



# Pragmatic sociology: Theoretical evolvment and empirical application

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This special issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory* engages with a research programme – the ‘sociology of critical capacity’ or, in short, ‘pragmatic sociology’ – that is now increasingly gaining attention and popularity, as well as meeting critique, beyond its original academic context, France.<sup>2</sup> One of the main aims of this approach is to reintroduce a moral-political dimension into sociological research. As argued by one of its main proponents, Luc Boltanski,

[a] moral sociology should be understood as the attempt to reinsert, in the analysis of the action of persons in society, the reasons for acting and the moral exigencies that these persons give themselves, or want to give themselves, if not by way of ‘ideals’. (Boltanski, 2005: 20)<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, pragmatic sociology can be understood as an attempt at a renewal of the social sciences, not least in its reassessment of the relationship between theoretical knowledge as elaborated by the social scientist and the forms of theoretical knowledge implicated in social practice (cf. Dodier, 1993; Wagner, 1999: 342). As argued by another of the main contributors to the pragmatic approach, Laurent Thévenot, ‘Our concern is to contribute to the development of a science of social life, which does not suffer from this “*dédoublement*”, [that is], the splitting in two of the author, between the profession of naturalist researcher of society and that of political and moral philosopher’ (Thévenot, 2009: 39).

As is by now rather well known, this sociological approach emerged around the *Groupe de sociologie politique et morale* (GSPM) and found its most clear statement

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in what is probably its landmark publication *De La Justification* (1991), published in English as *On Justification* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Some of the main characteristics of the approach developed in the book include: the refusal of any external position for the social scientist and the assumption of an implication of sociological knowledge in social reality; the irreducible plurality of available practical-theoretical viewpoints in social reality; and the recourse to political philosophy as providing the systematic theoretical statements of knowledge forms used in social practices of justification (Wagner, 1999: 343).

The originality of pragmatic sociology lies not least in its attempt to situate itself between an emphasis on human agency (taking human agents and their moral capacities serious) and on structural features of social life (recognizing the supra-individual nature of forms of knowledge). In this, there is an attempt to retrieve the significance of political and moral philosophy for our understanding of social life in the common. In this, rather than separating sociological knowledge from moral and political philosophical considerations and notions of the common good, pragmatic sociology seeks to explore the moral dimensions of how people engage with the (social) world, and, in this, to reduce the gap between a 'neutral' sociological enterprise and the normativity of social action as well as a plurality of views of the common good available in society (Thévenot, 2009: 38–9). In contrast, then, also to the political-philosophical endeavour to come up with a singular or reduced set of principles for a society to be just, pragmatic sociology presumes a plurality of criteria of justification, related to a plurality of views of the common good, which are understood as in principle irreducible and between which no ultimate hierarchy can be identified (Wagner, forthcoming).

## A brief theoretical reconstruction

Pragmatic sociology developed not least in stark contrast to the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. One of the key moves in pragmatic sociology was to steer away from the problems of a structuralist approach, and abandon ideas of overdetermined social action as well as that of the external position of the sociologist. In other words, where in Bourdieu's critical sociology the emphasis was on the reconstruction of non-conscious, routinized forms of individual behaviour on the basis of 'habitus', dispositions, and the structuredness of the social world in general (in distinct fields), in pragmatic sociology the designation of aprioristic types of knowledge of the social world are eschewed and human action is always seen as deeply implicated in situations, where the latter are 'always in need of interpretation' (Wagner, 1999: 346). As argued by Thévenot,

[While] Bourdieu still anchored in different social positions the distinctions between symbolic dispositions, ... [the] pragmatists' differentiations like James' 'various types of thinking' or Hacking's 'styles of reasoning' are related to different modes of accommodating reality depending on the orientation towards the situation. The first kind of differentiation is linked to the disposition of the person while the other is related to the disposition of the situation. (Thévenot forthcoming a)

While the emphasis in pragmatic sociology is clearly on action or, more accurately, on situations or environments in need of interpretation, there is equally a structural or at

least situation-transcending element in the approach. The latter comes through in what is perhaps the element most widely picked up by other scholars, that is, the idea of a plurality of ‘orders of worth’ or ‘regimes of justification’.<sup>4</sup> Human agents interpret distinct situations in which they find themselves by means of reference to justificatory narratives (‘polities’) and devices or *dispositifs* (which, together with the ‘polities’, form ‘worlds’). As argued by Boltanski,

