

Living Like Nikanor The 'Paradox of Transition' in Contemporary Cuba

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Abstract

Cuba is clearly not easily definable as a "post-socialist" society (Phillips, 2007; Enriquez, 2010). In the case of Cuban society, therefore, the term "transition" can be referred to the change that invested the relationships between citizens and the State since Raul Castro has started to reform the socialist Cuban system. This change has impacts also on how the concept of "work" is reconceptualised. Last Socialist Party Congress underlined that the Cuban socialism has not failed; nevertheless many economical changes are reshaping Cuban economy and, even more important, the basis of the citizen-State relationship. For the first time since the beginning of the Revolution, the No. 141 law decree introduced the possibility to work independently from the State. Though, only some job sectors (mostly in the tourism industry) have been involved in this privatization process, and the "professionals" (physicians, architects, layers, professors, engineers) aren't allowed to work on their own. This partial privatization of the job market produced a paradox: many professionals have left their jobs in order to find a more remunerative occupation, and they have started to work as waiters, or as taxi drivers, in order to try to get a better salary and improve their quality of life. This paper will explore this paradox analyzing the fieldwork I carried on in Habana, Cuba, during the past five years.

Keywords: Cuba, ideology, transition theory, informal economy and citizenship

1. Prologue [♦]

Interior-day. Nikanor, a man in his forties, is making coffee in his kitchen when two men knock on the door. These gentlemen, kindly and authoritatively, tell him they have been sent by the Government to install two microphones in the apartment. Nikanor seems to be in shock; the two men explain the reasons behind their visit:

We know your name is Nikanor O'Donnel, and you work as chauffer for the Cuban Art Institute and, sometimes, you work illegally as broker for houses permutation (...) and obviously we know you often speak evil of the Government (...) our aim is to install some microphones in your apartment in order to easily listen to your antigovernment comments.

Nikanor reluctantly invites the two strangers to come in: while he complains about the rude sincerity of their speech and the Government intent to spy on him, he quickly surrenders to their will and realizes they could have easily irrupted into his home and tap-wired the rooms without his permission. However, there is something that seems to bug him: why has the Government chosen to spy on him rather than on somebody else? The two gentlemen reply:

Because you are a creative one! Most people only complain about the blackouts or about "Gramma", [National newspaper] But you, you made really witty criticisms about our migration politics. You were so helpful to us!

After fiddling with the microphones, the two gentlemen conclude that the bathroom offers the best acoustic reception. They then 'advise' Nikanor to use that room to make his antigovernment speeches, and invite him not to hold back on his 'sharp' and 'sarcastic' observations as they could be of great practical use.

This brief skit is drawn from the 2004 corto (short film) *Monte Rouge*, written and directed by Cuban filmmaker

[♦] This article is dedicated to the loving memory of my friend and psychiatrist Roberto Leiva, who died while he was waiting for his PVE and before I had the chance to see him again.

Eduardo de Llano. The short film was conceived as a satire of the Cuban National Security Department. In fact, *Monte Rouge* is a part of a series of short films financed by the *Cuban Institute for Arts and Film Industry* (ICAIC). Nikanor is the protagonist of all these short films: by the words of his creator, Nikanor personifies a particular and standard type of citizen in each movie: in *Monte Rouge* is a single man and a chauffeur, quite critic about the Government yet not politically engaged, disenchanted towards the social system and yet quite unable to take action. In other movies he is a married man, a world traveller, and even a journalist. The closing theme of these short films was composed by the renown Cuban songwriter Frank Delgado and chants the deeds of a "grey man", someone who is quite mediocre but also capable of small and witty actions; not quite the hero as these actions do not produce any real or significant change in his life or society. Nikanor is nobody and everybody at the same time; he is not a real person, but a prototype: after all, "we all have a Nikanor inside us", sings Frank Delgado.

