

# The Third Way and the End of Politics<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Advocates of the Third Way have searched for a means of grafting traditional concerns for equality and social justice onto an economic system based on free markets. Yet they fail to consider whether attempts at reform are neutralised by the nature of consumer capitalism. The implicit philosophy of the Third Way is not based on any critical analysis of modern capitalism. In particular, it assiduously avoids any discussion of the sources and exercise of power, preferring to focus on 'lifestyle choices'. The belief that inequality and exclusion can be resolved by education ignores structural disadvantage and emphasises the failings of individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Pamela Kinnear and a referee for very helpful comments. All views remain those of the author.

## In Search of Theory

Over the last decade, the Left has been dominated by the politics of the Third Way. The term was coined as part of the reinvention of social democratic and labour parties in response to the wave of neo-liberalism that captured the world in the 1980s and early 1990s. Uneasy both with the harshness of Thatcherism and the untenability of socialism, advocates of the Third Way looked for a means of grafting traditional social democratic concern for equality and social justice onto an economic system based on free markets.

While social democratic and labour parties had long since rejected the corrupt forms of socialism that had been imposed on Eastern Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 nevertheless seemed to bring down the final curtain on an era in which even mild forms of collectivism could be pursued as an alternative to capitalism rampant. Within those parties, the left wing fell silent for want of ideas and was vanquished, while the ‘pragmatists’ of the right argued that the parties must flow with the neo-liberal tide and attempt to channel it so that traditional principles are protected. Thus emerged the Third Way, a political program set out most eloquently by Anthony Giddens in his 1998 book *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* and taken up in bastardized form in Australia by ‘maverick’ Labor MP Mark Latham (e.g. Latham 1998).<sup>2</sup>

As a political program, the Third Way implicitly accepts the two most important ideas of the First Way — that the principal objective of government should be to increase the rate of economic growth, and that the best way to achieve this objective is through the free operation of private markets. Certainly, in some situations constraints must be placed on markets but this is not taken to imply criticism of the free market as such.

Having conceded these fundamentals to the First Way, the Third Way has had difficulty finding a rationale that differentiates itself in any substantive way from neo-liberalism. One of the clearest statements of the Third Way can be found in a collection of essays by the Demos Foundation, a London think tank close to Tony Blair. The editors of the volume, *Tomorrow's Politics: the Third Way and Beyond* (1998), note that the center left — defined so broadly as to include the Clinton Administration — had taken government throughout much of the western world, but that to do so the Third Way ‘has had to accept some of the right’s agenda’. Consequently:

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of Latham’s views see Hamilton (1999). The side-lining of Latham in the Parliamentary Labor Party had less to do with the ‘radicalism’ of his interpretation of the Third Way — after all, Tony Blair is said to have modelled the Third Way on the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments — than with his unwillingness to accept party discipline.

the political contest is focused on how to balance prosperity with social inclusion, capitalism with community, how to modernise welfare systems, public services and labour markets, how to deepen democracy and how to connect progressive politics with the imperative of ecological sustainability (Hargreaves and Christie 1998, p. 1).

As this suggests, the idea of the Third Way remains as slippery as ever, although some have attempted to define it as a philosophy with three cornerstones:

the idea that government should promote equal opportunity for all while granting special privilege to none; an ethic of mutual responsibility that equally rejects the politics of entitlement and the politics of social abandonment; and, a new approach to governing that empowers citizens to act for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

While this triplet seems to match the pronouncements of Blair's Labour Government, the first two at least are core principles of the modern Australian Labor Party. But they could equally, indeed, more accurately, describe the public stance of the Coalition Government. In fact, a senior Howard Government minister, Amanda Vanstone, citing these principles, has declared herself to be a devotee of the Third Way, for it is no more than a repackaging of ideas stolen from 'the rich warehouse of liberal ideology' (Vanstone 2001).

