

## From Critique in Modernity to Critique of Modernity

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*If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it; every past, however, is worthy to be condemned - for that is the nature of human things: human violence and weakness have always played a mighty role in them. It is not justice which here sits in judgment; it is even less mercy which pronounces the verdict: it is life alone, that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself.*

**Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>**

Modernity opened many new gates to the human spirit. Some of these gates have been quantitative transformations of practices existing before the emergence of modernity, while others have been qualitative ruptures. Because modernity allowed itself to be radically critical towards all pre-modern human practices, the capacity to critique all things human, (beliefs, thoughts, organisations; power, joy, or happiness) has been accepted as a legitimate and even necessary act. This critical perspective, once recognised as a legitimate act, could not be restricted to only those who proclaimed fidelity to modernity. Critique, even the most radical form of it, gained an ontological legitimacy towards modernity itself, including its aspirations for new contents, forms of beliefs, thoughts, organisations, power, joy, and happiness.

The premise of this paper is that the legitimacy of the critique of all things is one of the tangible elements of modernity; the subject of such a critique could well be modernity itself as well as the totality of its premises. The peculiarity of the critic facing modernity, even to the extent of its rejection, by explicitly recognising, or implying, the fundamental need for a dialogical relationship with modernity, becomes part of modernity itself. In one sense, it could be said that criticising modernity is part of modernity's agenda.

The variety of starting points, stances and arguments that have shaped critiques, whether soft or harsh, of modernity, both from within modernity and from outside, could have induced a consideration of the exteriority of the critique of modernity towards the modernity project. It is useful to look at the variety and the epistemic contents of the critiques of modernity in order to better grasp the possible place of the critic in modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life", *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: CUP, 1997, pp. 75-6.

When talking about the critics of modernity, what comes to mind first are those critics who are part of the lineage of modernity, for example, postmodernists who attack the enlightenment foundations of modernity.<sup>2</sup> Another case of radical critique of modernity that remains within modernity's lineage, while denouncing its implications, is the perspective of colonial modernity.<sup>3</sup> More interesting, and more difficult to grasp, are those who criticise modernity from outside of modernity's references, for example, the religious fundamentalists' rejection of modernity. Very often the rejection of the foundations of modernity by religious fundamentalists is a special case within the broader category of "Conservative Critics" of modernity.<sup>4</sup> Fundamentalism is, in fact, a radical critique of the very foundations of modernity: the enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

One of the common elements of all existing religions is the existence of one or other expressions of fundamentalism among their thinkers and believers. Sooner or later these thinkers come to reject modernity.<sup>6</sup> One is forced to notice a common element within the broad spectrum of critics of modernity; the majority of audible critics consider themselves to be righteous for critiquing modernity, particularly in respect of their description, understanding, or rejection of modernity. Within this context, two important questions emerge concerning the degree of criticism towards the "adversary" as modernity is labelled:

- What is the inner logic of the critique, its epistemic foundations?
- What is the incidence of its radicalism?

Looking at the relationship between criticism and modernity requires a more specific reading of criticism as a specific category.

<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Enlightenment thoughts as mainly serving the purposes of a corrupt humanism centred around a Masterful Subject who dominates nature and everything living within it". Thus, the task becomes not to seek any revolutionary change, or even to articulate the political aspirations of a particular oppressed group, but to "wage a war on totality". See Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, New York: St. Martin's Press 1989, pp. 84-92

