

The government of unemployment and the rhetorical devices of European social policy

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Introduction

These reflections are based on work carried out by our research team over the last few years (Crespo and Serrano, 2005; Serrano, 2009; Crespo, Revilla and Serrano, 2009; Crespo and Serrano, 2011; Prieto and Serrano, 2011; Fernández, Martín and Serrano, 2012; Serrano, Fernández and Artiaga, 2012; Serrano and Martín, 2012). Our field of research is psychosociology and our particular area of interest the discourse of European social policies².

We are interested in political discourse as a performative practice, an activity which produces and transforms social reality and, in particular, as an ideological and moral practice. It is ideological insofar as it defines what is considered real, normal and moral, that is, insofar as it seeks to define what should be done.

The European Union is a rhetorical institution par excellence. One of its main activities is the discursive production of a vision of political and economic reality which becomes, or aims to become, *doxa*, that is, unproblematic and indisputable knowledge. Over and above its capacity to exercise legal-type control, the European Union is above all a regulatory institution of a rhetorical kind.

The European Union's rhetorical activity is particularly evident in the area which interests us here, namely social policy. This activity is governed by the so-called open method of coordination, the essential *modus operandi* of which we have examined elsewhere (Jepsen and Serrano, 2005; Serrano and Crespo, 2007; Serrano Pascual, 2007). It is a particular mode of regulation whose regulatory capacity derives not so much (or not only) from its ability to impose rules, as from the power to name and

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describe the problems facing our societies, that is, from its capacity to impose *doxa* or common sense regarding the best way to fight unemployment.

We use the concept of *doxa* to refer to knowledge which is considered socially unproblematic, and which is taken as the starting point for argumentation. This usage draws on the work of Perelman (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1988) and Bourdieu (1979, 1980, 1987). The sociological concept of ‘common sense’, as used, for example, by Alfred Schutz (1967) is very closely related to the concept of *doxa*, invoking as it does the notion of reality - the obviousness-, but also its collective character, in that it is shared by a group of people (in Spanish: 'sentido común', common knowledge/sense), as well as a normative, ethical and ideological dimension (in French: le 'bons sense', the ‘good’ knowledge; in Dutch: 'gezonde verstand', “healthy knowledge”).

European institutions play a key role in the diffusion of a new *doxa* or ‘common sense’ with respect to the world of work. European institutions have had a major ideological impact on the discursive construction of the vocabulary used to refer to unemployment, thereby determining the way the problem is discursively framed. New concepts designate what unemployment is and new ways of understanding the problem, as well as legitimizing the strategies used to combat it.

Within this discourse, we will focus on a rhetorical device which we consider especially important for the analysis of the rhetorical technologies used in European discourse: paradox. We use paradox in one of the more classical senses of the term, that is, in the sense of an internal contradiction which leads to the affirmation of something which at the same time is negated.

Although the term paradox (or paradoxical) is widely used in the social sciences, it is generally used in a generic way, rather than as an analytical category. In sociology, Max Weber employed the term paradox when analyzing the structure of human action, above all in modernity (see Symonds and Pudsey 2008). In psychology, paradox is a key concept in the double bind theory that Gregory Bateson and the Palo Alto group (Bateson *et al.* 1956; 1963) developed to explain the pathogenic process of a certain type of communication within families, in which an explicit message of acceptance is accompanied by an implicit message of rejection. The question of paradox has also figured prominently in the writings of authors as different as Marx, Unamuno, Hegel

and others, but in a different sense to that in which we employ it here. For us, paradox would not be so much a consequence of surpassing common sense, or the effect of a less ambiguous definition of uncontested ideas, but rather a reflection of the rhetorical (and hence contested) nature of discourses, and hence of the existence of different perspectives and points of view.

We, in contrast, analyze paradox from a dialogic perspective, in line with the approach proposed by authors such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Valentin Volosinov (1986), who understand the sign as a space in which different, sometimes opposing, understandings of isotopic fields confront each other. Polysemy, therefore, is a reflection of the existence of different points of view and of different social positions. The sign is semantically incomplete, as it represents the materialization of a conflict between social groups, and is therefore, open and inconclusive. All concepts encompass a range of meanings which are the expression of a multiplicity of points of view.

