The 1619 Project, streaming on Hulu, expands its racialist falsification of history, politics and culture

Tom Mackaman 12 February 2023

Those familiar with the 1619 Project will be unsurprised to learn that the World Socialist Web Site was not invited to review in advance its latest incarnation, the six-part documentary series recently aired on the Walt Disney-owned streaming service, Hulu. Evidently, the courtesy was extended to media that could be counted on to produce fawning pieces, including the New York Times, which, predictably enough, hails its progeny as "urgent" and "groundbreaking."

The series' producer, media magnate Oprah Winfrey, who is nothing if not a savvy businesswoman, knew better than to expect such flattery from the WSWS, which, together with eminent historians it interviewed, played the decisive role in undermining the *Times*' rampage through history when it first appeared in August 2019. The socialist intervention not only exposed the *1619 Project* as counterfeit history, it gave the lie to the claim, pushed by Project "creator" Nikole Hannah-Jones, that all criticism was, *ipso facto*, right wing or even racist.

For readers who may be unfamiliar with the *1619 Project*, it arose around a series of claims about American history put forth by the *Times*. These were: 1) That slavery is a uniquely American "original sin"; 2) That the American Revolution was launched as a counterrevolution to preserve slavery against the British Empire's plans for emancipation; 3) That Abraham Lincoln was a racist and that whites in the Civil War viewed slavery only as "an obstacle to national unity"; 4) That blacks have always "fought back alone" to redeem American democracy; 5) That all social problems in contemporary America, from obesity to traffic jams, are the outcome of slavery; 6) That "anti-black racism" is "endemic" and part of a national "DNA" that can never be eradicated; 7) That the true story of slavery had never been told, obscured from view by those Hannah-Jones derided on Twitter as "white historians"; and 8) That the historical foundation of America is slavery.

The present review is not the place to review the entire, devastating case against the 1619 Project. Suffice it to say that none of the foregoing claims are true, and that they were demolished by the WSWS, as well as by a number of leading scholars it interviewed, including Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, Gordon Wood, James Oakes, Delores Janiewski, Clayborne Carson, Richard Carwardine and Adolph Reed Jr. All of this work is compiled in an important volume available at Mehring Books, The New York Times' 1619 Project and the Racialist Falsification of History.

But one point must be stressed. The foundation of American history is *not* chattel slavery. It is the two revolutions, the War for Independence (1775–1783) and the Civil War (1861–1865). The political and social transformation wrought by the First American Revolution set into motion processes that led to the Second. That revolution, in turn, destroyed chattel slavery after just "four score and seven" years of the new republic.

The revolutions did not, and could not, solve all historical problems. They even created new ones in place of the old, preparing the ground for the creation of a modern capitalist society, with all that has entailed. Thus, the revolutions had birthed, by the 1870s, both a powerful and ruthless capitalist ruling class, *and* the world's most potent, and racially mixed, working class. The democratic and egalitarian patrimony of these revolutions falls to today's working class—and to its historical destiny to lead a socialist revolution in the United States, as part of a massive movement of the international working class. This is why we have defended the revolutions against the *1619 Project*'s historical falsification.

The *Times*, for reasons it has never explained, refused to meet any of the criticism from the WSWS or eminent historians forthrightly, and has still not done so to this day. It instead embarked on a series of personal attacks, deflections, retreats and surreptitious alterations, orchestrated by *New York Times* magazine editor Jake Silverstein. By right, these tacit admissions of its own bankruptcy should have been enough to drop the curtain over the whole sorry affair. Yet this is America, after all, where both money and politics dictate that something so big cannot be allowed to fail. The ink had already dried on lucrative franchising deals, including the present documentary series with Lionsgate. And, under conditions of war, pandemic and explosive social inequality, the *1619 Project*'s toxic racialist ideology still had work to do. *The show must go on*!

And so it has, on Hulu.

The series reinterprets the basic structure of the 1619 Project for television. Once again, we are told that present social problems are the outcome of slavery. This theory—always posited but never shown—is what imparts to the series, even more than the book and the magazine that came before, its frenetic, almost dizzying and essentially incoherent quality. The episodes hop around from place to place and back and forth between past and present. Hannah-Jones is everywhere all at once. In addition to being co-producer, with Winfrey, she is the narrator and the sole interviewer, and an entire thread of the documentary deals with her upbringing and family history.