As I was conducting fieldwork research at the Mental Health Community Centre "Francisca Panchica"¹ in Cuba, I stumbled upon Nikanor: Raudelis, a patient, was recounting a story about his boss and a meeting at work and about the time his boss asked him to shut up in the name of "the common wealth of all workers"; Nelson, another patient, ironically called Raudelis "a Nikanor" to make fun of his inability to speak up in front of his boss:

Nikanor represents the ironic side of our citizenship. Have you ever seen "Monte Rouge"? It's like saying that nobody thinks that invisible eyes are spying on us, like in the Orwell novel. Indeed, we perfectly know what we can say, and what we cannot say. And the problem isn't el miedo (the fear), we are not afraid about the police like American people think. The point is we have been educated in such way that we cannot think differently. We know the system's side effects, and the good effects, and we go on and... laugh at it. (Personal communication, 27th April 2008)

In a brief dialogue between Nikanor and the two gentlemen, during a scene of *Monte Rouge*, the two men congratulate Nikanor on his witty antigovernment comments, and he utters in response: "Thanks – I answered, while my conscience was digging a hole into the floor and my core values were burying inside it". The contradiction between the main character's critical conscience and his effective agency in real life produces a paradox, which is treated and reiterated with irony. The same irony is an inherent part of Cuban citizenship, as Nelson pointed out.

2. Introduction

Nikanor's character embodies the contradiction between the idea of a socialist world and the struggle of everyday life. He feels a discrepancy between a sense of belonging that is based on a person's social function and his desire to be formally recognized as a human being. As such, he symbolizes the "paradox of the theory of transition", which posits a unidirectional path from socialism to capitalism. As many other ordinary Cuban he is "engaged in the pedestrian but vital task of *resolver*" (Damian, 2000: 120), and attempting to redefine the rules of the game while not being totally in control of it. This point raises a question, about the quality and the limits of resistance and subversion: by "performing compliance" (Damian, 2000), doing his "informal job" as a broker, or speaking against the Government, is Nikanor actually working against or, rather, contributing to legitimate the State's authority?

In contemporary Cuba, some people have made the transition between living and working like Nikanor and owning a business. These citizens, known as *cuentapropistas* (literally "workers for own account"), have shown a significant amount of agency towards the State in their quest of acceptance as human beings. In this article I will first explore the dynamics of such transition. I will examine the changes that have occurred between Cuban citizens and the State in the past five years and a new idea of work that has emerged. I will also introduce *cuentapropista* as new type of worker.

However, this picture is only partial. Cuba is clearly not easily definable as a "post-socialist" society (Phillips, 2007; Enriquez, 2010). In fact, I will tackle the limits of such transition, by presenting the case of those who work in the health sector who cannot fit into the new type of worker and continue to feel stuck into the Nikanor's paradox.

This article builds on fieldwork conducted in Habana, Cuba, intermittently over a period of five years, from October 2007 to August 2012.

¹ My ethnographical experience was carried out in the biggest Mental Health Community Centre in Havana, during eleven months, from October 2007 to July 2010. I was investigating how the political and economic model influences both mental illness and the recommended mental health treatment.

3. The era of shifting ideology

On July, 26th 2012 I was walking up and down in the city of la Habana looking for the commemoration of “Cuartier Moncada” attack. I had heard about this celebration since my first fieldwork in Cuba in 2007: Fidel Castro used to give a speech and the people showed a black and red flag with a big number “26” printed on it. “Walking on the street you were able to hear the speech because everybody was listening to it on television or radio, because Fidel set the speech in a different town every year, moreover there were “fiestas de barrios” (neighbourhood celebration)”, told me Cuban anthropologist Dulce Milagros Niebla.

Speaking about the local celebration of the 26th July, the anthropologist said:

The general awareness is that the Government really doesn't care anymore: for fifty years they have been distributing food and drinks at a low prize in order to help the people to celebrate in the “barrios”, because that was considered an important moment to celebrate the our belonging to the Revolution. When they stop to do it, people's feeling is changed as well. (Interview, 26th July 2012)

As the Cuban anthropologist argued, Cuban people have been celebrating 26th July from 1959 to 2010, in the last three years, despite the Government goes on with officiating the public speech (Raul gives the speech ever years in Santiago de Cuba), people have given up on local celebration, feeling a sense of disconnection from the traditional source of moral sentiment.

Many authors have been worked on the importance of public celebration (or public rituals) in keeping on social and political structures (Handelman, 1998; Connerton, 1999), turning on the concept, we may say, that giving up on public rituals brings the people to disconnect themselves from the moral sentiment of “belonging”, as Niebla suggested.

