

How Wild is Wildcat?

Don't Participate in the Ruin of Creation... Participate in the
Creation of Ruins

Wildcat

Spring 1994

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Introduction

Following the short review of *Fredy Perlman’s Against His-story, Against Leviathan!*¹ which appeared in issue 15 of our central organ, we have nailed our colors to the “anti-Civilization” bandwagon.

But the abandonment of the Marxist theory of history, and its replacement with an as-yet uncompiled jumble of insights, is not to be undertaken lightly. We are in a period of transition, and this series of articles is intended to express this, with all the hesitations and contradictions inevitable in such a non-trivial exercise.

The central question we wish to address is this : was the development of class society in any sense a necessary precondition for its opposite? The traditional Marxist answer to this has been an unqualified “yes”. As Marx put it in the Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*: In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or — what is but a legal expression for the same thing — with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution... No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself... In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production — antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism,

¹ *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!*, Perlman F, Black and Red, Detroit 1983.

but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close.

This was later vulgarized by Engels: “the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life” (The Origins). But there is continuity between Marx and Engels; although Marx talks about consciousness “corresponding to” the economic foundations, and intellectual life being “conditioned” by the mode of production, he also says social being “determines” consciousness. The phrase used by Engels, “in the final instance”, has about as much content as the expression “at the end of the day”. It is meaningless. Either something is determined by something else, or it isn’t.

Engels argued that, although there was a communist society prior to the emergence of Civilization, this was only “primitive” communism. The primordial community had to be broken, and thousands of years of slavery and war had to ensue, in order to develop the productive forces enough for humanity to return to communism on a higher level. The development of the productive forces, a story written in the annals of Mankind in letters of blood and fire, was necessary in order to create the material preconditions for communism.

One of the problems Marxists inherited from this fire-and-brimstone teaching was this: if the productive forces need to be developed in order to create the preconditions for communism, and they are not yet sufficiently developed, are revolutionaries obliged to support their development? He who sups with the devil needs must use a very long spoon: after an early bout of enthusiasm for the prospect of immediate communist revolution in 1848, Marx and Engels settled down to a more “tactical” period in which various capitalist factions were backed on the grounds that they had more chance of developing the productive forces than others, increasing the chances of a successful communist revolution in the future. The canonical example is their support for the Union in the American Civil War.

At the other extreme is the view that an advanced form of communism — a society of abundance with no exploitation and little conflict — could have developed directly out of the primitive communist societies which existed in most of the world for most of the time that human beings have been around, and that resistance to Civilization has ALWAYS had the potential to lead to the global human community. This may seem academic, since Civilization now covers the world, and if communism is going to happen, it will have to arise from the world as it is. But as we shall see, rejecting the necessity of developing the productive forces as a precondition for a global human community has important consequences today. As well as the writings of Perlman, Marshall Sahlins, John Zerzan etc., a radical break with Progress includes the Russian anarchist Kropotkin, the Italian communist Bordiga and his French successor Camatte. What the left communist tendency around Bordiga termed the “invariance” or continuity of the communist program was originally described by Kropotkin. The

concept is simple. As long as there has been class society there has been a movement towards a communist society — the abolition of all class societies. Kropotkin was a geographer turned revolutionary. He, unlike probably any other revolutionary theorist of the last two centuries, personally witnessed (and lived among) all forms of human societies, from gatherer-hunters to peasants to the industrial working class. For him, an anarchist communism was available at any point in history. A traditional Marxist would deny that a revolution could occur (or succeed) in the peasant society in 17th century Europe because mass production (and thus the mass worker) had not come about to give it a social content.