<sup>3</sup> For some, this has three main aspects "The first is that *modernity* must not be mistaken for a thing in itself, for that slight of hand obliterates the context of political economy. The second is that once modernity is constructed to be prior to colonialism, it becomes all too easy to assume, wrongly, the existence of an origin and instrumental temporal lag separating colonialism from modernity. Thus, the third point is that the modernity of non-European colonies is as indisputable as the colonial core of European modernity", in Tani Barlow, "Introduction: On Colonial Modernity", in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, edited by Tani Barlow, Durham, Duke University Press, p. 1. For a brilliant presentation of the main arguments of "Colonial Modernity", see Hiroko Matsuda, *Colonial Modernity Across the Border*, unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Australian National University, 2006. David Harvey has criticised modernity by stating that the logic that hides behind its project is one of domination and submission, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, London, Blackwell, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Kraynak, "Conservative Critics of Modernity: Can They Turn Back the Clock?" *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 2001, pp. 31-39. See also Martin Travers *Critics of Modernity: The Literature of Conservative Revolution in Germany, 1890-1933*, New York Peter Lang, 2001, as well as Thomas Docherty *Criticism and Modernity*, Oxford University Press 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Pauline Westerman, "The Modernity of Fundamentalism", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 1, January 1994, pp. 77-85. See also Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, Cambridge, The Polity Press, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> For a broad panoply of religious fundamentalist argumentations against modernity see Martin Marty, and Scott Appleby (Eds.) *Fundamentalisms Observed*, The University of Chicago Press, 1991.

## Anatomy of the Concept of Criticism

It is difficult to define the concept of "criticism." Its commonly accepted meaning is evaluation and judgment of an object. There are, however, several explanations of the relationship between criticism and its object; how criticism perceives its object; and, what the impact of criticism is on its object or the society where the criticism occurs. The purpose of this section is to present an overview of the variety of understandings of the concept of criticism, and then offer a topological map.

The conventional explanations of the concept of criticism tend to categorise them in accordance with the approach, for example, "New Criticism," "Postcolonial Criticism," "Reader Response Criticism" and so on. These explanations are easy to understand and undeniably important. After reading these kinds of explanation, however, one feels that the definition of "criticism" becomes much more ambiguous because the boundaries between the approaches often overlap, and the focal point of each approach is often so different that it would be impossible to measure all of them with a single criterion; for example, "Feminist Criticism" has been established as one genre of criticism, but it is also considered part of "Radical Criticism". According to Scott N. Arnold, "Marxist Criticism" is also part of "Radical Criticism". For other authors, "Radical Criticism" includes so-called "Postcolonial" critics. The boundary between each approach is not clearly drawn. The focal point of "Reader Response Criticism" is the reader, opposing the assumption of a single meaning that is shared by author and reader. "Postcolonial Criticism" is focused on the power relationships that impose a "single" meaning on a society as a form of domination. Thus, the focal point of each approach is so different that it is impossible to map out the multiple understandings of the concept of criticism.

While there are many criteria which might be used to understand the concept of criticism, for example, chronological arrangements, the internal/external criterion of judgment, and so on, this paper adopts the following two axes: "Position of the critic" and "Political Orientation of Criticism". If criticism is the evaluation or judgment of something, it must include the relationships between the critics and their objects. The first axis shows how the critic positions himself in relation to his object. Some might regard critics as the representatives of universal and objective values, while others might regard them as mere addressers of their own opinions. The second criterion is the "Political Orientation of Criticism". In this sense, the term "political" does not indicate whether the critic is on the left or right, but whether the criticism itself is oriented to politics or not. Some say that criticism evaluates its object negatively, and then brings about something better. On the contrary, the function of criticism is to show the internal organic arrangement of its objects.

When these two axes are crossed, there are four quadrants, and each one shows a particular type of criticism. This paper will explain each of these types of criticism and then present a fifth approach that is beyond the boundaries of the quadrants in Figure 1.

