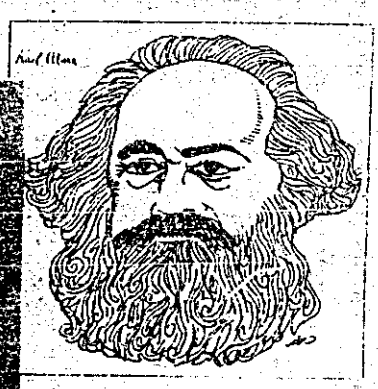
Luxemburg, Feminism and Marx

A DISCUSSION OF THE WORKS OF RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA



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off our backs

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Dear Friends,

We are reprinting the following review and commentary as an opening to a dialogue with other revolutionary feminists. We look forward to the much-needed discussion on the challenges facing the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1980s; please write us your thoughts. — Women's Liberation, News & Letters Committees

Luxemburg, Feminism, and Marx

Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution, by Raya Dunayevskaya, Humanities Press, 1983

The Marxist-Humanist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya begins the chapter entitled "Luxemburg as feminist," in her latest book on Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution, with a quote from Herman Melville: "... for original characters in fiction, a grateful reader will, on meeting with one, keep the anniversary of that day ... original ones, truly so, imply original instincts." Luxemburg, of course, is no fictional character; yet meeting her in the pages of this book is that type of experience that stays with the reader, both in one's thoughts and in one's daily sensuous encounter with the world -- this world, 1984, Ronald Reagan's America.

Listen to Luxemburg's definition of "being human," written in a letter to her friend Mathilde Wurm from a dreary German prison cell in 1916, where she had landed for her revolutionary opposition to World War I: "I'm telling you that as soon as I can stick my nose out again I will hunt and harry your society of frogs with trumpet blasts, whip crackings and bloodhounds -- like Penthesilea I wanted to say, but by God, you people are no Achilles. Have you had enough of a New Year's greeting now? Then see to it that you stay human.... Being human means joyfully throwing your whole life 'on the scales of destiny' when need be, but all the while rejoicing in every sunny day and every beautiful cloud. Ach, I know of no formula to write you for being human...."

Penthesilea was the Queen of the Amazons, and Luxemburg's identification with/ invocation of her in this letter is in the context of a blistering attack against both those socialists who had capitulated to the war, and also those who devised theories and excuses for the capitulators. Dunayevskaya uses this quotation as the frontispiece of the book, alerting the reader from the start that her discussion of Luxemburg will focus both on Luxemburg's revolutionary passion, revolutionary humanism, and on her feminist dimension, till now disregarded by Marxists and feminists alike.

not a feminist per se

Luxemburg herself stayed away from an identification as a "feminist." There is one letter from her in 1911, a year of intense anti-militarist activity in which the women of the German Marxist party, the Social Democracy (SPD), were the most militantly anti-war as well as opposing the opportunism of the party leadership; Luxemberg writes to Luise Kautsky, "Are you coming for the women's conference? Just imagine, I have become a feminist!" But on the whole, starting from her entrance on the German scene

in 1898, as a young woman of 27, when the male leaders of the large and prestigious SPD wanted to shunt Luxemburg aside into the "Woman Question," Luxemburg, in refusing to be pigeon-holed, didn't raise Women's Liberation as an independent question, apart from the "class struggle."

Yet Dunayevskaya's careful tracing of Luxemburg's feminist dimension is no scholastic matter of isolated quotes; nor is it a psychological reconstruction of what Luxemburg "really" felt. Rather, it is that today's Women's Liberation Movement has given Dunayevskaya new eyes and ears to see both Luxemburg's greatness and her shortcomings; it is that for Dunayevskaya, the dialectics of revolution -- the centerpoint of Luxemburg's passion -- can never again be kept in a separate compartment from Women's Liberation. At the same time, the fact that today's feminists have largely ignored Luxemburg's contributions to revolutionary theory and the relationship between theory and practice -- because she "wasn't a feminist" -- speaks volumes on the separation that has rigidified between feminist theory and theory of revolution.