[O]ne sees persons, who, without forgetting their own interests – those interests on which sociology put all its emphasis – motivate their own actions, in which they put into practice their own sense of justice, and advance justifications. Just like all of us, they are, almost without interruption, inserted into chains of critique and justification, so that the person who finds him or herself under the reflectors of critique tries to justify him or herself and also asks his/her adversary to justify the criticisms he/she advances. Justifications and critique cannot [however] be just this and that, they need to be founded to acquire robustness. (Boltanski, 2005: 23)

The interpretative openness that follows from the assumption that the social world is always incompletely structured thus leads to the idea of an irreducible if not inexhaustive pluralism (cf. Benatouil, 1999: 383). Uncertainty or inquietude is seen as always present in the social world, and different forms of engagement with the world (Thévenot, 2006) as well as institutions as semantic structures (Boltanski, 2009) are ways to (temporarily) overcome uncertainty.

### Pluralism

Probably, one of the most significant implications of this is the abandonment of any strong, Durkheimian emphasis on a homogeneous, shared commonality in society.<sup>5</sup> Instead, central is the assumption of a rather profound indetermination of social life and human action as more or less continuous attempts to overcome uncertainty or inquietude. The justificatory narratives or ‘grammars of worth’ – which are specific resources that help in overcoming disputes and conflict – that Boltanski and Thévenot originally proposed are: the market order, the industrial order, the civic order, the order of inspiration, the order of fame, and the domestic order (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). In other works, they further elaborated on an ‘environmental order’ as well as a ‘network order’ (Lamont and Thévenot, 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

Disputes in the social world involve distinct ‘moral grammars’ or grammars of the common good. But, as argued by means of a very original move in pragmatic sociology, such grammars cannot be fully taken for granted in distinct situations of dispute, they need to be put to the test. Chains of critique and justification are thus not merely a discursive matter, but include a moment of confrontation with reality – the *test* – in which, by seeking recourse to devices (*dispositifs*) of both a material and a cognitive nature, and which are often institutionalized in one way or the other, the claims made can be verified in terms of their foundation (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). One could speak then of a model of ‘limited pluralism’, referring to a plurality of justifications that are commonly shared to various extents within a society (Boltanski, 2005: 25). In this, the importance of, and compromises between, different regimes can differ between societies.

But pluralism is not only proposed in terms of an imperative of public justification in social action. Since the social world cannot be reduced to situations in need of justification, the regimes of justification as elaborated in *On Justification* are situated in a wider context of regimes of action, which in Luc Boltanski's own development of pragmatic sociology juxtaposes regimes of dispute to regimes of peace (Boltanski, 2005: 27). In this way, pragmatic sociology is expanded into a wider theory of society and social action. The regimes of dispute and peace can be further broken down into regimes of justification, regimes of violence, regimes of routine, and regimes of love or agape (Boltanski, 2005: 29–30). Perhaps one could further add a 'regime of critique' to this diversification (Benatouil, 1999; Blokker and Brighenti, this issue).

Such a horizontal or public plurality of regimes of action is in certain ways paralleled, but also differently elaborated, by Laurent Thévenot's project to conceptualize plurality in a vertical or non-public sense, i.e., as the idea of different non-public regimes, or forms of engagement 'under the public', to which people relate in their actions. Thévenot has coined these forms of relating to the world regimes of engagement, or, a 'plurality of socially acknowledged ways in which the humans are committed to their environment' (Thévenot, forthcoming b: 1). This vertical plurality or differentiation distinguishes a variety of forms of engagement ranging from the familiar to the public, differentiating between a regime of familiar engagement, a regime of engagement in a plan, and a regime of publicly justifiable engagement (Thévenot, 2006; for a recent statement in English, Thévenot, forthcoming b).