The celebration of 26th July is just one the meaningful transformations of Cuban set: in the past five years the political and economical scenario in Cuba has changed as well. When in the 2006 Fidel Castro transferred the leadership of the country to his brother and second-in-command Raul, the Government has began analysing and planning political and economical changes. The planning was published in the 2010 and called “Proyecto de Lineamento de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución” [Guidelines plan of Economical and Social Politics of the Party and the Revolution]. This document was approved by the sixth “Congreso del Partido comunista en Cuba (PCC)” [Cuban Congress of Communist Party] on April 17th 2011.

One of the most important changes that the Congress activated was the new opening to “little private enterprise” (*cuentapropismo*) and to private property. Until 2011 it was impossible for a Cuban citizen to buy a home² or a car. The opening to the private little enterprises also gives the citizens the right to buy a license to work on their own and to contract people to work for them. According to the guidelines, co-operative societies are allowed too, and the State enterprises will be more independent from the Government; the Conference also claimed to “differentiate” (*distinguir*) the Socialist Party from the establishment, in order to decentralize the powers, behalf of local *municipio* [borough]. These changes underline how the Cuban Government has been progressively loosening its control over the economic system and shifting its view on an ideology that has been predominant in the country over the past sixty years.

The “cuentapropistas” are the most important symbols of Cuba's shifting ideology and of the complexity of exploring the term “transition”. As the last Congress underlined the Cuban socialism didn't fall; however many economical changes are reshaping the Cuban economy and, more importantly, the basis of the citizen-State relationship. Decree 141 of the Law allowed the possibility to work independently from the State for the first time since the beginning of the Revolution. The licences were officially released from 1993 to 1998 (Phillips, 2007), after the so-called “*periodo especial*”, a period of extreme poverty that Cuba experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. Self-employment was no longer allowed, until the last Congress, when new licenses were released.

4. From “informal workers” to *cuentapropistas*

Sheila is a young Cuban psychologist, she graduated in 2010 and then she started to work for the Public health system. After only one year of work, she decided to leave her job in order to work as a hairdresser. This was as an “informal part-time job”, that is, according to Castells and Portes, an income-earning activity unregulated by the State, in contexts where similar activities are State regulated (Castells and Portes, 1989; Roberts, 1994). As she told me:

² In Cuba all the buildings were State propriety, nobody could, in a legal way, sell his home, or buy a home.

I was spending all my time working. I worked all day long: in the morning I was a psychologist and in the afternoon I was an hairdresser, during the night –my only free time- I took care of my grandmother who lives with me (Personal communication, 22 July 2012).

Sheila's salary as a psychologist averaged around 500 Cuban pesos. Indeed, the medium level of salary for "professionals" (physicians, architects, layers, professors, engineers) ranges from 500 to 750 pesos, one of the two official currencies (to the value of 20-30 cuc, pesos convertible, the other currency equivalent to American dollar). In order to understand the purchasing power of this salary, it possible to compare it with the price of some of the more common products: a bottle of shampoo costs on average 2 cuc, a litre of tomato sauce has the same prize, four toilet rolls cost 1cuc. Fruits and vegetables have a held down prize, as well as rice, sugar and bread. Besides, thanks to the new guidelines, a waiter or a hairdresser could make up to 10 cuc per day, which is ten times more than a "professional salary".

With her "informal job" as hairdresser Sheila is able to earn from 120 to 200 cuc per month. As one of Sheila's frequent clients told me:

For this reason she left her job as psychologist. I define my appointment with her arreglo-terapia [dressing up - therapy]. She dresses my hair and I can talk with her about my problems at the same time. When I leave her home I feel better and I look better (Personal communication, 22 July 2012).

Fernández, in his book *Cuba and the politics of passion*, defined the "informal" as one of the most formidable adversaries of the Socialist State (2000: 101), but he also argued, that if that is true and the informal economy betrays socialism, it also provides citizens with enough creativity to escape it and to deal with the socialist regime. As a matter of fact, as Fernández maintained, informality "while it erodes legitimacy, as people break the law on a daily basis, it secures practical legitimacy insofar as people do not challenge the formal trapping of the regime directly" (2000: 120).

