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**“It’s too soon to tell”:
Understanding the 2016 U.S. Presidential Race and its
Consequences**

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**“It’s too soon to tell”:
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Abstract

This paper examines some of the factors contributing to Donald Trump’s extraordinary victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential race, including a series of fractures (gender, race, educational, etc.) as revealed within America’s political culture and electoral system. Extending this analysis, however, the paper also draws parallels with wider and growing cultural, political, and economic divisions throughout much of the western world (as also shown in the U.K.’s Brexit vote in the spring of 2016). Finally, the paper examines some of the election’s possible broader consequences especially for globalization in its neo-liberal form.

Keywords:

Introduction

In an apocryphal story, Ho Chi Minh is said to have replied when asked the question, “What happened during the French revolution?” that it was too soon to tell. While it is quite likely that no one – historians, political scientists, pundits, and voters at large – will be able to make complete sense of the 2016 US Presidential Election for a while to come, some of both its surface political and deeper social causes can be detailed; and while its long-term impact remains unclear, a survey of possible outcomes can also be suggested.

In this vein, this paper briefly examines the immediate political (tactical and strategic) and socio-demographic factors contributing to Donald Trump’s extraordinary victory, including a series of fractures (gender, race, educational, etc.) as revealed within America’s political culture and the increasing problems of the US electoral system. Extending this analysis, however, the paper also draws parallels with wider and growing cultural, political, and economic divisions throughout much of the capitalist world. Finally, the paper outlines both a range of possibilities for the Trump administration as well as the election’s broader implications for globalization in its neo-liberal form.

The Politics of Victory – and Defeat

If there had been a candidate running for U.S. president in 2016 whose name was “None of the above,” that candidate would surely have won in a landslide. Given, however, the calcification around the two party system in that country, either Hillary Clinton (low on trust)¹ or Donald Trump (low on likeability) had to win. And though the smart money and the analytics seemed to favour the former, America’s electoral system, coupled with a series of social-cultural factors, conspired to bring about the latter’s unlikely victory.

One such factor is the United States’ two party system. While political parties in the liberal west have long served the purpose of channeling discontent through the illusion of competition, the American electoral system is particularly adept in restricting choice. Though both the Democrats and Republicans advance claims to being ideologically distinct – liberals versus conservatives² – supported by their particular tribes – ethnic minorities, women, and social liberals in the case of the former, white southern males and social conservatives in the case of the latter – at the level of their party elites, any real difference is less obvious. Until the 2016 election, both agreed on the benefits of neo-liberal globalization and the free market; both also agreed on the importance of the U.S. remaining a militarily strong and interventionist state in world affairs, as witness the Republican invasion of Iraq under President George W. Bush and Democratic

¹Journalist Jonathan Chait (2016) quotes from an Amy Sullivan article early in 2005 in which she wrote, “Clinton can win nearly any debate that is about issues, [but] she cannot avoid becoming the issue in a national campaign. And when that happens, she will very likely lose.”

²The Canadian philosopher, George Grant, years ago wrote that what exists in the American political system are two variations on liberalism (Grant, 1965).

forays into Libya and Syria under President Barack Obama. (Neither party seriously wants to decommission the many hundreds of U.S. military bases around the world.) Given the lack of real choices, support for both parties became increasingly tenuous and shallow, based to a large extent on tradition. The lack of a legitimate alternative political vehicle opened up space for an unconventional politician espousing a populist appeal.

The erosion of support was most obvious in the case of the Republican party. The disastrous invasion of Iraq and the Great Recession that began in 2007 resulted in the emergence of the insurgent Tea Party movement (Williamson et al., 2011). While ostensibly motivated by the election of Barack Obama as president, in fact Tea Party supporters set their sights on taking over and transforming the Republican party from within. Their success in the 2010 mid-term elections paved the way for Donald Trump as they broke the establishment arm of the Republican party. Moderation, in the traditional form practiced by the Bush family and Mitt Romney, became a synonym for elitism and failure. Trump's success in winning the Republican party's nomination was achieved in a contest that pitted him against a large but mediocre field of candidates. (Jeb Bush was the only traditionally conservative candidate with any notoriety and even skills – qualities that went against him.)

