The Effects of Neoliberalism on Volunteer Tourism in New Orleans

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Abstract

Tracing neoliberalism's effects, this paper examines how neoliberal policies create dependence by the government and residents on volunteers' labor and financial resources, how neoliberalism creates disorganization in rebuilding efforts and labor, and how neoliberalism highlights disparaging sentiments against the government. This paper uses ethnographic methods to explicate the issues, complexities, and complications of volunteer tourists' labor, and their relationships with New Orleans' residents and government. We close it by discussing possible implications and possible solutions for volunteer tourism coordination and operation.

Keywords: Ethnography, Labor, Relationships, New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina, Disaster, Neocolonialism

1. Introduction

The "goodness of strangers" does not completely explain why primarily religious groups go to help residents of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005. Another impetus for volunteer tourists' altruism is because the government is not helping residents. Harvey states, "The fundamental mission of the neo-liberal state is to create a 'good business climate'. This contrasts with the social democratic state that is committed to full employment and the optimization of the well being of all its citizens subject to the condition of maintaining adequate and stable rates of capital accumulation"(2005, p. 19). Harvey (2005) asserts that the government's primary goal is financial gain and social welfare follows. By prioritizing to "create a 'good business climate'" and not providing assistance, the government's policies paved the way for religious groups to compensate for the government and help residents rebuild their homes. "This frame of thought helps explain why many New Orleanais never received housing assistance from the federal government and volunteers came to help residents" (Erdely, 2011, p. 79-80). I show that neoliberalism affects volunteer tourists' relationship with the city, its residents, the labor market, and the government. Through in depth interviews with volunteer tourists who share their experiences and understanding of New Orleans with me, this paper demonstrates how volunteer tourists have taken on the role of providing assistance, a role once held by the government.

2. Literature Review

Volunteer tourism research has moved towards understanding travel as experiential knowledge with studies by Wickens (2011), Benson (2011), Broad and Jenkins (2008), and Wearing (2001). My study hopes to add to this body of work as well as providing contexts for volunteer tourists' experiences. In McGehee and Andereck's "Pettin' the Critters" (2008), the authors examine the relationship between residents and volunteer tourists. The volunteers who I interviewed conjointly deliberate about their relationships with the residents and how that brought them to conclusions about the city, state, and federal governments. Like many papers on volunteer tourism (Broad and Jenkins, 2008; Campbell and Smith, 2006; Daldeniz and Hampton, 2011; Erdely, 2013; Sin, 2009; Wickens, 2011), this paper addresses the internal motivations of volunteer tourists. However, this paper further focuses on how an external motivation, particularly the lack of government assistance, drives volunteers to work. Philip R. Stone states that some "...sites, such as cemeteries, memorials, or disaster sites that have become tourist attractions 'by accident' because of their relationship with turbulent and tragic events" (2006, p. 147).

The 1884 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition spurred New Orleans as a tourist attraction (Gotham, 2007). However, areas of New Orleans such as: the Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans East, and Lakeview, were never tourist attractions before 2005. As Pezzullo asserts, Katrina Tours, which consist of busses driven through disaster areas, seek to recruit tour patrons to become volunteers and assist the city in its rebuilding (2010). Disaster inspires volunteers to *clean up* the messiness that the government chooses to ignore. This messiness includes rebuilding homes destroyed by failed levees. Stone mentions New Orleans as a site of death and disaster (2006, p.147); however, he does not talk about New Orleans as a place where neoliberalism confronts volunteer tourism. As a space where personal transformation occurs (Erdely, 2013), New Orleans's tourism is simultaneously transforming (Pezzullo, 2010). New Orleans' tourism industry is changing to attract people who are willing to help others, or volunteer tourists. Wearing states that volunteer tourists ".... for various reasons volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment" (2001,p. 1). The aspect of volunteer tourism that makes it leisure is that this labor occurs on holiday. As Wearing and Law explain, tourism is leisure that happens when one is "away" as opposed to "home" (2013, p. 280). Because volunteer tourism is not "home" work, it's "away" work. Rojek echoes this in his book, *Labour of Leisure* where he contends that holidays are considered leisure because tourists choose what they want to do (2010).

