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**Occasional Paper**

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**Contrasts and Parallels – Cultural and Political  
Approaches to Identity in Succeeding East German  
Generations**

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The results of research on East German youth and transformation are ambivalent. The Leipziger Jugendinstitut (Leipzig Institute of Youth) registered a clear individualization amongst young people of the 1980s – even before 1989. Studies of new employment after 1989 supported the postulate of a similar trend in the entire population of Germany. However, East Germany is also described as a static body, a society on hold without any value shifts. These conflicting research findings are confirmed by everyday experience. The euphoria of unification was buoyed initially by the idea of a joint culture and tradition in East and West. By the mid-1990s at the latest, however, it had become clear that a profound alienation divided the two parts of the country. There was no internal unification. Two subpopulations tended to maintain separate private spheres. By now it is generally accepted that it will probably take generations to achieve "internal unification". It appears that this reserve is not only the result of different memories and "yarns" and a relatively brief culture shock. It also is based on more profound differences between East and West that have so far proved difficult to reconcile.

These contradictions become understandable when you consider the conditions of change in the East and West, paying attention to the similarities between both states as well as the differences. Although research on the change in values tends to portray it as an automatic process related to cohorts, for example, it seems that social change always emerges from social movements and their chances of success. However, social movements usually crystallize around a generation which supports them, executes them and promotes them as historical phenomena of its generation.

Social movements or generations as vehicles of change are only possible, however, in a pluralistic society with autonomous elements. Such pockets of autonomy existed in West Germany but never developed fully in East Germany. Nevertheless, East Germany was not a "totalitarian system" with completely undifferentiated social homogeneity. The cadre-oriented party and government in East Germany accepted "partial structures" to a certain extent but tried to exploit them in their centrally defined quest for an objective modernization and stabilization of the dictatorship. It is possible that the SED elite dreamed of creating a completely homogenous society in the distant future. This is in the nature of totalitarian systems but has only been achieved

on a large scale by Stalin in the Soviet Union. Reality in the GDR was more about compromise between bourgeois and socialist construction of the state. Articulate subsystems existed in embryonic form, but they were prevented from expressing themselves and developing into social movements. The dictatorship could not tolerate such subsystems and endeavoured to harness them to the professed aims of the party. This ruled out social change, which must come from such subsystems and increase the legitimacy of the state, which is derived from the "recognition" of such social movements.

Construction of government and society in the GDR was modelled on the bourgeois state. The framers of the constitution believed this would guarantee technical progress, economic growth and control of society. Its pluralistic structure, however, was centralized and imbedded in the hierarchy by the party in control. An ambivalent process of modernization began. As it progressed, objective and subjective modernization diverged. Objectively the GDR developed into a modern industrial state, albeit with its well-known weaknesses and flaws. The resulting subjective modernization, however, which did indeed begin, was severely impeded. Thus a change in values also took place in the GDR, but only in small, restricted areas. It did not spread to encompass the whole of society. Focusing on narrow contexts, one can distinguish the same generational phenomena in the renewal of values in the West. The repressive isolation of these modest beginnings caused some of them to adopt a symbolical radicalism to compensate for their ineffectiveness. The close-knit groups that created their own scenes made an exaggerated cultural statement and had little impact on the general population. This is in stark contrast to the doctrine and image of the GDR, which maintained that the culturally creative, who are the pillars of these scenes, should be closely involved with the population.

The course of a budding, repeatedly stifled renewal of values can be documented in a comparative study of generations in East and West for the whole parallel, yet contrasting, history of the GDR and the FRG. But this requires more than measuring change on the polarized indicators of obligation and self-assertion. One must also conduct a qualitative comparison of generations from certain historical perspectives. The generations which had such a lasting effect on the cultural development of the FRG and embodied social change were latent in the GDR. The "Weimar generation" maintained its dictatorially secured monopoly on policy making in the GDR until the very end, however, preventing succeeding generations from developing into social movements. The beginnings of change are particularly visible in the reactions to repression. The change would have matched the one in the West if it had been politically possible.

