

The informal economy and trade unionism in Bolivia at the beginning of the 21st century

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This paper discusses the nature of trade unionism in the ‘new’, deformed economy of Bolivia, specifically the city of El Alto¹. It argues that the reconfiguration of trade unionism within the contemporary economy is of central importance to understanding the alternative visions of the state and of economic development that are being expressed in Bolivia today. With the resignation of two presidents in the last 2 years over (largely) the question of state ownership of natural gas resources, and the election of Bolivia’s first indigenous and decidedly anti-neoliberal president, the eyes of the region and indeed the world are on Bolivia. At the heart of both these processes lies the ‘new’ trade unionism, which represents ‘micro-capitalists’ who own their means of livelihood. Rather than this leading to reactionary politics, I would argue that they are the source of much of the radicalism of the contemporary Bolivian political scene.

A brief history of trade unionism in Bolivia

Although typically in Latin America trade unions have been mechanisms for governmental control of the working classes through corporatism, the history of trade unions in Bolivia has

¹ El Alto is a city of 700 000, most of whom are first-third generation migrants from the Aymara-speaking countryside. It began as the slum district of La Paz, the capital city of Bolivia, but grew so much that it became a city in its own right in 1985. It remains the poorest city in Bolivia, but is one of the largest.

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been less consistent in this than in other countries of the region, beginning in the 1920s, when anarcho-syndicalism gained ground within several trade union organisations, especially those of the market women in Oruro and La Paz (Lehm and Rivera Cusicanqui 1988; Lora 1977). The Miners’ Federation, which was formed in 1944, helped organise the revolution of 1952 alongside the MNR party, and then set up the COB (Central Obrera Boliviana, Bolivian Workers’ Centre). At the beginning, the COB was led by members of the governing party (MNRistas), but it and the Miners’ Federation always had a strong Trotskyite faction, articulated most notably by the POR (the Partido Obrero Revolucionario, or Workers’ Revolutionary Party). Because of this, there was consistent opposition to the MNR leaders and the worker-ministers of the first government. State control over the trade unions of the COB was perhaps effective only for a few years; after the military coup of 1964, a majority of the COB unions moved into opposition to the government. During Banzer’s dictatorship of 1971-8, the government attempted to replace the COB with ‘Workers’ Coordinators’, but failed, and the COB, particularly the miners, once again led the opposition. Since the transition to democracy, all the main political parties have attempted to control the COB executive committee.

The traditional revolutionary vanguard of the miners were seriously weakened with the New Economic Policy of the Paz Estenssoro government in the mid-1980s. This was Bolivia’s version of structural adjustment, and Bolivia’s enthusiastic implementation of such measures meant that many, including Jeffrey Sachs, who advised the government, saw the country as a model for the rest of the developing world. Decree no. 21060 of 1985, often known among *Alteños* (residents of El Alto) as the ‘Ley Maldita’, or ‘evil law’ privatised the state-owned mines and led to thousands of miners losing their jobs (around 20 000 in fact). This was called

the ‘relocalisation’, and the fired miners the ‘relocalizados’, although they were not ‘re-localised’ anywhere. Such a dramatic event had the obvious effect of severely weakening the miners unions and thus the COB itself.

The peasant unions supported the government for considerably longer than the miners, particularly because of the Agrarian reform of 1953; then in 1964, General Barrientos signed the ‘Peasant-Military Pact’, winning the peasants to a pro-government position until the 1970s. However, oppositional tendencies began to take over the peasant unions from the late 1960s, as young Aymara nationalists, who became known as the Kataristas, gradually rose to prominence (see Hurtado 1986; Rivera Cusicanqui 2003 [1984]). By the late 1970s, after the repression that followed the massacre of the peasants of Tolata in 1974, the peasant unions were at the forefront of the opposition to the dictatorship alongside the COB. From 1979 onwards, the Kataristas ran the unified peasant Confederation, the CSUTCB² (Rivera Cusicanqui 2003 [1984]). Now, different factions of the Kataristas vie with the MAS³, the *cocalero* political party, for control over its leadership committees.

