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THE PHILOSOPHICAL WORTH OF ‘LIBERAL’ PEACEBUILDING

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Abstract
The concept of Liberal Peacebuilding is often associated with the failure of pushing liberalisation in war-torn failed states: the practice of liberal peacebuilding as a liberal project instead of a peacebuilding effort. The essay starts with breaking down the basic premises of a liberal peacebuilding and its ideological drive. Then, it identifies and evaluates the critics and alternatives to liberal peacebuilding. The essay sees that the implementation of fixed standard peacebuilding packages in vastly different scenarios and countries is the consequence of practicing liberal peacebuilding as a liberal project. This essay argues that liberal peacebuilding is worth saving if it recognises itself as an unfinished project, and instead advocates peacebuilding efforts that are more concentrated as a (and in showing) technical solution rather than an ideological impulse. As such, the essay proposes the prioritisation of maintaining stability in a post-conflict state, through concentrating on ensuring the specific case-per-case technical solutions, often which is attributed to institutional foundation to ensure the deliveries of collective aims and interests of local society.

Keywords
Peacebuilding, liberalism, republican peacebuilding, institutional capacity, positive freedom.
INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Roland Paris wrote an article titled “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding”, a rigorous defence on the oft-criticised notion of liberal peacebuilding. Affirming the liberal framework as the only worthwhile reference for rebuilding post-conflict societies, Paris concludes with the argument that in order to achieve security, threats and violence inside war-torn countries can only be dispensed with by building states that implement political and economic liberalisation, a democratic system of governance and market-oriented economic growth (Paris, 2010).

The term peacebuilding can be understood, in general, as efforts to prevent or curb hostility inside a state (Barnett et al., 2007; Paris, 2010). For a liberal state, it is within their interests—or as how it is framed in some cases, duty—to carry out the liberal peacebuilding. Such apparent drive is motivated by the assumption that pushing for the liberalisation of a state would in a way guarantee security (Barnett, 2006). The objective is to replace the old, weak, fragile, hostile state into a friendly, open, and stable one—with minimum state intervention and the hand-over of political power to its people, forever thankful to their saviours. However, that is not often the case, as liberal optimism is often not rewarded and is often criticised both in implementation and conceptual level.

As Alex Bellamy and Paul Williams (2005) point out, the idea of “liberal peace” behind liberal peacebuilding is more often about creating “liberal polities, economies, and societies”. Liberal peacebuilding is then associated with the perpetuation of societal fragmentation and conflicts inside post-conflict societies unprepared for the demand of neoliberal open economy, resulting only in the “reproduction of hierarchies of power due to the structural constraints of neoliberal market relations” (Chandler, 2010: 140). The high degree of criticisms mounted against liberal peacebuilding warrants discussion whether it is worth saving.

This article sees criticisms of liberal peacebuilding as centred on the implementation of liberal peacebuilding as mainly a liberal project: viewing it as a quest for Western liberal countries in promoting or enforcing conditions in a “failed state” by fitting it in the prevailing neoliberal idea (and thus, regime) of how to gain peace and prosperity. I view the pursuit of peacebuilding as a liberal project as the main reason for its stagnation, one that has rendered it largely ineffectual. As would be outlined further below, I nevertheless argue that the ideological background of a “liberal” peacebuilding should not be faulted. In saving liberal peacebuilding, this article calls for viewing liberalism as in itself, an “unfinished business”—that is, a recognition of liberalism as
philosophy that harbours variegated value(s) that potentially contradicts or tempers one another.

This article attempts to trace the philosophical worth of liberal peacebuilding by first briefly delineating the basic premises of a liberal peacebuilding and the belief that it would lead to lasting peace, especially in relation to Roland Paris’ defence. The second section identifies and provides a survey of contending perspectives, evaluating critiques and attempts to provide alternatives to liberal peacebuilding. Next, the article delineates how the strength of liberal peacebuilding lies in how the liberal philosophy itself nurtures clashing values that temper one another. The assertion that as a practice liberal peacebuilding is more a liberal project than a peacebuilding effort is argued on the basis of the prevalent implementation of fixed standard packages in different countries. This article contends that liberal peacebuilding is worth saving as long as it remains cognisant of its “unfinished” nature, and advocates for peacebuilding efforts that focus more on technical solutions rather than operating mainly on ideological impulse. As such, liberal peacebuilding should scale down its ambition and outlook.