The revolt against the establishment elite was less visceral but still apparent within the Democratic party, as signaled by the success of Bernie Sanders – America's only avowedly socialist elected official – in the primaries leading up to the 2016 election. The sense felt by many social and religious Republicans that their party only gave lip service to their issues was mirrored by many low income and minority ethnic Democrats who felt that their party only serves up nice rhetoric. Still, it seems likely in retrospect that the Democrats would have won the election had their candidate not been Hillary Clinton, a deeply polarizing figure around whom scandal swirled and who seemed, in an anti-establishment election, seemed the epitome of the insider.

Despite the obvious discord among American voters, most academic observers and journalists refused to believe that a Trump presidency was possible. A very few, however, saw through the gathering mists to the iceberg looming.

One prescient journalist was Roger Cohen (2016). Writing in the *New York Times* a year before the election, Cohen captured the growing anger and angst of American voters and how Donald Trump was using it for his own political purposes:

A near perfect storm for [Trump's] rabble-rousing is upon the United States. China is rising. American power is ebbing. The tectonic plates of global security are shifting. Afghanistan and Iraq have been the graveyards of glory. There is fear, after the killing in California inspired by the Islamic State, of an enemy within.

Over more than a decade, American blood and treasure have been expended, to little avail. President Obama claims his strategy against Islamist jihadist terrorism, which he often sugarcoats as “violent extremism,” is working. There is little or no evidence of that.

A lot of Americans struggle to get by, their pay no match for prices. Along comes Trump, the high-energy guy. He promises an American revival, a reinvention, even a renaissance. He insults Muslims, Mexicans, the disabled, women. His words are hateful and scurrilous. They play on fears. They are subjected to horrified analysis. Yet they do not hurt him. He gets people's blood up. He says what others whisper. He cuts through touchy-feely all-enveloping political correctness. This guy will give Putin a run for his money! His poll numbers rise.

It would be foolish and dangerous not to take him seriously. His bombast is attuned to Weimar America....

[Germany's] Weimar Republic ended with a clown's ascent to power, a high-energy buffoon who shouted loudest, a bully from the beer halls, a racist and a bigot. He was an outsider given to theatrics and pageantry. He seduced the nation of Beethoven. He took the world down with him.

A few others echoed Cohen's apocalyptic warning. In another *New York Times* article, Ian Baruma (2016) similarly argued that the rise of authoritarian populism threatened American liberal democracy. Writing just before the election, Yascha Mounk (2016), writing in *Politico Magazine*, suggested that American democracy could break down, citing as evidence polls showing a steady decline in support for the idea of democracy; that during the twenty years before 2016, in particular, the number of Americans believing that military rule might be a good or very good thing had gone from one in fifteen to one in six.

But these voices were few and, if heard, went unheeded. By 2016, much of the American electorate had become politically jaded, confused, and alienated from the dominant political culture and its two representative parties. Part of this disillusion and bewilderment reflects changes in the wider cultural landscape. There has been a steady erosion in recent decades in the perceived legitimacy of authority figures, whether the Church, the State, the Market, and with ideas and beliefs associated with modernity. Post-modernists describe our current cultural landscape as defined by a mistrust of grand narratives, absolute truths, and rationality, and a rejection of any authoritative canon (see Cahoon, 1996). Donald Trump – an individual who manufactures at a whim “alternative facts,” that in previous generations would have been termed “lies” – is the perfect postmodern president.

But the rise of Trump, and populist unrest in general, reflects also a failure of the media, in its various forms, to inform the public, a failure resulting from a combination of a lack of resources, incompetence, and intention.

America's Media Landscape and the Role of Talk Radio

With few exceptions (e.g., National Public Radio, the Public Broadcasting Service), the American media is entirely privately owned. Each enterprise is in the business of making profits within an industry that is highly competitive and where profit margins are thin. In this context, media outlets relentlessly seek

out new readers, viewers, and listeners. Much of the American media seeks not to inform, but to entertain, to provoke, to shock. Neil Postman's (2005 [1985]) classic book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, is more relevant today than when first published, its consequences more profound. In practice, much of the American media today plumbs ever lower depths in search of the weird and the titillating (e.g., the Real Housewives who are anything but), while making celebrities³ out of marginally talented singers and narcissistic nobodies, including a second-rate businessman whose main talent until recently has been self-promotion.