The starting point for the analysis of paradox is, therefore, this polysemy. The inherent polysemy of political discourse is reduced to a monologue when its dialogic and contested character are eliminated, turning it into a technical and authoritarian discourse in which the management of unemployment (in this case of social policies) becomes a unambiguous process of engineering of the subject. Polysemy (or *poli-doxa*) is transformed in discursive terms into paradox, as the result of a rhetorical exercise in which the clash between different, conflicting points of view ends in the subversive colonization of an interpretative framework in order to recodify it under a new meaning, inducing the rhetorical (and caricaturesque) inversion of the proposed codes.

We are interested in paradox because we believe that it illustrates some of the most interesting rhetorical and ideological mechanisms at play in the semantic and rhetorical operation that currently shapes the way we understand, discuss and think about the social question. The paradox at the heart of social policies lies in the internal contradiction inherent in affirming that which is negated (or negating that which is affirmed), a figure which in other interpretive contexts can take the form of irony. In the case of social policy, the *leitmotif* is that of activity, independence and flexibility, concepts constructed in opposition to passivity, dependence and rigidity. This shift is possible thanks to the growing hegemony of a psychological discourse that has permeated business management and which, by extension, is used in political

management. In this way, for example, the social right to unemployment benefit, a major achievement of democratic struggle within Welfare States, comes to be associated with dependence and passivity. The paradox of European social policies is expressed, therefore, by implicitly reducing and subverting the explanation for the situation of unemployment experienced by many citizens, making responsibility for this a personal rather than a social question. In this way, social problems are transformed, paradoxically, into personal problems.

This is achieved through a shift in the meaning of a series of symbolically highly charged concepts, such as solidarity, autonomy, liberty and responsibility. These are concepts which have played a key role in the legitimation and institutionalization of social protection in industrialized societies, now converted into paradoxes: it appears that they refer to the same thing (solidarity, responsibility...) when in fact they are proposing quite the opposite to what was previously considered obvious and undebatable.

The key to this paradoxical transformation lies, as we see it, in the reduction of the social level of explanation to an individual, psychological level. It is a process we have termed political psychologization (Crespo and Serrano, 2011): the conversion, as noted above, of social problems into problems of an individual or psychological type.

This rhetoric leads to the depoliticization of social policies, a process which takes the form of clinical practices of engineering of the self. In this way the Welfare State becomes a therapeutic State, focused on managing individuals' adaptation to the new conditions of the labour market, and thereby playing a key role in the production of a new type of subject. Psychologization is the neo-liberal version of the individualization inherent to modernity: it is a moral discourse in which structural, social problems are turned into personal, clinical, psychological problems, such as risk aversion and lack of self-confidence or motivation.

In this way, paradoxically, liberty becomes the starting point for self-restraint: the thing that makes me free restrains me; that which strengthens me makes me more vulnerable; that which makes me autonomous leads to my subordination.

A new European discourse

The principal shift in the European discourse on social policy occurred at the Luxembourg Summit in 1997. Since then, a whole series of different new concepts have been put forward in a bid to explain the situation of unemployment which affects young people in particular, as well as the means necessary to fight it. Key elements of these new social semantics include concepts such as employability, flexicurity, and more recently, entrepreneurship.

All of these are uncontested and unquestionable, but also paradoxical, concepts. They are unquestionable – they form the basis of a *doxa* -, in the sense that the opposites are obviously unacceptable, at least according to the common sense of modern democracies: rigidity as opposed to flexibility, passivity as opposed to activity, dependence and heteronomy as opposed to independence and autonomy. Obviously, no one would want to be passive rather than active, dependent as opposed to an entrepreneur, or rigid as opposed to flexible.

Consider an example from 2000, an emblematic year in the production of European rhetoric insofar as it marked the beginning of a new millennium:

"Thus, a comprehensive and coordinated policy approach to social inclusion should go far beyond the redistribution of prosperity by means of **passive benefits** paid to those left out by economic and social change- the challenge is not so much to increase redistribution but to manage our economies and societies in a way which maximizes the potential for full **participation**, so as to reduce the waste of human resources and to achieve a fair distribution of opportunities. More than ever, encouraging and supporting a forward looking **adaptation** process that prepares all citizens for change offers the best prospect for the strengthening of solidarity and social cohesion..." European Commission (2000; p.8)

Here we can already see the essence of the proposal to replace the Welfare State by a diffuse Participation State, then emerging as a new rhetorical cliché. The key to this change lies in the way in which the (active) exercise of social rights has come to be

seen as a passive type of behaviour, while the individual (passive) adaptation to unemployment and precarious employment has become an exercise in participation.