A key dimension of regimes of engagement is the emphasis on the search by human agents for certainty and security. But there is, in this, an important acknowledgement of the dual nature of any engagement, i.e., on the one hand, the forms of guarantee that these regimes provide – involving what Thévenot calls 'closing one's eyes' – which, on the other, are at the same time a source of awareness of the sacrifice involved, and therefore of doubt and critique, i.e., involving 'opening one's eyes' (Thévenot, 2010b).

Recently, Thévenot, in collaboration with Nicolas Auray, has added a fourth regime of engagement, the regime of 'explorative engagement', which is in strong tension with, in particular, the regime of familiar engagement. While it is still based on the search for a kind of guarantee, here it consists in a search for novelty and the excitement of discovery (Thévenot, forthcoming a: 17). This regime is related to notions of creativity and innovation, and brings with it a different kind of relation with guarantee and certainty.

Thévenot has further complemented this plurality of ways individuals engage with the world with a plurality of 'different arrangements of commonality in the plural' or 'grammars of securing life together', that is, different ways in which forms of commonality between humans are constructed, or 'different ways of making the *first person plural*' (Thévenot, 2010a, forthcoming b; emphasis in original). Thévenot identifies a grammar of common affinities, a liberal grammar of individuals in public, and a grammar of plural orders of worth, differentiating respectively between references to common places, to individual choices, and to the common good (Thévenot, 2010a, forthcoming b).

### Critique

The plurality of interpretations of, and engagement with, the world is at the basis of the possibility of critique. The emphasis on the impossibility of creating a state of permanent

certainty or quietude with the world leads to a portrayal of the social world in which critique can always emerge. Critique emerges from clashes between different interpretations of the world in distinct situations. Conflict is looming when there is disagreement in a distinct situation over which world interpretation (or 'polity') is relevant and is to prevail. Conflict can also emerge in cases where there is agreement on how to interpret a situation, but in which the presence of elements which belong to other 'worlds' is denounced (identified as an illegitimate 'transport of worth' in the case of the undue presence of a positive worth, belonging to another world, and as the 'transport of deficiency' in the case of a 'handicap'). The presence of such elements debases the 'purity' of the situation (as, for instance, in the denouncement of 'undue' attention to personal relationships or localistic ties in the hiring of (academic) personnel, invoking the 'civic world' (equality) as well as the industrial world (skills) against the 'domestic world' (hierarchy, local ties)).

Critique takes then largely two forms in pragmatic sociology (as elaborated in particular in Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, and Boltanski, 2009). The first form is a corrective or reformist critique, in which the impure application of conventionalized or agreed-upon regimes of justification is denounced. The intent of critique in this case is to denounce injustice because of an incomplete or manipulated implementation of just principles. Indeed, the object of critique is 'justified by the same normative positions as those invoked by the critique' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 33). The upshot is that when such critique – 'critique internal to the city' [or 'polity', PB] (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 33) – is acknowledged, the existing conventions or interpretations of reality will be fortified. Thus, in the example of the selection of new (academic) personnel, the denouncement of the selection of a local candidate by reference to the basic principles of merit or skills possessed and of equality, when acknowledged, would lead to a strengthening of a civic-industrial compromise as the foundation of hiring practices, at the detriment of the domestic order of worth.

Reformist critique comes through in 'tests of reality',<sup>6</sup> in which the outcome is, however, not fully predictable, in that the critique raised might result in the confirmation and strengthening of the existing order, as mentioned above, but this can also be accompanied by an unsettling effect (*effet perturbateur*), which draws attention to instability and incongruence in the existing order. The latter occurs when a reformist critique makes evident latent contradictions (Boltanski, 2009: 161). What is more, with very different implications, critique might be circumvented through forms of displacement and refusal of acknowledgement.

A second form of critique, radical critique, takes as its object the collective of existing arrangements and proposes a different way of achieving a just reality. In this case, when a 'critique pertaining to another city' is successful, it will involve a shift in dominant arrangements and their justifications. Radical critique is related to a 'test of existentiality' – in the dual sense of a test (*épreuve*) as a form of testing and as a challenge (Boltanski and Honneth, 2009: 103) – which is situated on the 'margins of reality', and in this way offers a way to open up a 'pathway to the world', that is, to a non-institutionalized social reality (Boltanski, 2009: 163). In this, radical critique 'endangers the comprehensiveness of established definitions and puts into doubt the universal character of confirmed relations' (Boltanski, 2009: 164).