To truly understand the Trump phenomenon, however, one has to delve into the peculiar phenomenon of talk radio. A Swiss friend visiting me some years ago found it incomprehensible. She remarked that it would never fly in Europe. She sensibly asked, "Why would anyone want to listen to people talk about things they know nothing about?"

In the pseudo-egalitarian sphere of talk radio, however, all voices have the right to be heard, though that of the host is more equal than others given his or her control of the phone lines. But, in any case, talk radio thrives not on the sharing of facts or knowledge; it is all about the expression of feeling. Termed "argutainment" by Saurette and Gunster (2011), the purpose of talk radio is to pump up ratings whereby to attract advertisers, hence to increase profits. Talk radio is – as Donald Trump might say – "hugely" influential in the United States. It is almost entirely a right-wing phenomenon: endlessly pro-capitalist and hyper-American, derisive of government and of so-called "special interests" (e.g., liberals, socialists, feminists, environmentalists, intellectuals). It is also home for the endless dissemination of conspiracy theories.

In the fall of 2010 – the time of the mid-term elections – I spent four months in Atlanta, Georgia. (I was a Visiting Fulbright Research Chair at Kennesaw State University, where Newt Gingrich held his first academic post.) One cannot get around Atlanta except by motorized vehicle, so I drove a lot during which time I listened out of morbid curiosity to wall to wall right-wing talk radio: Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, Mark Levin, Rush Limbaugh, and Michale Savage. The degree of conspiratorial-laced invective whipped up by the hosts is impossible to describe to anyone from outside the U.S.

But it is effective. Talk radio was in the vanguard of the Tea Party revolt in 2010, hollowing out the Republican party from within, and paving the way for Trump's victory in 2016. The post-fact world of Donald Trump was test-driven over a decade on talk radio which endlessly repeating conspiratorial tales⁴ about such things as "One World Government" and the "real" causes of the spread of AIDS⁵; conspiracy tales that contributed to the fear and anger felt by many voters for whom Washington became an alien force inhabited by uncaring and useless members of the establishment.

³Daniel Boorstin's (1987 [1962]) famous definition of celebrity: Someone famous for being famous.

⁴Donald Trump's path to the presidency was paved by his role in the Birther Movement that asserted (falsely) that President Obama was not an American citizen by birth.

⁵To be clear, conspiracies do exist, but most actually occur quite in the open and do not require the imagination of an Oliver Stone to deconstruct them.

But who were these scared and angry voters? To which groups did Donald Trump’s rhetoric and apocalyptic visions appeal – and Hillary Clinton’s similarly drive away? It is to an examination of splits within the American electorate that I now turn.

The Socio-Demographics of Discord

In 2016, voter turnout was 55.6 percent, down slightly from 58 percent in 2012 (Gregg, 2016). The percentages follow generally a pattern of low turnout in American elections going back several decades while also mirroring declines in other western democratic countries. Hillary Clinton won 48.2 percent of the vote (65,853,516 votes cast) compared with Donald Trump’s 46.1 percent (62,984,825 votes cast), but the American system of deciding a president through votes in the Electoral College worked in his favour. Trump won 306 of the 538 of the pledged electors in the Electoral College.

Every polity is defined by distinct fractures. In Europe, class and religion have been historically prominent; in Canada, the French-English divide and regionalism are major factors. In the United States, race and region play a particularly significant role, though augmented by other factors as well. Many of the factors held true in exit poll data compiled by Edison Research (2016) for the National Election Poll. The poll data for race, gender, and religion are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Voter Choice by Race, Gender, and Religion in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*

	Trump	Clinton
White Voters	58	37
Black Voters	8	88
Hispanic Voters	29	65
Men	52	41
Women	41	54
White Men	63	31
White Women	53	43
Black Men	13	80
Black Women	6	94
Latino Men	33	62
Latino Women	26	68
Protestant	60	37
Catholic	52	45
White Evangelical or Born Again	81	16

Source: Edison Research (2016).

