

# The sacred and the profane

## *The arbitrary legacy of Pierre Bourdieu*

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Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. £15.99. ISBN 0–7456–2055–8 (pbk), 264pp.  
Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001. £14.99. ISBN 0–7456–2256–8 (pbk), 144pp.

**One faces an intriguing paradox** when reviewing the work of Pierre Bourdieu: it is becoming increasingly difficult to critique his *oeuvre*, although for reasons that may not immediately spring to mind. The difficulty arises not from such internal issues as the voluminous nature, theoretical complexity or empirical breadth of Bourdieu's work – these make the task harder but all the more worthwhile. Rather, the problem emanates from something the analysis of which represents one of Bourdieu's principal achievements: the logic of the academic game. Bourdieu's star has been in the ascendant in recent years, with increasing numbers of translations of, introductions to, and reviews of his work. His status in the pantheon of social scientific thinkers has thereby become intimately interconnected with the careers of growing numbers of recontextualizers (commentators, translators, reviewers, etc) and so subject to the struggles of the academic field. That more people have a stake and interest in the intellectual position named 'Pierre Bourdieu' is one reason why his work can now evoke an almost religious fervour in both support and denunciation. The current logic of the social scientific field tends to produce personalized dichotomies; one is held to be either for or against Bourdieu – no other position is recognized. Bourdieu's work has become either sacred (and to be praised in genuflection) or profane (and so to be damned to the outer circles of academia). In such a climate sympathetic *critique*, a work of immanent development rather than hagiography or criticism, represents an abomination and thus may bring a hail of personal derision and ire upon one's head from both sides of this false divide.<sup>1</sup>



The death of Pierre Bourdieu in 2002 heightens this predicament; with his passing, Bourdieu's achievements were much discussed, weighed and evaluated. As this revaluation now dissipates we are left with the question of what to do *beyond* Bourdieu. Bourdieu's work rests at a critical juncture: his contribution may be kept behind glass, a museum exhibit, labelled, excavated for meanings and expounded on or ignored but nonetheless unchanging; or the intellectual project to which he contributed may be continued, developed, built upon and thus Bourdieu's contribution (ultimately) developed and changed. Each path has its dangers. On the one hand, attempts to secure the integrity of the approach may lead, as the plenary is preserved by a priesthood, to its ossification. On the other hand, with the death of its author, the furthering of Bourdieu's intellectual project may lead to proliferation and fragmentation as competing ancestries branch off and leave little sense of a shared project. To this conundrum, the question of the role of canonic works and intellectual traditions, there is of course no easy answer – it is one which has engaged cultural studies since its emergence. Thus, one could say that the question of what to do with Bourdieu's inheritance represents, in microcosm, the canonic conundrum facing cultural studies as a whole. To address how to move beyond Bourdieu is thus to address *in nuce* the future form of advance in cultural studies.

Ironically, the answer to this conundrum lies within perhaps the single most important underlying principle of Bourdieu's work, one which generated the distinctive contribution he bequeathed but that is rarely articulated in revaluations of his legacy: the quest to reveal the sacred as profane. It is this driving impulse which generates the principal contributions *and* the key areas for development of Bourdieu's intellectual project; it represents the (often unrecognized) linchpin for moving beyond Bourdieu. In other words, it provides the rationale for and focus of a productive critique of Bourdieu's approach, as it is the locus of both its strength and, potentially, its weakness. Moreover, far more than empiricist considerations of his substantive attention to or neglect of questions of culture or power, it is this under-examined dimension to Bourdieu's work which represents its principal point of contact in form and spirit with the informing projects of cultural studies, however different their realisations within their very different social and intellectual contexts. Thus it is in addressing this underlying impetus to reveal the sacred as profane that one can see the lessons of his legacy for cultural studies. As such, it forms the principal focus of this review article. I begin by exploring the nature of this sacred and profane linchpin, then highlight its possible problems, before finally turning to address how these problems may be overcome and thus how the intellectual project may now be advanced further.



