

The German Green party, and what is left of them

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The following report was given at a meeting organised by the "Forum Gleichheit" last November 16 in Berlin. Ute Reissner is a member of the "Partei für Soziale Gleichheit" (Socialist Equality Party) and a contributor to the World Socialist Web Site.

The Waterloo for the German Greens as a party of social opposition came with its participation in the war led by NATO against Yugoslavia carried out under the pretext of defending the human rights of the Albanians. It is difficult to find a precedent for a party that has changed so quickly and thoroughly upon coming to power.

Immediately after their election victory in September of last year and before forming the new government, the designated foreign minister Joschka Fischer (Greens) and prospective chancellor Schröder (SPD) travelled to Washington. A few days later the Greens voted in the German parliament (Bundestag) for the sending of 6,000 German soldiers into Kosovo. The majority of Green party delegates backed this decision at the special party conference in Bielefeld on May 15, 1999, and thereby raised the issue of support for the war to the level of official party politics. The Greens thus took up the task of legitimating the first combat mission by the German army since 1945.

This step also opened the floodgates with regard to domestic politics, a sphere which, up until then, had prevented the party from moving too quickly to the right. A few days ago the first part of the government's cost cutting programme ("Future-programme 2000") was passed in parliament with the votes of the Green party. The plan aims to implement cuts of 30 billion German marks, about 50 percent of which is to be raised by attacks on pensioners and unemployed.

There is no indication that the Green party will veer from its present course. Even in the course of the conflict between Chancellor Schröder and his rival Oskar Lafontaine, who sought to implement the cuts in a more careful and balanced manner, the Greens stood behind the leadership of the SPD.

Three days from now, on November 19, the "Fundamental-programme and strategy congress" of the Green party will take place in Kassel, which is to draw up a balance sheet of the first year of the SPD-Green coalition government. In the name of the party leadership, Gunda Röstel and Antje Radcke declared that an "open discussion" should take place. But what is there to discuss? Is the direction of the party not decided—irrespective of any palaver?

"Does the necessary open-mindedness for a productive debate over programme still exist? Can political strategies still be changed at all ...?" Such relevant questions were posed by the left-wing professor of economics, Elmar Altvater, who has been a member of the Greens for 20 years.

By the way, the apt expression that the justification of the NATO bombardment represented a "Waterloo" for the Greens came from Altvater, as well as a perceptive characterisation of the war itself which has ended with the creation of a protectorate, in which a Green Cecil Rhodes[1] (Tom Königs) has the job of building up the civil

administration.

But Altvater seems unable to either make a clear decision or draw a political conclusion. At the beginning of the year and after the beginning of the war he reacted by cutting off his membership contributions and said he wouldn't be worried if he were to be expelled from the party. He didn't leave the Greens, however, although it is a fact: the orientation of the party is clear and will not change. It is only being refined and developed.

This is well illustrated by the reader for the coming congress issued by the party. It includes contributions from various members of the Greens and professors, but also one from Hans-Olaf Henkel, the chairman of the National Association for German Industry (BDI).

A few quotes from the reader and other papers that are to be discussed are useful to illustrate the direction in which the Greens are moving. I shall focus on the question of war and militarism, because this influences all other spheres of politics. The war in Kosovo was not just a turning point in the first year of the SPD-Green government in Germany, but also in international politics. I do not want to repeat the complete analysis of our party, but it must be said that the essence of this war was the beginning of a new carve-up of the world between the mightiest imperialist powers.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the United States took the initiative and the leading role in the race for spheres of influence and resources. They began to utilise their military superiority in an increasingly aggressive manner. But the Europeans and especially the Germans are attempting to rapidly catch up and so the task of re-making militarism in a palatable form has become a decisive factor of Green politics.

The first text is by the renowned professor Dr. Dieter S. Lutz from the Institute of Peace Research and Security Politics at the University of Hamburg. It is entitled "The German way—to serve peace! Questions to the Green party", and develops a concept of European politics under German leadership. His leitmotiv is the loosening of European dependence on the US and NATO.

Professor Dr. Dieter S. Lutz quotes the veteran SPD-politician Egon Bahr, who as someone without official function, is able to speak his mind: "In actual fact America looks on Europe as a protectorate, needing protection, lying on the western boundaries of the Eurasian continent, while Russia has to be restrained and its influence on its southern limits weakened."