The overriding focus on Hannah-Jones—*she* is the star, not the history—continues and deepens a key feature of the *1619 Project*. From the beginning, the *Times* insisted that the entire Project was the brainchild of one intrepid reporter who only wanted to "finally tell the truth" about American history—a claim that relied on denying an immense body of historiography, as well as major popular achievements such as the documentary series on the Civil Rights movement, *Eyes on the Prize* (1993), and the multi-series dramatization of slavery, Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977), both of which were viewed by millions of Americans.

In any case, it should be obvious that more was involved in making a single reporter, who had managed to write only a handful of articles in the space of four years prior to the *1619 Project*, the avatar of what may be the most expensive project ever launched by the *Times*.

Hannah-Jones both embodies and speaks for a grasping upper-middle class layer that the *Times* recognizes as the base of the Democratic Party. She is not alone. A number of like-minded journalists and thinkers have been minted in recent years—Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ibram Kendi spring to mind. As the Queen could create Knights of the Realm, so American capitalism can bestow its own, drearier, distinctions. The new "race experts" have been made millionaires, showered with Pulitzer Prizes, corporate grants, institutes, endowed professorships, five-figure speaking fees and publishing deals from the very "white institutions" that they decry. These luminaries, along with many dimmer stars in the racialist galaxy, insist that society's fundamental problem, from police violence to the distribution of Academy Awards, is not class, but race. *Race yesterday, race today, race forever!*

The time has come to drop the pretense that any of this is left or "radical," let alone Marxist, as it is seen in the fevered imaginings of right-wing commentators and politicians that are manipulating it to attack public school curriculum in dozens of states. It is the aim of Marxism to unite the working class across all lines of race, ethnicity and gender, not only in this or that country, but across the world. The *1619 Project* has just the opposite aim. It is intent on dividing the working class.

Blaming white workers for the collapse of the unions

This sinister aim comes out into the open in the series' fourth episode, "Capitalism." The installment has changed from its earlier magazine and book versions, which were focused on a false presentation of the economics of slavery by sociologist Matthew Desmond. In Desmond's view, which is now briefly presented by 1619 Project enthusiast Seth Rockman of Brown University, plantation slavery was the most dynamic aspect of American capitalism, for the North as much as the South. This position, a shibboleth of the pretentiously named school of thought called "the new historians of capitalism," makes both the Civil War and the North's victory in it incomprehensible. Details!

Rockman is hurried off and the episode pivots into a hymn to the American trade union bureaucracy. The decades-long decline of the unions, Hannah-Jones tells viewers, is a primary cause of both social and racial inequality. The episode focuses on the failed effort of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to organize the Bessemer, Alabama, Amazon distribution facility, and the barely successful effort of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) to organize a facility in Staten Island. About 1 million Americans work for Amazon, and another 600,000 labor for it in other countries. Everywhere they are exploited to the hilt in order to line the pockets of the world's third-richest man, Jeff Bezos, and other shareholders and executives. One might expect that such a workforce would be prime material for labor organization. But the Bessemer workers spurned the RWDSU twice.

The historian brought on to explain all of this is Robin D.G. Kelley of the University of California, Los Angeles. Kelley first attributes failure at Bessemer to Amazon's "soft power," by which is meant its use of money and influence to avoid unionization. Examples of "soft power" mentioned in the episode include the distribution of voting instruction cards saying "vote no" on one side, and the alteration of traffic signals to interfere with union canvassing.

No doubt these things happened. But surely, as a labor historian, Kelley knows that American workers have braved far worse to organize unions—court injunctions, spies, mafia goons, police, state militia and the United States Army, to name a few "hard power" tools.

Kelley indeed knows better, and so the cause must be located elsewhere. He identifies the ideal culprit for the purposes of the 1619 Project: white

workers. Here is the dialogue:

Hannah-Jones: Some would argue that even today, too many white workers still choose racial solidarity over their own economic interests as labor fights play out across the country.