The main ideological characteristics of this paradoxical discourse

We can identify two complementary types of strategies at work in this discursive shift, the first syntactical and the second semantic. The former can be considered syntactical in the sense that they are characterized by an alteration in the order and line of argument. The latter, in contrast, are characterized by changes in the meaning of the concepts.

1) Syntactical mutations

We can discern three parallel, and yet interconnected, processes:

a) The annulment of earlier conceptual oppositions

The principal opposition or contradiction which is annulled is that existing between economic and social interests. This probably constitutes the core of neoliberal ideology: economic arguments - and interests - are invariably considered to take priority in the management of social policies. They are not just the most important, but the only arguments, as revealed by the imposition of austerity policies in the Southern European countries.

The official discourse defends the notion of the complementarity of economic arguments based on the principle of viability (the fight against the fiscal crisis) and those based on the principle of social equity (the fight against social exclusion)

"The Union has today set itself a **new strategic goal** for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of **sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs** and greater social cohesion. ... This strategy is designed to enable the Union to regain the conditions for **full employment**, and to strengthen regional cohesion in the European Union. The European Council needs to set a goal for full employment in Europe in an emerging **new society** which is more adapted to the personal choices of women and men." (European Council, 2000)

This supposed complementarity can in fact turn into a contradiction, since the measures (good quality, personalized, offering real alternatives) needed to promote labour market participation in fact require an increase, rather than a reduction, in public expenditure. Thirteen years after the Council of Lisbon, it is evident that the new European society is fragmented, and that the new strategy is purely economic-financial, suggesting that any talk of full employment and better jobs is mere sarcasm.

Running parallel to this process is the tendency to give increasing social policy weight to the factors of differentiation between individuals rather than to those which make individuals equal, thereby promoting greater differentiation within the workforce between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor/unemployed. In this way, the “social question” comes to be structured around divisions within the workforce rather than around the division between capital and labour.

“The knowledge-based economy is increasingly challenging the adaptability of companies and the workforce and setting **new demarcation lines between the haves and the have nots in terms of skills, qualifications and competencies.**” (European Commission, 2000)

"The policies of the Union and Member States' reform programmes should also aim at "**inclusive growth**". Inclusive growth means building a cohesive society in which people are **empowered to anticipate and manage change** and consequently **to actively participate** in society and the economy. Member States' reforms should therefore ensure access and opportunities for all throughout their lifecycle, thus reducing poverty and social exclusion through removing barriers to labour market participation, especially for women, older workers, young people, people with disabilities and legal migrants." (European Council, 2010).

b) the reversal of the order of established causalities

Closely related to, and in fact a continuation of, the mechanism described above is the inversion of causes and effects (or of the victims and those responsible). This can be seen, for example, in the tendency to present the beneficiaries of social protection not as the victims and product of labour market flexibility, but rather as one of the causes of rigidities in the labour market. Social benefits thus become incentives; social rights are

replaced by psychological incentives; the failure is not of the labour market, but rather of personal motivation.

"**Benefits**, tax and training systems –where that proves necessary- must be reviewed and adapted to ensure that they actively support the employability of unemployed persons. Moreover, these systems should interact appropriately **to encourage** the return to the labour market of those inactive persons willing and able to take up a job. Particular attention should be given **to promoting incentives for unemployed and inactive people to seek and take up work...**" (European Commission, 2001b, p.11)The same applies to unemployed people, who are no longer the “victims” of the market, but rather it is the market which is the victim of unemployment, as increasing social expenditure does not create jobs, but leads to both inflation and unemployment.

