

Inside Occupy Wall Street

How a bunch of anarchists and radicals with nothing but sleeping bags launched a nationwide movement

Jeff Sharlet

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Spencer Platt/Getty Images

It started with a Tweet – “Dear Americans, this July 4th, dream of insurrection against corporate rule” – and a hashtag: #occupywallstreet. It showed up again as a headline posted online on July 13th by *Adbusters*, a sleek, satirical Canadian magazine known for its mockery of consumer culture. Beneath it was a date, September 17th, along with a hard-to-say slogan that never took off, “Democracy, not corporatocracy,” and some advice that did: “Bring tent.”

On August 2nd, the New York City General Assembly convened for the first time in Lower Manhattan, right by the market’s bronze icon, “Charging Bull,” snorting in perpetuity. It wasn’t the usual protest crowd. “The traditional left – the unions, the progressive academics, the community organizations – wanted nothing to do with this in the beginning,” says Marisa Holmes, a 25-year-old filmmaker from Columbus, Ohio, who was working on a BBC documentary called *Creating Freedom*, about why people rebel. “I think it’s telling that, of the early participants, so many were artists and media makers.”

Even the instigators and architects present at the creation marvel at how things just happened. “It was a magic moment,” says Kalle Lasn, *Adbusters*’ 69-year-old co-founder. “After that, things took on a life of their own, and then it was out of our hands.”

Adbusters' call to arms had been timid by the standards of the movement quickly taking form. The magazine had proposed a "worldwide shift in revolutionary tactics," but their big ideas went no further than pressuring Obama to appoint a presidential commission on the role of money in politics. In Lasn's imagination, though, that would be just the start. "We knew, of course, that Egypt had a hard regime change where a torturous dictator was removed," he says, "but many of us felt that in America, a soft regime change was possible."

Possible, but not likely. They were still thinking in inches. "To be perfectly honest, we thought it might be a steppingstone, not the establishment of a whole thing," says David Graeber, a 50-year-old anthropologist and anarchist whose teaching gig at Yale was not renewed, some suspect, because he took part in radical actions. It was Graeber who gave the movement its theme: "We are the 99 percent." He also helped rescue it from the usual sorry fate of the left in America, the schisms and infighting over who's in charge. He had shown up at the August 2nd meeting thinking it was an *Adbusters* thing; he was surprised to find a rally dominated by the antiquated ideas of the Cold War left. "This is bullshit," Graeber thought. He recognized a Greek anarchist organizer, Georgia Sagri, and with her help identified kindred spirits. "We looked around. I didn't recognize faces, everybody was so young. I went by T-shirts – Zapatistas, Food Not Bombs." Anarchists in name or inclination. He calls them the "horizontal crowd" because they loathe hierarchy. "It was really just tapping on shoulders. And a lot of people said, 'Shit, yeah.'"

They set up a circle in a nearby park, dubbed it the New York City General Assembly and got down to talking about how they'd pull off the occupation. They were inspired by something they'd read on the *Adbusters* website, a quote from Spanish political theorist Raimundo Viejo, who was active in the revolts across Europe this year. "The anti-globalization movement was the first step on the road. Back then, our model was to attack the system like a pack of wolves. There was an alpha male, a wolf who led the pack, and those who followed behind. Now the model has evolved. Today we are one big swarm of people."

But the reality was, they only numbered about 60 people. "You always fantasize," says Graeber. "But at some level, you've given up on thinking it's really going to work." They had no money. And they were planning to take over one of the most heavily policed public spaces on the planet. "Everybody was talking about occupying Wall Street," says Marina Sitrin, author of an oral history of revolution called *Horizontalism*. "Having been around NYPD for two decades, I kind of chuckled to myself and decided not to share what I thought at the time was a wise perspective, which is we should prepare for everybody to get arrested." And that'd be the end of it, another short, sharp chapter in the little-read book of the modern American left.