The familiarity as well as alienation and irritation between the two parts of Germany are probably the result of this "mirror image parallelism". But the repression of social movements and generational phenomena inherent in the objective modernization of the GDR led both to the aforementioned loss of legitimacy on which the GDR finally foundered and to a specific GDR mentality. Traditionalism and individualization merged to form "conventional individualism". Western research of value systems had discounted it, but it appears in all the mentality studies as a specific reaction to the division between the consummated objective and stymied subjective modernization process in the GDR.

Consequently, it is as incorrect and one-sided to describe the GDR as a completely idled, static society as it is to postulate a largely parallel or only slightly delayed analogous development. Instead, the GDR underwent a completely unique development of gradual delegitimation. This evolution was the result of a specific combination of movement and inertia. The main outcome, in everyday life and in high cultural spheres, of this GDR-specific "development without change" is the conservation of a special historically significant model of personality and identity, usually understood as pre-individualistic and centred on ideas of an integral "human nature". Individualism, attained without doubt by the youngest GDR generation of the 1980s and 1990s, like the educational theory of enlightenment, sees personality as the blossoming of an inherent, ingrained nature, unlike Western individualism, which views itself as the materialization of its "own design". As the behavioural norms of socialism receded and lost their significance as patterns of action – in the 1980s this development was seen by GDR mentality researchers as a westward leaning – the greater the tendency toward an essentialist identity model. One which regards the biography of an individual as the development of a specific human being but still ascribes universal characteristics to this individual, not categorizing the person as an historically objective law but nonetheless as a typical human being. The attitudes of community and duty, present right up until the last generation, were consequently not the expression of socialism or of socialist education and moulding. They constituted a conservative resistance to socialism, with which they only conformed superficially. What remained in the GDR-specific mentality was not socialism but the bourgeois basis on which it is normatively founded. The idea of a human nature that varies from individual to individual but still fits into broad, universal categories.

The East German model differs greatly here from the updated Western identity construction of a self-made man whose individuality is not a particular expression of a universal nature but a contrast to other self-made men, all of whom are structured by differentiation rather than by refinement of nature. The current alienation between East and West is thus shown as the dichotomy between "essentialist" and "distinctive" identity.

Nowhere was this difference so apparent as in art. The main currents of GDR art, tied to "essentialist identity", focused on the "human picture", on the question of the existence or well-being of human beings. Westernized FRG art, on the other hand, dominated by abstraction since the 1950s, concentrated on "perception". Its conditions, possibilities and innovations were subjects and objects of art. GDR art remained predominantly narrative, directed towards the contents of nature or essentialism external to art. "West Art", however, developed an autonomy leading to self-referentiality of art and depicting narratively non-communicable concerns. The fundamental characteristics of succeeding generations are outlined briefly below, though this does not claim to be an exhaustive account of GDR social and cultural history. In accordance with studies in the West and social history studies during the GDR's existence, it has been divided into periods of 10 years and roughly each decade is identified as a generation.

In both countries the first generation consists of those born in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. These age groups, who supported anti-aircraft batteries at

the end of World War II and are known as the ack-ack generation in the West and the East, shunned politics. They were absorbed in their own private lives and making a living. They were overshadowed by the so-called "Weimar generation" consisting of those born just before or around the turn of the century who constituted the political elite in both parts of Germany.

A comparison shows that the dominant forces in the 1930s generation were from the proletarian sector in the GDR and the middle-class sector in the FRG. The common generation resulted in similarities. Contradictions arose from the differences in social class and context. Both the aforementioned elements from this generation in East and West saw culture as a reflection of traditional social movements, as the sum of values in the sense of valuable objects or valuable possessions and property. Cultural policy, modelled on social and ownership policy, was consequently derived from the sharing, possession, inheritance, administration as a trust and redistribution of assets.

The major differences between the "generational models" and the fates of the generation lie in the fact that the East German subpopulation was rallied around a battle cry to execute a strategic campaign in a thoroughly politicized society. This matched the experience of the socialist faction of the "Weimar generation" but did not tally with the experience of the proletarian sector of the 1930s generation. Thus, from the beginning, a cultural conflict arose and a mental gap opened between the elite and the rising young proletarians. In urban development, for instance, the older elite proved to be iconoclasts. This attitude was met with the incomprehension of the East German 1930s generation. In literature and art, the focal point of the cultural heritage programme, the older generation did attempt a kind of redistribution but also tried to cloak their embrace of traditional cultural values in fighting terms alien to the younger generation. In addition – and this formed the decisive gap between the founding elite and the "generation of construction" in the GDR – the younger people were unable to accept the central status of a symbolic high culture of the middle class as a "war prize", since they, as a more apolitical generation, were absorbed in the informal culture of the working class. But this old, informal working-class culture, as far from more sophisticated middle-class culture as it was from the intellectual cult of the proletariat experiments, faced great suspicion by the old elite and the bourgeois-inspired culturally active circles because it could be interpreted as a redoubt of resistance an of *petite bourgeoisie* attitudes.