Although it may have been possible to develop communism in areas of the world where class society, or Leviathan, to use Perlman's nomenclature, was weak and disintegrating, such as America, was it inevitable that, sooner or later, Europe would invade, with guns and smallpox? Given the Native Americans' almost total lack of awareness of the world outside them, they would have been unable to prevent such an invasion. It has always been possible to directly create a communist society but this can only be done permanently on a world scale, because any Leviathans left alive will sooner or later spread their tentacles. In the past it was still possible to avoid or drop out of existing civilizations, sometimes for centuries at a time. Today it obviously isn't. If communism can be created in one valley, or one continent, there would be no desperate urge to spread it. Sooner or later, communism would be crushed by one of the Leviathans lurking about. It is hard to imagine how the natives of America could have resisted the Conquistadores WITHOUT having an explicit knowledge that such people existed and would one day come to get them. For all the wisdom that they must have possessed, it remains a striking fact that pre-capitalist peoples (communist and civilized) knew almost nothing about the parts of the world inhabited by people not of their culture. Communism has always been possible. But it is arguable that stable, permanent communism depends on the development of a world proletariat.

This argument is subtly different to the elegant and seductive verses of the materialist excuse for history outlined above. Whereas the Marxist theory of stages has led many of its followers, including Marx himself, to support capitalist development, the view that permanent communism depends on the development of a world proletariat does not lead in that direction. Marxists argue that the chief productive force is the proletariat itself. We disagree. For us the proletariat is the working class as a revolutionary force, precisely to the extent that it opposes development and sabotages production, ie. to the extent that it isn't a productive force.

Although the concept of "the development of the productive forces" leads to attacking the class struggle, the development of the proletariat as a revolutionary class leads to supporting it at all times. The struggle against class society may be unable to permanently abolish it until some unknown date in the future, but that does not lead us to support Leviathan rather than the struggle against it. (It is impossible to have it both ways. To the extent that Marx supported Lincoln, he supported the crushing of the class struggle against the war effort, and there was plenty).

Anyone can find examples of the proletariat benefitting from accidental by-products of capitalist development. The “model villages” created by the Guatemalan army during the Terror of the 80’s helped the Native Americans organize by concentrating people from scattered and divided communities together, helping them understand their common interests, though this is not the kind of example usually favoured by Marxists to defend development. The discovery of the cure for smallpox is taught at school as a splendid product of Progress. What is overlooked is that epidemics of the disease, with a body-count in the tens of millions, were equally products of the same social force.

We do not intend to take a position here on whether a global communist society has always been possible, or whether class society was in any sense a necessary detour. A question like this cannot be answered in a few pages. We hope these articles stir up the debate.

It is difficult to say at present exactly what consequences will follow from the abandonment of Marxism. Supporting and learning from the struggles of indigenous peoples, nomads etc., against Progress is one of them. Another is a definitive rejection of Eurocentrism. The traditional Marxist view is that the most capitalistically developed parts of the world must be the centre of the revolution, since here the transition to communism is made easier by highly socialized production. This is wishful thinking. The parts of the world where capitalism is most highly developed are also the ones where the working class is most separated from community. The socialization of production can help the class struggle — a strike-bound factory in South Korea can disrupt the economy of Germany and vice-versa. It can just as easily hinder it — often the ability of urban proles to resist starvation is critically dependent on their links to the land, eg. peasant relatives. In the sixties and seventies, French workers around St. Nazaire were still able to significantly supplement their diet by hunting whilst on strike.

The Left and Rights

The social-democratic view of socialism as evolution (ie that socialism would be the next stage beyond capitalism) was a major cause of the downfall of the 1917–21 revolutionary movement, much of which saw state capitalism under workers’ control as a step towards communism. Communism became an inevitable outcome of the general progress of society. Social democracy promoted a dependence on a passive working class response to the crisis as the mechanism of transition from one “mode of production” to the next. This sees workers as victims of capitalism, only becoming revolutionary in reaction to capitalism and the actions of the capitalist class. All factions of social democracy subscribed to this notion. Marxists argue that it was impossible to create communism prior to the development of the productive forces made possible by the explorers of the 15th and 16th century, with their Bibles and smallpox. This argument is like the famous quip from the Vietnam war, “it was necessary to destroy the village in order to save it”, writ large. It is equivalent to saying “it was necessary to exterminate

the communities of entire continents in order to lay the foundations for a global human community". This is called dialectics, or speaking with a forked tongue.

