Adorno 1950, Greenstein 1975, Marcuse 1974). Regardless of whether the experience of threat is grounded in an 'objective reality', little stops politicians from taking advantage of the situation and the sentiment. Politicians from across the political spectrum have done that in the past, blaming either the external threat coming from the Soviet Union, or internally putting blame on immigrants or finger-pointing at particular ethnic groups identifying them as responsible for 'high' crime-rates. In such 'a culture of fear' (Robin 2006) politicians fabricate enemies from within and from abroad, scapegoating groups that are different from the majority or from the fantasy of what a 'true American', 'true Brit', 'true Australian', 'true German' stand for, and turning them into reasons for the nation's failure, disunity, experience of fear and insecurity. When in such a political constellation the population knows who to blame for their perceived peril, the defence against those groups and their ideas, or the need to attack them, presents itself as the obvious solution.

However, the 'culture of fear' that populist politicians happily promote is not without a link to the individual psyche. Psychoanalysis has something to say about this link. Psychoanalysis is devoted to interrogating what informs desires for safety, freedom, for leadership, for prohibitions on others and for the certainty of identity. Psychoanalysis asks questions about what mobilises individuals or communities into voting for populist politicians or someone such as Trump, particularly in the face of glaring contradictions and obvious falsity. Psychoanalysis does not presume that ordinary incentives apply, but asks how does obedience, denial, seduction persist, despite obvious flaws in character, capacity for truth, or care or responsibility in a leader? Why do we see such a devoted following, even though these leaders often break with the core norms of contemporary domestic and international politics? Why do we so readily hate others? And how do we so easily forget the effects of such hate in the past? Each of these questions has multiple lines of inquiry and avenues for interrogation. These interrogations are the bread and butter work of political psychology and they are the terrain of psychoanalytic examination.

Psychoanalysis was developed as a technique of the clinic, it was and remains the 'talking cure', in order to help individuals with symptoms which caused them difficulties in their lives – from clinical psychosis to anxiety – but its purview, since Freud, has reached much further than individuals. With the intervention of French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis became more than just a clinic concerned with the symptoms exhibited by its patients. Lacan might disagree, but Lacanian theory from its inception in 1950s has also become a theory of society and in doing so, it went beyond the boundaries of individual patient diagnosis. From the war trauma work of Wilfred Bion on groups, to Slavoj Žižek's commentary that 'all the world is a symptom' (2006), psychoanalysis has considered and been further developed in relation to group, social and political psychologies and their many pathologies. Its prime terrain is the unconscious where it appears in language, including images, gestures and silences. 'There is no unconscious except of the speaking being' as Lacan (1990: 5) states. 'It speaks, does the unconscious, so that it depends on language, about which we know so little' (ibid.). In disciplines such as law the language of the unconscious is readily seen in legislation, judgements and policy. In law the unconscious is well accepted as a motivator of decisions and doctrine – in the work of Peter Goodrich, Bill McNeil, Renata Salecl, Shoshana Felman we can understand how the unconscious insists to produce ideas and outcomes. Anxiety, as one of key affects in psychoanalytic theory, for example, pushes for particular forms of law, as Rogers notes in this issue, through what can be imagined and what is feared. Similarly in the arena of literature the unconscious is well understood to insist in the words, phrases and spaces that constitute a literary work, Cathy Caruth, Justin Clemens and Jacqueline Rose being just a few who document this effect.

In the political sciences the unconscious is positioned more in the background and yet it persistently appears in statements or policies. Evidenced in a well-known comment by Donald Rumsfeld (2002) about the lack of evidence linking the government of Iraq to the weapons of mass destruction, Rumsfeld stated:

reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say we know

there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones (2002).

But what Rumsfeld forgot, and Žižek (2004) points to, is that there are also unknown knowns, that is, 'there are things we don't know that we know – which is precisely the Freudian unconscious' (2004). While it seems hard to accept that politics emanates from an unknown and sometimes an unknowable world, this unknown known 'world' is precisely where psychoanalysis grounds its political observations.