Because volunteer tourists are choosing to work and where they want to work during their holiday, volunteer tourism is leisure. Not only is volunteer tourism an alternative culture according to Lyons and Wearing (2008), but the volunteer tourists of New Orleans serve as an alternative culture of tourists. New Orleans, nicknamed "The Big Easy," has been transformed into a place where labor occurs for many tourists. As Urry discusses, tourists are looking for a "departure" from the routines of their lives (1990, p. 2). Even though volunteers are working, they are not paid to work as they normally would. Volunteers are also not working in their same environment. New Orleans provides an alternate environment to labor. Thirteen of the twenty-five groups I interviewed came to volunteer in New Orleans with their church group or Christian college. Volunteering provides a way for people who strongly identify as Christian to go to a city known for its reputation as a party destination. Instead of coming to New Orleans to imbibe, these volunteers work. A growing body of literature on neoliberalism in tourism exists as well. Meghani (2011) weighs the role of neoliberalism in Americans going to India for medical procedures. The author finds this form of tourism detrimental to the caseload of India's medical system; however, Americans' financial resources (and lack of insurance) make going to India for a medical procedure an attractive option for both American patients and Indian physicians. In the "Problematization of Medical Tourism," Smith (2012) also argues that neoliberalism has negative effects on the possibility for all citizens in impoverished nations to get medical care. She argues that wealthy foreigners who enter developing countries for treatment will raise the cost of treatment for everyone, making it impossible for residents to pay. Additionally, Duffy argues "…ecotourism is a powerful vehicle for neoliberalising nature because it neatly intersects with notions of rolling back the state, use of the market for environmental management, and the engagement of non-state actors (such as communities, NGOs and the private sector)" (2008, p. 341).

As these authors argue, neoliberalism has affected medical and ecotourism. Volunteer tourism is also affected by neoliberal policies. Higgins-Desbiolles argues that "Volunteer tourism attempts to bring humanistic and ecological values into focus and thus it may serve as a challenge to the dominant neoliberal paradigm that currently holds sway" (2009, p. 333). However, I pose that volunteer tourism reinforces the neoliberal ideals of governmental entities. Because volunteer tourists are willing to work without compensation, the government does not have to pay anyone to do the same work. Wearing, McDonald, and Ponting (2005) call for further research the role of neoliberalism in ecotourism; however, I look at neoliberalism in volunteer tourism. This will give us an understanding of how neoliberalism works within political and economic structures outside of governments' focus on the environment. In "Inclusion of the "Othered" in Tourism," Wearing and Darcy (2011) conclude that the needs of residents of the host country are often discounted by the tourism industry. Providing a case study from the visitors' perspective of how residents' needs are ignored by the federal government, this paper asserts that volunteer tourists are often deficient in trying to make up for the government's shortfalls, addressed in my study through volunteer tourists' narratives. Bianchi and Stephenson (2013) conclude that the principles of capitalism are reinforced through privileged individuals who are able to travel. This paper serves as a case study to reinforce those ideas.

3. Method

This is a case study of how volunteer tourism functions within the culture of New Orleans. To understand the culture of volunteer tourism, I participated with volunteer tourists and conducted this study as a critical ethnography. Conquergood (1991) asserts that ethnography is a communicative process and highlights listening as an integral part of this process. He states, "Listening is an interiorizing experience, a gathering together, a drawing in, whereas observation sizes up exteriors" (1991, p. 183). Conquergood highlights the relational process of ethnography as a way to enter people's lives. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw discuss the procedures in conducting an ethnography stating, "Immersion in ethnographic research, then involves both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that gave rise to them" (2002, p. 2). To immerse myself in the culture of volunteer tourism, I spent seven months, from November 2008 to June 2009, gathering data through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and spontaneous conversations. I spent Thursday through Saturday weekly with volunteer groups shadowing and participating in volunteer activities. In January and February 2010, I resided with a volunteer tourism group for four days. I use critical ethnography to conduct this study and analyze the effects of volunteer tourism on New Orleans.