For the social democrats, communism meant capitalist prosperity for all so factory production, and therefore factory discipline, had to be maintained at all costs. The refusal of work was as important as ever in practice but was almost never consciously advocated. In Petrograd in 1917 the workers organized into Factory Committees frequently decided to fine themselves for lateness and other healthy expressions of proletarian indolence.

Together with Progress, the left peddles the concept of civil rights. Rights are defined by capitalism as what it can give to the proles, usually to buy off an attack. But rights are attacks upon traditional freedoms which guaranteed personal autonomy. Rights take away freedom and make the working class even more integrated and dependent upon capitalism. A useful way to conceive of the difference between rights and freedoms is to look at Housing. Now, in classical capitalism, one has the right to own property, even someone else's house, which leads to the creation of homelessness in order to make housing a valuable commodity. In response to the working class's defence against homelessness, etc. the left wing of capitalism demanded the right to housing, a program which, at its most extreme, became one of the key programmatic components of Stalinism, the right to housing supplanting the right to own property. But nowhere in the continua of these extremes of "rights" lies the freedom to house yourself. There is a big difference between the right to be warehoused in a tower block in Moscow, Brixton or Watts and the freedom to build and live in a mandan/longhouse/tipi/yurt or "organic" home in a medieval Arabic/African/Chinese/Japanese town.

["Come on lads! Another 5000 years and you'll have created the material preconditions for communism!"]

There are trends within Marxism which do not follow the logic of Marx and Engels' progressive errors. According to the Autonomist wing of Marxism the attack on industrialism and work (the "revolt against work") is fundamental to class resistance to capitalism. Such people have always, in practice, to some extent, fought against capitalist Progress. Other Marxists argue that although historical stages (Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism, etc.) were necessary, all necessary stages have now been completed, and that there is therefore no reason to support the further development of class society in order to help create the preconditions for communism. In spite of these exceptions, we think that the Marxist theory of stages is a weak basis for a communist platform, because those who accept the need for the development of the "productive forces" as a precondition for communism, must consider the possibility that they haven't developed far enough yet. This at least opens the POSSIBILITY of giving critical support to some aspects of capitalism today, and of telling sections of the working class to wait.

Intransigent opposition to Progress is certainly closer to a direct expression of the needs of the proletariat. The Luddite movement in 19th century England is probably the most famous example of resistance to the development of the productive forces. Oppressed classes have always opposed the extension of exploitation. The exploiters

and their allies have often found ways of arguing for the “necessity” of this or that development. There is a seamless continuity between Marx’s support for the wonderful Yankees in the American Civil War and German social democracy’s support for the First World War. This was no “betrayal” of their ideology; they thought the victory of Germany would help the development of the productive forces, and they may well have been right. In the late seventies, the Iraqi Communist Party justified their alliance with the Ba’athists against the Kurdish Nationalists by saying that Saddam stood for capitalist progress against the backward Kurdish bourgeoisie. In one crucial sense, though, even Perlman’s *Against His-story* can be used to defend historical inevitability. In his description of the spread of Civilization, he argues that successful attempts to resist it usually lead to the creation of permanent armies, which become the basis of state power. Communities of resistance gradually degenerate into new Leviathans. For example, he describes how this happened to the communist movement in 15th century Bohemia. Although he says that the defeat is complex, and not predetermined, his actual description has a fatalistic ring to it. Although the Bohemian Taborites were conscious of the predicament, this didn’t enable them to get out of it. Between 1420 and 1434, they defeated five assaults by Crusader and German Imperial armies. Initially, they resisted the tendency to set up a military machine. Their military leaders, Zizka, Proscop and Zbynek, were temporary chiefs, and not initially generals. But the Empire was a machine for grinding out armies, and each time it was defeated, it came back. Although the Taborites successfully defended themselves, the continual fighting gradually turned them into a mirror image of what they were fighting. Among the specializations which permanent militarism enforces is a division between soldiers and peasants who toil to feed the army. The Taborite military leaders negotiated with barons to supply the army with food produced by forced labor. The more radical Taborites were still attacking the barons, undermining the military front. The Taborite leaders eventually organized a crusade against these more radical communists, and the degeneration was complete.