### **Power and the Third Way**

It is not inconsistent to accept the prevailing system and at the same put forward policies to ameliorate some of its negative social and environmental effects as long as one believes that the negative effects are not caused by anything fundamental to the system. As soon as one begins to reflect on the philosophy of the Third Way it becomes apparent that it is not based on any critical analysis of modern capitalism, so that a critique of the Third Way as a political philosophy must begin from what it fails to say rather than what it claims to stand for. In contrast to traditional social democratic and socialist programs, one looks in vain for any discussion of classes, exploitation, the influence of the profit motive, the power of transnational corporations, the division of labour, the myth of free markets, the alienation of consumer society, or even the roots of unsustainable development and patriarchy.

The absence of any challenge to consumer capitalism means that much of the Third Way's political agenda has now been adopted quite comfortably by conservative parties that are shifting back from a more hard-line position as the damage inflicted

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<sup>3</sup> This definition comes from the 'New Democrats' Progressive Policy Institute: [www.ppionline.org](http://www.ppionline.org).

by the decade of neo-liberal policies becomes a political liability. The absence of a rationale leads Giddens himself to make the astonishing statement that governments throughout Europe claiming to represent the left are making policy on the run and that practical policies are not guided by any political principles.

In the UK, as in many countries at the moment, theory lags behind practice. ... governments claiming to represent the left are creating policy on the hoof. Theoretical flesh needs to be put on the skeleton of their policy-making ... (Giddens 1998, p. 2)

In other words, we know what we want to do but we lack a justification for doing it. Although written three years ago, no progress has been made towards putting theoretical flesh on the policy skeleton, except perhaps in the area of 'social capital', itself a contested idea claimed as much by conservatives as social democrats.

The aversion to social criticism means that advocates of the Third Way shy away from discussion of the motive force of political and social change, that is, the sources, forms and distribution of power in modern society. Traditionally, socialists understood power as deriving from ownership of capital, and oppression, injustice, and inequality as arising from the fundamental struggle between capital and labour. Although most would agree that this is a simplification that conceals as much as it reveals, it nevertheless focuses on something fundamental to the structure of society. But in the Third Way no fundamentals are challenged; the world of the Third Way is characterised by *complexity* rather than conflict (Holbrook 2000), and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that talking about complexity serves as a means of avoiding consideration of conflict.

Giddens is quite explicit about the Third Way's desire to reject class and avoid any discussion of power relations that may be built into the social structure. In phraseology that has an unfortunate resonance in this country, he writes that 'Third Way politics is one-nation politics' (Giddens 1998, p. 69), so that we are all united in one nation. While we may have our disagreements, nothing fundamental divides us. The implication is that social and environmental problems are not due to exploitation but to ignorance, and when enough people understand then our problems will be resolved. The response to ignorance is education and persuasion, not compulsion. The implication is that when business organisations fiercely resist proposed new laws to cut greenhouse gas emissions or increase social security payments it is because they do not yet understand that these changes are in the interests of us all.

The Third Way is determined to be pragmatic, to avoid sterile ideologies, and to embrace change rather than resist it. It does not have a 'worldview', only some practical policies to make the world a better place. It is apparent that the conscious rejection of ideology serves a political function. But by eschewing a 'worldview', the Third Way does not make itself innocent, for, contrary to the positivists of the

economics profession, there is no practical objectivity that predates ideology. If it does not have its own worldview then it has nothing to separate itself from the prevailing worldview, and must therefore share it. This is why many on the Left see the Third Way as in fact little more than an apologia for the prevailing system, and its advocates as supporters of the system that is responsible for creating the very things they condemn — inequality, injustice, and environmental decline (e.g. Rundle 1999; Scanlon 1999).

In politics today it is *de rigueur* to claim that everyone will be a winner, and Third Way politicians have proven to be masters of conflict avoidance. It is naïve to expect that essential social changes will not involve often-titanic political struggles in which progress requires the defeat of entrenched forces. It remains true that while power is complex and multifaceted, the central locus of power in modern society lies in the business community, and especially those segments that created and prospered from the neo-liberal policies of Thatcher and Reagan. Unless the Third Way is to resort to the fatuous escape route of ‘expanding the pie so that everyone can have more’, it must confront the realities of economic and political power. Indeed, we have enough years of witnessing ‘Third Way’ politicians warming the seats of power to know that serious attempts at social reform have run into trenchant opposition and that the representatives of the Third Way have repeatedly sacrificed the boldness of social change for the moderation of practical politics.