The poll data are not surprising, and reflect what we might expect given the two party’s success at solidifying their core vote over time. Nonetheless, the

impact of ethnicity and race upon the gender vote is striking, with White men and women voting heavily for Trump while their Black and Latino counterparts voted for Clinton. Additionally, while Protestants and Catholics voted in the majority for Donald Trump, his overwhelming popularity among white evangelicals and born again Christians is notable.

These factors alone do not tell the whole story, however. Table 2 provides data on the impact of income, education, and place of residence (urban, suburban, rural) on the vote.

Table 2. Voter Choice by Income, Education, and Place of Residence in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

	Trump	Clinton
<\$30,000⁶	41	53
\$30,000-49,999	42	51
\$50,000-99,999	50	46
\$100,000-199,999	48	47
\$200,000-249,999	49	48
>\$250,000	48	46
<High School	51	45
Some College	52	43
College Graduate	45	49
Post-graduate	37	58
Urban⁷	35	59
Suburban	50	45
Rural	62	34

Source: Edison Research (2016).

Table 2 shows that, Clinton did better among low income families, while Trump did best among the middle-income families (between \$50,000 and just under \$100,000). At higher income levels, the margins of difference were slight.⁸ In short, Trump did well with voters who, while not excessively wealthy, were not abjectly poor. His appeal went beyond issues of class.

Even more pronounced, however, were the correlations on education and place of residence. Trump scored highest among those with less than high school or some college, while Clinton did best among college graduates and those with post-graduate education. Trump also garnered significant support in rural areas and, to a lesser degree, the suburbs, while Clinton obtained large support in urban areas.

⁶All figures measured as family income.

⁷Cities of 50,000 people and above

⁸An analysis by Nate Silver (2016a) in May 2016 similarly showed that Trump appealed not to the poor, or even disproportionately the very wealthy, but to middle income families. The medium household income of Trump supporters was roughly \$72,000, well above the national medium average of \$56,000.

Digging a bit further, Nate Silver (2016b) examined voting across the United States' demographically largest (>50,000) and smallest (<50,000) counties according to education, income, and racial profile (predominantly white vs. majority-minority). While one must be aware of an ecological fallacy, Silver's conclusion that education was the central factor underlying the vote appears sound, upon which he draws the following specific conclusions in comparing the voting patterns of 2012 with 2016:

- High-education, medium-income white counties shifted to Clinton
- High-income, medium-education white counties shifted to Trump
- Highly educated majority-minority counties shifted toward Clinton
- Low educated majority-minority counties shifted toward Trump

At the same time, while education was indeed a factor, it also cut across racial and gender lines in complex ways. Noting, for example, that 53 percent of white females voted for Trump (see Table 1 above), Rogers (2016) shows that these numbers take on a very different complexion again when college education is taken into account. In that case, 51 percent of white women with college degrees voted for Mrs. Clinton, while 62 percent of women without a degree voted for Mr. Trump. Unfortunately, without access to the entire data set with which to do the proper regression analyses, the portrait of Trump and Clinton voters must remain provisional.

What, finally, can be said about the respective voting tribes in the 2016 election. At one level, the pattern of voting reflects a split between cosmopolitan "elites" and the hunkered down middle class masses (see Douthat, 2016). But it should be noted that the former are not located solely on the east and west coasts and that the latter were equally represented within both Clinton and Trump camps and perhaps even more so among the tens of thousands of discouraged non-voters.

American Exceptionalism and the Lost American Dream

All nations are mythological constructs. From its initial bread with England, the United States has set itself up as different from any other country; indeed, not only different, but exceptional in the sense of being a chosen land of a chosen people with a unique mission – a destiny manifest and otherwise – to bring liberty to the world.

Beyond these lofty statements, the United States – the true offspring of John Locke – also held itself out as the land of opportunity where anyone – give or take Black slaves, women, and non-property owners in its early days – could grow rich.

By the end of the 19th century, the U.S. was already well on its way to becoming an empire – successor to the British; a role that runs against the quest for liberty when expressed by one's colonies. As for opportunity, certainly

wealth could still be accumulated in the U.S., but after the 1960s the class system became more entrenched.