"As long as we Europeans can't agree on a mutual order of peace and security America will maintain its dominating or even hegemonic influence." He further deals with the question of how the Greens are to work for German foreign-policies that aim at altering this situation, freeing Europe from NATO under the motto, and I quote: "Leading by serving".

These statements are best quoted completely and in context, as Lutz puts his finger on the considerations that may not necessarily be pronounced openly, but are uppermost in official German politics and also where the

Greens are integrating themselves most thoroughly. He develops an imperial strategy tailor made for Germany.

"As the most powerful country in Europe, what role can or should Germany play on the way to a lasting order of peace and security in and for Europe? That of supremacy and leadership?" he asks.

Well, Lutz doesn't want to say "yes" directly:

"To simply answer this question with a 'yes' or a 'no' would mean denying both reality and the history of Germany. The size, geographical location and economic strength of Germany, but also Germany's past must be taken into consideration for the role Germany is to play at present and in the future."

"For Germany, as the strongest power in Europe this means first that leadership must be shared and secondly this should be 'leadership by serving'."

"What is meant by 'sharing leadership'? Aside from Germany, the will to create a well-defined geopolitical European state is most powerfully expressed in France. The willingness to build a regional system of collective security, inside and for Europe, is still existent in Russia or can be revived. It will only be possible to build Europe and a functioning European security system through Germany and France closing ranks and establishing a relationship with Russia and other states on the basis of partnership and equality. This is why Germany must share its leading role with France and Russia...."

Nevertheless one shouldn't be too self sacrificing. So Lutz continues with semantic finesse. He elaborates: "To serve means to put oneself at active disposal.... The active moment in the meaning of 'serving' further excludes an understanding of this declaration of intent in the sense of 'waiting', 'keeping calm' or 'leaving the initiative to others'. It demands more involvement from the 'German people' ('Volk!') for continuous and lasting peace politics."

That the aim of these "peace politics" is to be the "permanent abolition of the institution of war" as well as the "dynamic construction of non-violent structures [internationally]", is emphasised as a matter of course. However this is entirely secondary. The main thing is the strategy of developing European security politics under German leadership: In plain English, an alliance with France and what's left of Russia, against the influence of the United States in Europe.

This perspective has already been put into concrete terms in a paper published in September 1999 by Angelika Beer, defence spokeswoman of the parliamentary fraction of the Green party. It was titled "Less is more! Considerations over the modernisation of the German army in respect to security politics and technology".

The quintessence of the paper is the creation of a powerful professional army (at present, Germany has a conscript army), which is to be ready for immediate action around the globe.

Of course she declares at the beginning that the reform of the armed forces must be embedded within "preventive foreign and security politics" and an up-to-date German army is not "a means of forcibly asserting national interests". It is, of course, a commonplace phenomenon that the will for peace and pacifism is never conjured up more strongly than during the preparation of wars.

Angelika Beer complains that the German army is orientated only towards defending the country, just as it was during the Cold War. "The German armed forces ... have only partially adapted to the newest developments, requests and technological changes of the last decade. Insufficient structural reforms have led the army into a dead end, from which it must be liberated in order to be prepared for the future."

Following her own conversion from pacifism Angelika Beer develops a veritable missionary zeal with regard to securing a future for the German army.

What is necessary is the construction of an independent European defence identity: "The defence of the alliance and the overcoming of crisis

demand a restructuring of the German army into an army that is able to bring adequate, well trained and supplied forces into action on its borders and in neighbouring regions without problems of mobilisation. What is needed are forces characterised by high mobility, technological and operative superiority, discipline and flexibility with regard to possible action, in the context of multinational and international operations."

She ascertains regretfully, "this is agreed upon neither within the Greens nor in Germany as a whole".

Further on detailed plans to reorganise the German armed forces for the purpose of creating a "more efficient and cost-effective army" are laid out. The text concludes: "If we are not prepared to reform and adapt accordingly all of the instruments which are useful in overcoming conflicts, including the military, the danger exists that we will miss the chance of a German contribution to the changes in international relations." This is the concluding sentence. It includes an open declaration of German national interests, i.e., the interests of the ruling class in Germany.