masses in motion

Luxemburg is best remembered for her appreciation of the spontaneous creativity of masses of people in revolutionary action, and for her disputes with Lenin, critiquing him in 1904 for an overly-centralized concept of the Marxist party, and, while hailing the November 1917 Russian Revolution, warning of the imperative need for the practice of an open, socialist democracy after seizure of power. Both these questions have been given new meaning in our day by the contemporary Women's Liberation Movement, which has so forcefully raised the validity of revolutionary creativity outside "party" structures, the need for non-elitist forms of organization, the problematic of "What happens after the revolution? Are we to be confronted merely with a change in leadership and power, or will the revolution be deep and ongoing and practicing new human relationships?"

today and tomorrow

It's just such an expansive, human vision that informed Luxemburg throughout her life. "I am a land of boundless possibilities," she wrote, and that sense of opening on to the world, discovering and creating the world, never left her. Dunayevskaya describes Luxemburg as "an original character... (who) instead of being simply 'one in a million,' combines yesterday, today and tomorrow in such a manner that the new age suddenly experiences a 'shock of recognition,' whether that relates to a new lifestyle or the great need for revolution here and now." (p.83)

It is that urgency for social revolution that animated Luxemburg's vision, action, thought, and speaks to us today, for surely social revolution is needed if we are ever to end this nightmare world. It was the dialectics of the 1905 revolution in her native Poland -- when the masses in motion were a "land of boundless possibilities" -- that drove Luxemburg to new heights, in everything from actual participation in the revolution to her pamphlet summing up those experiences, The Mass Strike, the Party and the Trade Unions. It is that pamphlet that earned her the reputation as a "theorist of spontaneity": "... in the mass strikes in Russia," she wrote, "the element of spontaneity plays such a predominant part, not because the Russian proletariat are 'uneducated,' but because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them." (quoted, p.18)

And it was the dialectics of revolution that informed her feminism, in everything from her urg-

ing the socialist women to maintain their autonomy from the International Socialist Bureau, to her personal life, her break-up with her lover Leo Jogiches. "I am only I once more, since I have become free of Leo," she said. Dunayevskaya writes: "... the revolution is an overwhelming force that brooks no 'interference' from anyone. Luxemburg needed to be free, to be independent, to be whole." (p.92)

failing to follow through

And yet... both on the "Woman Question" and on spontaneity, Luxemburg failed to follow through and develop her insights. Thus, by 1910, when she was mercilessly exposing the opportunism of the SPD leadership and they responded with vicious, personal, sexist attacks (in private, but doubtless known to her), Luxemburg studiously maintained what Dunayevskaya calls a "tone deafness" to male chauvinism. Moreover, she remained a member of the party she saw degenerating: "The worst working class party is better than none."

Luxemburg considered herself a loyal follower of Marx in not allowing anything to take precedence over the "class struggle" or the unity of the working class party. It is true, Dunayevskaya points out, that some of Marx's own writings on Women's Liberation were unknown to Luxemburg, from his 1844 Humanist Essays where he singles out the Man/Woman relationship as the most indicative of the need for a total Humanist revolution, to his 1881-82 Ethnological Notebooks, in which he discusses both the freedoms and limitations of women under "primitive communism." But even where Luxemburg did know Marx's position, as on the "National Question" -- Marx saw national struggles for liberation as a potential independent revolutionary ferment, whereas Luxemburg considered them reactionary -- even here she maintained that she was "really" practicing Marx's "true" position. Dunayevskaya argues that it is just such a narrowing of the openness and expansiveness of Marx's Marxism that has been the bane of the Marxist movement since Marx's death.

one from many?

This holds as well for the question of organization. With a limited conception of Marxism as "theory of class struggle," Luxemburg had no ground in her thought for transcending her contradictory position of hailing spontaneity and exposing the party leadership -- and yet organizing no new tendency around her views. In Part III of the book, on Marx, Dunayevskaya takes up Marx's 1875 Critique of the Gotha Program, in which Marx critiqued the unity program of the "Marxists" and the LaSalleans, arguing that unity, if based on some "lowest common denominator," can open no new road to freedom. His forewarnings were proven correct when, by 1914, the SPD had so gone off the rails of freedom -- for the purposes of creating a "mass party" -- as to capitulate to the German war effort. By 1919, it was the SPD leadership that crushed the German Revolution and aided the assassins of Rosa Luxemburg.