When I travelled to the U.S. in 2010, observing the mid-term elections, I was struck nonetheless by how these twin mythologies of exceptionalism and opportunity continued to thrive, most especially among segments for whom they could not possibly hold true. I listened to a speech by Sarah Palin in which she spoke to thunderous applause about President Obama turning the country into one that was no longer “exceptional,” instead just another country. It seemed to me that Palin and her followers were expressing not some great geo-political need to lead the world but holding instead, even frantically, to an identity that was slipping away from them; an identity shaken – stolen perhaps – by decades of fruitless wars in places that many Americans could not find on a map. They were expressing a kind of existential angst resulting from losing themselves in a world rapidly changing and therefore increasingly scary. For the fact is, though the U.S. is different in the sense that every country is different in some ways from any other, it is in the great scheme just another country – or, if you will, empire; one also in decline as all empires do in time.

There is, one notes, a contradiction in Donald Trump’s appeal. Far from wanting to maintain the American empire, he seems instead quite fine with having it retreat within its borders. His America First policies go against the way by which the American empire has expanded since 1945; the use of indirect and hegemonic power (Mann, 2008). In retreat, he leaves space for the empire’s subalterns to re-assert themselves and for other challengers to emerge, notably Russia and China.⁹

Trump’s musings on America’s problems, though inarticulate and often incoherent, do reflect one clear kernel of truth, however: that the empire has become enormously over-extended and must pull closer to its borders. Trump’s promise to the American people is to bring home the resources spent abroad to deal with such domestic things as education, health, social welfare, and inner city decay in general. Unfortunately, Trump’s business plans will “trump” this promise, for his policies are based not about rebuilding the commons but in fueling the private economy.

This likely future aside, for the mass of Americans, to whom Donald Trump’s fevered pitch appealed, the American dream is long past. Reciting evidence from a bank of studies, David Leonhardt (2016) notes that, for an American born in 1940, the chance of making more money than one’s parents stood at 92 percent. For 1950, the figure still stood at 79 percent, but in the decades after steadily declined. Those born in 1980 have only a 50 percent chance of making more money than one’s parents. Along the same line, Thomas Edsall (2016) similarly notes that, “Adjusted for inflation, the average hourly wage [for Americans] increased \$1.49 from 1964 to 2014.” The demise of the American Dream, Leonhardt (2016) argues is the result of “the fruits of growth [having] gone disproportionately to the affluent.”

⁹I am indebted to my good colleague, William Johnston, for his suggestion of this argument and even its wording.

None of these facts is a secret to anyone who has studied social stratification in the U.S. Pundits and scholars, from Barbara Ehrenreich (2006) to Robert Reich (2012), have written about it for decades. But neither the Republicans nor the Democrats paid much attention. In their own way, both parties became representatives of the cosmopolitan elites who have benefitted since the 1980s from neo-liberal globalization. Trump caught the voices of the masses living outside this elite's privileged echo chamber and led a conventional populist revolt against them and the neo-liberal world they had constructed.

The Revolt against Neo-Liberal Globalization

In the 1950s, the CEO of one of the country's big three auto companies declared before Congress that what good for America was good for General Motors and that what was good for General Motors was good for America. By the 1970s, however, the two entities were drifting apart. The velvet gloves of the American state felt like chains to capital. The American state had greatly assisted capital during the period of the Fordist regime, indeed bailing it out during and after the Great Depression. Now the American state assisted in a new regime of capital accumulation, based on free trade of which the U.S. and its ally, Britain, became chief mentors.

In the great scheme of history, neo-liberal globalization appears as a blip in time, scarcely forty years, though its dubious achievements have been many. Today, for example, nearly every aspect of life has been marketized. It is impossible to imagine a society – a *life* – outside of the market economy.

But almost as soon as globalization began, fissures appeared. The world economy since 1980 has experienced more frequent and increasingly greater disruptions than in the past, culminating of course in the Great Recession that began in 2008. But, although neo-liberal globalization's appearance has been short, it has not been without precedent. Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]) writing in *The Great Transformation* as the Second World War drew to a close argued that the idea of self-regulated markets, if implemented, could only result in economic, social, and political chaos. In turn, he argued, individuals and communities would seek out alternative means of protecting themselves from danger, more often than not turning inward, invoking protectionist economic measures or seeking out strangers in their midst whom they blame for the problems.