Perlman’s book contains, in embryo, a theory of historical development. His account of the origins of ancient Sumer is unquestionably materialist. Leviathan has been through numerous stages, as has resistance to it. Only modern capitalism has instituted the “worship of Leviathan unadorned” — previous class societies tarted up Babylon with hanging gardens, etc.. Compare Florence with Seoul. Perlman predicted the emergence of One Big Leviathan, and hinted that this period, which has now begun with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, may have great potential. Certainly, the proletariat of the world is more culturally homogenized than ever before, but it is difficult at present to see how the New World Order of Madonna and MacDonald’s contains its own negation. We don’t consider that the succession of societies, and the development of greater and greater productive forces have led to the possibility of abundance for all after about 5000 years of war and slavery. Primitive societies were societies of plenty. Whatever the reason for the origins of class society, it was IMPOSED on the majority of humanity by its originators and their successors. It did not “arise” because of the

“need” to “develop the productive forces”. Technologies and the forms of social domination which accompany them have always been instruments of political control rather than methods of satisfying given human needs. Needs are created by society, along with the means to satisfy them. Societies are not determined by their “material basis” — precisely the reverse. As Perlman put it, the so-called material foundations are the claws and fangs of Leviathan, not the ground on which it stands. Perlman briefly discusses the abandonment of Civilization by pre-Columbian Americans. The first article below examines it in more detail, and digresses into the theoretical implications. The second and third articles are reviews of recent publications dealing with the issues of Progress and Primitive Communism from different angles within the revolutionary movement.

1,000 Years of Resistance

Around 1500 BC, Civilization first blighted the Americas. The mysterious Civilization of the Olmecs appeared on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. The Olmecs carved giant heads with African features, and one stela with a bearded, Babylonian-looking bas-relief. The Mayas of Copan and Palenque buried their kings in pyramids, like the Ancient Egyptians. The first Mexican archaeologists assumed that MesoAmerican Civilization must have originated in the Old World. It may have been possible to cross the Atlantic in a boat of that period. With the consolidation of nationalism, and particularly the Mexican bourgeoisie’s affiliation with the Aztecs, it became fashionable to see the Olmecs, Aztecs, Mayas etc. as home-grown. It was considered insulting to Native Americans to suggest they couldn’t have built their own Leviathans. Today, the tide has begun to turn full circle, and perhaps it will again become possible to investigate the possibility of a transatlantic origin for the Olmecs. Some academics seriously discuss the possibility of a Chinese origin for Maya culture².

If Civilization was imported, the consequences would be helpful to our position; it would mean that Civilization only originated in Eurasia. Its subsequent spread would be the result of the fact that attempts to resist it lead to the formation of permanent armies and thus states; resistance is recuperated. If it arose in two places, this would add weight to the argument that Civilization is inevitable; but not much, since there is no doubt that, however many origins the Beast has, the vast majority of its victims were taken captive by expanding Leviathans, rather than “giving rise to” their own. Perlman gives odds that Civilization arose in one place, ancient Sumer. This view was fashionable in Victorian Britain, ie. until the sixties, whereafter it became trendy to believe in multiple origins, as this was compatible with the more democratic ideology of multi-culturalism which had only just caught on — though it had been *de rigueur* among US anthropologists since the 1910’s. The Olmecs were succeeded by the Maya, whose civilization stretched from Northern Yucatan through the Peten

² The Maya, Coe M, Thames and Hudson, London 1993.

jungle to the highlands of what is now Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. The Maya kings appear to have formed city-states which warred and made alliances, like the Ancient Greek metropoli, rather than a centralized Leviathan. One of the reasons for the downfall of the Olmecs was resistance. Olmec sculptures were systematically vandalized. Though little is known about exactly how this happened, archaeologists have tended to cohere around the view that it was the result of a rebellion of the lower orders. This position has been under attack in recent years.