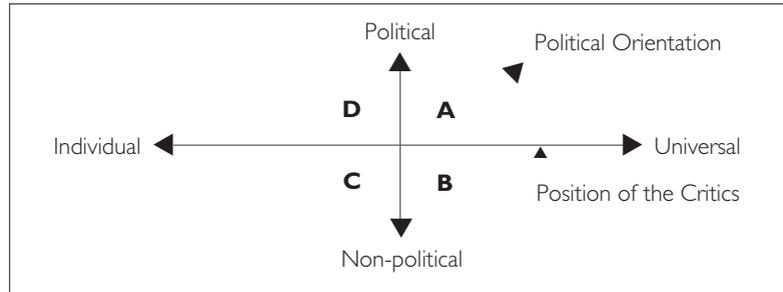


Figure 1

However, before offering the explanations, it is important to explain the reasons for and the legitimacy of adopting these two axes. It was stated previously that the basic definition of criticism is to evaluate or judge something. If this definition is accepted, it means that there are many “criticisms” because in contemporary society, thanks to technological developments and freedom of speech, there are uncountable “criticisms” from reviews, editorials, and one’s impression, to professional “criticism”.<sup>7</sup> This situation allows ordinary people to state their opinions as a kind of criticism, and the scope of the “critic” has expanded to include them.

At the same time, however, the expansion of the scope of criticism is sometimes judged negatively because it seems to bring about the depoliticisation of criticism. In 1962, Sugano pointed out that the political impact of criticism is lost in societies where the common bonds disappear. This situation has not changed. In the late 1980’s, Terry Eagleton also pointed out that professional critics should have a political and precious role in contemporary society, however, he noted that in contemporary society, critics aimed only to keep their authorial position, thus depoliticising and rendering meaningless.<sup>8</sup>

Since the so-called cultural turn, the important focal point of discussion about criticism seems to concentrate around these two axes. The cultural turn, challenging “the generalising, decontextualising approaches of positivist analysts who attempted to formulate scientific explanations and predictions about actors’ behavior, the validity of which could be assessed without considering actors’ understandings of the situations that they faced”,<sup>9</sup> has raised issues for social criticism. If the assumption that the validity of something is multiple and not pre-given is considered, what is the meaning of a “critical account” of something? In this situation the position of the addresser of criticism, and the orientation of the criticism become much more important. Thus the two axes are selected.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Scott N. Arnold wrote about the expansion of the scope of the critics as follows, “(n)early any reflective person has grounds for dissatisfaction with the social system in which he finds himself. Most of us are social critics of some sort, though some of us are more severe than others” (Arnold 1989: 25). There are many authors who have mentioned the expansion of the scope of the critic (cf, Ruhloff 2004: 381), and the following definition by Tokio Iguchi shows the thickness of it. He stated that every discourse that includes evaluation of something, from the judgment of the art of others, to food, and personality of the others, is criticism (Iguchi 2001: 7).

<sup>8</sup> Eagleton 1988: 156.

<sup>9</sup> Kemp 2003: 62.

## Approaches of Criticism

Adopting two axes provides four archetypal forms of criticism as follows.

### I. Quadrant A: Criticism as Enlightenment

In Quadrant A, the political orientation is positive and the position of the critic is universal. This means that criticism is to be regarded as a normative activity conducted by those who bear “universal” or “ideal” standards to judge the object. In this sense, the criticism aims to show the standard which the object of criticism should have, but does not have yet, and thus expose the gap between the object and standard. Hereafter, this approach is called “Criticism as Enlightenment”. In this understanding, Enlightenment means the process of making something better “by the light of reason of inconvertibly true standards, rules and maxims... the depreciation of all that failed to meet these standards, and of any pretension by “superstition”, local custom, authorities, arbitrary decrees, partial representation of merely private reflection to universal and self-evident truth”.<sup>10</sup>

The ancestors of this understanding of the concept of criticism are the ancient Greeks. According to Kauppinen, the function of Socrates’ questioning was “help(ing) people already pregnant with knowledge to articulate it in explicit form, thus bringing their views and actions under rational control”.<sup>11</sup> In Platonic Doctrine, “learning is a matter of retrieving, bringing into light, through dialogical reflection, the buried knowledge we always already have”.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting, however, that in Ancient Greek, the concept of critique included private subjectivity. In that period, “(c)ritique is”, as Benhabib pointed out, “the subjective evaluation or decision concerning a conflictual and controversial process crisis”.<sup>13</sup> In the period of early Enlightenment, she continues, the term lost its connection with subjective judgment, and finally, on the eve of the French revolution, “criticism” came to mean “the exercise of rational evaluation...”.<sup>14</sup>