**DISCUSSIONS**

**The Prevailing Premises of Liberal Peacebuilding**

In “The End of History” (1989), Francis Fukuyama asserts that Western liberalism represents the pinnacle of modern society, “the ultimate evolution” of modern states. Fukuyama believes that liberal values have become the pinnacle of human civilisation and the standard of modernity. Based on the same optimism, a key assumption in liberal peacebuilding is to associate liberalisation with stable and lasting peace (Paris, 2010). This idea is rooted in Immanuel Kant’s conception of perpetual peace. Kant believes that peace can be achieved when states establish and uphold three things: democracy, trade, and international institution (Russett, 2010; Desch, 2008).

*Democracy* demands a state to be transparent to the people, therefore restricting it from adverse actions as it is supposed to represent the whole nation. This notion is embodied in the democratic peace theory, which proposes that—as history suggests—democracies rarely fight each other (Maoz and Russett, 1993; Morrow, 2002). This is due to liberal prescription for restrained state actions, the upholding of compromise and cooperation as core values, ultimately the trust among liberal states as they accede to the same system and values.

Proponents of liberalism believe *trade* will promote interdependence. Hence, a liberal state is accustomed to cooperation as well as having the realisation that states need
each other to fulfil their needs. International institution allows states to exchange information and build trust among each other, reducing misunderstanding in the process. A liberal state can then be understood as characterised by its open markets, limited state intervention, democratic system, support of individual freedoms, as well as tendency to favour cooperation and compromise (Poku and Therkelsen, 2013; Katznelson and Milner, 2002; Paris, 2010).

Meanwhile, peacebuilding can be understood as efforts in building a modern state that fulfils its basic function: control and representation over society. Control over society includes the legitimacy to the use of force as well as bureaucratic arrangement with capacity to extract, control, and regulate resources from society (Barnett, 2006). Two elements can be inferred from this, as stated by Michael Barnett (2006), the degree of the state and the kind of state. The degree of the state refers to its instrument to control, or in other words, the state’s capacity. The kind of state refers to the principles that are practiced throughout the structure of the state. A liberal peacebuilding can be seen as implementing “movement towards democracy, markets, and the rule of law” to curb hostilities inside a state (Barnett et al., 2007).

Fearing the formation of a predatory state, the main goal of liberal peacebuilding is to create a limited state with strong society that can restrain the state (Barnett, 2006). Adherence to Kant’s principles manifests in the impulse for liberal states to spread liberal values in the hope to guarantee security and peace. Reflecting unbounded optimism, it is within the Western liberal states’ interest to promote liberalism in war-torn countries. However, as Barnett et al., (2007) note, the very belief results in peacebuilders practicing greater attention to “the kind of state being built”, rather than the depth of the peacebuilding itself.

**Liberal Peacebuilding: Critiques and Alternatives**

Peacebuilding, I argue, can be measured more by its failures rather than its successes. Recent track records of liberal peacebuilding missions have not been pretty. The continuing violence in Iraq (SIGIR, 2013), for instance, has invited criticisms upon the effectiveness, validity and legitimacy of a liberal peacebuilding effort. Paris (2010) states that practical efforts from peacebuilding often do not actually address the source of hostility. Policymakers often carry out actions like calling for elections or rolling out economic reforms while ignoring other factors that are actually the root cause of hostility, such as the absence of institutional mechanisms established to resolve disputes or strong

Barnett (2006) argues that seeds of further conflict might be planted as liberal peacebuilders push fragile states into compression of decades worth of radical transformation in the space of just few months. Attempt to hold election—which permits competition/rivalry to come to the fore—in the early phase of democracy might further aggravate conflict (Jarstad and Sisk, 2008). There are also critics that problematise how peacebuilding enforces standardised liberal “modernity” without deep consideration of the natives (Mac Ginty, 2015), termed by Paris (2010) as “local ownership”.