In contrast, an agreement was reached in the West, a coalition between the founding fathers and the generation of construction. The Weimar generation in the West was also characterized by its combativeness – expressed as rigid anti-communism. But it aspired to bourgeois, privately oriented society. The younger generation identified with this ideal but for different reasons. Therefore, initial conflicts soon yielded to universal agreement so that the 1930s generation in the West found recognition and became a bona fide member of the family. Its understanding of culture as the sum of assets united the middle class in the West and the working class of the 1930s generation in the East. But the relationship to preceding, or state-founding generations is completely different: a widespread, stable integration took place in the West, but proved impossible in the East. The East German 1930s generation's identification with the GDR was based on established sociopolitical achievements and professional careers which had previously been

inconceivable to the working class. However the children of the 1930s owe their advancement to the changing of the elite guard thanks to the founding generation. Members of the constructing generation did not have to compete for their positions. They received them on a silver platter from an all-powerful, paternalistic party and government machine. For the rising proletarians, who were the formative powers of the East German 1930s generation, this meant a constant feeling of being overextended as well as a sense of humility and dependency on the authorities that had enabled them to advance. They were probably also haunted by guilt about their own career being at the expense of others and not on their own merits.

A similar combination of parallelism and opposition occurs in subsequent generations. Both West and East 1940s generations reached adulthood at the "end of the postwar period", characterized in West and East by strengthening scientific methods in administrative and economic planning. It is precisely this age group who pushes ahead this change. The "1968ers" from both parts of the country were influenced by their early memories of war and the resulting responsibility towards their families, parents and above all their mothers, though these obligations were dealt with in very different ways in East and West. In the West the reaction was one of vigorous emancipation from paternal and political domination. In the East it was more of an acceptance of parents as one's helpers and guides.

Aided by educational reform and new, previously unknown, now pervasive career patterns for a new elite of wage-earning academics, the 1940s generation in the West developed an academic-analytical concept of culture symbolic of its demand for recognition. This symbolism was dramatically overstated in the prototype of the independent and autonomous academic committed exclusively to pure knowledge and not to any kind of application and in the stereotype of revolution as the beginning of a reasoned, academic age. This consummated the distinction to the previous generation, though the term revolution used by the 1968ers in the West and so clearly defined as mass upheaval shows their fixation on the past. Nevertheless the 1940s generation in the West, whose revolt in 1968 provoked a major conflict between the founder generation and the construction generation in the Federal Republic, was able to establish a new career ladder based solely on cultural capital, on academic performance. Doing this downgraded, both symbolically and culturally, the career of the entrepreneur based on material capital which had been the only avenue of advancement. The ferocity of the 1968 conflict was a reflection of the head-on collision between two forms of capital and two ladders to success. The cultural model of academic reasoning, of analysis and planning, replaced business savvy, which was regarded as ideological and decisionistic.

The 1940s generation in the GDR also tended to view everything from an academic angle. State, ruling party and the political elites in the GDR related to and laid claim to academic reasoning and planning both officially and symbolically. They believed that society was founded on a revolutionary triumph of reason, whereas the barriers, symbolically and dramatically, still had to be stormed in the West. This meant that the East German 1940s generation was unable to create a similar scenario of conflict with the existing GDR society. The founding generation had already jumped on the new bandwagon. The Weimar-reared avant-garde had already implemented the

programme of the 1940s generation, making social climbing an academic discipline.