No brief explanation of criticism as Enlightenment can be achieved without referring to Immanuel Kant’s understanding of criticism. For Kant, Kompridis said, criticism is to submit something to reason’s free and open examination. His explanation also shows that criticism as Enlightenment connects the term with not only “reason” but also with “public” because “(t)o submit something to critique, then, is to submit it to reason – to reason interpreted as a non-coercive medium of public justification. If something can be justified in light of reason’s “free and open examination” – be it a contestable cognitive, moral, or aesthetic claim, a contestable social practice or cultural tradition – it deserves our respect (Achtung)”.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Bannet 1997: 24.

<sup>11</sup> Kauppinen 2002: 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 4.

<sup>13</sup> Benhabib 1986: 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 19-20.

<sup>15</sup> Kompridis 2000: 24.

Then, the two characteristics of criticism as Enlightenment appear. For the first, the critic is expected to have a public role as a representative of community and to make the object better by self-correction.<sup>16</sup> Those who have this understanding of criticism, for instance, would “criticise the beliefs and concept informing such practices (for example slavery, apartheid, abortion, or animal exploitation) because they want to bring about their reform of abandonment”.<sup>17</sup> Second, criticism includes political orientation: to make something better in accordance with a “universal” or “ideal” standard.

## 2. **Quadrant B: Criticism as Discovery**

In Quadrant B, the critics are also representative of truth, authenticity or validity, but the political implications are less direct. In this understanding, criticism is regarded as the discovery of an objects' hidden organic arrangement that decides the meaning of it. Hereafter this approach is called “Criticism as Discovery”. The core element of this approach, seeking for the aesthetic meaning of the object,<sup>18</sup> seems to sneak into every criticism as long as it delineates the field of investigation. When one decides on an object, one is unavoidably in the process of seeking for some sort of purity.<sup>19</sup> Because the most popular objects for which this approach is adopted are textual, for example, literature, this explanation is based on literary theories.

This kind of criticism has been called aesthetic criticism and formalism, but the most famous version of this type of criticism is called “New Criticism”.<sup>20</sup> This approach has political intentions and implications, but the critic does not intend to bring about political impact. According to Ochi Hiromi, New Criticism was started in the early 1930s by people who were worried about the devastation of humanity caused by developing industrial capitalism. They tried to save humanity by recovering old traditions, which seemed to have been lost.<sup>21</sup> However, the initial politicality of this approach soon became invisible because of the substantive method they adopted. Those who recognised the criticism as discovery advocated separating outside factors that might influence the object under investigation. Texts came to be regarded as self-contained and autonomous from other things such as social situation, human emotion or other texts. In other words, this trend required people to see the texts only in terms of intrinsic, timeless, and universal aesthetics.<sup>22</sup> The critics were required to find the intrinsic formations of texts.

According to O’Kane, New Criticism denied extrinsic criticism, which tried to take environmental factors into consideration to investigate the objects of criticism, because,

<sup>16</sup> Saeki 1958: 32, Sugano 1962: 11.

<sup>17</sup> Pleasant 2003: 98.

<sup>18</sup> Tomiyama 1990: 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> According to Tanji, Russian Formalism was highly influential on New Criticism because part of the New Criticism group in the 1930’s in United States was composed of people who had fled from repression in Russia (Tanji 2003: 10).