On the contrary, the legal but partial liberalization and "dollarization" (Brotherton, 2008) of the job market has been improved the economical differences between who can work independently and the professionals, who cannot do it. The economical reform has been brought what Phillips defined a "legal creation of an anomaly": "*cuentapropistas* embody an increasing tension between Cuba's socialist past and uncertain future" (Phillips, 2007: 312).

Indeed, the partial privatization of the job market has produced (or enhanced) a paradox: many professionals have left their jobs in order to find a more remunerative occupation, and they have started to work as waiters, or as taxi drivers, to try to get a better salary and improve their quality of life.

Walking through Havana it's possible to note some of these changes: many coffee shops have appeared in the houses' doorways, and some places showed handwritten signs that read "área de venta de trabajadores por cuenta propia" [shopping place of private workers], or *se vende* [for sale]. The restaurants are currently divided into *statales* [State property] and *particulares* [private property], and many Cuban citizens have left their jobs to start a private work.

The private practice of medicine (like all "professional jobs") isn't allowed, so before the introduction of the new guidelines many professionals had "informal jobs", like Sheila did. Marta, for example, one of the workers of the Mental Health community centre where I carried out my fieldwork, sold handmade bags that she sewed with recycled material. She worked as a therapist during the day and sewed at night. When she spoke about that with me, she was ironic about her situation: "If the job is what gives you the money to live with... Making the bags is my job, and working as therapist is my hobby."³ By the way, it's important to underline that the choice of Sheila shows how work in the informal economy can become a full time job.

Luis, fifty-five years old, worked as a lawyer in Cienfuegos. His informal job consisted in cultivating a small backyard in the back of his house. Then, when the Government began to release licences again, Luis left his job and officially became a greengrocer⁴. Odalys, fifty-two years old, told me:

I was a teacher in the University of la Habana, I taught philosophy for more than twenty-five years, I loved my job but I can't leave with 20 cuc per month. I'm too old to work illegally and I got a licence to rent a room in my home and I left my job. It hurts! But it hurts less than couldn't buy a pair of shoes to my daughter (Personal communication, 6th July 2012).

Odalys and Luis had to leave their professions in order to start the own activity because nobody in Cuba can,

³ Personal communication, 18th October 2010

⁴ Personal communication, 13th July 2012

legally, have two jobs. For this reason those professionals that consider they couldn't live off their salary have to make a difficult choice: either to continue to work in the informal economy (illegally) or to leave their job and becoming *cuentalpropistas*.

Abi is a forty-nine year old woman; she worked as an engineer for a Cuban enterprise for fifteen years. She started to work as a hairdresser ten years ago as an informal job in order to earn more money; in the last year, according to the new reform, she obtained a license as a hairdresser and decided to quit her engineer job. Commenting on her choice, she told me:

Look, it is not only a money problem. Because a foreigner who doesn't know how we live could think that we are greedy, because we leave our job so as to earn more. But the core problem is this: when you wake up early in the morning to do the cue in order to get six eggs⁵, and you see that your neighbour who is a taxi driver can buy a peace of meat, and you cannot... Tell me what's happen in your country, is it possible that an engineer who works for the State for fifteen-years can't buy a peace of meat, even once a week? That's the problem! You are a good citizen, you work for the State, and how do they repay you? (Personal communication, 7th July 2012)

Abi's words underline the "legal anomaly" which Phillips refers to. The partial liberalization of job market put the professionals in the paradoxical situation that they are becoming the poorest people in the country. By paradoxical situation I mean that, after the Second Industrial Revolution, professionals have been considered as one the most important and remunerative positions in the global work market (Neuwirth, 2011). As a matter of fact, one of the most frequent questions that I was asked by my Cuban interlocutors was: "how much money could you earn with my profession in your country?".

As my ethnographic research suggests, on one hand the informal economy has been built as the basis for a proto-civil society - if by civil society we mean a "public space in which individuals, groups and associations exercise their rights" (Damian, 2000:124). On another hand, and paradoxically, the informal economy has acted as well as an escape valve for social conflict, helping the Government to legitimate its policy. The new *cuentalpropismo* could be considered as a sort of "formalization of the informal", here again a paradox, if we consider that the most committed of workers, those who are working in the public health system and in public education, cannot take any advantage from it. As a matter of fact, commenting on this paradox, a Cuban anthropologist (who prefers not to be mentioned by his full name) said during a meeting in the University of la Habana: "the two beautiful children of Revolution -public education and public health care- are ill!"⁶

5. The economical challenge of the health sector

Focusing on the professional workers of the health sector (physician, psychiatrists, psychologist...), the paradox seems to be double. A Cuban physician could feel uncomfortable not only by comparison with his "foreign" colleagues, but also considering that the health sector is, after the tourist sector, the most important economical resource of the island. As a matter of fact "*Salud y turismo*" [Health and Tourism] was one of the strategic programs designed by the Government to face the economic difficulties of "periodo especial". The aim of this program was to convert health from symbolic into economic capital.