Adbusters had called for 20,000 bodies; only 2,000 showed up on September 17th. And maybe 100 of them slept over that first night in Zuccotti Park, a block-long granite plaza tucked between skyscrapers a couple of blocks from Ground Zero. The next night, there were a few more, and on Monday morning, they were still there. There was a

police raid on Tuesday, and the little press the occupation got was mocking: *The New York Times* sent an entertainment reporter, who made fun of the protesters. In the days that followed, the few grew in numbers, a demographic that didn't conform to media clichés: a gritty spiral jetty of anarchist punks and out-of-work construction workers and teachers who sleep in the park and rise early to get to school. Cooks and nannies and librarians, lots of librarians, and Teamsters and priests and immigrants, legal and otherwise, and culture jammers, eco-warriors, hackers, and men and women in Guy Fawkes masks, an army of stunt doubles from *V for Vendetta*, all joined by young veterans of the Arab Spring and the revolts in Greece and Spain – actual revolutionaries who had overthrown dictators and made Western nations shake.

Now there are more than 1,600 occupations around the country and the world, some big, most small, some no more than one angry soul on the side of the road with a sign that says “We are the 99 percent.” They are in Boston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, Oakland, Seattle and Nashville; in London, in Sydney, in Cape Town, Tokyo and Sao Paulo. By November, Occupy Wall Street was serving more than 3,000 meals every day from its free kitchen, stocked mostly with donated food. At night, a rotating cast of as many as 500 bed down in the park, many of them using blankets and sleeping bags provided by the occupation. There's a library with some 4,500 cataloged volumes – everything from the *Communist Manifesto* to *He's Just Not That Into You* – an all-volunteer medical staff to provide free health care, a station that gives out hand-rolled cigarettes if you want them.

Six weeks in, when Marina Sitrin sat down to collect her thoughts about the movement she had helped start, words failed. So she began with a slogan – “my favorite chant, preferably sung: *This is what democracy looks like.*” The kind of thing you'd hear shouted at every rally against a war or a law or a reactor for the past 20 years. But it wasn't true anymore. This isn't just what democracy looks like, say the occupiers, it's what it feels like.

One of the basic premises of the Occupy movement is the idea that democracy exists for most Americans as little more than an unhappy choice between two sides of the same corporate coin. “We've been so alienated from our own sense of agency that being asked to be part of any real decision is exciting,” a woman in her late thirties who calls herself Beatrix tells me. She's one of the old hands, close to the core of nearly every major radical action in New York of the past decade. So she's a little jaded, but even so, she's startled by what's happening: “Movements usually spend a lot of time on education, telling people why they need to come to the demonstration. This is exactly the opposite. The people came. Now we're all deciding together what happens.”

“Right off the bat I was addicted,” says Jesse LaGreca, sipping a beer at a fireman's bar near the park. Two hundred and fifty pounds, with wiseguy eyes and a permanent ruddy flush, LaGreca looks like he grew up on a bar stool in a place like this. He has a decade-plus of dead-end jobs behind him. The best was managing a L'Occitane store in the West Village – \$15 an hour, no health insurance. Lately, he's been making his living as a writer, posting deeply researched rants against the Republicans on the

liberal blog Daily Kos and asking for donations. “You put up a PayPal link and tell people, ‘Dude, I’m fucked. Can you help me?’” Just before heading down to Occupy Wall Street, he wrote a post called “If I light myself on fire, do you think these bastards will notice?” It was a tribute to Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit vendor who did just that, igniting the Arab Spring. LaGreca also asked for a MetroCard.

“I’m not gonna lie,” LaGreca says. “First thing I saw at the park was the topless girls.” He knows how that sounds. “Can’t help it, dude. But then I saw the food lines” – the Occupy Wall Street kitchen, feeding all comers – “and then I saw the books. I’m a nerd, man. I read and read.” He dropped out of high school in the 11th grade, but continued his education on the job as a school janitor in New Jersey. “Read all of Thoreau, Emerson, Shakespeare. Read a lot of Dostoyevsky. I was a shitty janitor.”

So there were books, free food and women, but that wasn’t what kept him there. “I see people talking. Everybody’s talking, man, and I can talk, too.” He didn’t just have a voice. He had amplification – the human microphone. On the fourth day of the occupation, a former science teacher named Justin Wedes was speaking to the crowd through a megaphone when a policeman threw him to the ground, the first of a series of rough arrests that morning. “Just to intimidate people,” recalls Graeber. One man’s face was ground into a flower bed, another dragged, cuffed, until his hands bled, another left gasping, denied his inhaler. The cops moved in, citing a law prohibiting the use of electronic amplification. This turned out to be a lucky break: Without conventional means, the occupiers would have to figure out a new way to hear one another.