Luxemburg had critiqued that leadership as early as 1910, but her thinking, too, was mired in the fetish of the need for a unified party. One of the greatest achievements of the contemporary Women's Liberation Movement, Dunayevskaya argues, is the break with the 1960s Left which told women to wait till "after the revolution" to raise feminist demands. But has the revolutionary potential inherent in that break been fol-

lowed through? Dunayevskaya considers this problematic in "The Task that Remains to be Done: The Unique but Unfinished Contributions of Today's Women's Liberation Movement," by taking the reader on an exciting historic journey in which we see Women's Liberation yesterday and today, as both Individual and Universal, unseparated from the Black dimension in both Africa and America, and from revolution and revolutionary ideas, including those of Marx. These pages are alive with individual women, from Maria Stewart, Margaret Fuller and Sojourner Truth in the nineteenth century, to Ding Ling, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Maria Barreno in the twentieth. And in the category "Individualism and Masses in Motion," Dunayevskaya points out that "the individuality of each woman liberationist is a microcosm of the whole, and yet... the movement is not a sum of so many individuals but masses in motion." (p.83) Here she shows us everything from the March 1917 Russian Revolution initiated by women textile workers on International Women's Day, to the 1929 "Women's War" in what is now Nigeria, to Black women in the South of the 1950s and women in Iran, 1979.

practice to theory

What Dunayevskaya calls the "movement from practice to theory" in each historic period is shown in its highpoints and achievements; yet it is the "movement from theory" that has failed to develop those highpoints as ground for the future. Dunayevskaya critiques Women's Liberationists for too easily accepting the "male" version of a truncated Marxism that obscures not alone Marx's writings on Women's Liberation but the totality of his philosophic methodology, a "living dialectic" that demands to be recreated on the ground of the "new passions and new forces" of our age.

It is thus that Dunayevskaya turns to confront the full scope of Marx's work, "From Critic of Hegel to Author of Capital and Theorist of 'Revolution in Permanence'"; her treatment here is of a different order than any standard treatment of Marx. It is not alone her discussion of Marx's 1881-82 Ethnological Notebooks (only transcribed and published in the 1970s) that is new -- though that, certainly, is telling, as she puts to rest the notion that Engels' Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (supposedly based on these notes of Marx) represents the views of both men. Just as she contrasts Engels' unilineal view of historical progression to Marx's multilateral perspective, so she shows how Marx was ever conscious of new subjects of revolution, whether the Black dimension in America, the peasantry, women, or what today we call the Third World.

challenging ground

"How total, continuous, global must the concept of revolution be now?" (p.107): this is the question that underlies the whole book, the setting of a revolutionary philosophic perspective without which the activism of the 1930s may end in yet one more soured or aborted revolution or revolutionary moment. "Without such a vision of new revolutions, a new individual, a new universal, a new society, new human relations, we would be forced to tailend one or another form of reformism.... The myriad crises in our age have shown... that without a philosophy of revolution activism spends itself in mere anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, without ever revealing what it is for." (p.194)

This book spells out no "blueprints," but by integrating history and theory, individualism and masses in motion, revolution and Marx's philosophy of revolution, it lays challenging ground for addressing

the questions we confront in our activity, whether on form of organization, the relationship between Women's Liberation and other forces of revolution, or the relationship between social revolution in America and "solidarity work" with the Third World. The three parts of the book, on Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx, each have their own integrity, and yet are so tightly intertwined that when we reach the penultimate chapter, on Marx's concept of revolutionary organization -- we are confronted once again with Luxemburg's breakup with Jogiches following the 1905 revolution!

What is so exciting about Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution is precisely this unity of Individual and Universal, of past and present; "history" is always live history-in-the-making, with "revolution" not as a slogan or abstraction, but potential and possibility of a creative humanity, with women as revolutionary Subject adding new dimensions to the very meaning of "freedom" and "socialism."