## 'Eternalizing the arbitrary'

The linchpin is the analysis of a process that Bourdieu refers to as 'eternalising the arbitrary' in the preface to the English language translation of *Masculine Domination*. This slim volume, a bestseller in France, illustrates clearly this key dimension of Bourdieu's project. Here he focuses on relations between the sexes, aiming to combat the 'transformation of history into nature, of cultural arbitrariness into the *natural*' (2001: 2, original emphasis) by showing how the form taken by these relations, and the masculine domination which currently characterizes them, while presented as necessary, universal and eternal, are in reality arbitrary, socially constructed and historically contingent. The quest is to debunk any sense of naturalness about relations between the sexes and show their basis in arbitrary social relations of power. For example, Bourdieu argues that

far from playing the founding role that they are sometimes given, the visible differences between the male and female sex organs are a social construction which can be traced back to the principles of division of androcentric reason, itself grounded in the division of the social statuses assigned to men and women. (2001: 15)

The point to note here is not the content of the argument but rather the *form* taken by the analysis. Raymond Aron, in *Politics and History* (1971), stated: 'To customs and beliefs, the very ones we hold sacred, sociology ruthlessly attaches the adjective "arbitrary".' Bourdieu echoed this years later by stating: 'Sociology's misfortune is that it discovers the arbitrary and the contingent where we like to see necessity or nature' (1994: 14). This summarizes succinctly the main thrust of Bourdieu's *oeuvre*: nothing is to remain sacred. As he puts it in *Masculine Domination*, his project is informed by a desire to 'point out that what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labour of eternalisation performed by interconnected institutions' (2001: viii).

Bourdieu's project is a conscious drive to profanize. It is this impulse that underlies the cornerstone of Bourdieu's widely discussed legacy: a subtly theorized contextualism. Often, cultural studies is defined by its 'radical contextualism' (e.g. Grossberg, 1998) and could be described *inter alia* as born of an effort to sociologize and historicize such subject areas as literary criticism. However, in an intellectual culture of commitment rather than of consequence, such intentions often have outrun results producing a rhetoric–reality gap (Maton, 2002; Maton and Wright, 2002). What many call for, Bourdieu delivers: an empirically grounded, theoretically sophisticated contextualism which enables not only thicker description but also thicker explanation. I am referring here to the well-known theoretical framework (comprising such interlocking concepts as



'field', 'capital', 'habitus', etc) which Bourdieu developed in his analyses of a series of fields of practice (educational, literary, cultural, artistic, etc) to provide a rich and complex account of the positionality of symbolic forms in time and space.

A clear example of this drive to profanize and the rewards it can yield is provided by another of Bourdieu's later works, *Pascalian Meditations* (2000). In this text, Bourdieu focuses on the realm of philosophy and the basis of knowledge claims. He philosophically reflects on philosophical reflection with the aim of breaking 'the enchanted circle of collective denial' (2000: 5), restoring what has become viewed as 'pure' or 'abstract' categories of thought to their determining social and historical conditions of existence. In this realm the sacred is epitomized by notions of 'knowledge for knowledge's sake' and belief in unchanging, universal epistemological standards of truth. Bourdieu is determined to reveal both the social conditions of possibility of this standpoint and its deleterious effects on knowledge. He argues that belief in a detached, uninvolved or 'free-floating' intellectual position, one enabling 'pure' thought, legitimates and masks not only underlying relations of power but also, and just as importantly, systematic distortions in the knowledge produced by such beliefs. Bourdieu identifies three sources of taken-for-granted presuppositions shaping one's knowledge claims, of increasing generality: one's individual social position and trajectory, the doxa of one's field of practice, and the doxa common to all high autonomy fields. The last of these is Bourdieu's principal concern in *Pascalian Meditations*. It is, he argues, the most tacit and deep-seated of the three; where one's individual prejudices are liable to be contested by others within the field, the distortions resulting from the position and structure of the field as a whole are less obvious and shared by all field members, indeed by all members of fields enjoying relatively high autonomy from economic and political interests.