Peacebuilding is defined closely through delimitation of a stable and legitimate state; it elucidates a state’s failure by way of its inability to fulfil its basic function. Michael Barnett (2006) and Selby (2013) warn that the idea of a legitimate (or failed) state should not be decided by Western audience, as it is an “epithet of social consensus with the appropriate process and collective aims within the state itself”. Paris (2002) and Duffield (2007) further point out criticisms of liberal peacebuilding as being a form of a “mission civilisatrice”, a continued impulse of imperialism from the past or reiteration of the belief that it is European power’s duty to improve people's life abroad.

A number of alternatives have been proposed in the attempt to challenge liberal peacebuilding. Jeffrey Herbst (in Rotberg, 2003) would go so far as to advice to “let the states fail”, as he believes in letting political authority build itself in the more real and achievable arrangements. Jeremy Weinstein (2005) argues to let recoveries run without foreign intervention and let the distribution of power within the state plays out naturally, what is termed by Mac Ginty (2008, p. 159) as a “plural peace”. Goodhand and Walton (2009) talk about giving attention to the history of the region, who the people are, and what fits them.

Barnett (2006) offers the term republican peacebuilding as alternative, based on the republican political theory that employs republican principles of representation, deliberation, and constitutionalism in establishing stability inside a state. This alternative emphasises the language of community and the people by promoting the sense of belonging in deliberation (Barnett, 2006). Local knowledge and participation are listed as the fundamental thing that is missing in the case of U.S. failure to foster Iraq’s stability (Larry Diamond, in Barnett, 2006). For Barnett (2006), republican peacebuilding proposes priority attention towards institutional foundations for a stable state by
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distributing political power in factions, as well as using proper means, taking into account
the interests of the people, to achieve collective aims. What this provides is a modest
accountable vision, different from the idealistic and instructive social engineering of the
liberal peacebuilding.

Proponents of liberal peacebuilding model, led by Roland Paris (2010: 338),
however, have retorted by calling to “save” the idea of liberal peacebuilding from
“exaggerated backlash, scepticism, and even cynicism”, which can lead to a form of
ignorance that allows for a state of “lawlessness, predation, disease, and fear”. In his
article, Paris (2010) suggests at least four points of defence. First, peacebuilding has
always been, in large part, a “post-settlement” feat instead of a “post-conquest” one,
meaning that it is not closely related to forcible entry. Second, it is an overstatement to
compare liberal peacebuilding to old imperialism, which clearly is meant for empowering
the country of origin. Third, liberal peace needs to be defined in its rightful sense; Paris
claims that a liberal peacebuilding is always conducted on the grounds of permission.
Fourth, critics should also pay attention to the real positive effects of the peacebuilding,
even if absence of conflict does not equal perpetual peace. To conclude, Paris (2010, 357)
states that “strategies not rooted in liberal principles would likely create more problems
than they would solve”. Liberalism remains to be the prevailing model of a modern state,
recognised in universal terms and embodied in international institutions.

Paris argues that criticisms of liberal peacebuilding only amount to the technical
levels, such as depth, use and distribution of resources, preconditions for peacebuilding,
considerations for policy, and conduct (Paris, 2010). Paris further states that even the
alternatives, such as Barnett’s republican peacebuilding, are actually still within tenets of
liberal peacebuilding. This means, as he argues, that there is nothing wrong with the
ideology itself.

One thing that Barnett fails to emphasise in his republican peacebuilding model is
“the necessity of state”, which better reflects the need of the indigenous society than type
of governance. Liberal peacebuilding has a specific bias which directly flows from its
Kantian roots, that is, favouring “limited state” as the solution. The problem in liberal
peacebuilding is that it relies on democracy, whilst the continuity of democracy needs
economic support and bigger role of the state. Departing from this problem, Paris appears
to have failed in understanding Barnett’s proposition when he argues that the republican
peacebuilding is still within the conception of liberal peacebuilding (Paris, 2010). A
democratic system and a market-oriented economy seem to be part and parcel of Paris’
definition of liberal peacebuilding. Looking deeper at the internal division within liberalism itself, this packaging would prove problematic when translated into policy or technicalities. This should not be so, since within liberalism itself there are deep internal divisions, which showcase how it is, as a philosophical foundation, still in fact riddled with debates on how best to translate the importance of individual liberty. There exists no single solution or view in liberalism. In other word, it is unfinished.