Sitrin, schooled in the factory takeovers of Argentina, which followed that country’s economic collapse, had an ingenious solution: “the people’s mic.” One person speaks, all repeat, the words rippling through the crowd. “Mic check!” it begins with a single voice. “Mic check!” thunders the assembly. It’s absurd, its inherent humor and brevity undercutting the wordy earnestness that usually makes political meetings unbearable. “My concern”/“MY CONCERN”/“is deeper”/“IS DEEPER”/“than sleeping bags!”/“THAN SLEEPING BAGS!”

“Cops made a huge mistake,” says LaGreca. “The people’s mic, it’s such a unifying force. Almost like a choir. Like a modern religious revival. But it’s a civil revival. Down here, we’re becoming citizens.”

The people came. And then they stayed. Occupations are literally about refilling space – parks and plazas, a hollowed-out public sphere. That begins with bodies, accompanied by noise. Which is where the drums come in, bongos and tablas and tambourines and full drum kits with snares. In the beginning, the drummers drummed as long as their arms could flail, sometimes 12 hours a day. The noise was so loud it was like a wall on the western edge of the park. At first the drums were exciting, even if you weren’t really a drum-circle kind of person, which most of the occupiers weren’t. But then they got annoying. Like when you were trying to sleep. Or talk. Or hold a general assembly.

One of the first times the General Assembly asked the drummers to quiet down, they simply moved their drums farther down the park. Another time, the drummers

said what they were doing was sacred; they'd quiet down in a little while (they didn't). "This movement would not be here right now if we didn't do what we did, by playing all day," a drummer boasted. One night they grew so rowdy, they began to drown out the General Assembly altogether. So the first order of democracy was to bring the drummers, many of whom did not want to stop drumming long enough to talk, into the assembly. A lot of them weren't interested. "Aggro" was the word you started hearing around the camp. "Scary" was another. What was to be done?

The drummers did it themselves, imperfectly but "horizontally," through self-regulation rather than "vertical" rule imposed from above. They pulled themselves into a "working group," one of the key units of organization in the occupation – there are 82 as of this writing and there will almost certainly be more tomorrow. The drummers called their group Pulse and agreed to lay down their sticks for a while to attend general assemblies.

"John" – that's all – a compact man, all taut vein and muscle, with a shock of wiry gray-black hair, spoke for Pulse one night, arms twitching in just a T-shirt on a cold evening. "We," he said. "We," the crowd said. "Want to respect you." Back came the echo, a call-and-response through which everybody, apparently, respected everybody. But John wasn't satisfied. "But we want respect too!" he shouted bitterly. The drummers, he reminded the General Assembly, had restricted themselves to two-hour sessions, noon to two and four to six. But there was a move afoot to cut them back to only one two-hour drumathon. "We are the movement's heartbeat!" John shouted. "You're cutting out your heartbeat!"

To which another speaker, an earnest young woman named Linda, responded, "I have a clarifying question. How is it that one group can claim to be my heartbeat?"

The first night that I stayed at Zuccotti Park, bodies were laid out like tiles, head to toe, in circles and blocked out in squares and the occasional heap. There were street-sleeping pros, homeless and crusty punks, wrapped up in tarps, a few people on air mattresses with fluffy pillows. I didn't actually sleep. I paced among the tarp-covered bodies, sat on the steps, browsed the library, drank coffee from the food trucks open 24/7. The second night, after beers with LaGreca and a few other occupiers, I followed his friend Austin, a college dropout – a casualty of his student loans – who works with autistic children, to the Comfort Station for some bedding of my own. "We'll set you up on the margins," said Austin. "That way you can get out if you need to."

Twice I woke up. Once when a squat woman with dreads down to her knees shuffled by with a broom, a cleaning detail, and woke another sleeper, who stood up with his sleeping bag wrapped around him, stumbled, and gave up, letting it drop to reveal a sculpted body, naked but for dog tags. And a second time when a deranged man, top-heavy like a bulldog, punched the air above my head, daring anyone to take a shot at him. The occupation's security, thin-limbed men with walkie-talkies, spread their arms out like birds and surrounded him. "We love you, man," they said, over and over, containing but never touching. Finally he fled; the scene was too strange for conventional crazy.