<sup>21</sup> Ochi 2006: 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> McLaughlin 1994: 17.



firstly, “it was impossible to know for sure what effect any given social event had had on a text, extrinsic criticism could not say absolutely that the cause it had identified was the cause of a literary texts”.<sup>23</sup> They preferred New Criticism’s approach because “it worked with a more sophisticated interpretive sense. Unlike the simplistic hermeneutic of the extrinsic model, the approach appreciated the complex and elusive nature of poetic meaning in fact, the fundamental ambiguity of literary language was what made poetry special”.<sup>24</sup>

When this approach was institutionalised by taking it into university curricula, the separation of texts from environmental factors resulted in two consequences. Firstly, it privileged the text as high-culture, in other words, New Criticism became part of the process of civilisation.<sup>25</sup> This means, it was hegemonic; “it institutionalised the “cultural and political amnesia” necessary to the uncontested expansion of imperial power”.<sup>26</sup> By focusing only on the internal organisation of text, criticism cannot take into consideration the social situation in which text were written, published and read. Secondly, criticism became elite because “New Criticism reinforced teaching of a limited set of prescribed texts in schools and promoted a view of literature as a body of knowledge to be transmitted from teacher to students”.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, criticism as discovery’s characteristics can be summarised as follows. First, there is a single, monist and intrinsic formation in text and the critic understands it better. Second, although the results and motivation of this approach are highly politicised, criticism itself does not intend to have political implications.

### **3. Quadrant C: Criticism as Diversification**

In the third quadrant, the critic’s position is neither universal nor political. Though this understanding of criticism is popular in contemporary society where movie reviews, book reviews, editorial and personal opinions are welcomed, only a few scholars have defined criticism in this way. This understanding, according to Richardson, admits the radically indeterminate, subjective and relativistic nature of criticism, and it “would deny in theory the possibility of any model, ideal, or authorial reading. There is no autonomous textual meaning there to be recovered; the reader creates the text even as he or she reads it”.<sup>28</sup>

This type of criticism, hereafter called “Criticism as Diversification”, as Tanji pointed out, might help to diversify the possibilities of reading its objects,<sup>29</sup> but it does not directly

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<sup>23</sup> O’Kane 1998: 686.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ochi 2006: 14.

<sup>26</sup> O’Kane 1998: 691.

<sup>27</sup> Johnston 2003: 53.

<sup>28</sup> Richardson 1997: 32.

<sup>29</sup> Tanji 2003: 7.





intend that the criticism should bring about political implications (this does not deny the fact that diversifying possibilities has political implications by rejecting the authoritative meaning imposed by the canonical understanding of the object, and by validating differences between readers).<sup>30</sup> The reason is that there is no “authority able to adjudicate between rival interpretations; any reading is always only another reading, never a better, more accurate or more comprehensive reading”.<sup>31</sup>

#### **4. Quadrant D: Criticism as Transforming**

The difference between Criticism as Diversifying and the fourth type seems to be ambiguous, but the latter, hereafter called “Criticism as Transforming” has clear political intentions. In Quadrant D, “universal” validity is denied, but not the importance of possibility. In this understanding, the quasi-universality of monistic recognition of the object of criticism is denied, and it is preferred to debunk the marginalised version of reading of the object and the social situation where hegemonic understanding is possible. Bannet clearly shows this point:

“Critique is oppositional, unmasking, demythologising, subversive or deconstructive. Enlightenment thinking is always unsound: deceptively universal or partial, instrumental or normalising, ideological or logo centric, oppressive or exclusionary. Critique liberates us from such falsehoods and from the injustices they conceal; it brings down philosophies and ideologies absolutist, speculative, systematic, political, humanist, metaphysical or hegemonic to lead us to a brighter day”.<sup>32</sup>

This trend of criticism is highly influenced by postmodern thought, where meaning is regarded as self-referential rather than fixed to an external reality, and at the same time, it is “denied that a system of interrelationships can produce a reliable system of signification”. This indicates the ambivalent character of criticism: it denies universality, but at the same time, it has to transcend private evaluation because “all of evaluation is required to be correctness”.<sup>34</sup>

What is the implication of this ambivalence for the concept of criticism? It is often said that this ambivalence of postmodern thought is fatal to criticism because it tends to end up with mere proliferation of skepticism, which leads criticism to be vulnerable and less meaningful. For example, Kompridis pointed out that though the skeptical moment of critique is, in a sense, an inherent character of critique, when the skeptical moment comes to be dominant in a critical activity, “critique becomes vulnerable to the same self-undermining skepticism it has generated in the beliefs and practices it takes as its object”.