Kelley: Whiteness has its own value, but as W.E.B. Du Bois says, it's a paltry wage. That what they get from holding onto whiteness is so minuscule to what they could get by holding onto solidarity. Together, they could take the plant. They could actually fight and win a living wage. But by standing apart, what they end up getting is pride in being white.

Through this act of historical transubstantiation, Hannah-Jones and Kelley displace all the problems facing the working class onto the shoulders of "white workers." Kelley says nothing of the decades of betrayals of *all* workers at the hands of the very union bureaucracy that they are now expected to vote for. He offers no analysis of the viability of right-wing, nationally-oriented trade unions in an epoch of global economy. Unsurprisingly, not a word is uttered about the unions' total subordination to the Democratic Party. Kelley does not even seem to ask himself how it is that the workers in Bessemer could possibly have confidence in a union that has been endorsed by President Biden, formerly known as "the Senator from Du Pont"—who, within a year of calling for the organization of the Amazon plant, used his office to override the strike votes of rail workers!

Kelley's attempt to blame white workers for the fate of the unions is absurd based on the *1619 Project*'s "case study" at Bessemer. The RWDSU certainly played the racialist card. It hoped that by bringing Black Lives Matter activists into the organizational drive, support would be gained in a facility that is 85 percent African American. As one report put it, which appeared on the Payday Report website, "With support weakest among young Black men in the plant many are hoping that the Black Lives Matter movement can get younger Black activists more engaged on their behalf."

The racialist appeals by the RWDSU and its supporters could not overcome the legacy of AFL-CIO betrayals. In fact it had the opposite effect.

The racialist theory of music

Episode III is an hour-long racialist attack on the one realm in which the unification of the various peoples that comprise the American population has achieved the most beautiful and portentous results: music. The universality of American popular music, its "translatability" into innumerable languages and cultures, must, on some level, express the hopefulness, even exhilaration, at the prospect of tearing down the walls separating peoples everywhere. Themselves the victims of segregation, and worse, black musicians have played protagonists' roles in many forms of American musical expression. But whether in the interracial cooperation of musicians, the music's capacity to reach and elate diverse audiences or the form and composition of the music itself, on a fundamental level, genres such as jazz and rock-and-roll have been about bringing people together. It is this quality of American popular music, at its best, that has so horrified conservatives and reactionaries the world over.

Hannah-Jones is having none of it. According to her, popular American music is really "black music." And the history consists of nothing more

than the "centuries-long efforts by white Americans to warp, appropriate, and steal our music."

This is filthy stuff. The idea that races "own" cultures that other races might "steal" is itself racist. This is the same position, changing what needs to be changed, that Hitler held toward the threat allegedly posed to "Aryan art" by Jewish usurpers. Music, like any artistic expression, can never be owned by a "race," and, in and of itself has no racial pedigree whatsoever. As for "cultural appropriation," a favorite racialist concept, it should be pointed out that among the basic characteristics that distinguishes the human species from all others, in an anthropological sense, *is* cultural appropriation—the capacity to learn socially and to act on it. All of world history is a vast fabric of cultural appropriation.

Hannah-Jones' primary interlocutor here is another *Times* columnist, Wesley Morris, who thinks very much like her. Here is a sampling of the dialogue that results.

On blackface minstrelsy:

Hannah-Jones: White fascination with black music during the era of slavery quickly translated to an appropriation of our sound and a gross distortion of our image.

Morris: I would say blackface minstrelsy is the key to everything with respect to American popular culture, with respect to the way that white people understand, or think they understand black people.

On jazz music:

Hannah-Jones: But even as it was beloved in London or Paris, that didn't mean that love translated to America.

Morris: White people, uh, were concerned that jazz was a corruptive force, that would lead to race mixing.

On why Motown music was popular:

Morris: [Music producer] Berry Gordy's timing was perfect. He started this company when there were cameras to put these black people in front of.

For the record: Blackface minstrelsy, while certainly of historical importance, is not "the key to everything with respect to American popular culture;" there were, and are, many white jazz musicians; and the beauty and energy of Motown music has nothing to do with cameras.