Of course this paper is full of phrases like "crisis-prevention", "Instruments for overcoming civil conflicts" and many more. But these are of a simply decorative nature, which do not apply in the case of emergency. After all, what is to be done when others start a war? When the "Management of crisis" doesn't work? Then regretfully arms will have to be taken up. As Ludger Volmer, the Green Minister of State in Fischer's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, explained: "Our engagement in Kosovo didn't mean the betrayal of Green principles through government policies, but the translation of Green peace politics in times of war." Precisely.

With regard to economic and social policies, the Greens are definitely on the right wing of the coalition government—in many aspects they are even further to the right of the conservative CDU. The cost-cutting programme, that they pushed through together with the social democrats, goes beyond anything the Kohl-government would have dared to implement. The same goes for the Green minister Andrea Fischer's reform of the health sector.

The discussion papers put forward by the Greens are mostly just rehashes of economic liberal phraseology.

The first point made in the "Berlin Thesis for a redefinition of Green policies", published recently in October 1999, is to distance itself from the past of the party. The party "should no longer be a forum for all those who are not part of the establishment". One must back concepts that make "more responsibility and independence possible and take up a critical position towards over-emphasising state planning and direction." "Social and economical mechanisms are more effective and longer lasting in regulating the economy" than "bans and regulations". Great store is set in the support of small- and middle-sized companies, as well as the self-employed. A sort of abbreviated bible for market liberalism.

Pre-election promises, such as the reintroduction of wealth tax and taxation of trading profits, have been filed away. One can no longer achieve social justice by "morally intimidating those better off with corresponding deductions". Furthermore, in respect to social policy, the Greens "are not just the advocates of excluded minorities". But enough of this.

Advocates of the Greens, or people who doubt the rigour of their turn to the right, plead that there is still a left wing within the party that doesn't agree with this course. This is not entirely false. But the question must be asked: How was the right wing able to assert itself so easily and with such vehemence, while the dwindling number of critical members helplessly stood to one side?

Two fundamental reasons and driving forces exist for the development of the Greens: Their social and ideological roots and their corresponding reaction to the social changes of the last two decades.

The emergence of the Greens was closely connected to the crisis of the working class. The founding generation translated their disillusionment with social democracy and the Stalinist parties into a rejection of any

perspective based on the working class. This is how the Green party emerged as a chemically pure petty-bourgeois party, in respect of its programme as well as its membership—a party which thought it had liberated itself from any social restraints, only to become pliable jesters for the ruling class at a later point.

Prior to 1968 a number of protest movements are regarded as forerunners of the Greens.

Although they were then in opposition, the SPD and the trade unions played an indisputable role in the reestablishment of capitalism in West Germany and often stood on the right of the political stage. Two questions initiated intense debates: the integration of the unions into corporate decision-making and rearmament.

Following the Second World War aversion to militarism among the population was so deep and widespread that Franz Josef Strauß, from the far right of the CSU, made his famous statement: "May his hand drop off, he whoever seeks to take up a rifle again." In this atmosphere a rearmament of Germany seemed impossible.

Under Kurt Schumacher the SPD was so nationalist and anticommunist, that protests against rearmament were not initiated by the SPD, but by the churches and different "communist" groups. The SPD only joined in later.

After the Second World War the DGB and the biggest single trade union, the IG Metall, ditched any broader social perspective step by step. Initially they had still demanded the democratisation of the economy as a whole, as well as the nationalisation of key industries as the first step towards socialism. But they made continuous retreats. In the end they insisted only on co-determination in the coal and steel industry, and that was to secure the seats held by trade union leaders on the boards of the respective companies.

In 1959, at its Bad Godesberg party conference, the SPD bid farewell to its claim of being a workers party and explicitly declared itself to be a Peoples Party. This led to a split, and the expulsion of the socialist students league, the SDS, despite the temerity of this organisation.

Broader class struggles were countered by the SPD moving further to the right, as well as repressive measures. When, during the mass strikes of the miners in 1966 against large-scale pit closures, the trade unions began to lose control, the SPD reacted by forming the "Grand Coalition" with the conservative CDU. It implemented emergency laws that allowed for the constitutional setting aside of the constitution. Essentially, this was the reintroduction of the same mechanism which had allowed Hitler to legally assume power.