A consequence of this congruence was that the younger generation in the GDR in the 1960s found itself in relative harmony with the socialist system and the GDR. Student protests in the West seemed to signal to contemporaries in the East that the latter "were already on the right side", were part of a progressive system that was not ripe for revolution but only required technological refinement. Thus the 1940s generation in the East did not adopt the model of the ivory tower scholar but of the engineer working academically for a just society, of the "idealistic *homo faber*". It accepted the servant role assigned to it by the academics in the drive towards "academiization" of production and administration. It exercised an "orientation towards progress without emancipation" as a synthesis of objective and subjective modernization. Like its predecessors, the East German 1940s generation was faithful to its principle of "working" in the sense of manufacturing objects and goods. It skipped the next step to the "bargaining" model of policy making. The Eastern war-decade babies remained, in stark contrast to their Western counterparts, an apolitical generation.

The 1950s generation, which did not differ greatly from the 1940s generation in the West and was seamlessly melted into the student movement and the new social movements, was characterized in both parts of the country by a "romantic" counterreaction to the rational movement of the 1940s generation. It developed anti-rationalistic and critique-of-reason attitudes and emphasized empirical models, vehemently criticizing systemic structures in East and West. Holistic, hedonistic strategies of self-discovery and self-healing replaced theoretical reasoning, at least in the West. The rational approach did not disappear completely, but it was certainly relegated to the background. Women's lib was the prime expression of the concerns and structures of this new movement, supported mainly by the 1950s generation.

The same tendencies surfaced in three spheres in the GDR. First, in the Protestant parishes, where "early Christian" fellowship bonds and brotherly love developed in opposition to the repressive power of the state. Second, in Bohemian circles in cultural centres with a hermetic language only accessible to insiders. Programmes of happenings and festivals, romantic, antibourgeois features, love of nature and personal development flourished. Finally, a conspiratorial opposition within the ruling party explored alternatives to large-scale socialism and fixation on instrumental reason such as "early communist" models of co-operative production communities.

In the West the 1950s generation with its empirical insurrection seemed to attach itself effortlessly to the 1968 movement and in the long term may have been far more influential than the 1940s generation in achieving self-assertion values. The 1950s generation in the East, however, triggered a far more serious conflict than its predecessor. The first postwar generation began an internal emigration from socialism, clearly identified by youth research in the GDR in the 1980s. The differing patterns in the 1950s generation in East and West can be understood, as can those of its predecessors, by the reactions of various contexts to the same approach.

The West was liberalized by the 1968 conflict and learned to cope with



deviations arising from social movements. The individualization which was propagated by the new social movement of the 1970s did not face the resistance the 1968ers had encountered a decade earlier. The perception that a new wave in the form of a youth movement can make one see an existing status system in relative terms, that it is not overthrown but devalued by giving it a new status and defining new values, pervaded FRG thinking from the 1960s on. In the GDR, on the other hand, the rejection of the analytic and academic model of instrumental reason, developed by the 1950s generation as a "dramatization" of its demands, amounted to a fundamental challenge to the GDR self-image as a scientifically substantiated society. The new culture of the 1950s generation which came of age during the 1970s experienced heavier repression than that its predecessors who were much more willing to be moulded in the GDR's self-image. Since the symbolic protest of the 1950s generation fundamentally questioned the GDR self-portrait and *raison d'être*, the regime introduced new, better-targeted and extremely effective methods of suppression and "subversion". These measures cut the sinews of conspiratorial and emotionally tied communities to the quick.

The same social change in the same generational structure had very different thrusts in East and West due to contrasting contexts. The first major conflict took place in the 1960s in the West but not until the 1970s in the East. This was not due to the GDR being behind the times, but because similar developments did not manifest themselves as a fundamental conflict during the same phase. In the West the attack was led by salaried academics because they had established a new career ladder during the 1960s to break the monopoly of an entrepreneurial career. In the East the gainfully employed academics were not seen as defying, but as confirming the academic model of society. The conflict was fuelled by lay criticism of the academic, by the "romantic" disaffection with instrumental reason, which appeared to coincide with the confrontations of the 1960s in the West and could no longer unleash a fundamental conflict, even though its scope and long-term effect were probably greater than that of the 1968 movement. In the GDR the same cultural symbolism did not have the same effect because of the explosive situation there. Repressive measures taken by the dictatorship drove the cultural blossoms of this generation into isolation or exile, preventing them from gaining a wider influence.