If Occupy is “semireligious,” which is how many at the park describe it, and “a spiritual insurrection,” in the words of *Adbusters* senior editor Micah White, then its rituals might be counted as these: First, occupation itself. Second, the General Assembly. Third, the kitchen and the food line. And finally, sleep, lying among your comrades, everyone vulnerable, everyone absurd, stretched out between the coffee trucks and the police cruisers, under the watchful eye of a mobile NYPD surveillance tower jacked up over a truck.

When I returned a week later, the scene had darkened. “It started with punks and nice academic anarchists and grad students and labor organizers,” said a journalist who’d slipped into the movement. “Then it got really mainstream. But now it’s like a circus.” The human mic wasn’t as loud. The sanitation group threatened to strike. There were more signs that made no sense at all (my favorite: “Alligator Fuck Housed Me,” followed by a frowny face). There were suspicions of police infiltration and accusations of treason. And the people who ran the kitchen, confronted by street people in need of more care than a protest camp can provide and sometimes given to violence, revolted, serving only rice. They even proposed a fast. The other organizers would have none of it. “In this camp, the bullshit flows in certain directions sometimes,” said one participant at a daily coordinators’ meeting, but that would be no excuse for starving anybody. “Everybody eats,” chimed in another coordinator. “Junkie or tourist, a donor or a worker – everybody eats.”

And then there were the tents. Zuccotti, renamed Liberty Plaza by occupiers, had become a tent city. For some people, the turning point occurred the night the drummers tried to drown out the people’s mic at General Assembly, but I think it was the tents. They have proved to be one of Occupy Wall Street’s most contentious issues. At the start of the protests, the rapper Lupe Fiasco donated 50 tents, but the police tore them down. In mid-October, members decided to try again, putting up a medical tent. Police moved in to dismantle it, but Jesse Jackson happened to be visiting the camp and put his body in the way. Cops on the scene got the word from on high that it wasn’t worth it to try and arrest him. “Jesse threw down for us,” LaGreca says. Soon, the park at night was filled with the clickety-click of tent legs crackling into assembly.

With the tents came a new kind of territory: turf, even private property. The park’s sobriety, an agreed-upon principle, began to erode. The police reportedly started directing street people to the park but refused to help when some got out of control. “You’ve got a right to express yourself,” went the cop’s refrain. “He’s got a right to express himself.” Junkies came and then the people who supply them. Some tents became shooting galleries. Rumors began to circulate – that there’d been a stabbing, that someone was running around with an AIDS-infected needle, that the hacker group Anonymous had a plan to destroy the credit ratings of the cops. A man who worked in the kitchen was arrested for sexual assault.

By late October, there were three levels of internal security. The kitchen closed at eight. The 24/7 library rolled up around midnight. Liberty Park is a city now, and

it has hours. There's even a town-planning committee that has held meetings at 16 Beaver Street, in an oddly shaped room with a movie screen and a grand piano.

But here's the thing: Anyone can still join. It's another old protest slogan metamorphosed. "Whose streets?" would go the call. "Our streets," came the reply. Now it's personal. Whose city? Your city, there for the making. All you have to do is show up.

Reporters keep sniffing around for leaders, but while it's true that the movement has spawned celebrities – like LaGreca, who lambasted a Fox News reporter in a YouTube clip that went viral – its resistance to organized leadership has proved enduring. Kalle Lasn is simply watching in awe from his home in Vancouver. David Graeber left for Austin four days after the occupation started. Marina Sitrin stays active in the legal team dedicated to working with Occupy Wall Street's arrestees (there have been almost 1,000 arrests in New York and more than 3,000 movementwide, as of this writing), but she's far enough removed from the action that LaGreca has never heard of her, just as the thousands who have joined the camp for a night have never heard of him, either. The evasion of organized leadership that for many began as a tactic – leaders are targets and weak links, subject to prosecution and co-option – has now grown into a principle.

Which left the biggest questions – What is Occupy trying to say, and who will be its voice? – with no conventional answers. The press found this maddening. It "doesn't really take you to a particular bumper-sticker action," declared a puzzled Gerald Seib at *The Wall Street Journal* – he couldn't imagine any other worthwhile outcome. Even some within the movement have their doubts. "You don't seriously believe this is a leaderless movement, do you?" Cecily McMillan, a 23-year-old graduate student at the New School, asks me one day. Not possible, she says, that's an illusion crafted by the OWS secret elite, who she insists are unresponsive to the demand for a concrete agenda by the "actual 99 percent."