Such cultural fields, Bourdieu argues, afford their members a distance from necessity, one enabling these actors a relation to the everyday world of leisurely distance or '*skholè*'. This *skholè* is embodied in practices which 'play seriously' in 'time liberated from practical occupations and pre-occupations' (2000: 13). While practices in the arena of the everyday are a matter of life and death then often of making a living, when considered from a position of *skholè* they become transformed into matters for playful discussion. The practices of intellectual fields are often a kind of intellectual gymnastics from which practical necessity is absent or repressed. While there is still much at stake in intellectual discussion, it is primarily symbolic rather than economic capital – it has a different form and context. Bourdieu is highlighting here how practices are decontextualized, abstracted and recontextualized in the process of becoming material to be analysed and discussed. Bourdieu thus argues that when we withdraw from the world in order to make sense of the world we create a new form of the relationship between object and subject, one different to



those engaged within the everyday world. This, he maintains, generates a different understanding of its constitutive activities – the difference between, for example, a synoptic ‘bird’s eye’ view of a city and the experiences of the individual pedestrian. However much one attempts to mask or avoid this by phenomenologically ‘giving voice to’ the view from below, a fundamental difference remains between scholastic reason and practical reason when understood in terms of their different social positions and thus their objectifying relations. (It is important to note that ethnographic, hermeneutic, even biographical approaches do not escape this problem, indeed they may mask it more effectively by claiming to do precisely what they cannot.) The problems for knowledge that Bourdieu highlights arise when the scholastic point of view is put forward as being the only view or the view motivating everyone, i.e. when scholastic reason eclipses practical reason as the logic of practice in accounts of the social world. In effect, such a move attempts to universalize and neutralize the scholastic point of view, tacitly proclaiming it free of its moorings in social and historical space – it is treated as if it holds for everyone everywhere at all times: ‘the errors of philosophy . . . often have as their common root in *skholè* and the scholastic disposition’ (2000: 31). Here one can see again Bourdieu’s key concern with contextualization and the arbitrary: in brief, the very nature of the scholastic position of studying the world tends to produce an indifference to the significance of context and coats what is arbitrary with a veneer of the eternal. In contrast, Bourdieu’s aim is to restore this sacred knowledge to its profane location in time and space, showing this self-proclaimed ‘eternal’ to itself be arbitrary.

## **The temporary and the eternal**

If Bourdieu’s focus on the myriad ways in which power relations work to eternalize the arbitrary has provided the basis for a complex and subtle contextualism, it is also the cornerstone of any movement beyond Bourdieu. The strength of Bourdieu’s approach is also its potential weakness, particularly as his posthumous star rises further in the intellectual firmament. In short, the danger is that it could appear there is *nothing* beyond the arbitrary, that everything is profane and nothing is sacred. This possibility is now nearer because with Bourdieu’s passing there is a temptation to make what he claimed to be a temporary and strategic emphasis on the arbitrary into an eternal verity. This would represent an inverted form of eternalizing the arbitrary. There is also the possibility of failing to recognize that Bourdieu is always pointing towards something just beyond his reach: the role of the non-arbitrary in knowledge, i.e. that aspect of knowledge which cannot be reduced to extrinsic relations of power. I now briefly consider these dangers before addressing how the direction being indicated by these warning signs may be avoided so as to bring to fruition the promise held out by Bourdieu’s legacy.



Bourdieu acknowledged a tendency to sociological reductionism within his approach but argued that it was strategic. In particular, he stated that his recurrent emphasis on the arbitrary nature of apparently neutral and ahistorical practices – conceptualized through the notions of capital, interest and interestedness – was temporary:

The notion of interest . . . was conceived as an instrument of rupture intended to bring the materialist mode of questioning to bear on realms from which it was absent and on the sphere of cultural production in particular. It is the means of a deliberate (and provisional) reductionism. (1988: 1)

Strategies can be habit-forming; Bourdieu's own notion of 'hysteresis' describes how practices may continue well after their evoking contexts have vanished because they have become embedded within that durable set of dispositions, the *habitus*. It is interesting here to note that, once established, Bourdieu's theoretical framework remained (despite claims to the contrary) relatively unchanged for several decades.<sup>2</sup> When surveyed with a wide lens rather than microscopically examined for minor changes or – a very unBourdieuian move – uncritically accepting Bourdieu's own characterization of his intellectual trajectory, it becomes clear that across his landmark works the object of study changes but the main approach, concepts and arguments remain fundamentally the same. The same basic matrix underlies such diverse studies as *The Inheritors*, *The Logic of Practice*, *Reproduction*, *Distinction*, *Homo Academicus*, *The State Nobility* and *The Rules of Art*, despite their apparent differences in style, subject and temporal location.