The "Easter March" peace movements of the 60s—annual demonstrations against atomic bombs and rearmament—consisted of a motley mixture of Christians, pacifists and Stalinists. In 1965-66 the first protests against the war in Vietnam began.

This résumé should illustrate that the post-war period was by no means uniform—with social democracy and the trade unions continuously fighting for reforms in the West. Rather, the main aim of these organisations was to stabilise and secure capitalist rule. They resorted to repression every time the struggles of the workers climaxed or social protest became too pronounced. In actual fact the period of reform only lasted from 1970 to 1974.

It isn't surprising that the social protest which was initiated by the student movement began beyond the reach of the bureaucracy, and therefore also outside of the official "workers movement".

The SDS, which led the student movement, mainly mobilised against authoritarian structures in the universities. It explicitly supported the theories of Herbert Marcuse, who claimed that both the workers and the bourgeoisie were corrupt and that the former could no longer be a basis for radical social opposition.

From 1969 to 1971 many Stalinist, Maoist or anarchist groups emerged spontaneously, or were founded by the bureaucrats themselves (e.g., the Jusos [Young Socialists] were formed by the SPD, the DKP [German

Communist Party] was founded by the SED, the governing Stalinist Party of East Germany). Their role was to channel the opposition. Various "urban guerrilla" and terrorist groups also eventually emerged.

In the main these groups expressed the widespread and complete confusion over a socialist perspective. Their naive attempts at either cuddling up to social democracy and Stalinism or participating in a confused opposition against them reflected the main problem of the twentieth century: the suppression of the Marxist orientated mass movement of the working class in the 1930s. The questioning of existing social relations was first of all debated by layers of intellectual youth. But only few of them found their way to any sort of serious, viable perspective.

In the 50s and at the beginning of the 60s the Fourth International, which had developed such a perspective in its history of opposition against Stalinism, had been weakened by a currency which responded to post-war pressures, adapted itself to Stalinism and rejected the independent role of the working class. This tendency, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, consequently adapted to the petty-bourgeois theoreticians of the student movement.

Initially social democracy successfully integrated the radicalised generation with state organised reforms. Willy Brandt described the protesting youth as the "lost children of social democracy" who had to be led back home.

To this end a veritable cornucopia of social concessions was made for some years, and a whole layer was created, dependant on positions and money from the state: many new teachers—especially at the universities—social workers, people in newly created jobs in the public service and social institutions of the state, or institutions financed by the state, such as the different welfare institutions or the churches.

There were concessions made to workers in terms of wages and social contributions.

The end of this reformist boom in the wake of world-wide recession during the years 1974-75 was a shock. Helmut Schmidt took over from Willy Brandt. The cuts in spending on the public sector hit exactly those layers who had just previously been so successfully integrated: the employees in the health and social sector, the administrators of the welfare state, those employed at the universities. Of course the workers had to pay as well.

The cuts in the social sector were accompanied by an ideological turn. A downright witch-hunt against anybody regarded as "left" began: the trade unions were systematically purged, under Brandt's leadership the SPD-FDP government had already passed the so-called "Decree on radicals", which led to the investigation of 3.5 million civil services applicants as to their political reliability (4,000 were either rejected or subjected to disciplinary measures and about 250 were sacked).

The origins of the Greens lies in this development. A part of the progressively, or at least mildly progressively oriented petty bourgeoisie, disappointedly turned its back on social democracy. But they didn't follow this break by turning towards a revolutionary perspective. Instead they did a complete about-turn, by more or less consciously breaking with everything that reminded them of the workers movement.

Most of the "communist", "socialist", "revolutionary", Stalinist and Maoist groups fell apart. Now the retreat into private life began, the withdrawal into politics of "immediate issues" and "satisfaction of one's own needs", the politics of "here and now". An alternative scene with its own small businesses, Third World stores and ecological shops came into existence—an alternative scene glorifying mindlessness, with a tendency towards mysticism, self-absorption and everything else which still makes these people so unpleasant today.

It was a backward-looking break from social democracy and Stalinism and the layers around them. A break undertaken with no far-reaching perspective, comparable to the reaction of civil rights campaigners in the

GDR against the SED, a confused rejection which was eventually channelled to the right. The Greens in the West took longer for their turn to the right than the civil rights campaigners in the East, but then in the stagnant period of the 80s everything took a little longer.