VanMaanen (1988) relates critical tales as a type of ethnography designed to reveal information, not just about the culture being studied, but also a way to talk about issues within the culture (p. 128). D. Soyini Madison (2005) suggests that critical ethnography is a method of discovery, explaining the role of the ethnographer, theory, and some rules to follow. Madison (2005) talks about the foundation of critical ethnography stating, "Because the critical ethnographer is committed to the art and craft of fieldwork, empirical methodologies become the foundation for inquiry, and it is here 'on the ground' of others that the researcher encounters social conditions that become the point of departure for research" (p. 5). By staying close to one's ethnographic subjects, Madison asserts the researcher is able to discover the roots of what is crucial to the culture. She elaborates on the critical ethnographer's role as, "tak[ing] us beneath surface appearances, disrupt[ing] the *status quo*, and unsettle[ing] both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (p. 5). Madison concludes the critical ethnographer should disturb subconscious beliefs to uncover issues of repression. I went below the surface emotions of anger, divisions of labor, and relationships between the volunteer tourists and residents to look at the larger neoliberal policies at work in volunteer tourism. Volunteer tourists' motivations are complex, and critical ethnography exposes the details and backgrounds behind their actions. Locating research participants through contacts with community centers and local churches, these contacts then gave me work locations each week. The contacts let the volunteer tourists know I was interested in interviewing them for my research, and I would meet them at the worksite. I spent some time at the site working, and then would ask if a few of the volunteers would be willing to be interviewed about their experience as a volunteer in New Orleans.

In addition to rebuilding activities, sometimes the volunteers and I spent time together at lunch, dinner, or making trips to home improvement stores. I videotaped fifty interviews with volunteer tourists. The interviews lasted between fifteen and ninety minutes depending on how much the volunteer tourists wanted to share. Some interviews were conducted solo, in duos, or in groups of up to five people. To record, I held a palm-sized video camera in the direction of the volunteers' faces. Keeping eye contact with my interviewees, I was consistent about giving nonverbal feedback to their answers. I rarely looked at the camera or the viewfinder. I shot this way to minimize the camera's presence and the subjects' self-consciousness. In addition to videotaped interviews, I also include notes from conversations and events when the video camera was not present such as interactions at dinner, lunch, and home improvement stores. I did not want the volunteer tourists to feel self-conscious about any of the information they provided and wanted them to be brutally honest in their answers; therefore, I assured them that their real names or images would not be used in the final project. Since I have never traveled to volunteer, I interviewed with a genuine curiosity about why people travelled to help others. Interviews centered on the various organizations they were working with, their volunteer experience, and what they did in New Orleans when they were not volunteering. After transcribing the interviews, I discovered themes and evaluated the information writing margin notes to summarize the contents of each conversation using Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's work (1995). Themes apparent in interviews from January to April 2009 became the subject of the interviews in May and June of 2009. These interviews focused on volunteer tourists' religious beliefs, feelings about the work they were doing, the role of stories in their trip, and the government's response to Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, I served as a participant observer.

Although I was a resident of New Orleans, and not a tourist, I did assist in some volunteer projects. I cut and hung sheetrock, painted, and cleaned New Orleanians' houses with volunteer tourists. I stayed in the volunteers' quarters in churches, and prepared and ate meals with them. This allowed me to experience what the volunteers were experiencing.

4. Findings

4. 1 Neoliberalism and Neocolonialism

Many wonder why homes were built in areas of New Orleans that flood. In the 1850s, the federal government began regulating the levees, which are earthen structures intended to hold back large bodies of water (Davis, 2006, p. 96-7). Building levees also increased the livable area around New Orleans, and insurance companies wrote policies taking the levees into account, classifying the land as outside the "flood zone" (Davis, 2006, p. 92). Before the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s, people of color were moved from one area of the city to other, more remote areas of the city (Jackson, 2006). Many African-American residents were relocated to these flood-prone areas of New Orleans before the 1960s and lived there just before Hurricane Katrina. Harvey states, "On the one hand the neoliberal state is expected to take a back seat and simply set the stage for market functions, but on the other it is supposed to be an activist in creating a good business climate…" (2005, p. 79). Because there are no governmental structures in place to assist in the rebuilding process, New Orleanians became dependent on non-residents who have the private resources to donate their leisure time and money to help rebuild their homes. Twenty-four out of the twenty-five groups I interviewed were from California, the northern regions of the United States, or Canada. Eighty-nine percent of the volunteer tourists I met were Caucasian, six percent were African-American, and three percent were of Asian descent.