McMillan is Northeast regional organizer for the youth section of the Democratic Socialists of America, which bills itself as the largest socialist organization in the United States. She's been involved with the Occupy movement since August, despite sharp differences with most of the people in the park. "I believe in a constrained view of revolution," she says, by which she means putting pressure on mainstream politicians. And for this, she says, she has suffered. "I have been called a terrorist. I have been called CIA, FBI. I have been called a Democrat!" Like Lasn, she wants regime change. Unlike most of the occupiers, she believes it requires the guidance of those, like her, possessed of what she calls "cultural capital."

She's a former cheerleader; she used to want to be a politician. She says her studies and her work – she's also a nanny – prevent her from sleeping in the park. But she's not afraid to put her body on the line. She was arrested after she charged Wall Street three times, a "direct action" that even some veteran anarchists – militant and masked – considered wildly courageous, if foolish. A cop thought so, too, blasted her with pepper spray, knocked her down, stepped on her head and snarled at her, "Shut up. You get what you deserve, cunt bitch."

We met in the atrium of 60 Wall Street, built in 1989 as a headquarters for JP Morgan and sold to Deutsche Bank right after 9/11. It looks like a bad Italian restaurant – white-tiled columns, mirrored ceiling, a grotto, stunted palms. This is where many of the movement’s working groups meet. At any given time there might be a half-dozen of them – the People’s Kitchen, Alternative Banking, Tactics, Medics, Sanitation. McMillan had just come from a gathering of one of the biggest and most influential groups, Facilitation, responsible for setting the agenda of the daily General Assembly. She was there as the least bristly representative of the working group that bluntly calls itself Demands, and her first demand was a place on the agenda, which she claimed had been denied by “infiltrators.” She wasn’t talking about police; she meant other occupiers opposed to her ideas.

The question of demands, in all their variety – whether to make them, when to make them, what to demand – is a peculiar one in that it’s at the heart of the national occupation debate, and yet mostly irrelevant to the occupiers at Wall Street. Their demand is simply for a better world, which, as far as they’re concerned, they’ve already started building. So to say that McMillan’s group didn’t have broad support would be kind. The divide in the park might be better expressed as between those who didn’t believe that the demands group even counted as a part of the occupation, and those willing to let them propose their demands before shooting them down.

McMillan seems to see her role as an underground leader almost as a genetic birthright. “My grandfather is Harlon Joye,” she told me almost immediately and emphasized several times across a number of conversations. “He drafted the SDS constitution” – as in, Students for a Democratic Society, one of the key organizations of 1960s revolt. She sees herself as giving “a voice to the voiceless.” To do that, she says, the movement needs concrete demands. Any demands. The demand at which the group arrived – “Jobs for All,” meaning a public-works program providing 25 million union-wage jobs – was not her first choice. But McMillan’s will did not matter – she was a servant of “the workers.”

While we were talking, a tall, beautiful woman with olive skin and a black leather coat was giving me the eye. The evil one. She was part of a little squad of four that became a nucleus around which more gathered, until they became about a dozen, and that’s when they surrounded me, close up, cutting me off from McMillan. They were, I learned, a “swarm,” and they were performing an “intervention.” On me.

“We were hearing there’s a *Rolling Stone* interview about demands,” said a long-haired man in shorts and only wool socks on his feet, a leaf pinned to his sleeve.

“We’re actually just talking about my history?” said McMillan.

“There’s been a lot of issues with the demands,” no-shoes said, ignoring McMillan. “As well as the kind of press we’re getting. The place we’re in now, as a movement, is actually slaying co-opters. Any political, ideological co-optation of the movement.”

“That’s actually where our conversation started,” said McMillan.

“Right. But a lot of people see the discussion coming from the groups you’ve been working with.” He mimed out the problem with his hands, one socked foot balancing on the other. “Demands are pretty much speaking for the whole group.”

“All we want is a voice,” McMillan said.