"Being *human* means joyfully throwing your whole life 'on the scales of destiny'": this book challenges us to that, and not only as bravery, but as thinkers, as feminist "thought-divers" working out a philosophy of revolution to help us in our movement to realize social transformation, reach for freedom, in our lifetime.

by Michelle Landau

More on Raya D. (from a reader...

Dear Carol Anne Douglas,

I have been wanting to write you for some time. Your latest three reviews in the July 1984 oob have finally pushed me to do so. I have been a fan of yours for two reasons. First is that I admire that you have such an avid interest in feminist theory, that you can read what is often written in academese with ease and get right to the heart of the author's argument. The second reason is that you are "opinionated," that is, you don't pretend that you are objective in the bourgeois sense of that word, you have a point of view that you neither hide nor think is invalid. Your reviews often read to me as a dialogue with the authors of the books. It is precisely that quality about your reviews that has made me want to write to you so often -- because I too have a point of view that has validity, and I often disagree with both you and those you are reviewing. (If you want to know about me, I am a signer of The Fourth World Manifesto, I appeared in the pages of oob in a write-up you printed on the Feminists Against Militarism Conference held outside Kalamazoo, Michigan, in September, 1981, and you can find my columns in the Marxist-Humanist paper, News and Letters.)

I too had many disagreements with Allison Jaggar's book, Feminist Politics and Human Nature, most of all her insistence on truncating Marx. It is that which leads to her mistake of thinking that the concept that "individuals are the best judges of their own interests" is liberal. While individual freedom is certainly not a concept that Russia or China would embrace, it is Marx's concept. In 1844 he wrote, "We must above all avoid setting up 'the society' as an abstraction opposed to the individual. The individual is the social entity." And in volume three of Capital (hardly the young Marx) he said, "human power is its own end." Freedom can never be abstract; if the individual is not free, there is no freedom. For example, freedom, as you point out, is very concrete to East Europeans. You write in your review of Jaggar's book that "a number of East European Marxists have written since the 60's that alienation is possible under socialism (or some state controlled forms of it -- the existing ones)." You further state that "socialist feminists do not advocate that kind of socialism. But their theory does not account for its existence." You then go on to say that "some unorthodox Marxists- such as Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, have gone further towards a critique of existing authoritarian 'socialist' systems than socialist feminists have so far."

don't forget Raya

I wish you would have mentioned the one woman revolutionary philosopher whose theory not only takes into account the "experiences of hundreds of millions of people" in Eastern Europe, but whose theory does account for the existence of oppression in so-called socialist countries. In the 1940s Raya Dunayevskaya worked out the theory

of state-capitalism from a revolutionary perspective using the categories in Marx's Capital and Russia's own statistics. Why are we pretending in 1984 that that hasn't happened?

To begin to try and correct that, I would like to look closely at the latest article by Raya Dunayevskaya: Marx's "New Humanism" and the Dialectics of Women's Liberation in Primitive and Modern Societies published by Praxis International, Vol. 3, No. 4, January 1984; available from Women's Liberation -- News and Letters Committees, 59 East Van Buren, Room 707, Chicago, IL 60605 for 50¢ plus 30¢ postage. In the concext of your remarks about the unfreedom of peoples in Eastern Europe, it is important to note that Praxis International is a Yugoslavian dissident journal that asked Ms. Dunayevskaya for this article. I make that point because you rightly point out in your Jaggar review that the existence of alienating "socialism" "severely limits the appeal of socialism as a political rallying point for Americans." Yes it does, even more so for East Europeans, but that does not mean we give up what can be a path for liberation.

some hard work

Towards the end of this short (thirteen page) highly condensed article, Raya Dunayevskaya introduces us to the concept of Marx's "hard intellectual labor" -- what she has elsewhere called "thought-diving"-- and in the same paragraph challenges her readers "to do the hard labor required in hearing Marx think." What becomes clear in working one's way through these pages is that Ms. Dunayevskaya too requires of us some hard intellectual labor right here and now.