All of the residences' homeowners were African-American. Neoliberal governments are against being a welfare state; therefore, they provide little assistance when residents need it. Residents of New Orleans are dependent on volunteer tourists to repair their homes for a variety of reasons: because they have other jobs, do not have time to work on their own homes, cannot afford labor costs, or are disabled. The overwhelming racial implications of Caucasians assisting African-Americans bred an attitude of neocolonialism with some of the volunteer tourists. In a telephone conversation with Terri, one of the volunteer coordinators, she spoke about one of the volunteer groups staying at the house, "This group that came in late Saturday night has this attitude like 'we're helping *you* out.' I heard in a prayer one of the leaders say something about 'these poor people.' Sure, the residents don't have a lot, but they're so much richer than this group will ever understand. That attitude doesn't help anybody" (phone call with the author, February 10, 2009). Volunteers like to feel like they are needed, and this statement shows the volunteer leader feels they are the saviors for the residents of New Orleans which gives them a sense of purpose. However, residents should not have to rely on others, specifically church groups who hail from other, wealthier parts of the United States and Canada, to help them rebuild their homes. Paula, a woman in her sixties from Philadelphia, talked about the dialogue hosted by the Rebirth Volunteer Center about race, class, and culture in New Orleans and mentioned, "Did anyone take any responsibility for bussing the people who were bussed out of the floods back to New Orleans and giving them money or transportation or whatever to get back? I mean they took them from their homes, and I understand they did it to save their lives. But it just feels like they were then dumped out there. 'Now you're on your own figure out how to get back.'

The whole thing was yucky, which is part of why I am here because I think I carry some of that collective white guilt and wanted to do something to contradict it even though I'm not directly responsible" (interview with the author, February 6, 2009). Paula struggles with her draw to volunteer and the government's opposing roles. She points out that the government is not helping New Orleanians get back into their homes. Yet, the government evacuated citizens from the city in the days following the storm. This highlights the ways the government did and did not take responsibility for helping its citizens. The neoliberalism of the government has contradictory functions. In one sense, neoliberalism fosters volunteer tourists to go to New Orleans. In the other sense, the government took responsibility to assist citizens when people were at risk of drowning in the flood. Volunteer tourists in New Orleans also shift responsibility from the government to volunteers. This causes the "white guilt" Paula mentions. People in the rest of the country saw what was happening to poor African-Americans through the barrage of media following the storm, and felt they needed to help. This highlights that people are volunteering because they want to be saviors and/or they feel guilt about the politics of their race. Although laden with good intentions, the volunteer tourists' position causes a neocolonialistic reaction to the neoliberal structures of the United States government.

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Since the government will not help them get back into their homes, residents rely on the kindness of strangers, who are wealthier outsiders. However, some volunteer tourists travel from other areas of the country with an attitude that they know how New Orleans should exist, rather than simply fixing the homes of residents. Because of the long-term racial and regional politics, this manifests itself as neocolonialism. The volunteer tourists show neocolonialism through imposing a sense of indebtedness upon New Orleanians for helping them, which Terri talks about. The volunteer, Paula, points out how the government simultaneously helps and does not help, which is also neocolonial. The government removed people from New Orleans when people were drowning in their own homes, but they made no provisions for getting them back to New Orleans. The residents give the volunteers a sense of purpose, the volunteers need the residents to need them, and hence this is an effect of neoliberalism.