In a yet to be published seminar *The Logic of Phantasy*, (Seminar XIV, 1967) Lacan places the unconscious in relation to the structure. He writes: 'unconscious ex-sists, [it] is motivated by the structure, that is, by language' (1990: 28). As Burgess, Hook and Rogers illustrate well in their contributions to this issue, for Lacan the subject is the function of language. With this statement about the unconscious and language Lacan opens the doors for the (political) analysis of the unconscious, its symptoms, and ways in which the subject displays those symptoms. This important psychoanalytic move suggests that not only does the unconscious make the subject dependent on the language; but also that the unconscious is dependent on the structure of language, as Zevnik (2017: 85) elsewhere explained. Thus, Lacan's statement that 'the unconscious is structured like a language', becomes only a more refined statement that the 'unconscious is politics'. How does this exposition of the unconscious translate into political categories? With a statement on the unconscious and language Lacan suggests that the political space is de-centred in the same way as the subject, which in turn prevents the reduction of the subject to unconscious rationality on which philosophy, political science, law or economy ground their representations and idealisations of subjectivity. (Tomšič and Zevnik, 2015: 5–6) In other words, the unconscious destroys the fantasy of a rational and free individual that the disciplines in social sciences hold dear; instead it binds such an individual to a moment of contingency, irrationality and unpredictability that the unconscious imposes.

With the notable exceptions of the work of Žižek, Eric Santner, Ernesto Laclau, John Cash, occasionally Judith Butler, and the obvious inclination of Fredric Jameson to name *The Political Unconscious* as such, the unconscious is largely an uncomfortable idea in the political, however. This is arguably because it introduces precisely the uncertainty, irrationality and unpredictability mentioned above, into the space that is primarily concerned with how to provide certainty (most commonly in the form of various security discourses). In political science, if the unconscious is referenced at all it is largely to justify its existence (such as in the recent work of Charlotte Epstein and James Martin,) or to treat it as if it is merely the yet-to-be-known terrain of politics. The unconscious, it seems, has also lost its favour in political psychology, but it has not always been so marginal to the discipline. Its beginnings were peppered with psychoanalytic thoughts, in the work of Graham Little, Alan Davies, Robert Lane, and of course Fred Greenstein, but its influence, as well as the focus on the unconscious, has subsided. The situation in political psychology is not, of course, as dire as Christopher Lasch in 1979 described of ‘academic psychology’ wherein it ‘retreats from the challenge of Freud into the measurement of trivia’ (1979, XIV). The measurement of the world in political psychology is not only reduced to quantitative elements, and even when it is, it is well accepted in political psychology that there is that which exceeds the activity of quantification. Much of contemporary political psychology is as complex as it was in 1975, when Fred Greenstein wrote in his critique of psychological testing by codification as an assessment that ‘code categories, no matter how carefully and subtly conceived, fail to exhaust the meanings of the respondents’ statements. (1975, 1381) But of course it is not only code categories that fail to exhaust. Psychoanalysis points to an unconscious, which, no matter how thoroughly it is put under the analysis microscope, will never be exhausted, and even its measure is elusive.

As the left leaning commentators struggle to understand “what happened” in relation to Trump, it seems that what is hard to accept about such political events is that *something* always escapes the measure and that the political unconscious might never be fully known or uncovered. If we look closely at Greenstein’s extraordinary work in 1975, as a revisiting of his 1958 research on children’s perceptions of leaders he thought something similar. In these studies the children gesture to imaginary

functions and Greenstein's assessments are tentative, partial, gentle, in fact. In particular when he talked of the 'political imagery', in the 1975 article, he wrote:

Even though we asked respondents simply to *describe* the leadership positions of their polity to the imaginary foreign child, their responses exhibit considerable affective content. In seeking to characterize the feelings underlying the statements children made to us, we must tread warily because much of the response content is ambiguous. (1975, 1383)

Indeed, here we see both the hesitancy and comfort in uncertainty. In this issue we seek to bring back this form of comfort in the discomfort of uncertainty. To live with discomfort might, indeed, be the best way to approach a political unconscious that is being articulated in policy and rhetoric at a ferocious, and arguably violent pace.

In a journal on political psychology and an edition, which is largely devoted to the unconscious symptoms of politics, understood through psychoanalysis, the phenomena that are Trump, Brexit or the rise of the right in Europe and in the antipodes, are not directly the topics of this edition. They sit alongside the careful analyses of Black Lives Matter and racism by Jeffrey Prager and Andreja Zevnik, of ethics and enjoyment by Derek Hook and Peter Burgess, of forgetting by Paul Muldoon, of the question of psychoanalytic application at all by Juliet Rogers, Stephen Frosh and Belinda Mandelbaum. These are not separate sites to the events above, indeed the relation of such events as Trump and Brexit to the Black Lives Matter campaign or racism could not be more complementary. We just need to look at how Trump's election has been a cause for elation amongst his supporters – including the Klu Klux Klan, to see racial issues writ large, but also how excitements emerge and converge as what Hook calls 'libidinal rewards'. As he says we need to 'attend to the libidinal rewards and investments that bind subjects to particular ideologies' or we will 'fail to grasp something essential about the interplay of power and subjectivity'. As a complement to this excitement we can look at the work of forgetting in Trump's political rhetoric, and particularly his concern with a nostalgia for the past and apply Muldoon's thoughts in this edition on how the 'sovereign is he who is able to forget'. Though these ideas can inform an analysis of this time, psychoanalysis does not give answers, it asks questions concerned with such interplays. It responds to resistances

and offers interpretations as part of ongoing conversations with the 'patient', with that which is laid before it in its talk, its silences and its sighs. But most of all it offers space and attention to the details of symptoms as they emanate from often unconscious desires as these are also the symptoms of particular polities.