Last week Ulrich Rippert explained that after 1945 the betrayals of Stalinism threw the working class back towards social democracy. Following the next betrayal—that of social democracy against the limited reforms made in the middle of the 70s, a layer of the opposition was thrown back to 1848—back to the forms of petty-bourgeois democracy so devastatingly criticised by Marx and Engels.

Two American scientists, the authors of an extensive research study on the Greens, consider this development entirely positive.[2] They write:

"The Greens as a party were needed to change the conception of what was regarded as left, that is the Left which had established by the 1880s in most European countries and around the globe by the turn of the century. Up until the theoretical contribution of the 'new left' in the 60s and the practical-political contribution of the Greens in the 80s, 'left' essentially meant politics of social and economic equality in the form worked out by the most important subject of the lefts, the class of industrial workers and their political representatives in the social democratic and communist parties.... Indeed the organised working class and its attendant politics possessed the monopoly of 'being left-wing' for nearly a century.... The traditional axis of the lefts saw the working class as the social representative of the paradigm" (p. 388).

For their part the Greens had created a completely new axis, which "in the future will define what is left". The connection between politics and the workers movement had been—finally!—severed and so the way was open to new shores. This book was published here two years ago. It would be interesting to know what the authors make of what has taken place since then.

To begin with, their motley outward appearance concealed the reactionary core at the heart of the Greens. The party was founded in 1980, and in the years between 1975 and 1980 there were many forerunners, temporary groupings, alternative and "multicoloured lists", citizens initiatives, and so on. The issues with which they concerned themselves were not all futile, but were orientated along a very restricted axis.

The trademark of this new development was the "ecology" question. Under this slogan disappointed former street fighters met with disturbed members of the upper class, to prevent the construction of a bypass or to prevent their own homes from being built on polluted ground. "Environmental protection" was a label which hid something else: the turn away from the working class and the social question. This is where nature came in to conflict with society.

The two American authors already mentioned, themselves great admirers of the Greens, make their own very sober evaluation. They say of one of the forerunners of the Greens, the GLU:

"Even if ecology had a great importance for the activists, it gained its central importance because of reasons connected with the strategic and historical situation of the party. The party included heterogeneous groups, which held different opinions on many questions. In order to overcome the 5% hurdle it was important that these different currencies succeeded in working together. At the same time the party leadership had the impression that it would be necessary to fan out and expand the political aims if the GLU was to develop from a protest into a programmatically based party. Ecology served both the strategic and programmatic needs ... the priority and the ambivalence of ecology served as a uniting link for the right and left wing and was the lowest common denominator for two otherwise hostile groupings" (p.290-91).

This utterly unprincipled basis of the new movement made it an ideal plaything and springboard for power hungry people with no scruples like Joschka Fischer.

The Greens discovered the "issues of humanity" five years before Gorbachev. Their founding programme of 1980 declares that ecology is not a question of class but a question of humanity. "This is why the crisis of modern capitalism cannot just be understood via the categories of economic contradictions. It is increasingly determined by the natural limits of our environment" (p. 236).

The "ecological alternative" of the Greens was a reactionary economic concept of small production. "Left" theoreticians of the Greens were eager to question "the positive approach of Marxist socialism towards growth, technology and the exploitation of nature". The Green ideologist Thomas Schmid "overcame" Marxism with a sort of original sin philosophy: "Industrialism is the newest and most destructive inheritance in our history, in which man made himself ruler of the world" (p. 222). The greatest evil is the claim by man to take destiny into his own hands.

Within the Greens the perspective of the so-called "Eco-socialists", (who served as a sort of bogeyman for some time) was characterised by an apocalyptic view of the world. Its best known representatives, Rainer Trampert and Thomas Ebermann, wrote in 1984: "The main target for Eco-socialist revisionism (which they support) was Marxism's naive belief in the objective, neutral and emancipatory character of science, technology and production" (p. 225).

Following a number of other statements, more rhetorical than theoretical, they declare: "These aims could never have been reached in a proletarian state or a social democratic technocracy. Instead the Eco-socialists propose a decentralised, democratic solution for the present crisis. They wanted to give as much political and economic power back to the local level as possible. The evil of centralised planning could only be avoided if the towns and communities were responsible for social and economic planning" (p. 227).