**Liberal Peacebuilding as an “Unfinished” Business?**

Paris’s fault possibly stems from his strict association of individual freedom and accountable government (liberal values) with the promotion of liberal democratic governing system, market oriented economic growth, and minimum state power or governance (liberal solution). Paris (2010) argues that individual freedom cannot be supported by non-liberals and that there is no alternative to liberal peacebuilding. However, employing constitutional and political “fixes” in pursuit of securing a democracy has proven to be troublesome in a divided society like Iraq (Wolpe & McDonald, 2008). Learning from a study on South East Asia, the difference between effective governance among countries lies in their institutional capacity in contrast with government types (Kuhonta, 2008). I believe that in ensuring stability, regardless of form of government, the key is to provide key leaders with the appropriate tools that can help them secure their collaborative capacity (Wolpe & McDonald, 2008). Building on this observation, I thus find it problematic that Paris confounds the liberal principle values with the rigid technical solution that he prioritises. First and foremost, this is because Paris’ solution can only represent one strand within liberalism.

Paris’s packed definition of liberal peacebuilding, I argue, bypasses internal contradictions within liberalism. As Katzenelson and Milner (2002) argue, there exist deeply seated tensions among scholars of political science as regard to the problem of how to manage democratisation and liberalism together. This is because efforts for one have often clashed with the other: What counts as disruptive social forces in liberalism is actually empowered by the expanding democracy. Doyle keenly acknowledges this internal division within liberalism in his seminal 1983 text on liberal legacies in foreign affairs.

Doyle (1983, 207) notes that liberalism is faced with a dilemma when it comes to the reconciliation of its three sets of liberal rights. First, “liberalism calls for freedom from arbitrary authority, often called ‘negative freedom’” (Doyle, 1983, p. 206). Second,
“liberalism also calls for those rights necessary to protect and promote the capacity and opportunity for freedom, the ‘positive freedoms’” (Doyle, 1983, 207). Third, the right for democratic participation or representation that works to guarantee the previous two (Doyle, 1983, p. 207). Reconciling the three presents a dilemma as one right potentially clashes with another. “The right to private property, for example, can conflict with equality of opportunity and both rights can be violated by democratic legislation” (Doyle, 1983, p. 207).

In this respect, to quote Bruce Cumings (1999, p. 286), “The triumph of the liberal program does not mean the end of history because modern liberalism is itself a heterogeneous, contested, and deeply unfinished business.” Similarly, Doyle (1983, p. 207) contends, “[t]he liberal tradition has evolved two high roads to individual freedom and social order; one is laissez-faire or ‘conservative’ liberalism and the other is social welfare, or social democratic, or ‘liberal’ liberalism.” Both reflect that liberalism may come either in the form of laissez-faire or social democracy. Paris’s definition suggests a liberal peacebuilding model based on laissez-faire. If we consider the contradictions within liberalism, the definition for liberal peacebuilding could be moderated by highlighting elements of social welfare. Mark Duffield (2010, pp. 64-65) suggests that even in developed states, especially in life-risks situations, “welfare bureaucracies and the support of critical infrastructures promote and protect life within mass consumer societies. As a generic form, this developed-life is characterised by its chronic dependence upon these bureaucracies and infrastructures”. Torres (1998) states that the development of a welfare state is important in fulfilling societal needs or “reconciling conflicting demands”. Positive freedom appears in various welfare programmes such as education or healthcare. This shows that manifestation of freedom has variations. They who emphasise positive freedom would suggest for bigger size of state with extensive bureaucracy and development of infrastructure. In liberalism, state can be “powerful” if the goal is for social welfare.

While the deep tension in liberal projects is that they often regard the state as a source of problem—indicated by their visions for minimum governance (Poku and Therkelson, in Collins, 2013)—if we take a step back to scrutinise debates on liberalism and its implementation, liberalism does have within it a variant that supports strong state. Hence, a state that can legitimately channel the contention among its people to political debates through democratic mechanisms and adopt a different approach towards the “positive freedom” away from the market orientation, may finally emerge.
Statebuilding as the Unfinished Episode of Liberal Peacebuilding