Of course, this is not necessarily a negative feature. In a disciplinary map structured around inbuilt obsolescence and new 'breaks' based on historical amnesia, such consistency is to be commended, not condemned. However, this could also cement an ostensibly 'provisional' reductionism. Our virtues can become our vices. As Bourdieu's approach becomes increasingly accepted, the danger is that sociological reductionism will become permanently embedded into the foundations of the approach. The result would be, paradoxically, to eternalize the notion of the arbitrary, making permanent a temporary strategy. This would reproduce in reverse the very errors that the emphasis on the 'arbitrary' was intended to rectify. There is always a danger that one becomes warped in response to one's opponents; one may end up their mirror image. Bourdieu's approach was intended to break open, to disrupt conventional attitudes to culture, art, knowledge and so forth. He aimed to expose the hidden distortions, biases and relations of domination masked by belief in the non-arbitrary, the universal and unchanging in the realm of culture by showing how what was presented as eternal was in reality arbitrary. Bourdieu's principal targets were thus typically forms of belief in intrinsic value, such as Kantian notions of the pure aesthetic and liberal humanist notions of



knowledge for knowledge's sake; with the exception of arguably his least intellectually sophisticated work, on television, his major studies have tended to concentrate on cultural fields of relatively high autonomy (such as élite education or art). These foci and targets have encouraged the 'provisional reductionism' to remain in place. However, contexts change: as Bourdieu's work and the general thrust of his argument becomes evermore widely accepted, there is the possibility of failing to live up to its high standard of contextualism by neglecting to appreciate that this emphasis on the arbitrary at the expense of the non-arbitrary, on function rather than form, on culture over Culture, itself may become a distorting feature of the field. If these become the orthodoxy then what was intended as an 'instrument of rupture' becomes an instrument for maintaining a new status quo, one where everything is viewed as arbitrary.

Does any of this matter? Bourdieu believed so. Alongside his focus on revealing the eternal to be arbitrary, he emphasized that this was not merely a unmasking exercise. *Masculine Domination* and *Pascalian Meditations* are littered with examples of Bourdieu distancing his approach from being viewed as an exercise in debunking. For example:

It is tempting (and 'profitable') to proceed as if a simple reminder of the social conditions of 'creation' were the expression of a desire to reduce the unique to the generic, the singular to the class . . . as if determinism, for which sociologists are so much reproached, were . . . a matter of belief or even a sort of cause on which one took up a position, either for or against. (2000: 6)

In his work, Bourdieu repeatedly returns to the question of whether his drive to profanize is merely what he calls, quoting Virginia Woolf, 'the pleasure of disillusioning' (2001: 109). He always emphasizes that there is more to it than that. In *Pascalian Meditations*, for example, he argues at length that he comes not to condemn philosophy but to liberate it from chains of its own making. This peculiar 'kind of *negative* philosophy that was always liable to appear self-destructive' (2000: 7) continually hints at something *beyond* the arbitrary, beyond the profane, beyond the social context. Bourdieu expends considerable energy on attempting to reveal and undo distortions to knowledge. His aim is not only to accumulate status for himself but also to work towards *undistorted* knowledge or truth. Indeed, Bourdieu wrote much of 'truth', 'science' and the necessity for a solid epistemological basis for social science – these foci cannot be reduced to the national context of his home intellectual field. In *Masculine Domination* Bourdieu is scathing about those 'spiritualistic (and conservative)' critics of science, who

see an assertion as just a disguised injunction or order, to see logic as a 'thought police', to see the claim to scientificity as a mere 'truth effect' designed to secure obedience or as a disguised aspiration to hegemony inspired by the will to power. (2000: 29)



Along with Pascal, Bourdieu argued the need to avoid ‘two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only’ (1931[1660]: 253, quoted in Bourdieu, 2000: 72). The latter is the error of the ‘pure’ gaze against which Bourdieu set his whole approach; the former is the potential error into which this approach could fall and that he wished to avoid. For Bourdieu, culture is more than an epiphenomenon of power, a reflection of vested interests. Consider, for example, his statement in *Pascalian Meditations* that ‘the discovery that someone who has discovered the truth had an interest in doing so in no way diminishes his discovery’ (2000: 3). Here we hear the return of the repressed eternal (albeit now historically and sociologically wiser). It is clearly important for Bourdieu that not everything is arbitrary.