"Guideline no. 19: Ensure inclusive labour markets, enhance work attractiveness and **make work pay for job-seekers**, including disadvantaged people and the inactive through: active and preventive labour market measures..., continual review of the **incentives and disincentives** resulting from the tax and benefit systems, including the management and conditionality of benefits and a significant reduction of high marginal effective tax rates, notably for those with low incomes, whilst ensuring adequate levels of social protection..." (European Council, 2005, p. 25)

At a time when wages are falling and, in the Southern European countries in particular, young people are working for free simply to remain active, the paradoxical use of the oft-repeated expression "make work pay" comes across as particularly ironic. Again, the social problem of precariousness is transformed into a psychological problem of motivation, at the same time as rights are transformed into incentives.

c) the creation of new dichotomies

While, on the one hand, dichotomies established in earlier models of social policies are being eliminated, on the other, new dichotomies are being put into place. This applies to the active/passive dichotomy.

“(social protection) systems need to be adapted as part of **an active welfare state** to ensure that work pays, to secure their long-term sustainability in the face of an ageing population, to promote social inclusion and gender equality, and to provide quality health services.” (European Council, 2000)

“Benefits for citizens and society would accrue from enhanced mobility of workers between enterprises. **Workers will be more inclined to take risks** associated with job transfers if benefits are adequate during **transition periods** and if prospects for new and better jobs are real.” (European Commission, 2007, p. 14)

The emphasis on the opposition between active versus passive (at the level of action), is linked to the opposition independent-dependent (at the level of the subject). At the economic level, "active" policies are, in fact, very passive in terms of job creation. In turn, the model of subject (worker) behind these policies, that is, a subject who is active, rational, a self-starter and reflexive, requires, more than ever “passive” measures to enable him/her to acquire the decision-making autonomy with which to organize a life project. The emphasis is on the obligation to participate in the labour market and to accept the options on offer (externally motivated subject), while, on the other hand, there is a fostering of the notion of individualisation and respect for the self-definition of the life project (self-initiated subject).

“The system of **financial incentives is one of the main determinants of participation in the labour market** ... The balance between income from work .. against income in unemployment or inactivity determines the decision to enter and to remain on the labour market” (European Commission, 2003, p. 11)

These systems need to be adapted as part of an **active welfare system to ensure that work pays**” (European Council, 2000, p. 9)

“Workers in the digital age therefore need to be ICT literate, highly skilled and have a high degree of personal autonomy and mobile and ready for continuous training.” (European Commission, 2000, p. 14)

“More generally, Europe’s population and young people in particular, must have extensive access to new basic skills- they must be helped to develop a capacity

to learn and to resolve problems; they need an appreciation of science and technological skills, they will need to be able to use information technologies, to develop a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and to be active, free and responsible citizens.” (European Commission, 2000, p. 11).

At the same time, work becomes a prerequisite for an individual's autonomy, but this then becomes normative and constraining and is moralistically presented as a duty.

“Employment has become on average less stable and less certain than in the past, and more dependent on high skills and adaptability.” (European Commission, 2000, p. 13)

Paradoxically, the further removed workers are from the labour market, the stricter the norms become. What, one might ask, is the point of reinforcing the work norm when there is a shortage of employment? Work is thus promoted less as an interplay of rights and duties than as a disciplinary instrument.

2) Semantic changes

Semantic changes represent the other side of the coin of the syntactical changes described above. Such alterations are giving rise to a major process of transformation, at the level of discourse at least, of three of the central concepts in relation to which the “social question” has gathered strength and expression in modern societies: the notion of unemployment (a problem to be combated); the Welfare State (the legitimate instruments for the fight); and citizenship (the notion of the potential public subject of these measures).

a) The notion of unemployment

The *notion of unemployment* is simultaneously dependent on two questions: the definition of the economic situation and the diagnosis and interpretation of the causes of the problem of unemployment.

With respect to the first question, it can be seen that a discourse is emerging in which the economic situation is defined as being in a state of flux. In the face of technological, economic and social change, presented as given and obvious, the “need” for social and

institutional modernization (structural reform, more training in new technologies, etc.) is considered equally obvious. Accordingly, this notion of modernization appears to be the “natural” response to economic change and globalisation. This “naturalisation” of the process makes it seem as if it is written into the natural order of things, beyond the sphere of human volition. It is in this way that the expression the “knowledge society” comes to designate, not a political choice, but the technical management of change. The social model defended in the past is now presented as a factor inhibiting adaptation to change in two ways: economically, because it increases the costs of production, and, morally, because it promotes dependency.