Democracy itself is subtly undermined by the refusal to consider the nature of power and the glib assumption that ultimate power lies in unrestricted consumption behaviour. Democracy asserts itself when a nation is gripped by great issues that demand collective decisions. In practice governments represent the people best when they are protecting their rights from threats from the powerful and providing for things that are best provided collectively – defence, roads, schooling, healthcare, and environmental protection. As Alford has argued, the act of collective provision is something that citizens do for one another (Alford 1996). In contrast to the comatose sovereign consumer of neo-liberalism, democracy needs something to do. By ceding so much decision making to the private choices of consumers in markets, electors have been transformed into political automatons. The capitulation of social democratic parties to the neo-liberal idea has been central to this, so that the Third Way serves as a sort of tranquilliser, the post-modern opium of the people.

### **Power and Lifestyle**

The advocates of the Third Way argue that the pursuit of ideology is old-fashioned, that society today is not marked by class division but by a ‘messy plurality’ and that politics is no longer the art of struggles for class dominance and social transformation (Holbrook 2000). The politics of struggle have been superseded by the politics of lifestyle and the real issues of ‘life politics’ involve questions of

autonomy and self-expression (Giddens 1998, p. 44). There is some truth in this perception of modern attitudes and politics. But the problem is the uncritical acceptance of it by advocates of the Third Way. There is no critique of 'life politics', no analysis of why people have retreated to lifestyle and no discussion of whether the messy plurality is a surface manifestation of deeper systemic social changes.

The Third Way seems to be saying that if people want lifestyle then that is what we must give them, without asking what forces lie behind the pursuit of identity and self-worth through lifestyle choices and brand association, and how these perceptions are created and manipulated in the marketing society.<sup>4</sup> Thus the 'life politics' of the Third Way is precisely the politics that suits the consumer society; it focuses on manufactured identity and the flim-flam of marketing rather than the deeper urges of humanity. It is the politics of the masses caught inside the web spun by corporations and their publicists. Nowhere in the writings on the Third Way can one find an analysis of how social structures condition thinking; one can find no discussion of class consciousness or false consciousness, nor any inkling of how or why people believe what they do.

Underlying all of this is a belief that people are free to choose what is best for them, in exactly the same way that the economics texts cleave to consumer sovereignty as the guarantee that in free markets people will get what they want. But what the idea of consumer sovereignty and the political individualism of the Third Way refuse to recognise is that people's preferences are not created *ex nibilo* but are formed by the society in which they live, which in the present case means in large measure and increasingly by the messages of the marketing society. Because the advocates of the Third Way have no social critique they imagine that people are free to pursue their life goals and to 'create themselves' (in Rorty's term) without constraint (Holbrook 2000).

The Third Way is adamant that it does not want to decide for people what they want but to provide everyone with the opportunity to express and satisfy their personal desires. A deeper critique would acknowledge that our desires are so bounded by the ideology of growth fetishism and so concealed by layers of images and distorted associations created by decades of marketing, that until we individually and collectively stop to examine ourselves, we do not know what is in our interests.<sup>5</sup>

In the Third Way, the model citizen is the highly educated, flexible and mobile worker: Robert Reich's abstract thinker (Reich 1991) or the bourgeois bohemian, or 'bobo' (Brooks 2000), perhaps best represented by Tony Blair himself. We might call this

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<sup>4</sup> See Klein (2000) for a popular critique, McCormack (1996) for an analysis of Japanese consumerism and Hamilton (2001) for an extensive critique.

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of one aspect of this complex issue, see Schor (1999).

model 'Third Way Man', a caricature that reaches its zenith with Latham's invention of the 'wired worker', the model worker of the information age who transcends the class struggle and stands as the harbinger of the end of history (Latham 1999). While one could venture a sociological critique of this type, and argue that they will always form only a small proportion of the population, the real question that must be asked is whether high incomes, professional mobility, disdain for community, and inflated self-image actually makes 'Third Way Man' happy. For if they are not happy, why should policies attempt to create the conditions for them to multiply? Perhaps the bobo is the most refined expression of the delusory effects of consumer capitalism, because the bobo is most prone to believe in his or her own freedom.