This article sees that liberal peacebuilding as shaped in the mould of those liberal “projects”. A major question arises: how is it possible for a state to be created with “projects” when it is in fact, a realisation of politics that contains sustained and institutionalised rule of “real interests and real clashes of interests” (Huntington, in Chandler, 2006: 479). The big challenge to liberal peacebuilding, then, is to admit that every effort to form or create a state needs to ensure that existing institutional structure can accommodate resistance, dissent and the perpetual struggle in its people. At this point, the liberal peacebuilding is worth saving as long as it acknowledges its own limitation or imperfection. As in creating a vibrant democracy and increasing the capacity for a nation to think and act liberally, a state needs to have strong institution (Barnett, 2006), I highlight that there is a need to put focus on the importance of strong institution as foundation of any state. This article argues that as liberalism itself is an “unfinished business”, liberal peacebuilding is logically an “unfinished business” as well.

The real merit of Barnett’s republican peace model lies in the insight that the technical solutions offered by liberal peacebuilding tend to fail because it made the “limited states” criteria as compulsory. Richmond (2006) claims that peacebuilding is about building emancipatory peace based on social welfare and justice, showing that making a “strong state” is supposedly the nature of peacebuilding. Big projects need strong state institution. There is nothing wrong with the liberal peacebuilding principles. The problem comes when it is being practiced strictly as obligations such as to hold elections or implement a market-oriented economy.

Therefore, it is important to prevent liberalism’s tendency to be disciplining, rationalising and generalising imprudent vehemence (Hume, in Desch, 2008), instead of employing it as a real technical solution as needed. The basic liberal principles should be kept, but when it comes to creating solution in peacebuilding, it has to be technically relevant. This is important because even the creation of a democracy also needs the role of the state. In other words, liberal peacebuilding is worth saving when it pays more attention to the development of effective state as necessary institution, instead of serving the ideological impulse to impose liberal grounds.

This article suggests for more attention to be given in liberal peacebuilding talks towards prioritising the establishment of strong state institution in peacebuilding practices, which prove to be, in most cases, as the basic need of a state to maintain order and stability. As Paris (2010) states, in the end, liberal principles are flexible enough.
Institutions are needed to establish legitimacy as well as state’s basic function to incorporate state’s structure and its people in a post-conflict situation. State is needed, to the extent of having infrastructural power which includes having military apparatus, and capability to extract tax, register citizens, and create dependency from its people (Slater and Fenner, 2011).

I also propose a liberal peacebuilding that is modified to adapt to local problems through in-depth understanding of the lives of local people, thus move in technicalities, so that it may tackle problems at the grassroots level. In addition, I would also like to give a thought on the possible need of careful consideration on liberal peacebuilding’s influence to justify and perhaps facilitate intervention policies, as it influences the discourse to react tamely to the idea of intervention, suggesting “there would be account of responsibility after”, disregarding the shock therapy from the cost and effect of an intervention. Ultimately, as Paris suggests, I prefer the exercise of peacebuilding at the request of or permission from the people of the target state.

**Proposing Strong Institution as Peacebuilding Essential**

We have already noted that there is a possible element of statebuilding in liberal peacebuilding whose merits derive from creating state autonomy to intervene and to initiate development process that leads to making effective bureaucracy and sufficient infrastructure for promoting life. Taking into account considerations from Michael Barnett, this article argues for the primary need of a strong institution in curbing hostilities, and by also taking into account detailed “tradition” and customs of the locals. A case study done by Hirblinger and Simons (2015) on peacebuilding in Burundi and South Sudan argues that the need for strong institutional building should not be taken for granted. It also further discusses how the failure to appoint genuine local representation could be the recipe for failure to the entirety of the peacebuilding project.

Alan Byman’s (2008) study on Iraq showcases how the absence of governance creates a condition of power struggle between local fractions/classes pursuing different interests. This situation in turn also increases crime rates, which renders recovery efforts more difficult, not to mention maintenance of everyday security. In times of chaos, power lies with local groups, whether they are based on a public figure or a movement by paramilitaries. The presence of strong local groups suggests that authority cannot simply be transferred to the higher form of new government (Byman, 2008). One major problem encountered by the U.S. peacebuilders in Iraq concerns putting an end to smuggling
practices, long-considered to be a tradition by the locals. Another challenge relates to the drawing up of Iraqi oil privatisation laws, which are allegedly reported to be written in secret between the Kurdish Regional Government, oil companies, and the U.S. government, excluding Iraqi oil unions and the general public in the process (Herring, 2008).