Police violence as innate "white fear"

Episode V, "Fear," reduces police brutality entirely to race. According to Hannah-Jones, it is rooted in "white fear of black progress, prosperity and freedom." The 1619 Project would have viewers believe that white police, in killing blacks, are merely acting on a psychological urge that is very nearly innate among white people, with Hannah-Jones and historian Michelle Alexander arguing that it has been passed down through the generations since colonial times. We are told that:

Being a good member of the white community is to be constantly on the lookout for any type of suspicious behavior among Black people. And it has become a type of historical memory that *consciously and unconsciously* gets passed down from generation to generation [emphasis added].

Elsewhere, Hannah-Jones insists that "we can trace this epidemic of brutality to slavery, when white people desperately sought to control those they enslaved."

These claims are absurd. Modern policing emerged with industrialization in the cities of the North, not on the slave plantations of the South. White people are not innately responsible for police violence against blacks.

But even the assertion that police violence is exclusively racial does not hold up to elementary scrutiny. A plurality of victims of police killings in the US in any given year are white, and about one-quarter are black. To be sure, this is a "racial disparity" in the sense that blacks account for only about 12 percent of the population. But it is not a disparity in the sense that it hews closely to black "overrepresentation" among the poor.

In any case, the fact that so many victims are white, or of other races, demonstrates that more is involved in police violence than racism, though this is undeniably a contributing factor. Police use of "excessive force" is not about upholding a racial hierarchy, but upholding American capitalism, which has produced what is among the most socially unequal societies on the planet.

If the issue were only race, then what is the solution? Ever since the socalled "race riots" of the 1960s, the Democratic Party and American liberalism have answered this question in one and the same way: through the promotion of black political leadership and black police chiefs, the hiring of black police officers, the convening of "community review boards," and through proposals to tinker with laws. This endlessly repeating broken record has solved nothing.

The "Fear" episode was certainly filmed before five black police officers beat to death Tyre Nichols, aged 29, on January 7, 2023, in Memphis. The chief of police that had created this "special forces" hit squad, called "The Scorpions," is also black. Such an event cannot be explained through the racial lens.

Covering up America's health care crisis

Episode II, "Race," focuses on yet another disparity, the horrific infant mortality rate among black women in America. We are told that this "is deeply tied to the legacy of slavery," and "centuries [of] false beliefs about black women's pain and their humanity," though no evidence is brought to bear to support these contentions. To Hannah-Jones, what is involved are "biases, whether unconscious or conscious," and chiefly the idea that "black people don't feel pain in the same way." In a wild and unsupported accusation, Hannah-Jones even claims that "some medical professionals still believe that black and white people are biologically different." Can she name one such "medical professional"?

According to obstetrician Dr. Veronica Gillispie-Bell, who is interviewed by Hannah-Jones, causes of infant mortality such as poverty and the collapse of the for-profit health care system play no role at all. "It doesn't matter whether you are socioeconomically advantaged, socioeconomically disadvantaged, you're educated, not educated," she tells Hannah-Jones. "The single tying string is being a black woman." The proof offered to defend this contention is the difficult pregnancy and child-birthing experience of tennis superstar Serena Williams, whose estimated

Historical falsification of America's revolutions

The first episode, "Democracy," repeats the original 1619 Project claim that the American Revolution was a conspiracy launched to defend slavery against British Emancipation. This entire argument rests on the most unlikely of shoulders: Lord Dunmore, that is, John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, the last imperial governor of Virginia, whose "Dunmore Proclamation," issued in November 1775, which offered freedom to the slaves of masters already in rebellion, the 1619 Project claims, was the cause of the revolution. Historian Woody Holton, another vociferous backer of the 1619 Project, is brought in to lend a patina of authority to this manifestly false claim.

The latest version of the 1619 Project once again presents Abraham Lincoln as a racist who played no progressive role in the Civil War. Neither did any other white person, it is implied. Hannah-Jones goes so far as to claim that the great Civil War-era amendments to the American Constitution, the 13th, the 14th and the 15th—abolishing slavery, establishing equal protection and birth right citizenship and guaranteeing the right to vote—were "born out of black resistance." It was blacks, Hannah-Jones, says, who "pushed lawmakers to pass" these amendments. Today, owing only to blacks' solitary efforts, "when other marginalized groups demand their rights, they sue under the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment."