But repression and dictatorship took more from the isolated Bohemian pockets, church communities and inner-party conspiracies than the chance to gain the wider influence needed to launch a social movement. The commitment to solidarity and reliability imposed on the isolated subcultures, parishes and conspiratorial cells led to a conservation of traditional concepts enhanced by symbolization shaped by the new generation. Existing and surviving required solidarity, connections and communities, known as emergency mutuals in working-class culture, where they provided a respectability, despite poverty, want and repression.

As in the traditional networks of working-class life or in any similar community, GDR subculture solidarity necessitated some kind of affiliation, a community of interests in a web of allies. This preserved "essentialist" identity models in the GDR. It took place in the artistic, ecclesiastic and political spheres of the 1950s generation. It also pervaded the traditional niches of the old working-class culture, putting them at odds with the official organizations and

the regime-propagated "society of struggle". The shift also occurred in the other, "majority" society. The masses accepted and extended these elements of working-class culture for the same reasons and to cope with shortage and hardship.

Even before the fall of the Wall, as mentioned above, East German youth research emphasized the eastern counterpart to Western individualism in the 1960s generation which was growing up and reaching adulthood in the 1980s. East German young people espoused a Western view of life. The disregard for socialist behavioural norms seemed to support this conclusion. "Private", individual goals were at the top of the value scale. This similarity, which can also include attitudes and orientations shaping behaviour, disguised the fact that East and West Germans from the 1960s generation were united in a similar parallelism and opposition like the generations before them.

In their vociferous disapproval of the antisuperficial, integral introversion and soul searching of the 1950s generation, Western 20-year-olds of the 1980s became a symbol of the superficial. Worship of beauty in merchandise consciously transformed the latent, ever-present cultural differentiation strategies into a distinct programme. The surplus of commodities on the market, giving the processes of selection a hitherto unknown dimension, as well as the increasing competition between individuals in a period after the demise of the welfare state encouraged distinctions based on superficialities where possible in order to protect the intimacy and privacy of the individual from competitive encroachment. Individualization, i.e. an individual form of expression, focused on highly visible distinctions in outward appearances.

East German teenagers and young adults of the 1980s, children of the 1960s who were between 20 and 30 at the time of reunification, lacked the prerequisites for surface-oriented distinctions in creating the Western disposition of their generation. They were neither confronted with an overabundance of commodities nor with all-encompassing, increasingly stiff competition. Their individualization was directed toward family, friends and career, the traditional domains of bourgeois privacy. They usually endeavoured to avoid the intensity of expression so characteristic of their peers in the West, as they were only able to create their individual worlds in the niche of invisibility.

When you have to conceal your private life from the public and steer clear of competition self-portrayal is seen not only as vanity but as potential betrayal and a threat, as every appearance in public means a split in personality. The inconsistency between official GDR culture and crass reality was made bearable by retreating and maintaining privacy. In cases of doubt, semi-public areas like professional life had to take a private and personal stance. Members of the youngest GDR generation were even increasingly abandoning the "scenes", which characteristically combined the private and public and proved to be more or less *petit bourgeois*. They left these subcultures because the expectation of self-portrayal and the expression of innermost thoughts so prevalent there was a burden on their cloistered individualization. Even the most radical opposition groups and scenes remained fixated in their protests to the existing party, state and dictatorship. Complete retreat from all these areas is only possible if resistance is no longer organized and life is relegated to the private sphere alone. The dictatorship began to replace individualizing

repression with atomizing repression.

Whereas the 1960s generation in the West tended towards an "aesthetic type" which expresses everything and develops an identity "distinctively" based on differences, members of the 1960s generation in the East disdained publicity completely, even avoiding the merging of public and private spheres executed by their predecessors. Lacking above all the modern strategies of expression, they built their identity around traditional elements of individuality. They developed "conventional identity structures" eliminating central categories of individuality and self-portrayal which were overemphasized in the West. They denied their lives a public dimension.

This neglect, indeed avoidance of those elements of differentiation that can only emerge in the public sphere meant that the 1960s generation in the East also handed down the idea of an essentially natural personality only present when strategies of differentiation are unnecessary or undesirable. Thinking in stereotypes seemed to promise a mutuality, connection and justification behind all the differences, neutralizing the threats of division and chaos. The final GDR generation cherished inherited concepts of personality. This set it apart from Western peers, despite apparent similarities in attitudes and behaviour. The last GDR generation's vicious rejection of the publicity consciousness of teenagers and young adults in the West is a clear indication that this difference was transmitted all the way down to the last "genuine" GDR generation.