Whereas corrective critique is operating within the boundaries of the normal, radical critique is more fragile as it always risks being relegated to the sphere of the abnormal, as a deviation or aberration (Boltanski and Honneth, 2009: 85). In this sense, radical critique faces more of an uphill struggle to be recognized as critique – as a public form of denunciation – at all. The experiences of injustice or humiliation that are often at the basis of radical critique are difficult to generalize (*montée en généralité* in Boltanski and Thévenot's terms) as existing narratives do not easily dispose of a language to recognize such experiences as unjust. Radical critique is therefore often articulated through more creative media such as art and literature.

The recent elaborations of critique as found in Boltanski's work are complemented or extended and refined by (and in some ways clearly in tension with) Thévenot's recent explorations of critique in the context of engagement, in contrast to the public forms of critique that are conceptualized in *On Justification*. Thévenot focuses on forms of critique that are to a much lesser extent based on articulations in public or forms of 'commonizing'. In this, one source of critique as identified by Thévenot is related to the 'structural tyranny from one regime of engagement upon another', which boils down to the impeding of the engagement with one kind of good (one way of securing certainty) because of the engagement with another (Thévenot, forthcoming a: 19). Thus, in the context of the contemporary predominance of a kind of 'network capitalism' and related responsabilization of the individual (cf. Borghi's contribution in this issue), the regime of engagement with a plan (involving individual projects, responsibility, choices, designing a plan) tends to stifle the regime of familiar engagement, in which localized and personalized attachments to the world play a large role (Thévenot, forthcoming a: 19). But it can equally be argued that the contemporary emphasis on the regime of engagement with a plan, in particular in its close relation with a liberal grammar of commonality, obstructs the regime of publicly justifiable engagement (involving the various orders of worth and their promotion of different understandings of the common good). As already mentioned, the critique that is potentially evoked by these forms of 'tyranny' is, however, not a public form of critique (and might in some cases be the basis of what Blokker and Brighenti in this issue refer to as forms of resistance).

A second form of critique explored by Thévenot is that related to the denunciation of reification, objectification, and alienation. This form of critique attempts to unveil the reduction to, or closure of, a one-sided engagement with what in their fullness are two-sided engagements. Reduction or objectification results from the confusion of the side of assurance or 'quietude' with reality as such (and, by implication, the 'forgetting' of the sacrifice involved). In the case of public justification, this entails the objectification of the properties of beings, in the case of engagement in a plan, the reduction of a project to its functional dimension, and in the case of familiarity, the reduction involves engaging in objectified routines (Thévenot, forthcoming a: 22).

### *Comparative endeavours*

To conclude this concise discussion of some of the dimensions of the theoretical architecture of pragmatic sociology, it might be useful to briefly explore its comparative potential. The main focus of pragmatic sociology is on situations of interaction, from

which it could be deduced that there is, therefore, a strong micro-sociological dimension. At the same time, however, the approach has been applied to more macro-sociologically informed types of comparison in a worthwhile manner. One way to use the framework as elaborated in *On Justification* is to synchronically compare different societies and their predominant regimes of worth or cultural repertoires (cf. Thévenot, 2009: 49). This was precisely the objective of Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot in a comparative study of France and the United States (Lamont and Thévenot, 2000), in which they set out to explore the different weight distinct orders of worth have in both societal contexts, and the way these are applied differently. The idea of different regimes of justification, in this work – perhaps somewhat awkwardly – referred to as ‘national cultural repertoires of evaluation’, form the basis of the identification of significant differences in terms of relating to the public and the private, the common good and forms of solidarity, and the individual and the collective in these two democratic societies.<sup>7</sup> Thévenot has followed this study up with a second comparative endeavour, in this case explicitly focusing on regimes of engagement and constructions of commonality ‘under the public’ in France and Russia, in this showing very different ways of relating to the public in both societies.