The peasants are a group of workers who have re-emerged as central to Bolivian oppositional politics in recent years. The *cocaleros*, that is those peasants who farm coca, in the Chapare region have been particularly noticeable; their leader is Evo Morales, the current president. Others include the peasants of the *altiplano*, especially those influenced by Katarismo; and the residents of El Alto, as both workers and *vecinos* (residents, neighbours). As Lechín points out, even if the contemporary COB and FSTMB are a shadow of their former selves, ‘the

² Confederacion Sindical Unica de los Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia, Single Trade Union Confederation of Bolivian Peasant Workers

³ Movimiento Al Socialismo, Movement Towards Socialism.

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emerging trade unions, those that now have the power of *convocatoria* [the ability to convene large numbers of people in demonstrations and the like] and political power, as is the case for *cocalero* peasants and peasants in general, ... have revived the mechanisms and the organic structure of the historic Trade Union, as well as its methods of struggle’ (Lechin W. 2003: 16). In fact, this is not surprising, as most of the *cocaleros* are ex-miners; and most of the residents of El Alto either ex-miners or (ex-)peasants.

The miners continue to claim their pre-eminence within the COB leadership, based upon their history at the vanguard of the workers’ struggle, and their political radicalism. However, both peasant and *cocalero* groupings have attempted to contest their hegemony within the COB executive committee. And the locus of political opposition and social movement organisation has largely shifted to the new groups mentioned above. No one would wish to claim the irrelevance of the COB, and the remnants of the miners’ unions, namely members of mining cooperatives, have provided considerable support to *Alteño* and peasant protests. However, the executive committee of the COB has been a latecomer to most of the protests of recent years. And the *cocalero* unions have scored considerable successes in getting their interests onto the national agenda, producing the country’s first indigenous and leftist President.

The economic context: deformalisation and ‘post-Fordist’ organisation of production, exchange, consumption.

At first sight, it seems remarkable that trade unionism is so important in the *alteño* informal economy⁴ today, as so much of the economic context seems to militate against collective organisation. The process of individuation accompanying the growth of cities has been a persistent trope of urban sociology and anthropology, expressed in early 20th Century urban sociology as the loss of *gemeinschaft* in favour of *gesellschaft* for example. In the case of Bolivia, scholars have stressed the individualism, stratification and fragmentation of city life in contrast to the strength of the rural community, or of the class-based community of miners (Canessa 1998; Gill 1997; Rivera Cusicanqui 2002). Scholars usually link individuation in the city to the structure of the urban economy. Olivia Harris argues that in the rural Andes, collective organisation is oriented usually to subsistence – the ‘nonmarket sphere’, while ‘intervention in markets is an affair for individuals’ and households (Harris 1995: 368). Markets are not confined to Bolivia’s cities, but they are associated with urban spaces, and more generally a common assumption is that competitive market economies are individualistic (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002), not least because this is how economists have historically approached the study of markets (Hart 2001). Of course, much economic anthropology has been devoted to outlining the embedded nature of markets, following the substantivists’ lead (Dalton 1971; Granovetter 1992 [1985]; Polanyi 1957 [1944]). In work on informal economies, however, the social relations underpinning market transactions have not always received as much attention as they deserve, as Keith Hart admits of his seminal article defining the informal sector in Accra (1973). The picture he painted then, and one that retains much power in contemporary literature, was of many individuals or small groups developing multiple and individual (or household) strategies for economic survival. In later works, he has

⁴ Here I am using a broad definition of the ‘informal economy’ as characterized by small-scale commerce, production or transport that is unregulated and untaxed by government, with people mostly self-employed rather than receiving a wage. I

done much to outline the social processes lying beneath supposedly individualised and abstracted market exchanges, such as the extension of credit (see also Basile and Harris-White 2000; Hart 2001).