Here it is already possible to discern the arguments which are used today to justify social cuts. The cuts in national and state funds are always justified as "strengthening the autonomy" of the communities. This argumentation also indicates the initial beginnings of extremely bigoted, egoistic politics: every man for himself. (An article on the attitude of the Green party to school-politics (featured on the *WSWS*) illustrates this. The cuts are pushed through in the schools using the motto 'autonomy' in order to subject the schools to the competition of the free market.)

An examination of this question makes clear why the Greens in the West came together with the civil rights campaigners of the East: their opposition to what they thought was a "proletarian state" or "social democratic technocracy"—an opposition from a reactionary standpoint. It is essentially the offended reaction of those layers who feel neglected by "those on top" and seek more privileges and appreciation. Rather than seeking an overthrow of the existing state of affairs they sought a better place for themselves in the set-up.

In the early years the Greens did actually regard themselves as a left-wing party, retained various social demands in their programme dating from the protest movement and essentially demanded the expansion of social reforms. On this basis the Greens also had their own trade union wing, which was frequently in opposition to the established bureaucracy. Various social demands were to be found alongside the reactionary rejection of science and technology and the glorification of small production, etc. Such contradictions made it hard for workers and youth to see through the Greens.

From the beginning there had been openly reactionary tendencies around the Greens, but before the party came into government they had always led a peripheral existence. In the peace movement of the early 80s, openly nationalist tones emerged from layers around the Greens, the former General Bastian and the former member of the CSU and soldier Alfred Mechttersheimer (both were Green MPs for a short period of time). They based their opposition against the stationing of American medium-range missiles on the national interests of Germany. Mechttersheimer

worked himself up into hating everything American. Bastian had a relationship with Petra Kelly from the so called "Ökopax"—current and in 1992 the two committed suicide—summing up their own hopelessness.

The development of the Greens in the 80s, especially after the first SPD-Green coalition in Hesse 1985, was essentially a history of the party's integration into established politics. Their delegates learned the dirty trade of politics from the lower ranks in the communal and state parliaments. Individuals adapted, and the rank and file has been also able to establish itself and climb socially. The layer of former protesters becomes wealthy, well situated and less inclined to rebellion. The voters of the Greens get older every year.

The end of the GDR confronted the Greens with questions which they could not even begin to answer. Their members, including former followers of Mao, Hoxha and Stalin, had long ago given up any attempt at explaining the character of the Soviet Union. The setting aside of these theoretical disputes in favour of "concrete ecological projects" had made the foundation of the Greens possible in the first place. This is why the events that took place in 1989-90 caught them by surprise. Just one thing remained clear: the collapse of Stalinism sealed the Greens' rejection of any perspective based on the workers or the oppressed. Together with the rest of the establishment they viewed these events as the failure of socialism.

In the time since 1998 and their entry into government it has become irrevocably clear that this party has lost any spirit of resistance. They have caved in without a murmur—first came their approval of the Kosovo War. Among the further best known "turnarounds" on the part of the new officeholders is the party's withdrawal of the law to regulate the disposal of old cars following a phone call by the head of Volkswagen Motors, Piech, to Chancellor Schröder, as well as the retreat at the start of this year from measures aimed at opting out of atomic energy—a measure previously agreed on with the SPD.

In conclusion one can see that the attempt to make "left politics independent of the working class" has failed totally. If you look at the party today, this old claim of theirs now appears only ironic. In a society characterised by class antagonisms there is no possibility of separating politics from class interests. This simple truth is becoming clearly evident once again.

Politics directed against militarism and social cuts must be based on the working class, on the working class as a social force which has the task of overcoming capitalism and creating a new socialist society. The damage that Stalinism and social democracy have inflicted on the consciousness of the working class must be overcome. Overcoming this is the responsibility of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the media of our international movement.

Notes:

1. Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902), British politician, embodiment of colonialism.
2. Andrei S. Markovits and Philip S. Gorski: "Grün schlägt Rot. Die deutsche Linke nach 1945", 1997. The quotes have been retranslated into English. The original English edition appeared under the title "The German Left : Red, Green and Beyond" in 1995, and is now out of print.



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