### **Beyond Bourdieu: restoring the sacred**

Despite his aims and intentions, the effect of Bourdieu’s framework *as it is currently formulated* is to suggest that everything is arbitrary. In a perceptive analysis, LiPuma (1993) highlights three dimensions of arbitrariness in Bourdieu’s approach. First, culture is arbitrary when viewed comparatively. Second, within any single culture the relative valuations of various cultural forms and products are arbitrary. These two, I would suggest, constitute the basis of the strengths of Bourdieu’s approach. Third, and most importantly here, LiPuma identified an ‘absolute substantive theory of arbitrariness’ (1993: 17). Cultural forms, contents and practices are considered by Bourdieu to be entirely interchangeable – anything could have served the same function as anything else. There is, in other words, nothing intrinsic to a specific cultural form or manifestation which lends itself to serving a particular function within the historical evolution of bourgeois distinction. As Bernstein argues, this form of arbitrariness excludes certain questions and foci:

To ask a question about the relation of a given field content (‘word’, ‘image’, etc) to the specialized structure of the field would be to propose that a given field content was not arbitrary. To say that the specialized structure was, in part, a function of the ‘internal’ specialized structure of the contents, in Bourdieu’s terms, would be an incorrigible proposition. It would most likely lead to a charge of essentialism reinforced by a secondary, more heinous charge of fetishism. (1996: 169–170)

In short, the internal structure of a symbolic or cultural system is said to have no structuring significance for its social field. For example, the internal features of science would be considered unrelated to its global reach; that the language of western mathematics is structured in ways that enable it to easily cross social and cultural contexts would be not part of the analysis. There is thus no non-arbitrary, no surplus element to





knowledge or culture. Here, culture is seen always and everywhere as a reflection of arbitrary social relations of power, and nothing more. For example, in his discussion in *Pascalian Meditations* of the influence of *skholè*, it is not the *structure* of scholastic reason and practical reason that attracts Bourdieu's analytical gaze, but rather their *relations to* practical practice, specifically the relations between their fields. In this view it does not matter what form scholastic reason or practical reason take in themselves; the distorting effects that Bourdieu identifies reside in the different social situations that they reflect. The structuring of knowledge is considered thus an epiphenomenon of social contexts (see Maton, 2003). The approach enables a subtly theorized understanding of how contexts shape culture (the benefits of which should be not understated) but at the expense of making culture nothing but contingent and arbitrary.

Where, then, to go from here? What might an analysis of knowledge (for example) which moves beyond the profane and arbitrary look like? It would be remiss not to briefly illustrate how this absent non-arbitrary dimension might be analysed. Here I shall focus on the issue addressed in *Pascalian Meditations*: the distorting effects of *skholè*. In Bourdieu's analysis the difference between the forms taken by practical reason and by scholastic reason, and the effects of *skholè* are asserted rather than shown. Although Bourdieu can be a convincing and engaging writer, one could not use these concepts to analyse the form taken by these different kinds of understanding and practice in a substantive study. One possible means for doing so can be found in the work of Basil Bernstein on 'vertical and horizontal discourse'.<sup>5</sup> This provides an analysis of the structure of everyday knowledge, or 'horizontal discourse', which he defines as 'a set of strategies which are local, segmentally organized, context specific and dependent, for maximizing encounters with persons and habitats' (Bernstein, 2000: 157). This is contrasted with 'vertical discourse' or 'specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge' (2000: 160), which takes two forms. One is 'a series of specialised languages, each with its own specialised modes of interrogation and specialised criteria' with non-comparable principles of description based on different, often opposed, assumptions (such as the various approaches of the social sciences). The other is 'an explicit, coherent, systematically principled and hierarchical organization of knowledge' which develops through the integration of knowledge 'at lower levels and across an expanding range of phenomena' (2000: 161), such as the natural sciences. Space prevents further elaboration here except to say that Bernstein systematically conceptualizes these discourses in such a way that one can describe any particular cultural or symbolic object as characterized by structure X, compared to W, Y and Z. Thus one can compare – despite differences of, or changes in, their content – the structuring of symbolic products across contexts and over time, making it possible to say where and when they are the same or different.