4. 2 Issues with Volunteer Tourists' Labor

Neoliberalism affects volunteer tourism and labor. Volunteer tourists do much of the labor to rebuild and restore homes in New Orleans. Although volunteer tourists' occupations at home range from social workers, to construction company owners, to students, to librarians, to pastors, these individuals are now doing physical labor to rebuild New Orleans. Volunteer tourists already have jobs, which afford them the opportunity to travel to help others. In fact most of the volunteers have university diplomas, but have no formal experience in building construction or rehabilitation. Volunteer tourism gives the government free labor. Volunteers are rebuilding New Orleans either because the government will not or because it does not have to as long as the volunteers are willing to do it. As Harvey states, "In the event of a conflict, the typical neoliberal state will tend to side with a good business climate as opposed to either the collective rights (and quality of life) of labor or the capacity of the environment to regenerate itself" (2005, p. 70). In the case of New Orleans, the state has ignored the need for labor to rebuild the city. Because there's no central agency coordinating efforts throughout the city, rebuilding efforts are disorganized and piecemeal. The process for volunteer tourists repairing homes follows a similar procedure. The volunteer group beginning the renovation of the home will create a "punch list," which is a detailed list of all the specific renovations that need to take place.

Someone who has prior construction experience usually is the "keeper" of this list and the director of the tasks that need to be completed on site. The group would complete the items they can within the week they spend volunteering and then create a new "punch list" for the next group. Because each group can only rely on the previous group's list, it often causes oversight. The previous group's leader may not have much construction experience or perhaps overlooked an important task. As one volunteer, Sal mentioned, "The entire plumbing system would not be allowed where we live [in Maine]. The pipes are too old, the house could flood, and the pipes can't be exposed" (interview with the author, April 17, 2009). This group couldn't complete any task tangentially related to the plumbing because of their unfamiliarity with the system. Because no singular group is working on the house for the entirety of the project, this causes discontinuity on the volunteer work site. The lack of volunteer coordinators' experience also leads to little direction or coordination of efforts. One volunteer coordinator, Tom, who is in his early twenties, talks about the instruction he's given before leaving with volunteer groups every day. My boss says, "take these people out, and make sure they are set [to work] for say, 4 hours or whatever" (interview with the author, February 10, 2009). Tom's only construction experience is being a volunteer. He graduated from high school in Chicago, Hurricane Katrina hit in late August of that same year, and he has been volunteering in New Orleans ever since. He has cleaned streets, gutted, and painted houses as a volunteer.

After two years of being a volunteer for various organizations, ACORN hired him as a volunteer coordinator. Volunteers also complain about the disorganization within projects. Jeanie, a volunteer in her forties from Philadelphia, stated, "I wouldn't call it the worst, but sometimes you get directions to do something and you're working. Then someone else heard something else, so then you have to go back to the coordinator to find out 'What did you want me to do? What's supposed to go next?' You can be confused" (interview with the author, February 6, 2009). The lack of training and the confusion on the job can cause a slowing of progress from both the volunteer and the coordinator. Volunteers also complain that they cannot work during all of their waking hours. "We've come a long way and you need this work so desperately yet you spend a lot of time waiting. And other people tell me there's just a difference between, I had a friend who lived in the South who said, 'There's just a different work ethic down there, and how people do things a little slower than normal'" (Deborah, interview with the author, February 6, 2009).

The waiting this volunteer talks about is often due to a lack of organization. Moreover, she mentions the difference between the different areas of the United States. She references that where she's from, Philadelphia, people move at a faster pace than in New Orleans, and that her culture is in a sense, better. Deborah is also not placing the blame where it should be, and does not see that the lack of organization and pace is not because she is in the South, but because the government did not have the proper stopgaps in place to ensure that disaster victims got the assistance they needed. In interviews, volunteers admitted that they did not have the skill set to do certain jobs. Mona from Baltimore stated, "I'm installing an insulation shield."

"Wow, that sounds complicated," I reply.

"Well, I did it last year, and I guess I have experience now," She says chuckling (personal communication with the author, January 20, 2009).