### **Power in Neo-Liberal Economics**

The unwillingness of the champions of the Third Way to consider power is a predisposition they share with the defenders of neo-liberalism. Nor has the Third Way challenged the model of human well being on which the economics texts are based. It has not questioned the utilitarian philosophy of modern economics and the marketing society, the sovereignty of the consumer and all of the anthropocentrism, individualism, materialism and celebration of competition implied by it. It has not confronted the naïve belief in progress, and has everywhere succumbed to the allure of technology and economic internationalism.

Neo-liberalism could not persuade everyone that markets are inherently good and government intervention bad, but one of its enduring legacies has been to persuade almost everyone that once markets are opened up governments become powerless to change things. In other words, while one might not like neo-liberal policies, once they are implemented they are irreversible. A parallel belief is that globalisation has created international economic forces that have emasculated governments, and the consequent diminution of the power of the state has destroyed forever the appeal of 'old-style social democracy'. The old values of social democracy might remain admirable, but in the new globalised world those who still adhere to its political program are hopelessly utopian.<sup>6</sup>

According to this view, the Third Way is no more than a reconciliation with modern political reality. Giddens writes that the Third Way 'refers to a framework of thinking and policy making that seeks to adapt social democracy to a world that has changed fundamentally over the past two or three decades' (Giddens 1998, p. 26). It is above all the strictures on government that make the Third Way necessary, for globalisation has robbed social democracy of its most effective weapons, the powers of the state.

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<sup>6</sup> A view put consistently over the years by the ultra-globalist writers of *The Australian*.

Of course, it is a great comfort to neo-liberals that, whatever one might think about the desirability of globalisation, there seems to be nothing that can be done about it. If any government attempted to resist the trends then it would be severely punished and compelled to fall into line. Staying in line requires governments to pursue a suite of economic policies that keeps 'the markets' happy. They include fiscal discipline, tight monetary policy, limiting taxes on the wealthy, restraining trade unions through 'labour market flexibility', divesting the state of ownership of public enterprises, a general commitment to small government, and removing restrictions on the free flow of goods and capital.

While conservatives, including advocates of the Third Way, are wont to believe that these ideas are the robust conclusions of economics, they are in reality based on the highly contestable beliefs of a particular school of economics, the neo-classical school. In fact, the leading ideas of the economic establishment have been shown to be highly contestable, both by recent economic history and formal economic studies.<sup>7</sup> One of the defining features of neo-liberal economics is its contempt for evidence.<sup>8</sup> After all, the superiority of free market solutions has been demonstrated over and over by the cleverest in the profession. One only needs to open up a textbook to see the proofs reduced to diagrams that even the most dull-witted undergraduate can understand.

Despite the accumulation of evidence that disproves the neoclassical shibboleths, the profession cleaves to them as firmly as ever. It is not only the academic economists who propagate these beliefs in lecture halls and professional journals; they are mirrored even more crudely in the prognostications of the 'market economists' we see quoted in the press and on television every day. The fact is that neoclassical economics has been spectacularly unsuccessful at developing a coherent explanation of how national macro-economies work or what drives the global economy. Third Way politicians and academic activists have been unwilling to challenge the neo-liberal economic consensus. They have rejected Thatcherism but not the economics on which it was based.

### **Power and Equality**

There is one political principle to which the Third Way is committed that differentiates it starkly from Thatcherism: greater social equality. While a commitment to more equality seems to be a defining feature of a party of the left, the notion of equality has become highly ambiguous in the politics of the Third Way. In

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<sup>7</sup> For a sharp, popular critique see Galbraith (2000). Other critiques include Quiggin (1996), Langmore and Quiggin (1994, Chapters 4 and 6).

<sup>8</sup> The Hilmer Report on competition reform is a case in point.



particular, it is not clear whether advocates of the Third Way believe in greater equality of opportunity or greater equality of outcomes.