Categories enmeshed in the political language of rights, law, political speech are the targets of the work in this issue. They are the symptomology, the speech or talk of the unconscious of political worlds and, as such, present themselves for analysis. There are perhaps three ways in which one can understand the relationship between politics and the unconscious. One has to do with structure of the social reality and the position of the unconscious; the other with the 'institution' of the subject, and the third with subject's relation to authority and the symptomology that pertains to that relation. The contributions to this special issue speak mostly to the third understanding insofar as authority appears in political practice and policy. The authors here maintain that what matters more than the unconscious itself is its relation to the political subject and the actions of those subjects in relation, including political relation. That is, it is not that politics happens at the level of the unconscious, but rather that politics appears in the relation between the unconscious and the language in which one part of the unconscious is revealed. What we ask in this issue, as an overarching question, is what is revealed of the political unconscious through the speech, the acts, the gestures of speaking beings particularly as they solidify into policy and practice in different political contexts?

The contributions of this special issue are ordered so that they address different symptoms and symptomologies that modern societies perform daily. The issue itself addresses three main strands of psychoanalysis that can be of use for political psychology – it directly speaks to political symptoms (Prager, Zevnik, Muldoon), it engages with the much needed conceptual work which aims to either bring psychoanalysis and political psychology in conversation or show how psychoanalytic intervention can open new conceptual vistas for political psychology (Burgess, Hook) or reflects on the universality and the critique of psychoanalysis (Frosh and Mandelbaum, Rogers).

The issue opens with Frosh and Mandelbaum's contribution, which shows so clearly how psychoanalysis itself is not above criticism. Similar to Rogers' intervention as the final piece, they speak critically of the work of psychoanalytic presumptions. Frosh and Mandelbaum specifically begin their discussion of conservatism in Brazilian psychoanalysis with an outline of the history of complicity with hegemonic ideas that psychoanalysis has entertained, from Nazism to anti-queer and misogynist tendencies. As they note – 'the "normal" practice of psychoanalysis has been politically cautious and individualised', but it is not without its emancipatory possibilities. Their focus is on Brazil and the role of psychoanalysis in collaboration with the civil-military dictatorship 1964–85. They argue that there is a parallel between the "'dynamics" within the psychoanalytic institution and the relations of power existent in Brazilian society' in the particularly repressive period of the dictatorship known as the "Years of Lead". In their work we see the chilling possibility of psychoanalysis itself becoming a symptom entwined with the politics of its time. And, as commented on by their interviewees, that the psychoanalytic society of that time in Brazil was informed by a politics that determined its practice as well as the constitution of its members, policed through silencing and exclusion, but also through economics. Their point about the use of Wilfred Bion's notion of the clinician's approach as importantly 'without memory or desire' turned into an apolitics in the clinic, is a disturbing insight into, not only how the very real fears of a dictatorship can influence psychoanalytic societies, but also how it can corrupt psychoanalytic practice, and perhaps more disturbingly for thoughts on resisting the current conservative turns in the western world, how it can dampen possibilities of the political subject's capacity for resistance.

In the election of Trump there is much to be resisted. We can say that what is gently described by Obama as an 'unconscious bias' has been elevated to the level of excitement, and might be well understood, in Hook's terms as an 'enjoyment'. In Hook's article we see an examination of the notion of 'enjoyment as a political factor', which is a key motif in Lacanian psychoanalytic social theory. Hook's careful mediation on the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* lays the field for an analysis of today's political environment that seems to be at odds with what it most desires. As Hook says:

Always composite, never an unalloyed pleasure, *jouissance* always veers

off into excess, be it by virtue of the thrills of transgression, or simply by means of its indulgence in what is 'too much', potentially traumatic, necessarily linked to pain. Simply put, such 'negative pleasures' are the result of gratification pursued 'beyond the pleasure principle', beyond the bounds of what is healthy, reasonable or ordinarily permissible.