The blatantly political nature of patri-archaeology is well demonstrated by the work of leading MesoAmerican researchers Linda Schele and David Freidel. *A Forest of Kings*³, describes the creation of a Maya city state, Cerros, as a decision taken by the whole community : “The people of Cerros did decide consciously to embrace kingship as an institution”, though they don’t make it clear how they know this. Building the temples was “an effort of master builders, masons and laborers DRAWN from the COMMUNITY, COORDINATED by the ruler and his counselors” (p106). We have emphasized some of the more problematic words. How were the laborers “drawn”, since when have rulers merely “coordinated” production, how can a class society be described as a “community” except by those who have a vested interest in disguising class antagonisms?

This book is full of similar pseudo-neutral scientific discourse. “The labor costs in quarrying stone, burning limestone to yield plaster, and finally building the structures, must have been enormous. If the elite of Tikal were constantly expanding this public space, we can assume that the prosperity and prestige of this kingdom were attracting a steady influx of new people whose participation in the ritual life of the kingdom had to be accomodated” (p136). On the other hand, we can investigate the origins of slavery, resistance to it, and apologies for it.

American Leviathans were generally fragile. They were prone to disintegration as a result of resistance by the mass of the population who thought an uncivilized life was preferable to being sacrificed to the gods. When discussing the causes of the Maya collapse, Schele and Freidel take pains to avoid the simplistic views of the previous generation of Mayanists, for example JES Thompson, who, when invited to a seminar on the collapse, reportedly wired back, “No need for seminar. Peasant uprising.”. This was written when class struggle was still fashionable in academia.

“For many, however, the end came when people turned their backs on the kings, as they had done a Cerros eight hundred years earlier, and returned to a less complicated way of living” (p379).

Why? Schele and Freidel list a dozen or so factors:

1. Dense population;
2. Malnutrition;

³ *A Forest of Kings*, Schele L and Freidel D, Morrow, New York 1990.

3. Sickness;
4. "A hard life indeed";
5. Neglect of raised fields due to military competition between rulers; 6. Crisis of faith;
6. Conquerors unable to legitimate themselves to the conquered;
7. Growth of the nobility, in more than one sense. The average noble was 10cm. taller than the rest of the population. They were better fed, and their children survived, therefore there were too many of the bastards;
8. The rich scumbags were driven to wage wars for tribute to pay for their upkeep. Endless war caused further problems;
9. Barbarians began to assert control of the trade routes;
10. Uprising. At Dos Pilas, for example, "a desperate nobility threw up a huge log stockade around the sacred center of their city, trying to shield themselves against the vengeance wreaked upon them by their former victims" (p383).

None of these factors explain anything without an understanding of the class struggle.

A more recent "explanation" blames ecological catastrophe for the collapse of Civilization. But Civilizations thrive on disasters. The ecological narrative, like many others, attempts to make the oppressed passive objects of crisis. The idea that they may have left Leviathan because they didn't like it never occurs to academia. For archaeology, the problem is to explain, not why Civilization was overthrown, but why it took so long for the "former victims" to wreak vengeance on those who had "drawn" them into the ritual life of the kingdom.

The uprisings wiped out Maya Civilization throughout the Peten region. Stelae, written dates and monuments came to an end between about 790 and 890 AD. What replaced the Classic Maya Civilization was not communism. But it was a lot better than human sacrifice. A communist revolution would have led to an offensive against the other Leviathans of the Americas. The rebelling population returned to what anthropologists call a "hunter-gatherer" life, though it is known that these societies are not dominated by production. It would be at least as accurate to call them "shaman-storyteller" societies. They also did some farming, but abandoned the intensive agribusiness of their deposed kings. They continued to use the cyclical calendars, but abandoned the "Long Count" which counted the days since a certain point in the past, since they did not need linear history. They also abandoned writing, since they could remember all the information they needed. They created a truly post-historic society.

Avanti!