What is clear is this labor is well worth it if one is reading because she wants to totally transform this alienating, sexist, racist, capitalist society, and if she is willing to entertain the thought that a revolutionary feminist philosopher, like Dunayevskaya, can reveal what in Marx's Marxism can help give a direction to the Women's Liberation Movement today.

who is Raya?

Before proceeding, it is important to introduce the reader to who Raya Dunayevskaya is. The Praxis International article says very little: "Raya Dunayevskaya has written extensively on Marxist-Humanism. Her latest book is Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution. A collection of her writings are on deposit at the Wayne State University Labor Archives." What is most important to this reviewer is the fact that Dunayevskaya is a revolutionary, the founder of an organization (News and Letters Committees in 1955), unseparated from the development of a philosophy of liberation she calls Marxist-Humanism. In fact, it is one or a combination of these four points -- woman, revolutionary, founder of an organization, and Marxist-Humanist -- that may have compelled not only bourgeois publications to purposely try to ignore her writings; but what are we to think of the feminist presses refusal to give her ideas a forum?

It is the very character of Marx's "New Humanism" and the Dialectics of Women's Liberation in Primitive and Modern Societies as a summation as well as development out of the body of Ms. Dunayevskaya's works, that gives this article both its richness and its requirement for "hard intellectual labor."1 But since its purpose is to help point a direction for the transformation of this society to one based on new human relations, which, as we know, is no easy task, we want to accept the challenge and

dive not only into Marx's thought, but to be able to hear this unique woman revolutionary thinking as well.

Marx & feminism?

What is key about the form of this article is that Dunayevskaya wants to look at "Marx's Marxism as a totality." Our age is the first to be able to do this, as works that have been previously unpublished or ignored are now being brought to light. It is the very compactness of the article that helps us to get a feel for Marx's absorption in women's struggles for freedom throughout his life. Dunayevskaya begins with the end, the Ethnological Notebooks written in the last year of Marx's life, as she wants to concentrate on his last decade to show Marx "rounding out forty years of his thought on human development and its struggles for freedom which he called 'history and its process, revolution in permanence.'" Dunayevskaya then goes back and begins again in the 1840s. There she shows us that when Marx spoke of "the direct, natural, necessary relationship of man to man is the relationship of man to woman," that became part of the ground for his philosophy: "Marx's concept of the Man/Woman relationship arose with the very birth of a new continent of thought and revolution the moment he broke from bourgeois society."

In the 1850s we see Marx's involvement not only with the working women and girls (some as young as nine) who broadened the 1853-54 strike in Preston, England, to include the question of education; but as well, Marx's defense of Lady Bulwer-Lytton who was thrown into a lunatic asylum because she "dared not only to differ with the views of her conservative, aristocratic-politician husband," but she dared to do so publically.

Dunayevskaya's reading of Marx's Capital gives new insights into what a feminist interpretation of Marx could mean for us today. Thus Marx's 80-page chapter in Capital on "The Working Day" is not seen by Dunayevskaya as simply description. Rather "Marx devoted that much space to women in the process of production and arrived at very new conclusions on new forms of revolt." (My emphasis.) In that same decade of the 1860s, Marx is trying to make sure that women are a part of the International Workingmen's Association both as rank-and-filers and as leadership -- Mme. Harriet Law was elected into the General Council. Marx as well points out that "great progress was evident in the last Congress of the American 'Labor Union'..." because "it treated working women with complete equality."

Yet this listing of facts does not do justice to either Marx or Dunayevskaya's work. What is key about both the form and title of this article is "Dialectics." Thus it is not only that the lengthening or greater intensity of the working day gives birth to "new forms of revolt." That methodology permeates the whole article as Dunayevskaya shows us Marx's revolutionary Dialectic, and thereby weaves one of her own. She is showing us Women's Liberation as a part of "history and its process." It takes "hard intellectual labor" indeed, to fully grasp this; and yet, it is precisely this -- Marx's revolutionary dialectic, his methodology -- that can help give a direction to the Women's Liberation Movement today. To Dunayevskaya the relationship of the philosopher to actual history shows Marx "transforming historic narrative into historic reason." She concludes, "That is the dialectic of Marx's seeing, not merely the statistics he had amassed, but the live men and women reshaping history. Nowhere is this more true than concerning the so-called 'Woman Question.'" (Dunayevskaya

always puts quotes around "Woman Question" both because that is what it was called in Marx's time as well as to show her considerable dissatisfaction with that as a title for all the great new ideas and developments women's fight for freedom has always raised.)