But Hook shows us how this form of pleasure is always linked to law and thus to the social world of prohibitions as policy. Enjoyment, Hook points out 'is always 'social' in a default sense – always, indeed, 'discursive' – inasmuch as it oversteps the bounds that define what is acceptable in a given discourse or social sphere.' In this sense, he says it is 'parasitic' on the social world. Racism, for Hook, is such an enjoyment, and in his work he notes several events where race and racism emerge as exciting forces. Indeed, in this edition race and racism emerge repeatedly as themes and as events, which point to the complications of political arenas. Race, we might say, is the category, which ruptures, in Muldoon's terms, the 'we' of political spaces.

Zevnik and Prager then speak to the symptomology of race and racism in the context of the USA. Prager examines the profound effects of a history of slavery in the United States through the lens of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, and how the withholding of the necessary reparations toward 'black lives' from white perpetrators results in an impossibility to forgive. It is this withholding, complimented with the ongoing treatment of black Americans as non-human, by white Americans, that he considers a fundamental part of the 'unconscious bias' that Obama spoke of in respect to the repeated shooting of black men by police. He asks, simply 'do black lives matter' in the US today? And if they do not, then how can black America forgive white America for the brutality of the past? Zevnik takes the analysis of the black lives matter project in a different direction, discussing the notion of the post-racial society that many across the political spectrum in particular white liberals so desire. The post racial society, she suggests, is a social fantasy. To explain this she discusses the lived experience of Americans and their attitude towards racism and social and political inequality. Drawing on the studies of public attitude her article points towards a persisting racism that the post-racial society has aimed to overcome, and to the effect that recent black activism had on dismantling the fantasy. Racism, she argues, is grounded in the unconscious and in the way a subject becomes politicized, but, like language, racism already permeates political categories such as rights or

citizenship concluding that a black subject cannot exist politically as a black subject. Similar to Prager's statements that 'Because of psychic enmeshment, the black body is invested with precisely those properties disallowed in the white body. The white body politic thus equates *Americanness* with whiteness.' Zevnik argues that there is always something that a black subject has in the excess and that miss-fits with white political categories.

Following symptomology of race and racism, Burgess brings this issue back into the realm of psychoanalytic and political theory. In his contribution Burgess revisits the concept of sovereignty in political theory by applying tools adapted from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. It critically reviews the premises of political subject assumed by sovereignty, and formulates a widened concept of sovereignty based on a general understanding of the 'self', 'self-relation' and 'identity' as the fundamental components of sovereignty. In as much as the subject comes into existence only in the face of sovereign authority, such a subject is also always already "under erasure", as Burgess explains. That is there is always something missing in the image in which the (political) subject appears in the world. Something escapes – the real – which is precisely, as Burgess shows, the 'object' sovereignty attempts to govern. With conception of the subject in mind, the article then focuses on the concept of the 'sovereign good' common to French histories of political thought and of particular interest to Lacan. By reinterpreting the sovereignty of the sovereign good, Lacan points to a path according to which an idealised and universalised notion of the sovereign is made possible and energised through an identification of the 'real' with the sovereign good. By understanding sovereignty as supported by the Lacanian real, we can better understand both the forces that drive it to self-preservation and the insecurities that make its survival and longevity powerful hindrances to its dissolution. Further, the article suggests a notion of a subject's self-mastery (self-sovereignty) that on the one end points to the possibility of radical resistance (that is of things being otherwise), while on the other end it invites the readers to entertain the possibility of uncertainty as constitutive of political reality. In doing so, Burgess gestures towards politics or the political which is no longer pre-occupied with security while equally does not strive to eradicate uncertainty.

We then return to memory, and the work of forgetting in Muldoon's philosophical consideration of political forgetting. Its importance as well as its possibilities, are discussed with relation to Athens BC, but his analysis of what forgetting can do could be applied to many conflictual societies struggling with 'cycles of violence' (Minow 1998), including Australia, the Americas and of course South Africa. Psychoanalysis has, we can suggest, been well applied but also corrupted in post-conflict societies, as if testimony in a court room is another form of the 'talking cure', as if it is simply 'better to have [trauma] out than in' (Rogers 2011). Muldoon, explains how memory or rather remembering and testifying to the painful memories of the past, have come to organise political life in post-holocaust Europe and beyond. But here he ponders on the political imperative to forget, particularly the Athenian BC injunction on remembering. Forgetting is not popular, Muldoon reminds us, but in his work he also shows how what is forgotten and what is remembered can form the basis of a political society. His analysis could be applied to many of the contexts discussed in this edition, and beyond. His use of Friedrich Nietzsche and Carl Schmitt to consider the capacity of the sovereign to be able to forget and to order forgetting could not be more apt in contemporary political spheres where contradictory truths are exchanged moment to moment. As Muldoon notes:

Forgetting, then, comes easy to those who feel no pain or suffer no loss. But who among us is really so rich that they can endure injury without suffering from it and happily renounce the pursuit of recompense (that is, justice)?