Individuation is often associated with competition, and competition in the informal economy of El Alto has become acute in recent years. The neoliberal restructuring so enthusiastically implemented in Bolivia from the mid-1980s onwards had two principal effects. First, on the demand side, the popular classes saw a decrease in their wages in real terms, were fired from their jobs or moved into temporary contracts. Initially, the circulation of cocaine money in the Bolivian economy alleviated this problem (Blanes Jimenez 1989; Sanabria 1999); but by the end of the 1990s, Bolivian governments had achieved considerable success in reducing the illegal growth of coca, and so the money was drying up. Second, on the supply side, the number of vendors increased as workers and miners were fired and migrated to El Alto in the mid-1980s. More recently, cheaper products manufactured in Chile, Brazil and China are increasingly arriving in Bolivian markets, both legally and as contraband. Many vendors I spoke with talked about how their earnings were good in the 1970s and 80s, but how competition has now increased to the point where their mark-ups are tiny:

‘Yes, effectively things have changed radically; for example, before there were more sales, we had more income. In contrast, now because there is quite a lot of competition and more traders, then sales themselves have really lowered, too much. Where you used to sell 100% of your stock, now you sell 20%. And profits too, we’ve also had to lower our prices in order to compete, for example before, from a [sachet of] shampoo, let’s say, we earned at least 2 Bolivianos, now a sachet only earns me 50 cents, sometimes 20 cents. And so we have to sell so that the money circulates and doesn’t stagnate.’

‘What you used to sell for 100 Bolivianos now you sell at 20 or 30 Bolivianos. Now it’s not like before, because before there was money in circulation, a worker earned,

acknowledge that it is difficult to define precisely; and that there is no clear distinction between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ sectors, since they rely so much upon each other (Hart 1973; Peattie 1987; Rivera Cusicanqui 2002).

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had [money] in order to buy from the streets, and bought from us. But now no, now it’s reversed, we only buy and sell between ourselves. For example, you, Doctora, you’ll sell books, I sell batteries, you buy batteries from me, and I buy exercise books from you – that’s all we do now.’

The *alteño* economy of the early 21st Century also shows elements of what Hardt and Negri call ‘informatization’, which they describe as a shift from the ‘modern’ domination of industry to a ‘postmodern’ domination of services and information (Hardt and Negri 2000: 280).⁵ The following cartoon illustrates the service- and communication-based side of the informal economy in El Alto (and other large cities in Bolivia): in it, no one is selling concrete things, everyone is selling services, such as photocopying, cell phone calls, translations, transcriptions, internet access, etc.. The picture it paints of almost unbearable competition accords with what many *alteños* feel (and fear). Another common complaint among street traders is that there are more vendors than consumers, and that money simply circulates between them, as one woman said, ‘like a *pasanaku*’ – a communal credit scheme. Accumulation is no longer possible, traders can only ‘live from day to day’.

⁵ Their analysis draws on Manuel Castells’ work. See also Hart (2001) for a similar argument.



Cartoon: The Financial Environment, ‘Marcos’, *Pulso* June 20-26, 2003, p. 3⁶

Neo-liberal trade unions

Whether neoliberal deformalisation and the consequent increased competition within the informal economy have meant a decrease in worker solidarity beyond the household is a matter of some debate, however. Agadjanian, for example, argues that

⁶ The sign at the top left says ‘We do consultancies, contracts, court cases, legal advice, consultations, advice sessions, translations, corrections, thesis, diplomas’; in the middle at the top, ‘cellphone calls, photocopies, internet, plumbing, electrician, movement [travel], minibuses, cleaning, surgery, tattoos, confessions’; at the bottom left, ‘CDs MP3, VHS, new clothes, almost new clothes, sociology, second hand clothes, cassettes, everything for 14 [Bolivianos], original articles, all the brands, classes given, massages 7 for 1, messages’. The man in the bottom right corner is saying ‘How wonderful! So we all offer a way of spending money and no one produces it.’ Just to the left of him is a small picture of the President with a sign saying ‘Gas sold’, referring to the export of natural gas.

‘increased competition in the swollen marketplace, combined with a sanctification of private initiative and self-reliance by the dominant class ideology, undermines workers’ collective strategies both by alienating them individually and by reinforcing compartmentalistic small-scale solidarities and alliances within various subgroups of workers.’ (Agadjanian 2002: 261).