As Julie Feinsilver (1989) argued, health in Cuba became a symbolic capital during 1980s when, in numerous speeches, Fidel Castro predicted that Cuba would become a "world medical power". "The phrase "world medical power" connotes socioeconomic development, scientific achievement, a model health system, and influence in the international arena" (Feinsilver, 1989). Indeed, Castro had the aim to improve health in the island with sustainable costs, and, more important, the aim to show through it how successful the Cuban socialist model could be.

The first program, under the name of "Health and tourism", was directed by the State-run-group "Cubanacan", and started in 1996. For the first time Cuba clashed with the capitalist world economy, creating health programs directed specifically to foreigners who pay in dollars⁷. Brotherton defined this program "dollarization" of the health sector. With the term "dollarization" he stressed the fact that the Cuban socialist government has been forced to resort to certain capitalist

⁵The "cue" in Cuba is really an issue. Some indispensable items (rice, sugar, salt, eggs, soap etc.) are distributed by the State in a predetermined quantity for each family. People are used to cuing up for a long time in order to be able to lay their hands on those items. A bitter joke circulating in Havana says: "When you see "la cola" [the cue], you start to do it and then you ask what it is for."

⁶The meeting was set on 23 July 2012 in the University of la Habana. The topic of the discussion was the future of the University.

⁷It's possible to find more information about Tourism and Health program, in the local book "Apuntes sobre salud y ciencia en Cuba, Senderos en el corazón de América", written by Dr. Julian Alvarez José de la Osa.

strategies to stay afloat (Brotherton, 2009).

However, the dollarization of the health sector doesn't change the material situation of doctors; even if the patients have to pay the services because they are foreigners, the doctors who treat them don't earn more money. During an interview, and commenting on the Cuban physicians' salary, Michel, a Cuban dentist, told me:

The only way to improve your salary is to go on a "mission". If you are willing to live two or five years abroad, in Venezuela or in Nicaragua, and participate to a Government's medical mission, when you come back in Cuba, you will receive some economical benefits, or a home, or a car. It depends on which kind of mission you participate in. I spent five years in Venezuela and now I can afford to purchase the furniture for my home. But, you know, I'm a lucky one, because my wife is a dentist too and we did the mission together, do you know how many doctors don't have a family anymore when they come back? Of course there are some doctors who decide to escape and quedarse [to remain abroad], but that's is another story (Interview, 17th July 2012).

Michel's words underline one of the most important paradoxes of the professionals of the health sector. The "heroes" of the revolution⁸, these doctors are among the poorest people in Cuba, and the only legal way they have to change their economical condition is to go on a "mission". In short, they have to work for their country outside their own country⁹. The hope of "living a better life" drives many Cuban doctors to join a mission and, consequently, cuts the number of professionals in the health sector.

Commenting on this issue, Leo, a Cuban artist, told me:

I brought my daughter to the policlinico [first-aid] last week, because she was having an asthma crisis, and there I found two foreigner medical students, I asked for a real doctor but there weren't any. Cuba has a lot of convenios [agreements] with other "poor countries", we send them doctors and we host their students in our universities. I'm cool with that, in theory, but when I can't find a doctor for my daughter, and I have to deal with these young medical students that barely understand me... I feel angry, really angry. Do you know what the nurse told me? "Are you looking for the doctor? He has to be in Venezuela" (Personal communication, 27th July 2012)

Leo's words underline that the entire population pays the cost of the Cuban medical mission in terms of lack of some health services. Nevertheless, many Cuban physicians do continue to spend their entire life working in the same *barrios* and taking care of their patients. When I arrived in La Havana (in October 2007), I started my research by conducting participant-observation on the everyday practices of seven *Consultorios* [medical clinics with one physician and one or two nurses]. I was struck by the intimacy of the bond between patients and physicians. Many patients showed their gratitude to the doctors by helping them cleaning the *consultorio*, bringing to them some coffee or snacks. Moreover the family physicians also seemed to act like the family-counselor, helping the patients to deal with their daily problems. When the doctor is in and he/she doesn't decide to go abroad to improve his/her economical situation, the patients seem to need to take care of them, like a form of informal payment for their work.