“**Technological advances** and economic globalisation **have altered forever the nature of work and employment** ... On the whole, **employment today is less stable and more uncertain** than in the past, **and adaptability** and high skill levels **are more important.**” (European Commission, 2000b)

“**Work in successful businesses** is no longer the same as in the old industrial model... instead **it requires flexible and adaptable workers** with a range of skills.” (*idem*)

The passage of time is beyond our control, as it is unconnected to human action. The clock can be stopped, but time carries on passing. The passage of time makes the threat worse, so intervention seems to be an urgent necessity.

“in a changing world Europe **cannot stand still.**” (European Commission, 2005, p.3)

The economic laws are naturalised as autonomous processes. Political action consists, therefore, not of questioning the economic situation, but of guaranteeing optimal conditions for economic adaptation and competition.

“We have yet to put in place the **structures needed** to anticipate and **manage better the changes** in our economy and society.... ” (European Commission, 2005, p. 4)

The discourse of the European institutions is contributing to the naturalization of the demands of the market, making *proactive adaptation* an unquestionable value. Political

options are presented as mere responses to economic pressures, thus encouraging the apolitical management of social conflict. At the same time, we can observe a significant terminological shift in relation to unemployment. This is no longer conceptualized in terms of lack of employment (and therefore, lack of financial resources), but is rather understood in terms of lack of employability:

“The employability of a person is her/his ability to find a niche in the labour market. Employability encompasses more than just training: it also provides individuals with **a better understanding of change**, of the need for mobility and of the means to upgrade skills. In short, it means that **individuals have confidence in their own ability to adapt to change.**” European Commission (1998)

Accordingly, the dichotomy driving state action is not equality/inequality but social inclusion/exclusion. Rather than exploitation, it is the notion of exclusion that mobilizes solidarity.

b) *Concept of the Welfare State*

This reformulation of the notion of unemployment also plays an important role in the transformation of the *concept of the Welfare State*. Paradoxically, in the new discourse social rights are identified with passivity and dependence.

“these systems need to be adapted as part of an **active welfare system to ensure that work pays.**” European Council (2000).

“by **removing** obstacles and **disincentives** to take up or remain in a job.” European Council (2001).

“The Strategy has brought a shift in national policy formulation and focus-away from managing unemployment, towards managing employment growth.” European Commission (2002).

“Reforms in tax and benefit systems and their interaction, so that they promote participation in the labour force and tackle poverty and **unemployment traps**, and increase labour demand and participation, in particular of those with low earning prospects.” European Council (2003).

The rhetoric of the new Welfare State transforms, paradoxically, the meaning of welfare. Unemployment is no longer an injustice but a trap, social benefits are not a social right, but a (psychological) incentive, and the public system, the Welfare State, is no longer conceived as the guarantor of rights but as a disciplinary state. The issue is no longer “to pay work”, but “that work pays”.

From a Welfare State geared to the equitable distribution of wealth (outcomes) we are moving in the direction of a Welfare State focused on the equitable distribution of opportunities (providing a similar point of departure) in accordance with a principle inspired by the idea of a meritocracy. Its purpose is not so much to supply work as to promote the employability (promotion of technical, procedural and ethical competences), flexibility (workers who are mobile, interchangeable and multi-skilled) and creativity (in the service of market competition) of workers. This means that employment policies are increasingly focused on labour supply (employability) and not only, or principally, on the demand side (creation of jobs via macroeconomic policy). From this perspective, the purpose of social policy is to make labour more flexible, better qualified, available and adaptable.

The notion of “security” is no longer understood as “protection against risk” but rather as the “capacity to adapt to change” by means of a process of continual learning. Accordingly, the function of the Welfare State is no longer to protect the citizen from the risk (or from social risks) inherent in a market economy but to forestall risk, that is to provide individuals with the tools required to improve their personal capital (employability) in order to facilitate their adaptation to an economy in a state of flux. The problem to be combated is not so much the shortage of jobs as the lack of employability.