The answers might be white North America, in Prager or Zevnik's terms, or non-Indigenous Australians, in Rogers. Remembering, as Muldoon, points out using Freud, is about the weighing of pleasure and displeasure, and in this we can see it has very little to do with ordinary desires for truth.

Such selective and pleasurable remembering is well applied to the history of Australia and particularly non-indigenous Australian's, who dwell all too comfortably in the unassimilable nature of the originary violence of colonisation, in Rogers' terms, and do not need to recall that that contemporary legitimacy was based on genocide. Rogers' particular concern is also then with such forgetting, in Australia, but also as it pertains to the political underpinnings of psychoanalysis more generally; a forgetting she suggests, which might also be a form of foreclosure on its own political and legal

origins; a forgetting which presumes forgiveness for the violences of the past. Employing the example of Australia, and the people who are always subsumed under a certain kind of memory, her concern is with the methodology of political psychoanalysis and the presumption, in Žižek's terms, that 'all the world is a symptom'. To this idea she objects and traces the relation between the subject of rights and the subject of psychoanalysis. Liberal law, and psychoanalysis, emerge from the same trajectory, she argues, both are concerned with what the subject can have, and what it cannot. Or, in short, both are concerned with limits. This trajectory is particular to the subject of rights, and, using postcolonial theory, particularly that of Gayatri Spivak, she looks at how psychoanalysis always presumes a form of desire that emerges from the primal scene, a scene that also resembles the formative scenes of liberal law. She contends that when analysing state practices, and indeed the subjects of nations states, we need to ask: What is the symptom? And then, from where does the symptom emanate? But more importantly for psychoanalytic theory applied to political analysis, can we treat something as a symptom whose analysis presumes a *collective* oedipal lineage? These, she argues, are questions for a political psychoanalysis which cannot shy from the presumption of a particular trajectory of desire, and the possibility that not all subjects follow this trajectory.

Conclusion –

Perhaps the final observation one should make about the unconscious and politics is that politics in psychoanalysis rarely comes as an emancipatory moment or an act. Instead, quite on the contrary, politics is 'hinging on the father' – in Freudian terms. Such a politics has little to do with the breaking away from authority or with a re-definition of authority; instead, it signifies subject's relentless drive to put itself in relation to authority: to be governed and recognised as *that* political subject or to understand how one becomes a subject of a 'despotic regime'. Without going into too much detail, one could say that populist movements are driven by either a strong ideology of other's hatred, by fear of anything that might be different or by a (charismatic) leader who speaks to the subject's quest for political recognition most directly. The Frankfurt School as well as mass psychology developed by thinkers such as Marcuse or Le Bon already pointed to this phenomenon. As the subject (or the society) searches for its ways in which it is to be put in relation to the master signifier

(the authority) it exposes, displays and performs symptoms of the unconscious. Be those individual acts of bigotry triggered by race, gender or sexuality; or social symptoms exposed in political discourse, policies against difference, the immanent threat against which only a wall or a barb-wire is to protect the security of that particular state and its population.

The contributors in this edition see psychoanalysis, with its attentions to these symptoms, as crucial to understanding the world of the political unconscious, and as it appears in the choice of leaders, the docilities and resistances to those choices, and also the accompanying symptoms of those resistances – protest, violence, silence and sometimes surrender. What motivates leaders to act, political communities to ignore or resist those actions, histories to be subsumed or remembered are symptoms informed by the unconscious. Just as we can forget an image, or in the case of trauma, an experience, we can forget our political pasts. As Muldoon points out, using Freud – are we not always partly in flight from the “relentless assaults of reality”? (Freud 1956: 57). Just as we can overlay the memory of a past onto another in order to justify an action, whether it be as revenge or as management, so too can policy and law emerge to manage the layered images of a political world. This is not to say, in the mode of Wendt that political communities are just large individuals (2004). They are not. But the unconscious can be seen to be at work, even if it itself cannot be *fully seen*, in the choices and historical memories of a community. The contributions in this issue offer discussions and reflections on what can be seen and what cannot, and a way into grasping the effects of the unconscious as it is displayed in policy, in law, in rhetoric, in historical narrative, in the clinic, in forgetting and remembering, in speaking, in enjoying and in resisting. They take some measure of the politics of these times and of the times before, and they linger on the impossibilities of analysing not only what always exceeds measure, but also what exceeds analysis.

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