Next to her, a small pale woman with a quiet face and quick eyes tilted a shoulder away from McMillan and declared to me and the rest of the swarm, “I want to be clear. We can have a voice without having demands.” She was Marisa Holmes, the filmmaker who’d been there since the beginning. She seemed egoless, her confidence precise.

From there, the conversation devolved into a dense thicket of the intricacies of process. What is consensus? Where’s the threshold? 90 percent? 75 percent? 80 percent? At issue were reports that McMillan had attempted to strong-arm decisions based on a simple majority vote. McMillan seemed frustrated by the accusation, which she couldn’t quite deny. Two months ago, she was a perfect organizing machine – disciplined, articulate, working-class roots with a grad-school veneer. But she was discovering she didn’t function as well on the new terrain of the occupation, where the traditional methods of the left no longer meant as much as they once had. She had no idea that providing “a voice for the voiceless” was not a service in demand in a movement built on the idea that everyone can speak for themselves. To her, the occupation was a symbol more than a community. When we walked by the camp later that night she seemed surprised: “They have tents now?”

Almost everyone you meet in the park will tell you some variation of one thing. They aren’t doing this for 2012, they don’t want to go to Washington, they don’t care what Congress or *The New York Times* or Bill Maher or Kanye West thinks of them. They aren’t trying to provide a voice for the voiceless. They are doing it for themselves, and they speak for no one but themselves. They are the 99 percent; so am I, so are you. Make your own demands if you want to.

Late one night, I met a woman named Elisa Miller at the Occupy Library. It was 2 a.m., and people were still up talking, a group of four Hasidic Jews sitting on the broad steps of the park’s shallow stone bowl, singing quiet Hebrew harmony around a soft guitar. Miller, a 38-year-old former landscape architect who took a bus up from New Orleans, had been in the park since the beginning. She said she hadn’t really laughed since Katrina: “We’ve been occupying New Orleans for six fucking years.” But something had changed. She had long straight brown hair and the loose rubbery gestures of someone who’s exhausted and yet glad to be awake. “You come here with what you’ve been OCD’ing about,” she said. “First day, you’ve got a sign: ‘Tax the rich!’ And it’s, like, sure, that’s a good idea. But then you’re here for a couple of days, you work in the kitchen or in the library, you speak up when you want to, and you get to thinking, here’s exactly what you need. You can march if you want to, but here?” She turned a circle, sweeping it all in, cops included. “This is where we’re rebooting history.”

So it seemed on my last day at Liberty Plaza, the Sunday following last month’s freak snowstorm. “What will happen in the winter?” has been a refrain almost as

incessant as the drumming. The answer, of course, is that nobody knows. Nobody has “known” anything that would happen so far. Maybe they will endure; maybe they will retreat; maybe Mayor Bloomberg will, like the mayors of Oakland and Denver, attack with gas and horses. “Subzero sleeping bags” are a topic of constant conversation, three words murmured or proclaimed with defiance and shivers. The morning after the big snow, I expected to find the occupiers blue-lipped and worried. Right before the storm, the city had confiscated their generators, used for emergency heat, among other things, and the bicycle-powered batteries they’d been building for just such a contingency were not yet ready to pedal. The wet snow collapsed tents, and the wind blew away tarps and signs and extra clothing. Copies of the *Occupied Wall Street Journal* whipped up into the night and plastered sidewalks.

But as I made my way to the park the next morning, the camp was sparkling. The snow had melted, tents clean, books dry, jeans strung on clotheslines. The kitchen was serving up roast turkey for all comers. And they came from everywhere, occupiers and street people and tourists, drawn, like me, to what they’d thought would be a scene of disaster. Some of the tourists picked up signs. “I guess I am the 99 percent,” said an electrical engineer from New Jersey. An elegantly dressed white-haired woman leapt at a chance to work in the kitchen: “I can do that,” she declared. Another woman brought a bag of helium-filled yellow balloons. The drummers, led by a dark-skinned man whose face was hidden by a green bandanna, sounded energized, as if the night’s cold had taught them all a new, less angry rhythm, like they were laughing behind their bandannas. That night, the General Assembly would be dedicated to a battle over demands; but that morning, the first of what will likely be a long and hard winter at Liberty, was a reprieve, a fantasy, a multitude, an imaginary city raising its flags.

The Ted K Archive

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