At this particular historic time, the circumstances build up by the new *lineamientos* have exasperated the doctors' frustration; at the same time the deterioration of public building has reached new limits, as showed by a public letter written to Raul Castro in September 2012 by the employees of one of the most important Cuban surgical wards. In the letter, the doctors under Callixto García complained about the lack of medicines and medical equipment, the unhealthy conditions of the structures and "the human mental deterioration generated by the loss of the minimal attention to the human being who works without any payment for many hours, in a country where the 'free things' are over, and we have a work level of comfort lower than in any other poor country in the world"¹⁰.

⁸I'm referring to the famous Fidel Castro's speech to the University of La Habana, www.infomed.cu

⁹Only in the mission called "Barrio Adentro" (in Venezuela and Colombia) there are actually 30.000 of Cuban doctors. For more information about the program "Barrio Adentro" see the official web site of Bolivarian Government www.minci.gob.ve/misiones/1/204341/salud_barrio_adentro.html

¹⁰The original letter says: "La atención médica, y sobre todo quirúrgica, en nuestro centro, es un gran desastre, caracterizada por: 1. Hospital destruido en su estructura física, por su edad e innumerables reparaciones de pésima calidad y corta duración. 2. Falta de importantes recursos en la atención a los pacientes por distribución inadecuada, por gestiones insuficientes o por exceso de trabajo ante la reducción de la actividad en otros centros por causas similares. 3. Deterioro humano mental acompañante por la pérdida de la mínima atención al hombre, que bajo largas jornadas de trabajo gratuito en un número importante de horas, y en un país donde las gratuidades se terminaron, tienen un confort para su trabajo que está por debajo de la de cualquier lugar pobre del mundo." (from: Carta abierta del Servicio de Cirugía General del Hospital Calixto García al Primer Secretario del PCC y Presidente de los Consejos de Estado y de Ministros, General de Ejército Raúl Castro Ruz Destacado, por Servicio de Cirugía General del Hospital Calixto García, September 2012)

6. Conclusive remarks

One of the most crucial questions about the contemporary Cuban job market is the following: how will the Cuban socialist system, which provides public education and health services as free of charge, be able to survive to those economical changes? How many people will accept to be doctors, social workers, or teachers and to struggle with a salary below standards? Will the system be able to provide a good quality of health services and dealing with the professional workers' discontent? Moreover, will the system be able to go on without the "fervent feelings akin to religious devotion" (Damian, 2000), which Fidel Castro generated and his brother Raul doesn't?

American anthropologist Sean Brotherton resumed such paradox in a phrase "we have to think like capitalists but continue to be socialists" (Brotherton, 2008). In my opinion we cannot consider the Cuban *cuentapropistas* as either capitalist or socialist. I suggest to think about them as people who are actually contributing to redefine the meaning of "work", and consequentially of "citizenship", in contemporary Cuba.

The new *lineamentos* challenge the dualism between socialism and capitalism, or informal/unregulated and formal/regulated work, while at the same time they create a paradox in the citizens-State relationship by separating two different groups of citizens. One group who can live the transition with a sort of agency, and one who cannot. Indeed both groups are engaged in the preservation of the socialist State, but in two different ways with also different consequences for them as social actors.

The *cuentapropistas* are becoming the driving force behind Cuba's modern economy, by increasing the taxes and improving the circulation of money. They are a new Cuban 'middle class', who can shop using CUC and who can benefit from hotels and restaurants, once only affordable for tourists. By distancing themselves from a socialist economy trough the private work sector they are actually avoiding the collapse of the system.

The State's workers, and in particular the workers of the health sector are engaged in supporting the socialist structure, allowing the Government to be able pay the National Health system. Anyway they are among the most exhausted Cuban society, and if the Government doesn't take care of them the "most beautiful child of Revolution" will die.

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