Because she completed this task once previously, as a volunteer, she is now deemed qualified to complete the task the following year. I, personally, learned how to cut drywall. I cut it with a handsaw, rather than an electric saw. This, along with my unsteady hand, compromised its accuracy. That piece of drywall still went up in 1515 Dauphine Street. I can't say I know what the consequences are of having the gaping hole between the wall and the floor, but it went into the wall. Usually one person in the volunteer group has construction experience and serves as the volunteer supervisor/coordinator. This person is in charge of the punch list, delegating duties as s/he sees fit, and completing the duties that no one else knows how to do or is too complicated for them to perform. Some organizations provide a volunteer supervisor/coordinator, and this streamlines the duties volunteers perform somewhat. In both cases however, the supervisor/coordinator is responsible for both ensuring that the tasks are completed and for training the volunteers. However, there is no accountability if the work is done incorrectly. Residents often live out of town while their homes are being repaired and do not know who worked on their home from week to week. One of the seemingly well-organized projects, actor Brad Pitt's Make it Right homes, has had issues with its homes' construction. A product used to build stairs and decks, TIMBERSIL, can rot with exposure to moisture (Richard Thompson, "Wood product said to be rotting in 'green'-built homes," December 30, 2013, http://theadvocate.com/news/neworleans/neworleansnews/7899967-123/innovative-wood-product-used-in (accessed March 27, 2014)). With New Orleans being in the mouth of the Mississippi River delta, this is a problem. Volunteer labor is free and available but may be compromising the integrity of residents' homes.

4.3 Volunteer Tourists and Governmental Discontent

Neoliberal policies reinforce anger at the government. Volunteer tourists see the deficiencies of the government and have lost confidence in its abilities. As Garland and Harper mention, one of the purposes of neoliberalism is to "[instill] a sense of loyalty to the capitalist nation remains a major function of much of the media we consume"(2012, p. 417). This proposes that volunteers' desire to help others was largely because of the media's display of what happened in New Orleans. International media showed New Orleanians suffering and the government doing nothing to quell that issue. This doesn't show a "sense of loyalty to the capitalist nation" as Garland and Harper argue, but actually has the contrary effect. Residents and volunteers are disappointed with how the state handled Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

Mona, a woman in her forties from Baltimore stated,

I left here last time with a different view of my government. You do get angry. It's not just the feeling that you've helped; it's the feeling that the people that you expected to help didn't help. The view that we're all Americans and we all would help anyone if they needed it, no matter their economic status or their race.' From what I saw here, I don't believe that anymore" (interview with the author, January 20, 2009). Mona hints at the explicit consequences of being poor and African-American in America. Mona expresses her frustration of living in a country with a lot of resources. But she sees the lack of housing, food, and financial assistance for the majority African-American citizens of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and is discouraged.

When I asked Erin what the disadvantages of coming to New Orleans to help were, she responded,

"This resident, Ronald, was so disappointed with the government, and I'm assuming this was a general feeling because I heard this when I was still back in Canada. People from New Orleans were given a refugee status while they were in Canada after Hurricane Katrina. It was a little disappointing that the government failed them because that's what they're there for, particularly at that time. That's why we have them" (February 19, 2009). Erin is a woman in her early twenties who is visiting with friends from McMaster University in Canada.

Her answer to my open-ended question was that by coming to New Orleans, she learned that the American government failed its people. Paula, a woman in her sixties from Philadelphia expresses her chagrin, "It just seems to me there ought to be better planning than that. I think that's something FEMA could have planned for. The whole thing was just so poorly done; it's bizarre to me" (interview with the author, February 6, 2009).Paula's anger is with the faulty planning and coordination of the Federal Emergency Management Agency; however, this anger is partially misplaced. Because volunteer tourists are doing much of the labor, they have taken the necessity from the government to hire people to do these jobs.

5. Conclusion

Volunteer tourists who travel to New Orleans hope to have a lasting impact on the residents they help. Through this research, I found that neoliberalism has many effects on volunteer tourism. Volunteer tourists have neocolonial attitudes in relation to the residents of New Orleans, disrupt the labor market, and show discontent with the government's dysfunction. This research also highlights the need for better communication and coordination between government entities and volunteer groups. Volunteers often travel to New Orleans with the expectation that they will be doing physical labor and only rebuilding homes. This research suggests that volunteers need to be educated about the communities they will be working in, the type of work that they will be doing, the volunteer organization's goals and objectives, and how the work affects the community as a whole. Although I do not see this paper changing transnational governmental policies to better take care of their residents, I do hope that this case study can give perspective to volunteer coordinators and volunteer coordinating agencies that changes can be made to make work more efficient while ensuring volunteer tourists have a better experience.

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