A second type of comparison – a diachronic comparison – has been the object of Boltanski and Chiapello’s work on the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Here, the more explicit engagement is with the displacement of distinct orders of worth, as well as with the emergence of new orders, in relation to justification of (practices within) the capitalist economy. There is, in this, an explicit acknowledgement of the historical emergence and construction of distinct orders of worth. What also emerged from this work is, as briefly alluded to above, a further refinement of critique, and an attempt to revive a critical form of sociology (as more explicitly explored in Boltanski, 2009).

## **Overview: theoretical exploration and empirical application**

The pragmatic approach clearly provides inspiration for the further exploration of theoretical matters beyond the determinism of structuralist approaches as well as the optimism and reductionism of consensual approaches – and in its most promising mode, a renewal of a theory of society. But it also lends itself widely for the further engagement with empirical clarification, sociological comparisons, as well as the enrichment of existing empirical-sociological fields. This special issue aims to provide a small sample of both the theoretical development of pragmatic sociology (as elaborated in particular in the first article by Mauro Basaure and the second by Blokker and Brighenti, and to considerable extent, the third article by Ilana Silber) and of more empirically-oriented applications (the articles by Vando Borghi and Søren Jagd). The issue further attempts to give a kind of state-of-the-art view of some of the work within this recent tradition, not least by giving the word to the two most prominent exponents, Luc Boltanski (in an interview with Mauro Basaure) and Laurent Thévenot (in an interview with Paul Blokker and Andrea Brighenti).

Mauro Basaure investigates both Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition and Luc Boltanski’s contributions to pragmatic sociology with regard to the dimension of political praxis. In his view, in Honneth’s work, two axes are central: the moral-sociological

explicative axis and the historic-philosophical reconstructive axis. Whereas the first has to do with the moral dimension of social action, the latter engages with the larger, historical process of moral construction in which particular actions can be situated. Basaure interestingly emphasizes that the latter's dimension of moral learning is conspicuously absent in Boltanski and Thévenot's pragmatic sociology. In his view, the political-sociological dimension of collective struggle and access to formal politics is situated between the two axes of Honneth's work, but is not sufficiently theoretically developed. This is indeed where Boltanski and Thévenot's work seems to be more promising, according to Basaure, not least because of the absence of an idea of normative learning, and an acknowledgement of the intertwining of morally induced social action and the political dimension. Where Honneth's perspective can be seen to suffer from a dualistic separation of the moral dimension of action and the political, in Boltanski and Thévenot's approach, the moral and the political are part of a singular perspective.

In their contribution, Paul Blokker and Andrea Brighenti equally discuss the political dimension to pragmatic sociology, which has, until recently perhaps, not been at the forefront of the approach. The authors argue that a number of different dimensions of politics can be said to be relevant to pragmatic sociology – politics-as-justification, politics-as-distribution, politics-as-constitution, and politics-as-defiance – but that especially the latter two would need further engagement, refinement, and elaboration. As observed by Paul Ricoeur, the status of the political community within which regimes of justification gain their validity is never conceptualized in pragmatic sociology, at least not in the seminal *On Justification*. While situating the critical potential of pragmatic sociology within radical and pluralistic democratic theory, Blokker and Brighenti discuss the constitutive dimension of politics in terms of the constitutional, foundational dimension of political communities and the tension between the instituted and the instituting. Finally, they suggest that one way of empirically engaging with constitutive factors and the 'outer edges' of the instituted order is by means of analysing forms of defiance or critique, in terms of both explicit (dissent) and implicit (resistance) of the existing order.

In Ilana Silber's contribution, she explores new terrain by relating a sociology of morality, and a plurality of regimes of justification, with the role of (benevolent) emotions in practices of justification. Her article is an excellent example of furthering theoretical insights by means of exploring empirical intricacies of justificatory practices. Her focus is on what she calls 'civic anger', which entails as she argues a 'type of moral and political emotion', that is articulated, for instance, in the context of the philanthropic behaviour of elites. Silber makes a case for regarding civic anger as a form of justification that is not easily grasped within the currently theorized range of regimes of justification. Justification in the context of philanthropy implicates the industrial as well as civic worlds, but civic anger cannot be easily understood with reference to these 'known' regimes. In Silber's view, a renewed sociology of morality would need to pay close attention to the complex relation between emotions and justification in the social practice of interpretation, an attention that might lead to the delineation of a new regime, or at least a 'quasi-regime', of justification.