“Employability: combating long-term unemployment and youth unemployment, modernising education and training systems, active monitoring of the unemployed by offering them a new start in the field of training or employment (before reaching six months of unemployment for every unemployed young person and 12 months for every unemployed adult), reducing the numbers dropping out of the education system early by 50% and deciding on a framework agreement between employers and the social partners on how to open

workplaces across Europe for training and work practice.” European Council of Luxembourg (1997).

“**Security (...)** is about equipping people with the skills that enable them to progress in their working lives, and helping them find new employment. **It is also about adequate unemployment benefits to facilitate transitions.** Finally, it encompasses training opportunities for all workers, especially the low skilled and older workers.” (COM (2007) 359 final, p.5).

“the delivery of lifelong learning ... lay[s] the foundations for productive human resources equipped with core and specific skills and enable[s] people to adapt positively to social and economic change. The development of an employable labour force involves providing people with the capacity to access and reap the benefits of the knowledge-based society...” European Commission (2001)

c) *Notion of citizenship*

The third aspect of these changes in the vocabulary of social intervention is the *notion of citizenship*. The concept of social citizenship which structured the principles of social intervention, according to which subjects were protected from the market, gives way to a notion of economic citizenship based on participation in the market. This economic citizenship not only implies the worker's unconditional availability for the market but also requires that the worker offer proof of this availability. As such, this paradigm of intervention is based on a moralistic notion of work that regards it as a *duty*. Work comes to be seen as the prerequisite for access to citizenship, implying a paradigmatic change in relation to earlier notions of citizenship and in relation to the means of exclusion and criteria for access to it. Rather than citizenship being linked principally to the idea of social and political participation, this notion of citizenship focuses on the idea of economic participation.

“... action should concentrate on the following priorities: attract and retain more people in employment, increase labour supply and modernise social protection systems,... Raising employment levels is the most effective means of generating

economic growth and promoting socially inclusive economies whilst ensuring a safety net for those unable to work.”(European Council, 2005, p. 24)

This shift changes the meaning of the social question. The question is no longer how to guarantee resources and security of livelihood, but rather how to foster economic *participation*. The reference to solidarity (collective responsibility) as legitimizing public intervention has been replaced by a new emphasis on individual responsibility. This principle of invoking individual responsibility concedes legitimacy to the compulsory character which is a feature of some intervention programmes. This is justified on the basis of the moral (and hence universal) principle deriving from the duties contracted by every individual with the state.

Conclusions

The principal paradox of European discourse on social policy is achieved through the reduction of social explanation - and intervention – to psychological or individual terms. This is the psychologization of the social, whereby social problems are transformed into personal problems, not only because they are experienced by particular individuals, but because the origin of, and solution to, them are seen as depending on the individual, and more particularly, on their motivations and attitudes. These motivations and attitudes are not considered to be fruit of interdependence, but rather of unilateral social influence.

We are witnessing not so much the replacement of the old discourse by a new, different one, but rather a paradoxical interpretation of the classic discourse of social solidarity. Notions such as activity, autonomy, solidarity, flexibility, unemployment and so on, are reconstructed as moral demands on the subjects.

This paradoxical discourse is performative in nature. The main consequences of the paradoxes of European discourse on social policy have a number of different dimensions. First, they imply the transformation of the political subject: from citizen into client. The exercise of social rights is not linked to an individual's condition as citizen, but is rather recompense for appropriate behaviour.

Secondly, these discursive shifts imply a transformation of the social contract and of solidarity (in the Durkheimian sense of the term). The autonomous (individual) subject

whose autonomy was founded on the recognition of interdependence (that is, as an interdependent subject), gives way to a (neoliberal) self-contained subject. And, the key to the destiny of the self-contained subject lies entirely within herself.

Thirdly, these developments imply a modification of the concept of social responsibility, through the individualization of responsibility. This serves to dissocialize the causes of social exclusion and vulnerability, transforming the analytical framework for thinking about the issue, as political analysis gives way to more individual or moral explanations (the civil obligation of all subjects to take responsibility for themselves).

In sum, notions of solidarity and social justice give way to therapeutic intervention, as this paradigm of intervention is characterized by focusing its attention and intervention on changing individuals' behaviour, motivations, and attitudes, rather than on establishing the necessary political conditions for a just redistribution of wealth, thereby challenging the very principles behind solidarity in European society.

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