If, for the purpose of illustration, we imagine these two forms of discourse as analogous to practical reason (horizontal discourse) and scholastic reason (vertical discourse), then Bernstein's concepts enable a *systematic analysis* of the process of recontextualization that Bourdieu describes in his account of *skholè*. They provide a means for analysing the structuring of practical reason, its recontextualization (under the influence of *skholè*) and its subsequent (re)structuring as different forms of scholastic reason. Where Bourdieu sensitizes us to the difference between the two forms of understanding and the differing social positions which help to generate them, Bernstein's concepts help to analyse and compare the *form* taken by practical and scholastic reason. Thus the distortions in knowledge created by *skholè* can be analysed and shown rather than simply asserted. Moreover, the forms that these symbolic objects take can be shown to be not entirely arbitrary. For example, the tendency of scholastic reason to decontextualize and derealise its objects is related to its *intrinsic* structure as a form of knowledge, and does not simply reflect the distance from necessity of its authors. This is to say that there are non-arbitrary reasons underlying the shape of reason; its intrinsic form may be restored as central to its understanding *alongside* its underlying social relations of power. Not everything is contingent and profane.

### **Some profane considerations**

Reflecting on my focus, I have uttered a number of profanities in this review article. A call to restore the sacred (the non-arbitrary) may itself be seen as profane. However, I argue that this would build upon what is valuable – what is, so to speak, sacred in Bourdieu's legacy. Across a host of fields of cultural practice Bourdieu has provided extraordinarily rich and subtle analyses of how relations of power work to naturalize the socially constructed, universalize the partial and eternalize the arbitrary. If this legacy is not only to be inherited but also to be kept alive and furthered, then it should be built upon and developed. Bourdieu repeatedly argued the need for theoretical development; the 'provisional' reductionism that he introduced in his comprehensive arbitrariness is a key place for that development. One central theme which shines through both these later works by Bourdieu is that his approach is characterized by a proclaimed commitment to knowledge, truth, to understanding what used to be called 'the object in itself'. This aspect of his project can be easily occluded by considerations of his dedication to uncovering the distorting effects of relations of power. I end with a quotation from Pascal (1931[1660]: 387) which, although not cited in *Pascalian Meditations*, summarizes well Bourdieu's legacy and the future direction for his approach: 'Thus, this proves nothing else but that it is not certain that all is uncertain.'



## Notes

1. It is worth noting that Bourdieu (1994) himself argued that being a 'Marxist', 'Weberian' or (by extension) a 'Bourdieuian' is a religious choice rather than a scientific one. This is not to say that *any* policing of a theory is problematic but rather to highlight differing bases for policing. Bourdieu argued against criteria for judgement following the intellectual equivalent of a nationalist logic, a 'my theorist, right or wrong' approach which elevates the theorist (and, although tacitly, the author as sponsor); rather, Bourdieu emphasized practical adequacy to a (constructed) object of study.
2. It is often noted that the dates for Bourdieu's works in translation distort the trajectory of his thought. In English, for example, what had been in the 1970s the occasional article and book had become by the late 1990s a flood of major works as Bourdieu's 'back catalogue' was translated. My argument that Bourdieu's approach and theoretical framework has remained fundamentally unchanged since relatively early in his intellectual trajectory is only reinforced by dating texts to their first French publication, and also draws strength from Bourdieu's tendency to highlight the early provenance of particular concepts or arguments. When one stands back from Bourdieu's own claims about conceptual evolution, the framework has remained relatively unchanged; what did change was the restless addition of new objects of study.
3. I am not suggesting that Bernstein's approach be bolted onto that of Bourdieu, but rather using a specific idea to illustrate the point that I am making. Like Bourdieu, my allegiance is less to an approach and more to a problem. However, one is likely to incur not only the wrath of those whose status depends on the distinctiveness (and thus self-sufficiency) of Bourdieu's work but also, conversely, those whose position depends on maintaining the distinction of Bernstein – a plague *from* both their houses. Ironically, one can use both theorists fruitfully to analyse why using both theorists is so likely to be attacked: social science is a horizontal knowledge structure where distinction between approaches is the basis of claims to symbolic capital.

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