Traditionally the focus has been on equality of outcomes with the emphasis on ameliorating income inequality. The primary solution of social democracy has been the progressive tax system and public ownership of essential services. The shift to equality of opportunity is attractive in an era of apparent public resistance to high taxes, for if disadvantage can be overcome then inequality of outcomes ought to be reduced. But there is a trap in this. If inequality of opportunity is the problem and the problem has been fixed, then inequality of outcomes simply has to be accepted. However, equality of opportunity will not be enough if an unacceptable level of inequality is built into the very structure of the capitalist economy. Then there is no escaping the need for redistribution of outcomes.

To reach this conclusion one needs a social analysis that identifies the sources of structural inequality, something the Third Way assiduously avoids. Instead, it has resorted to the idea of social exclusion, the term used to describe lack of opportunity for individuals to develop their potential. There is no doubt that exclusion is a cause of misery and disadvantage and has been intensified by the decline of the traditional working class, along with its cultural forms and social institutions. Structural change and globalisation have seen part of the working class shift into the middle classes and the other part slipping into a marginal existence of long-term unemployment or low-paid casual jobs and entrenched poverty. However, instead of powerful social classes imposing unfair structures that benefit themselves and leave much of the populace poor (relatively at least), in the worldview of the Third Way we must simply accept that what 'the market' delivers is natural and inevitable. All we can do is attempt to modify the impacts by programs that allow everyone to participate 'equally' in the market.

Such a worldview is strongly preferred by those at the top because it has a politically neutralizing effect. There is no powerful oligarchy at which to point the finger, only an impersonal system, the global market that lays down the ground rules by which societies and governments must operate. After two decades of talk about 'the economy' as an immovable and all-conquering force, the market has become reified in the public mind, a victory for the economists' textbook distinction between positive and normative economics. Consequently, misfortune is seen to be a product of the relationship between an individual and the market, and it is pointless to look for someone to blame. The solution to disadvantage, therefore, is to fix the individual rather than the economic and social system. The Third Way has thus subtly redefined the traditional concern of the left for social justice. It is now an issue not of structural economic disadvantage but the politics of life choices. In other words, social justice has become individualised and divorced from the essential structure of capitalism at a time when capitalism has reached its most purified form.

The emphasis on equality of opportunity in place of equality of outcomes has meant that education has become central to the political program of Third Way politicians. Education has replaced motherhood as the objective no one dares oppose. It is a universal good and the more we have the better off we are. Education can rescue anyone suffering from disadvantage. It is politically more attractive than motherhood because the state can provide more and better education simply by allocating more funds through the budget and training more teachers.

Education and training have become the new mantra for social democratic politicians. Tony Blair famously describes his three main priorities in government as ‘education, education, education’ (Giddens 1998, p. 109).

The parallel with the well-known slogan of real estate agents is not without significance. There is no doubt that education is important in tackling social exclusion — the relationship between education and social mobility has been well established. But education and training cannot be the panacea that Third Way politicians hope for. In short, what is good for the individual is not necessarily good for society. The rapid increase in investment in education of recent times has mostly been a form of ‘defensive expenditure’ as people attempt to maintain their position in the employment hierarchy as everyone around them upgrades their qualifications.<sup>9</sup> There is no reason to believe that the emphasis on education favoured by advocates of the Third Way will lead to a more equal or just society, although it may stave off a worsening of inequality. Indeed, by shifting the blame for ‘failure’ onto the individuals who failed to take advantage of the educational opportunities on offer, it may erode the public commitment to greater equality and inclusion.

Closely related to the emphasis on education, the other favourite cause of Third Way politicians is information technology. The Third Way is an explicit attempt to reconcile the values of social democracy with the new world of globalisation and information technology. Information technology is believed to have fundamentally reshaped economies and work. For some, it has taken on a sort of mystical power. Latham argues that the ‘information society breaks down all forms of hierarchy’ and gives everyone access to wealth (Latham 1999). The real division today is between the ‘information rich’ and the ‘information poor’, and ‘knowledge creation’ is the core priority of the Third Way. The information age will resolve inequality and help ‘dissolve the class struggle’.