In a concrete sense, some groups of workers have been severely weakened, the organised miners discussed above being the paradigmatic example. And, admittedly, if we take trade unions to refer to organised workplace groupings, then the associations of street traders that are the focus of this paper are not trade unions in the classic sense but are more like guilds or professional associations. However, from its inception in 1952, the central trade union structure in Bolivia has included a variety of different groupings; as the activist and historian Guillermo Lora said,

‘the COB [Central Obrera Boliviana] did not just embrace labour unions, nor did it limit its activities to promoting the formation of working-class federations. It also included popular associations which, although they called themselves unions, were not strictly speaking so. “The COB is not a trade-union organisation exclusively for the proletariat; it constitutes a vast network of mass organisations, including bodies which are not strictly unions (for example tenants, housewives, students). That is to say it brings together all the oppressed groups in the nation who face economic, social and cultural problems connected with the process of the national revolution.” ’ (Lora 1977: 283 citing Moller et. al 1957)

And people at various levels of the street traders’ ‘guild’ structure refer to their organisational life as ‘la vida sindical’ and make a distinction between politics and ‘sindicalismo’. The peasants union is called the ‘Single Trade Union Confederation of Bolivian Peasant Workers’, and the *cocaleros* absolutely consider themselves members of trade unions.

What these newly powerful popular groups share is a set of relations of production that should mean they are less vulnerable to state predation than were the miners, an argument made by Harry Sanabria for the *cocaleros*. He points out that their ‘social organization of production hinges on relatively autonomous and shifting production units’ (1999: 556), in contrast to the way the miners were concentrated in intensive and accessible production sites; and this is also

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true for peasants and the petty capitalists (micro capitalists) working in small family-based businesses in El Alto, and selling in different and relatively fluid street markets. This kind of household production model is of course common, even typical, under neoliberalism in countries of the global South. As Hart argues (2001), the model of economy that rigidly separates production (in the factory, office, etc.) from reproduction (in the home) is the exception rather than the rule, historically speaking.

Related to this, globally, street markets are often viewed as acceptable places for women to work precisely because they blur the distinction between house and workplace, and are compatible with women’s roles in the reproductive economy (Lessinger 2001). In El Alto, women form the clear majority of those engaged in small-scale commerce⁷, even though the dominant discourse is of women working mainly in the home: in my survey of Rosas Pampa, 20% of women said that they were ‘comerciantes’, or traders, while 33% said they were housewives. Many of the women I knew who called themselves housewives would also go out and sell goods occasionally, or would knit or weave commercially from their homes. The high level of involvement of women in commerce cannot be entirely attributed to increased numbers of female-headed households, or to the economic crisis of the late 20th Century, the factors usually outlined in the feminist literature (Berger 1989). These have played a major part, but in addition, urban Aymaras are drawing on indigenous cultural codes about female-male complementarity in labour (Harris 2000 [1978]) and a long history of female responsibility for commerce in the Andes (de la Cadena 1996; de la Cadena 2002; Larson and Harris 1995 ; Weismantel 2001).

Contemporary popular visions for economic development

All this means that we perhaps need to rethink some of our assumptions about trade unions and working class solidarity. For one thing, the way that the household model of production and exchange articulates with competition in the marketplace will be one of the forces that shape collective organisation, rather than making it disappear altogether. Neoliberalism thus helps to create particular forms of collectivity alongside its well-recognised promotion of the active individual citizen operating rationally in the market place (Lazar 2004; Rose 1999: 167-193)⁸. Furthermore, the ‘new’ working classes may be petty entrepreneurs/capitalists who own their own means of livelihood (the peasant farm, the market stall), but that is not to say that their politics or economic visions will be reactionary. In fact, the groupings that I have been talking about are the main sources of alternative visions of economic development for Bolivia today.

As Alvaro Garcia Linera⁹ (2001) has argued, some of the key demands of the protests that have swept Bolivia in the last 5 years have been articulated around questions of control over resources, in particular water and natural gas. In Cochabamba (the site of the so-called ‘Water War’ of April 2000), localised control over water provision was much more advanced than in El Alto, but in both cities protesters objected to its privatisation, especially given the foreign

⁷ Silvia Escobar (1989) shows that, in 1983, women were the majority (71%) of those engaged in small-scale commerce in La Paz. See also Rivera Cusicanqui (2002).