Actually, Lincoln personally fought for the 13th amendment, fearful that the Supreme Court would reverse the Emancipation Proclamation, which was a military order based on his prerogatives as commander-in-chief of the military in time of war. It was his last great political act before his assassination at the hands of white supremacist John Wilkes Booth. Then, in reaction to efforts by the new president, Andrew Johnson, to rehabilitate the old southern oligarchy, the radical Republicans, led by Congressman Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, brought the Civil War era to its political high-water mark with the 14th and 15th amendments in the period known as "Congressional Reconstruction."

None of it would have been possible without a massive antislavery political movement that emerged in the 1830s, gathered around the Republican Party in the 1850s, and culminated in Lincoln's election in 1860, the event that precipitated southern secession and war. It is no slight of black Americans to note that the amendments would not have come without Union victory, a struggle in which some 400,000 Northern soldiers "gave the last full measure of devotion," their lives, as Lincoln said at Gettysburg. The death toll was a terrible trauma for the society. Across the land, fathers, sons and brothers who went off to fight never came home again. Many more were maimed. This act of collective suffering, given "to both North and South ... as the woe due" for slavery, as Lincoln put in his searing Second Inaugural Address, is memorialized by monuments and public buildings across the country, including a great many in Hannah-Jones' home state of Iowa, which contributed a higher share of its population to service than any other state, North or South.

Money, the final homeland of black nationalism

Characteristic of the racialist worldview is an utter lack of curiosity about actual history. Hannah-Jones and the other race experts have fully formed ideas of the past. To them, it consists of an unbroken chain of white perfidy and black victimhood. All that remains is to arrange history's chairs just so.

How petty it all appears before the awe-inspiring power of *actual* African American history, what Clayborne Carson has called "the freedom struggle." At once tragic, moving and endlessly fascinating, African American history can never be separated from the broader struggle for equality and full human liberation, as Civil War history makes so clear.

The juxtaposition between the nobility and selflessness of the freedom struggle and the self-serving and essentially pecuniary aims of the *1619 Project* comes across jarringly in Hannah-Jones' interview with Civil Rights movement veteran MacArthur Cotton in the series' first episode. Cotton, in his 80s, is a former member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who fought to register voters in Mississippi in the 1960s. He was arrested and tortured for his efforts. He could easily have been killed. This was the fate of other civil rights activists, some of whom were white. The names James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and Viola Liuzzo—never mentioned by the *1619 Project*—come to mind.

Perhaps this is why, despite his own heroism, Cotton speaks with genuine humility. "I was a person who championed the underdog," he tells Hannah-Jones. "So it was just a natural thing that I would want to be in the movement because, the choice to me was accepting things like they were. And that wasn't much of a choice."

Hannah-Jones has certainly not suffered as Cotton did. Yet, seeing the world through the funhouse mirror of racialism, she believes his suffering to be *hers*, and that of the privileged social milieu for which she speaks. The brutal experiences of the slaves in the antebellum, convict laborers in the Jim Crow era, etc.—all of this becomes part of the quasi-autobiographical marketing operation. Thus, throughout the *1619* series, as was the case in the earlier versions, Hannah-Jones uses first-person plural pronouns to insinuate herself in the past. This is a fairly typical excerpt:

We laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, and lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads, that crisscrossed the South. The relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of our bodies would help make Wall Street and New York City a financial capital of the world [emphasis added].

Or, as her narration puts it, through history "we forged a new culture of our own giving birth to ourselves." The "we" is all black Americans, among whom, the *1619 Project* would have us believe, social class does not exist. Billionaire Oprah Winfrey is no different from a black autoworker.

This is the unmistakable, mystical language of racial nationalism.

Among the world's myriad nationalist ideologies—all of which are essentially reactionary in the epoch of world economy, as Trotsky explained a century ago—black nationalism is *sui generis* in that it has never demanded a "homeland," outside of the stillborn "back to Africa" movement of Marcus Garvey in the 1920s and the brief agitation in the 1930s for a separate "Black Belt" nation in the South, a demand associated with the Stalinists of the Communist Party. By the 1960s, black nationalists had given up on such talk. Whether in the sermons of black Muslims such as Elijah Muhammad, or in the manifestos of militants such as the Black Panthers, or from the printing presses of the right-wing *Ebony* magazine, of which Hannah-Jones' intellectual shaper Lerone Bennett Jr. was executive editor, the agenda now was "cultural nationalism" and "black control of black communities." None of this challenged the status quo, and indeed worked hand-in-glove with

President Richard Nixon's plans to develop "black capitalism" as a means of diverting working class anger in the midst of the nation's last great strike wave, which raged throughout the 1970s.