We have no intention of idealizing primitive society. Perlman refers to the pre-Civilized condition as “the state of nature”, but this is too simplistic. There are at least two main stages in primitive society, and it is worth considering what kind of life pre-human hominids lived before society emerged. From studies of our close relatives, some anthropologists have concluded that before the emergence of homo sapiens, our ancestors lived in harems. Tyrant males would monopolize groups of females, excluding the majority of males. This behaviour maximized the chances of a successful male’s genes being transmitted. Evolution produces SELFISH gene-transmitting behaviour, not the behaviour which is best for the species as a whole. To have sex with as many partners as possible increases the chance of a male’s genes surviving. It may even be genetically “fitter” for a male to kill infants of other males, ensuring that females spend all their time looking after HIS offspring. Conflict between males prevented the emergence of community. At some point, there was a revolution which led to the creation of human culture. The most convincing explanation of how this happened can be found in Chris Knight’s book *Blood Relations*⁴. Females had different interests than males; their genes are best reproduced by looking after their children. Eventually they overthrew the individualistic tyrants, and forced males to cooperate in going hunting, by refusing to have sex until the males returned home with game. They organized a periodic “sex strike” during which none of the females were available, since if any females broke the strike, it would quickly undermine the whole system. This then is the basis of culture; cooperation imposed by females by means of a strike. With this cooperative hunter-gatherer lifestyle, humans had it made. No other species could touch them. They quickly spread round the world around 50,000 years ago, and found vast game reserves wherever they went, with occasional dearths when they crossed deserts, etc.. This was the Garden of Eden. But the story of the Fall was rewritten. Eve was not responsible.

The Australian Aborigines have some remarkably lucid stories about how men overthrew women, and introduced the patriarchal society which most primitive peoples lived in. But patriarchy did not inevitably give rise to Civilization, as proven by the numerous examples of patriarchal peoples living for thousands and thousands of years without the slightest inclination to build ziggurats and throw each other off the top of them. The “Mesolithic crisis” of c. 10,000 BC supposedly led to the emergence of Agriculture and hence Civilization. But if Civilization was an inevitable response to a world-wide crisis, how come so many people managed without it until very recently? Why did it have to be imposed at such cost?

⁴ *Blood Relations*, Knight C, Yale University Press, 1992.

Horny

Marxists, who place today's horny-handed industrial proletariat in a subordinate position to pre-capitalist rebels (though even Marxists instinctively identify with all communist rebels — witness how many Marxist groups are named after Spartacus), could ask why didn't the Maya rebels go on to create communism? A fair question, but no more so than the same question asked of the participants in the 1917–21 revolutionary wave. Our position that communism has always been possible is perhaps stronger because we can point to considerable successes in pre-capitalist anti-Civilized movements, for example the Maya had 700 years of relative freedom before the Spanish invasion. The Bohemian communist movement of the 15th and 16th centuries was far more successful than the 20th century workers' movement. There were no Marxists around to tell them that the means of production weren't developed enough, so they brazenly set up large-scale communist societies which lasted for decades.

Vorwaarts

There has always been some awareness of the danger of class domination and how to oppose it. People with leadership obligations, eg. shamans, try to permanently usurp their responsibilities and turn them into a system of class domination. The communist program has always been immanent in the struggle to prevent this happening, and to reverse it once it has occurred. This position turns Marxism on its head; the political has precedence over the economic. If this makes us closer to Anarchism than Marxism, then so be it.

Arguments about Progress seem academic. But much working class passivity is reinforced by the belief that progress is inevitable — people identify with the economic success of “their” company or “their” country, and thus find it hard to fight lay-offs and wars when these are explained as economically necessary. Just as it is useful to know that for most of human existence, there were no classes, refuting the popular belief that they are natural, it is encouraging to know that people have always resisted Progress, sometimes with overwhelming success. We are not suggesting that winning this “battle of ideas” is going to convert people into revolutionaries. Generally, people adopt more radical ideas as a result of struggle; their conservatism is mainly produced by fear of the bosses' power. But showing that struggles can be won can only undermine this fear. The evidence against the inevitability of Progress shows that we CAN win, that class society has NEVER been inevitable, and that its continuity is less assured than its apologists of left and right contend.

The Ted K Archive

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