⁸ Neoliberal forms of collectivity would obviously not solely be occupation-based, but could include micro-credit groups, NGOs, community survival-based organisations such as communal kitchens, or community groups set up by development agencies for the purposes of project implementation, health promoters, groups of trainers in human rights, etc. Such contemporary forces also operate alongside and in interaction with more long-standing experiences of organisation: in indigenous communities, the miners’ trade unions or the trade unions of domestic workers, teachers, market sellers, etc.

⁹ Garcia Linera is a sociologist/mathematician/ politologo, who is at present the Vice-President of Bolivia.

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ownership of the utilities companies involved¹⁰. The question of foreign control over the revenue from the export of natural gas has of course been key to the stand-off between governments and the social movements since October 2003, and will be the most contentious issue for Evo Morales’ presidency. For Garcia Linera, such questions, namely ‘that of the management of water, access to land and the price of basic services’ are principally about the material means of sustaining social reproduction (2001: 43).

However, we should be wary of reducing this to a simple equation of protest as a response to poverty. In the inevitable simplifications that accompany the international flow of information, the contemporary political developments in El Alto and Bolivia have been understood through narratives of economic crisis, or the image of a noble and naturalised indigenous concern for Bolivian sovereignty over natural resources; but it would be a mistake to view the mobilisations as simply a politics of desperation. Although it would also be foolish to try to maintain that people are not responding to a situation of increasingly acute hardship in the midst of a severe economic crisis, the protests are also a politics of surplus and creativity, a point recognised by Hardt and Negri for the multitude: ‘Deprivation ... may breed anger, indignation, and antagonism, but revolt arises only on the basis of wealth, that is, a surplus of intelligence, experience, knowledges and desire’ (2005: 212)¹¹. The protesters have positive proposals, for example in their assertion of a sense of Bolivian sovereignty over natural resources. Gutierrez et al maintain that the proposals for the local control over water in Cochabamba have ‘demolished the fallacy of the duality between privatization and state

¹⁰ The main shareholders in Aguas del Tunari of Cochabamba were Bechtel, a US and German multinational and Abengoa SA, a Spanish company; while that of Aguas del Illimani in El Alto is/was Suez, which is French.

¹¹ The quote continues: ‘When we propose the poor as the paradigmatic subjective figure of labor today, it is not because the poor are empty and excluded from wealth but because they are included in the circuits of production and full of potential, which always exceeds what capital and the global political body can expropriate and control. This common surplus is the first pillar on which are built struggles against the global political body and for the multitude.’

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ownership which had guided contemporary political proposals’ (2000: 176). They argue that such new proposals can only have arisen through the operation of genuinely democratic decision-making processes, and in their view represent a clear alternative proposal for the ‘recomposition of political life’ (2000: 181).

This may be somewhat optimistic, and the extent to which proposals are thought through in the case of water in Cochabamba is certainly not generalisable across the whole spectrum of oppositional social movements. However, coherent visions of the state and of democracy are emerging in the theory and practice of the social sectors and popular classes. As David Nugent argues, the absence (or dysfunction) of the state can create as much of a ‘state-effect’ as its presence, as in the case of mid-20th century Chachapoyas in Peru, where local elites’ success in consolidating regional power and holding the nation state at bay

‘created the illusion (and illusion it was) that a liberated nation-state existed in a different spatial domain. ... [I]t was possible for the popular classes to conceive of the liberated nation-state not only as a ‘thing’ that could arrive from afar, but also as a thing whose arrival was being thwarted by the elite’ (Nugent forthcoming: 16).