The 1619 Project, which evolved from right-wing black nationalism, reveals all that remains after the long, pitiless process of historical distillation. Not a homeland, nor even "black control." The epigones of black nationalism want money—\$350,000 per person, to be specific, as we learn in the series' final episode, "Justice." The purpose of this payment, the documentary stresses, is not to resolve the enormous social inequality that has left about two-thirds of the entire American population living paycheck to paycheck. Its purpose is to resolve "the racial wealth gap." As Hannah-Jones explains it elsewhere, these reparations would be owed to all black people who identified as black in the census—herself and Winfrey included!

What is most extraordinary is that this is the only demand that Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project raise. In an earlier period, socialists had to compete against left-talking black nationalists. But in the 1619 Project there is no call for investment in public schools, hospitals, infrastructure, parks and museums. On the contrary, reparations would inevitably be diverted away from such forms of spending. There is no demand that taxes be raised on the very wealthy or on corporations. No call is issued that the enormous allocations of funding to the American military be redirected to social spending. Where are the furious denunciations of American militarism that once peppered the speeches of Malcolm X or Huey Newton? There is not the faintest echo of such "Black prophetic fire," as historian Cornel West has called it. Not so much as a peep of protest over the fact that the Biden administration spends more than half of the discretionary budget on the military, let alone a protest against the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens the survival of the planet.

In fact, the 1619 Project no longer even attempts to separate its racialist nationalism from American nationalism. It only asks for a special place within it. One result of this stacking doll of nationalism-within-nationalism is pronoun confusion. What, for example, does the word "our" refer to in the following, very typical passage from Hannah-Jones:

Without *our* idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts, *our* democracy today would look very different. In fact, *our* country might not be a democracy at all.

This pathetic endpoint for black nationalism was perhaps inevitable. The separatist dreams of its leaders always foundered upon the same intractable force that ultimately doomed the exclusionary plans of America's racist union bureaucrats: reality. There was never really any *objective* basis in American society for the division of white workers and black workers. Indeed, the indivisibility of their fate was already clear to Marx at the time of the Civil War. "Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where the black skin is branded," Marx observed a few years later, in 1866. From that time forward, the fundamental task has been to make conscious this reality, and unify not only white and black workers, but successive waves of immigrant workers—who again go unmentioned by the *1619 Project*.

Marx saw farther than early American socialists, who struggled to overcome, or to even identify, the class pressures that often deluded them into treating the question of race as something that could be dealt with *after* the class struggle, rather than as an integral aspect of it, as James Cannon later explained. The Russian Revolution, and the direct influence of Lenin and Trotsky, clarified matters. It invigorated an entire generation of black artists, musicians, and intellectuals associated with the Harlem Renaissance—also unmentioned by the *1619 Project*. More

fundamentally, through the Russian example, the advanced workers, white and black, learned that racial ideology was a critical aspect of the ruling class ideology—as it is today.

These political conquests of the last century remain. In the meantime, history has done its share of the work. If white, black and immigrant workers were already unified as one class, in an objective sense, in Marx's time, how much more so they are today. The Great Migration of the 20th century uprooted millions of blacks *and whites*, moving them from farm to factory, and South to North. The mass civil rights movement that swept away Jim Crow is inconceivable without this development. This great movement of people also prepared the further integration of the working class. Indeed, Hannah-Jones' own life testifies to this epochal change. Her father was born in Mississippi and transplanted to Waterloo, Iowa, where he married a white woman. Hannah-Jones makes nothing of any of it.

In the last half century, since the civil rights movement, the American working class has become more integrated than ever. More than that, even its most immediate struggles are more closely linked than they ever have been to those of workers throughout the world. Nothing will ever be gained by dividing workers against each other.



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