In Vando Borghi's contribution, the idea of regimes of justification is discussed in explicit institutional terms, that is, as shedding light on the way in which welfare

capitalism has been historically justified in Europe. His is an attempt to contribute to debates on the (im-)possibilities of critique in the current era of 'network capitalism' in which references to the common good have been marginalized by a predominant emphasis on individual responsibility and choice (related to what Thévenot recently has identified as the 'liberal grammar of individuals in public', 2010a). In other words, commonality is construed on the basis of a shared language of acceptable individual choices and life projects. In this, Borghi investigates the process of individualization in this light, in particular with reference to the devices of governmentality of activation and employability in the context of welfare regimes and labour market policies. It is Borghi's view that by focusing on such specific policy instruments one can detect deeper lying normative shifts in the normative structuration and justification of social policy as well as individual engagement with the labour market.

Søren Jagd focuses the attention in his contribution on the regimes of justification at work in organizational contexts. While organizational studies have in general taken into account what can be called 'competing rationalities', 'institutional pluralism', or 'institutional logics', Jagd argues that pragmatic sociology entails distinct emphases and insights that other approaches lack or overlook. His contribution starts with a comprehensive and fruitful investigation into recent studies of organizations that have used pragmatic sociology in their analysis. By way of the review, Jagd shows that pragmatic sociology helps shift attention away from a preoccupation with dominant logics or regimes of justification, as found in many institutionalist approaches, towards the dynamic plurality of regimes of justification as well as towards compromises between regimes. Organizational order and change are closely related to forms of justification and critique, according to this perceptive, and the former need to be understood in a more dynamic, processual way. According to Jagd, an important implication is that the intertwining of values and practices within organizational contexts needs to be studied more closely than has been done so far.

The issue concludes with two comprehensive interviews with Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, respectively. The interviews can be read as an introduction to pragmatic sociology for social theorists who are not yet familiar with the approach, in that ample room is given to an account of how and why the approach has developed since the 1980s by both Boltanski and Thévenot. But the interviews also offer a view on critical tensions, between Boltanski's and Thévenot's trajectories, but also between conceptual dimensions within the approach. What is more, traces of new horizons are touched upon by both Boltanski and Thévenot, indicating that pragmatic sociology still has quite some unexplored potential to be realized. The special issue hopes to be a modest contribution to the latter.

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### **Notes**

1. I would like to thank Laurent Thévenot for his insightful remarks on this Introduction.
2. This diffusion beyond the original, national context raises in itself interesting questions, for instance, that of the nature of the receiving end (as in the case of Germany, mostly through the

lens of critical theory, not least through Axel Honneth and the Frankfurter Schule). See in general on the reception of pragmatic sociology outside of France, Diaz-Bone and Thévenot (2010).

3. All translations are mine.
4. Among a growing number of different (inter-)disciplinary interests that can be found in the English literature are: the sociology of organizations (see Jagd, this issue), the sociology of law (Kostiner, 2003), political sociology (Blokker and Brighenti, this issue; Blokker, 2009; Eulriet, 2008), economic sociology (Latsis, 2006; Stark, 2006), sociology of the welfare state (Borghi, this issue), sociology of social services and public action (De Leonardis, 2009), cultural sociology (Silber, 2003), sociology of charity (Silber, this issue), local development and collective action (Allaire and Blanc, 2003), and even pragmatic sociology and literary studies (Dromi and Illouz, 2010).
5. As argued by Boltanski, 'the social world is a large muddle and not an ordered whole. To produce a collective is in these circumstances close to impossible; it is simply a miracle, even when one disposes of an optimistic view of humanity' (Boltanski and Honneth, 2009: 109–10).
6. In what Boltanski has specified as 'tests of truth', critique is absent, and the existing order is always confirmed (Boltanski, 2009: 160). 'Tests of truth' are then those tests that are to confirm existing institutions.
7. I loosely draw on this framework myself in an exploration of 'multiple democracies' and (elite) political cultures in a number of Central and Eastern European societies (Blokker, 2009).

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