It is not known if succeeding generations in the former GDR are still imbued with a natural concept of identity, whether this image of personality was handed down from father to son or if it soon dissolved in confrontation with the West and its "rules of the game". It is certain, however, that the GDR generations described seemed to cling to this model of identity. The differences between East and West will remain significant in years to come. It is therefore useful to explore their implications.

Essentialist construction of identity appears to entail two decisive consequences. One is that it tends towards the community perceptions of social co-existence based on ethnocentrism. Another is a tendency to view the quality of government, law and politics as a function of the morals of the people involved.

Ethnocentrism, an inevitable concomitant of essentialist identity, results from the qualitative, natural classification necessitated by this form of self-perception. "Begging to differ" from an essentialist point of view is interpreted as the absence of normality. We see "us" not only as superior to "them" but also as the only valid and correct category. Naturally defined identity always tends towards the rejection of plurality and diversity and to an extremely positive self-evaluation along with a totally negative evaluation of others and outsiders. Both elements are present in the new states of Germany and differ from the sceptical self-evaluation and from an extremely positive evaluation of certain other groups which predominates in the West. The basis of these assessments is an evaluative but competition-oriented distinctive construction of identity, which has reached a certain level of development in the West. This personality pattern is more willing to accept outsiders and is unlikely to tend towards an overrating of oneself. However, it includes a

marked inclination to see all relationships as competitive. This tendency is conspicuous today in the pre-unification states of the Federal Republic of Germany.

No less momentous is the second consequence of essentialist identity, seeing quality in politics, legislation and government as a function of the morals of a society or individuals. The nature and characteristics of a constituency, a nation or even "humanity" determine the basis for the quality of governments, politics and laws. If expectations and hopes regarding politics and society are disappointed, the reaction of those who see things this way can easily change from tragic disappointment to a condemnation of the inferiority of humanity, fostering and justifying cynical attitudes. The fact that reasonable legislation and institutions may make the honesty and inferiority of humanity a moot question is inconceivable from this point of view. Such an interpretation of politics, law and society is unmistakable in the new states of Germany, but in the older states a so-called "constitutional patriotism" is prevalent. This bases the legitimacy of a regime on the rationality of its institutions and not on the moral or innate characteristics of its subjects.

Opposing interpretations of democracy also mirror this second consequence of the difference between essentialist and distinctive identity. Historically this dichotomy appears for the first time in the contrasting geneses and outcomes of the American and French revolutions. In late 18<sup>th</sup> century France the protagonists were inspired by their search for material equality, whose norms and values can only be derived from sympathy. Rousseau's "virtue" became a condition for revolution and state. But the Founding Fathers of the United States, following Montesquieu, were concerned with the organization of a community, that is with an arrangement of rules and processes encouraging open development of an informed opinion permitting public affairs to be a matter of free self-determination of the citizens of a country. Today it seems that the GDR followed the traditional thinking of Rousseau, which influenced all the European revolutions, while the westernization of the Federal Republic and its ties to the U.S. established the North American thinking, derived from Montesquieu, that the act of foundation is a contract laid down in a constitution.

If you see these two political traditions as the backdrop to the present differences and the breakdown of communication between East and West Germany, it is easier to understand why this conflict cannot be overcome easily and the case closed. It is obviously more than a few marginally different attitudes, for instance in consumer or competitive behaviour or in the setting of personal priorities.

If, as Hannah Arendt maintains, the French Revolution led to a 200-year Atlantic rift and if this fracture started to heal in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, East German essentialism in all its different forms, as anti-Americanism, as cultural criticism of the USA, as charges of superficiality against Western civilization, tends to dismiss this "process of healing" as a cliché-ridden, self-righteous manifest destiny. East German essentialism also tries to incorporate political ideas which, from a Western standpoint, bear all the seeds of totalitarianism.

When one grasps the dimensions of this East-West confrontation, one begins

to comprehend the vehemence, and perhaps the speechlessness, of the inner-German conflict.

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