In a similar vein, much talk about corruption in Bolivia today tells the story of elite politicians and businessmen who are betraying a higher ideal of what the state should be, even though people are unlikely to talk about the abstract concept of ‘the state’. They are more likely to use abstract terms such as ‘our dear Bolivia’ (‘nuestra querida Bolivia’) or ‘the Bolivian people’ (‘el pueblo boliviano’), alongside concrete terms referring to politicians in general, the President, the Mayor or the government. With neoliberalism, the Bolivian state has absented itself from some areas, such as the provision of public utilities, while strengthening itself in others, especially the military (Gill 2000; Sanabria 1999). In the face of this, *alteños* often articulate specific visions of a strong developmentalist state. The two most oft-articulated complaints about contemporary Bolivian governments are that they are corrupt and

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that they do not provide jobs for ordinary Bolivian people. For Don Eugenio, of the Federation of Street Traders, the entrance of business-people into government has corrupted his ideal of a state that is able to give people jobs:

‘It’s politicking, so that the ordinary people are just the servants, part of the ladder for those people up there [i.e. politicians]. Because the supply of jobs has dried up. It’s because really they’re more businessmen than politicians – for example, CORDEPAZ had more people, and then also [people] used to work for the National Roads Service, YPFB [the state petrol company], the ENFE – the railways – all of them no longer exist. Now really the people, the base, now they work for people from above, no longer *for themselves*. Now there is no place where someone can be a public functionary.’ (my emphasis)

Working for the state is in his view working ‘por ellos mismos’, instead of working to the profit of the ‘gentes de arriba’, the owners of private companies. This kind of vision of the state may be quite specific to El Alto, or to urban Bolivians more generally, as in other parts of Bolivia people may feel the state to be remote and want to keep it at bay (Goudsmit forthcoming; Lepri 2003). Many *alteños*, particularly those who are politically active in collective organisations, have previously had jobs provided by the state – the *Alcaldía* is the biggest single employer in the city, for example, and many street traders were public functionaries during the 1990s. Others worked for public companies that were privatised in recent decades, such as the mines, the national roads service, etc. It is unsurprising therefore that they wish to return to a situation where they had a more secure job provided by the state that in some cases even came with benefits such as pensions.

Inherent to Don Eugenio’s vision is a claim for economic fairness, which should be protected by the state (cf. Nugent forthcoming). Such a view is also expressed in the demand from the *altiplano* peasants for the government to provide them with tractors and other kinds of development projects. These claims are somewhat paradoxical, because on the one hand people want more state in the form of tractors or jobs, but on the other, one of the main

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problems that spark off protests is too much state – e.g. when the state intervenes in previously community-based modes of water provisioning by attempting to sell them to other parties. The other example of too much state is, of course, state repression of demonstrators, actively and also preemptively through laws such as the Law of Citizen Security, which criminalised blockades and the repeal of which was one of the key demands of demonstrators in October 2003.

Thus, the call is for a particular kind of state, one that more clearly represents the interests of ‘the people’ as defined by ‘the people’, and is therefore more genuinely democratic. The problem with this is a political one – given current international economic orthodoxy and Bolivia’s relative poverty in terms of natural resources (it has oil but is no Venezuela) this may just be unrealistic; but there is a vision nonetheless. When imagining such a state, trade unionists and workers use historical referents, such as in particular the nationalisation of Gulf Oil in 1969. The contemporary period shares some interesting parallels with 1969-71, both being times of notable leftist agitation. With the Popular Assembly in 1971 and the demands for the Constitutional Assembly, both periods evidence demands for a democracy that is deeper than that of the official political system – as Hardt and Negri (2005) put it, for the rule of everyone by everyone.

Luis Tapia argues that during the 1980s and 90s, the defeat of the popular, trade unionist and leftist forces meant that the elite-based political party system took over institutionalised politics at that time, expelling the workers from them to the ‘no lugares’ or ‘non-places’ of politics. With the elections of 2002, the successes of the MAS and the MIP saw the return of the workers and the reentry of the class struggle into parliament; and Evo Morales’ recent

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success in the Presidential election underlines this. The proliferation of the non-places of politics during the 1980s and 90s meant

‘the renovation of the capacity for political life in the heart of the popular classes; [a capacity] for organisation and collective action. The non-places have revealed the banality of the places of politics, as well as their anti-national character.’ (2002: 72)

Morales’ election should represent the move of the popular classes into some kind of power, which does at least raise the possibility that popular visions of democracy and economic development will enter into official politics. Whether this will translate into more acceptable economic policies and what effects these might have remains to be seen.

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