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<sup>30</sup> Willner 2002: 159-160.

<sup>31</sup> Richardson 1997: 33.

<sup>32</sup> Bannet 1997: 23.

<sup>33</sup> Johnston 2003: 53.

<sup>34</sup> Iguchi 2001: 8.



In short, he worried that “unmasking critique is consumed by the very skepticism that made its own practice possible”.<sup>35</sup>

However, for the advocates of this approach, what this ambivalence means is not only the denial of the foundation of meaning, but also the possibility of transforming the present social apparatus, which imposes particular ways of thinking. To examine this point, this paper offers the explanation of secular criticism, which is a version of Criticism as Transforming, as presented by Edward Said.

Said criticised professionalised criticism such as academic literary criticism, literary appreciation and interpretation or literary theory because those theories were silent about political problems.<sup>36</sup> He suggested that criticism should be “oppositional”, and that it “must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuses; its social goals are non coercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom”.<sup>37</sup> In other words, criticism in a Saidian sense is, as Mufti pointed out, “a practice of unbelief; it is directed, however, not simply at the objects of religious piety but at secular “beliefs” as well, and, at its most ambitious, at all those moments at which thought and culture become frozen, congealed, thing-like, and self-enclosed hence the significance for him of Lukàcs’ notion of reification”.<sup>38</sup> This might sound like mere legitimatisation of the denial of foundations, but when the term “oppositional” comes to the centre of discussion, other possibilities will appear.

According to Arac Jonathan, the Saidian sense of the term oppositional might be equated to “contrapuntal criticism”, which is also inspired by Said. The *counter* in counterpoint is, of course, a term of opposition, and Arac continues, “in the musical technique of counterpoint, such phrasings as “note against note” occur; Said argues that “in the same way” counter imperial themes may be read against the thus far predominant interpretations of many great works of Western culture”. However, he insisted that “the direction of meaning here seems to me quite different from adversarial opposition”.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, the oppositional is used to mean opening a new space, which might be called a “third space”<sup>40</sup> by Bhabha. In a third space, the dichotomous relation is rejected and the new articulation of knowledge is required, and in this process, human emancipation is supposed to be achieved.<sup>41</sup>

“Oppositional criticism is aggressive; it cuts. Contrapuntal criticism is loving; it joins. As Said says in *Culture and Imperialism*, “My principal aim is not to separate but to connect”, his reason being precisely that “cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure”.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Kompridis 2000: 27.

<sup>36</sup> Said 1983: 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid: 29.

<sup>38</sup> Mufti 2004: 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> Arac 1998: 57.

<sup>40</sup> Bhabha 2004: 44.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Said, Edward W. (1993) *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Knopf, p. 51 from Arac 1998: 57.

Thus, the characteristics of the fourth approach are as follows. First, it denies any universal, ideal or monistic model, and, second, it denies depoliticisation of criticism. At first glance, this type of criticism might be seen as mere proliferation of possibilities of reading of an object, but the purpose of this type of criticism is not only to show alternative readings, but also to alter the social situation which is sustained by dichotomy.

## Remarks

The section above underlined the multiple understandings of criticism by providing two axes: "position of critics" and "political orientation of criticism", which demonstrated four interpretations of criticism: Criticism as Enlightenment, Criticism as Discovery, Criticism as Diversification and Criticism as Transforming. It is obvious that each interpretation should include variations, and would need much more detailed explanations, but there is a common element. In all four quadrants of criticism, what transcends the intentionality of the criticism seems to be the following:

- The transformation of the object of criticism to the core, central, or hegemonic position.
- Implicitly, or explicitly, beyond any radicalism in construction of the argumentation, opening a way for another existence of the object of the criticism becomes possible, desirable, or unavoidable.

Are these not the very premises of modernity?

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