Oddly, it is the very seriousness with which advocates of the Third Way declare their belief in the transformative power of the information economy that marks them as anachronistic. Only those unfamiliar with the use of computers can truly fall for the

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion see Hamilton and Denniss (2000).

hype of the information economy. Information technology, and information, are sources of power and influence, and the emergence of the 'information economy' has seen some realignment of economic and political power. But having access to a computer does not give the user access to this power. The adoption of information technology has transformed the work of those at the bottom end of the employment market as much as those at the top, and has been as much a cause of entrapment as of liberation.

The fact that computers are useful does not mean we should worship them, yet any number of pundits and politicians have substituted the marketing slogans of infotech for genuine political philosophy. To achieve this new world more quickly, we are told that we must transform education systems. By substituting information for knowledge, a highly specific set of skills is placed above a well-developed critical mind, and this reflects the essential anti-intellectualism inherent in the politics of the Third Way.

### **Third Way Politics**

Faced with the increasingly untenable nature of communism and more extensive state ownership in the post-war period, and the absence of any coherent alternative to the crushing force of the neo-liberal policy establishment, many social democrats felt they could do little more than fight a rear-guard action as one after another of the pillars of the post-war social democratic consensus was knocked down. The tragedy was that so many of the most influential social democrats simply gave in. Instead of searching for a creative response to the new dispensation, they embraced Mrs Thatcher, but secretly of course. As the conservative commentator Geoffrey Wheatcroft observed: 'Intelligent British Tories have quietly recognised that Blair's New Labour is Thatcher's greatest triumph' (Wheatcroft 1999).

The creeping capitulation of social democratic parties led to an extraordinary bipartisanship on economic policy, that is, on the issues that mattered most. As opposition fell way to privatisation, free trade, competition policy, and deregulation of the financial sector, an elaborate dance of deception began. The gap between the conservative and social democratic parties became one of product differentiation rather than ideology, and just as product differentiation and brand loyalty are marketing concepts, so political parties began to hire marketing specialists to help them sell their messages. In the same way that clever marketing is required to persuade skeptical consumers that one brand of soap powder that is virtually identical to other brands is in fact radically different, so political parties now hire experts to persuade skeptical voters that one party is radically different from its opponent. Increasingly, modern social democratic politics is the politics of politicians who are not sure what they stand for but who employ advertising agencies to convince us that they stand for something.

Today both conservative and social democratic parties complain that the other party has stolen its policies. So little that is fundamental separates them that almost any policy could be found in the platform of either party. The adoption of a particular policy is determined not by consistency with some broad ideology but by whoever thought of it first. With the advent of the Third Way, politics made a transition from ideas to personalities. The policy analyst was replaced by the spin-doctor; the party platform can be found buried beneath the media strategy; image management substituted for bold reform; and choosing words became more important than choosing actions. Staying 'on message' means avoiding debate. The new sophisticated social democrats understood the modern world in ways the 'old socialists' could not.

The disappearance of substantive difference between the conservative and social democratic parties has meant that both parties are more likely to attract careerists and opportunists rather than people committed to principles. We are now seeing younger politicians rising to prominence who in their twenties were courted by both sides. They could comfortably have jumped either way but made a decision on the basis of which party would better facilitate personal advancement.

The triumph of neo-liberalism and the new right has led social commentators to conclude that people have lost interest in politics and that this is a threat to democracy. Writes Giddens: 'Political ideas today seem to have lost their capacity to inspire and political leaders their ability to lead' (Giddens 1998, p. 2). The reason for this is that the political ideologies of conservative parties and their social democratic opponents have converged. The loss of political idealism that Giddens bemoans is itself the product of the convergence of Third Way politics on neo-liberalism. Third Way politicians say they want to revive political engagement by creating a realisable vision for a better future. But the Third Way has inspired no mass following because it does not know what it stands for, at least not beyond the things it does not want to talk about: its implicit faith in growth and markets that it shares with its opponents. As a result, people are staying away from the polling booths or seeking out alternatives to the traditional parties. Tony Blair's recent landslide is not an endorsement of the Third Way; the record poor turnout of voters is a better barometer of what the people think.

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