Engels / Marx

The main concentration in this article, as well as in her work Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution, is on Marx's recently published (1972) Ethnological Notebooks. Here the concern seems at least twofold. One is Dunayevskaya's emphatic assertion that Friedrich Engels is no Marx and that his unilinear work, Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (supposedly based on Marx's Ethnological Notebooks) was "damaging... to future generations of Marxists...." But it is not only "Marxists" she is concerned with: "we were all raised on this (i.e., Engels') concept of women's liberation as if it were, indeed, a work of Engels and Marx." Dunayevskaya aims "to disentangle Marx's views on women and dialectics from those of Engels." She does this by taking us on a short trip (to take the longer journey see Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution) through Marx's eyes to primitive societies. There we see what I think is her second emphasis, that unlike Engels' unilinear view of history (first matriarchy, then private property bringing with it women's oppression), "Marx traces dialectical development from one stage to another and related it to revolutionary upsurges so that economic crises are seen as 'epochs of social revolution.'"

Engels saw only the greatness of women's freedom in primitive societies and after the onset of private property he saw only women's oppression. Engels described the effect of private property on women as "the world-historic defeat of the female sex." Marx, on the other hand, saw both women's relatively greater freedom as well as the origins of women's oppression right within the primitive commune. After class society, where Engels saw only "defeat," Marx saw unceasing revolt. What Dunayevskaya is showing us is the dialectic at work where, even in the study of anthropology, Marx is able to see the duality in each situation, the oppression as well as the revolt, the possibility of new paths to freedom.

Dunayevskaya is not the only one to have taken up Marx's Ethnological Notebooks as part of the writings of his last decade. But that must be pointed out is that no one has looked at that last decade as has Dunayevskaya. An example is a new work edited by Teodor Shanin, Late Marx and the Russian Road -- Marx and 'the peripheries of capitalism', which contains writings by Shanin, Haruki Wada, Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan.[2] Whereas they debate many of the questions Dunayevskaya develops, e.g., the extent of the continuity between the young and the older Marx -- women as revolutionary transformers of society are nowhere to be seen. To see the relationship of Marx to the dialectics of women's liberation, one would have to study Raya Dunayevskaya and read Marx for oneself. Certainly this article is a good beginning -- short, concise, difficult enough to make one ask questions, and so very clearly revealing a genuine passion for transforming society that it will make you want to take the plunge and do the "hard intellectual labor" needed to hear both Marx and Dunayevskaya thinking.

Terry Moon

Footnotes on next page

[1] Raya Dunayevskaya's body of work is extensive. Besides her latest, Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution (1982) what is instructive to see is the development of women as a revolutionary category since the emergence of Women's Liberation as a Movement in 1967. Her first work, Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 until Today (1958), while not making a category of women, singled them out in each freedom movement discussed, for example, the milkmaids who started the Paris Commune of 1871: "Although the men had not yet come into the streets on this early morning, and although the women were not armed, they held their own. As in every real people's revolution, new strata of the population were awakened. This time it was the women who were to act first." In her second work, Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao (1973), Women's Liberation is a category. Not only is the Women's Liberation Movement developed in chapter 9 as one of the "New Passions and New Forces" of our age, but "two drafts of the entire work were submitted for discussion and editing to special black/red, youth, rank-and-file labor as well as Women's Liberation conferences." Even though it is in the last chapter where women are taken up so directly, chapter one, "Why Hegel? Why Now? Absolute Negativity as New Beginning," gives some of the most profound insights into the relationship of a philosophy of human liberation to actual movements for freedom.

[2] See Michael Connolly's review, "Marx's Last Writings on Russia: New Paths to Revolution and Philosophic Continuity," News & Letters, Vol. 29, No. 5, June, 1984.

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