The cases mentioned above showcase the need for strong institution as the basis of peacebuilding, as well as careful considerations of local customs. In the case of Iraq, peacebuilders should consider its priority, whether to take actions to stabilise the “weak state” or strive for the creation of liberal states subscribing to neoliberal conformity (Herring, 2008). The set of priorities taken would prove whether the peacebuilders are there to build peace in the nation or if it is the case that peacebuilding is indeed a form of liberal impulse as many have insinuated. A peacebuilder championing liberal values must ready themselves to face situations where perhaps, at least temporarily, non-liberal traits would work better for greater development and stability.

A study by Eric Kuhonta (2004), albeit not focused on peacebuilding but social development, provides an interesting insight. Kuhonta (2004) finds that democracies in Southeast Asia fail at the promotion of social development whereas illiberal regimes succeed, notably as exemplified by Singapore. This leads him to suggest that development depends on the capacity of the institutions instead of the type of regime. This is not to suggest that illiberal values should be the end goal. The idea merely suggests to reject the impulse of liberal absolutism, which might occur when one associate non-liberal values with malevolence or evil. As Slater, Smith, and Nair (2014, p. 369) argue, “Whenever we think of the tasks a democracy must accomplish to survive against its authoritarian rivals, we see tasks that require the existence of a capable state, not a limited one.”

The task of creating a viable democratic state cannot be achieved by a weak state, something which orthodox, pro-market developmental approach that champions restrained state actions at times encourages. Peacebuilding needs a strong state, both in terms of capacity and infrastructural power. The ultimate challenge for proponents of liberal peacebuilding is to recognise this. State’s legitimacy, an important aspect in a post-conflict society, comes from the state (Lai & Slater, 2006). Liberal peacebuilders have to admit that a strong state can also be a solution. There are two extant variants of liberalism, one that weakens state’s role, and another that empowers state’s capacity. It is therefore a mistake for Paris to regard Barnett’s republican peacebuilding as just another form of
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liberal peacebuilding. The principle of individual liberty cannot be directly associated with a democratic system and a market-oriented economy.

Peacebuilding cannot be reduced to “small project” fostered by international community ticking off to-do lists. Peacebuilding is in essence, a large-scale extensive project— supporting good institutions needs a lot of resources in order to guarantee its legitimacy after conflict. It needs committed efforts beyond the promotion of democratic life, a primary one would the drawing up a strong state budget to be allocated for building infrastructures and conducting hard-task development projects that ensure welfare for the citizens.

CONCLUSION

Critics have mainly detracted from liberal peacebuilding at the level of conduct or in case per case basis—thus far, they have not managed to dismiss liberal peacebuilding as an idea. In the end, what ultimately counts for a peacebuilding is the result, which is the condition of the state, whether or not it has achieved stable and lasting peace. Understandably, peacebuilding is especially challenging as calculations and implementations are demanded in a hard-pressed situation of dire needs.

This article argues that liberal peacebuilding should stick to its basic principles of individual liberty, but be technical in proposing solutions. It should be willing to let a post-conflict country have a strong state as the base of its peacebuilding. The peacebuilder sponsor should then perhaps accept if democracy and market-oriented economy is not the direct solution for stabilisation, especially during the initial phase of recovery in post-conflict societies. After all, liberal peacebuilding should prioritise peacebuilding instead of being mainly about imposing pre-designed liberal template prescribing the curbing of the role of state. The type of the state and how it runs are of secondary importance to institutional capacity and infrastructural building.

Liberal peacebuilding is still worth saving as long as liberalism does not exert itself as an orthodoxy that sets up standardised “ideals” for different areas of the world. Liberalism should remain true to its nature as a philosophical foundation, especially as we consider its character as an “unfinished business”. There are elements in liberalism that can save the reputation of liberal peacebuilding if used as its basis, notably, positive freedom. It is crucial for liberal peacebuilding projects to let go of rigid liberal understanding and temper the ambition to enforce democracy and market-oriented economy as solution—and for proponents of liberalism to maintain it as an inclusive crude philosophy.
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