The U.S. has not been the only country witnessing a revolt against neo-liberal globalization. The election of Syriza in Greece, the Arab Spring revolts, the Indignados in Spain, and the Occupy Movement in the U.S. after 2008 expressed much of this discontent. But world leaders took little note, concerned more that world markets be shored up and that financial stocks rebound; and rebound they did.

A recent Oxfam report shows that eight individuals today possess the equivalent wealth of the world's bottom fifty percent of people (Elliott, 2017). But again, as detailed by Piketty (2014), this is not a new phenomenon; inequality

has been increasing steadily throughout the world over the past forty years, moving also steadily into capitalism's core countries.

The result has been a growing divide between the masses and the elites, as was finally played out in the U.K.'s Brexit in spring 2016 and the subsequent American election. An international survey of citizens' attitudes conducted every year by Edelman Trust, a global public relations firm, is instructive. In 2014, its survey found a declining level of trust in government across citizens of 27 countries, with trust levels particularly low in France and the United States. The Edelman survey for 2016 (over 33,000 respondents in 28 countries) is even more instructive, however. Summarizing the results, CEO Richard Edelman (2016) states:

A yawning trust gap is emerging between elite and mass populations. The global survey asks respondents how much they trust the four institutions of government, business, nongovernmental organizations and media to do what is right. The survey shows that trust is rising in the elite or "informed public" group – those with at least a college education, who are very engaged in media, and have an income in the top 25 percent. However, in the "mass population" (the remaining 85 percent of our sample), trust levels have barely budged since the Great Recession.

Most strikingly, the survey found that, "The average gap in trust in institutions between the elites and the mass population has grown to 12 points (across the developing and developed world). In the U.S. the difference is 19 points." But the difference in trust inequality also correlated highly with income inequality; that is, high-income respondents were far more likely to trust institutions than did low-income respondents, the gap in the United States being especially large, 31 points.

Increasing inequality, a loss in institutional legitimacy, a turn to radical – even authoritarian – alternatives: we have seen this before. The events leading up to Donald Trump's election follow much of Karl Polanyi's script outlined earlier. Marx, were he alive, might concur wryly that in the person of Trump history has indeed been repeated as farce.

Conclusion

There are things we will perhaps never know about the 2016 election. What role did the candidacy of two libertarian candidates, Gary Johnson and Jill Stein, have on the vote's outcome? Did Russia's machinations genuinely effect the election? To what degree did the last minute intervention of F.B.I. director James Comey, in saying that the investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails was being reopened, sway voters? Why did the pollsters seem to get the election outcome so wrong? These questions will no doubt be the stuff of academic debate for many years to come.

There is even more we cannot know at present about how the Trump years will unfold. Will the Democrats regain control of Congress in 2018? (My prediction: Yes.) Will the U.S. retreat from or continue to be engaged in foreign conflicts? (Yes to the latter.) How will the administration's protectionist agenda impact the U.S. economy – both in the short and medium term? (My own prediction: a short-term run-up in the markets, based on easy money and speculation, followed by a severe recession.) Will Donald Trump eventually face impeachment? (Maybe, but only if the Republican party comes to believe that continuing to support him is politically disadvantageous. An alternative possibility is that Trump will resign amidst growing controversy and public derision, and because he will find the job too difficult and frustrating given America's famous "checks and balances.") Whether I am correct in my predictions will be made evident within the blink of an election cycle.

Ultimately, however, while Trump is *a* problem, he must be viewed as not *the* problem, but, rather, a symptom of a crisis in the global political economy. He is in most regards the typical authoritarian-populist, and charismatic, leader often thrown up by history at times of crisis. Of greater importance in the long term are the remedies of the causal factors that have led to this signature moment in American and world history. As in the past, the excesses of the unregulated market, lauded and applauded by liberals everywhere, have set the match. Again, only time will tell us how long and how far the fire will spread.

At the same time, it is too soon to argue, as some have done, that we are embarking on a post-capitalist world (Mason, 2015). Capitalism, like a game of whack-a-mole, has shown a remarkable ability to adapt and profit from change. Is it in full retreat or is this only a moment of retrenchment? Again, it is too soon to tell what kind of world will prevail.

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