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Geography and public policy: activist, participatory, and policy geographies

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Diggers dig and cranes roar
In an attempt to bring the community to the floor
Brick by brick and stone by stone
Pull old buildings down
Build new homes
This is how regeneration begins
People lose
Contractors win
The chaotic construction of whole communities
All in line with Government policy
Architecturally brainwashing
Generation after generation
(Garry, 2006: 15)

I Introduction
I begin this third, and my final, ‘Geography and public policy’ progress report with an excerpt from a poem by Mike Garry. In his collection Mancunian meander, Garry uses his poems to provide a series of accounts of the city of Manchester, from ‘City Living’ to ‘And God Created Wythenshawe’, from ‘The Fallow Field’ to ‘Don’t Rush Home’. The titles and the poems are infused with geographical reference points. Fallowfield, Rusholme and Wythenshawe are all neighbourhoods to the south of the city centre. Fallowfield is now a largely student-dominated area, Rusholme is a neighbourhood with a significant Asian population and home to what is known locally as ‘the curry mile’, while Wythenshawe is a working-class 1940s-built former public housing estate, which continues both to experience multiple forms of social and economic dislocation and to be a site of strong informal networks of reciprocity and giving (Massey, 1996; Ward et al., 2007). This paper begins with a quote from ‘Regeneration’. In addition to being hugely incisive, and thoroughly entertaining, this poem contains within it a number of references to the many different ‘publics’ brought forward, and pushed back, through the act of urban regeneration. Government policy-makers, architects, consultants, building contractors, investors, residents, activists: all publics produced through the acts captured in Garry’s ‘Regeneration’ poem. Each is heterogeneous – there are clear differences within a particular public as well as between one public and another.

Wrought with caustic reflection and social commentary, the poem draws the attention of the reader to those who participate in the making and the remaking of the urban built environment. These are also some of the

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‘publics’ called forth by human geographers. Campaigning alongside local residents to produce participatory visions for housing-estate renewal, consulting with regional development agencies to produce economic strategies, mobilizing with local communities over access to clean water and visiting local schools as part of university-widening participation schemes are all examples of the ways in which human geographers seek to do away with the academic/activist divide (Blomley, 1994; Tickell, 1995; Routledge, 1996; Lees, 1999; Ruddick, 2004; Chatterton, 2006). They are the means through which a small but growing number of human geographers of different subdisciplinary stripes have set about popularizing their geographies – personal/political – and in the process have strived to overcome this dualism that has historically characterized much of human geography (Fuller and Kitchen, 2004). While those working in the global south have perhaps been quicker to centre this binary, and to acknowledge the limits to this drawing of boundaries, in other areas of human geography this distinction remains pervasive.

Activist, participatory and policy geographies: a range of ways in which geographers have set about getting involved in ‘public policy’. In this paper I want to review and discuss this variety of approaches within human geography that share a commitment to, according to Kitchen and Hubbard (1999: 5), ‘expose the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places: challenge and change those inequalities; and bridge the divide between theorization and praxis’.

II From grey geographies …

In her third and final ‘Social geography’ progress report Pain (2006: 256) argues that ‘[t]here are signs that we are moving beyond the last decade’s debates on policy research’. If the last few years have seen a slowing down in the discipline’s concerns with ‘policy research’, what does that leave me to say in this, my final ‘Geography and public policy’ progress report? If one takes a quite understandably narrow view of ‘policy’, then Pain is undoubtedly correct. After a burst of agenda-setting papers in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Peck, 1999; Martin, 2001; Massey, 2001; Dorling and Shaw, 2002), followed by a series of papers that consolidated and built on these (James et al., 2004; Beaumont et al., 2005; Burgess, 2005; Castree, 2005; Eden, 2005; Johnston and Plummer, 2005; Owens, 2005; James, 2006), the last couple of years have seen papers in this area slow to a trickle (Ward, 2006).

This is perhaps not surprising. It is not the first time, nor I am sure will it be the last, that human geographers have felt the need to reflect on their position in society and in the wider physical and social sciences, and on the consequences of their work and to be disappointed at what they find (and what they don’t). One only has to look at the pages of Area in the 1970s, where the talk was of ‘relevance’ and of ‘revolution’, of the ‘new’ and more ‘radical’ geography, to appreciate the longer-term relative insignificance of recent work (Whitehand, 1970; 1971; Chisholm, 1971; Prince, 1971; Berry, 1972; Dickinson and Clarke, 1972; Blowers, 1974; Coppock, 1974; Harvey, 1974; Smith, 1976). That this remains a debate so untouched by postcolonial critiques of western knowledge’s claims to universalism is at best surprising, and at worst disturbing (Robinson, 2003a; 2003b; Radcliffe, 2006). Progress in this case has been rather slow. Put in their historical perspective, the recent interventions might be best understood as a small number of human geographers experiencing a periodic urge to reflect on how to make a difference, within the relatively narrow confines of the area in which they research. The precise details of how to make a ‘difference’ are, of course, what have been up for negotiation, as those with differing understandings of the conditions under which research is funded, produced, disseminated and valued present their respective cases. That it has largely been UK-based geographers (with a small number of US colleagues) who
have set the parameters in the most recent exchanges leaves open to question how issues of ‘relevance’ might be understood in different geographical contexts.

So, looking at the most recent debates – and being too young to have been involved in their predecessors – fewer human geographers appear to have participated this time around. On the one hand, the domesticating of ‘critical geography’ (Castree, 2000) would appear to have rendered the issue of ‘relevance’ and ‘the relationship between the outside world and academic research’ (Lees, 1999: 378) less controversial. The mainstreaming of some of the issues that so stirred earlier generations of human geographers appears to have been reflected in the relatively small number of human geographers who participated in the recent debates. Yet they appeared to have cast a disproportionately large shadow over the discipline. Much fist-shaking and head-nodding has taken place, as conferences and seminars have been organized to discuss the details of a relatively small number of papers. And then ... silence. Well, not quite, but almost. It is not clear what the longer-term implications of this flurry of soul-searching and outpouring will be for human geography. I am sceptical that the ‘revival of interest in policy research within the discipline [will develop into] ... a full blown paradigm shift’ (James et al., 2004: 1905). It has not in the past. The legacy of the series of papers produced over the last few years on geography’s relationship with public policy – apart from acting as an historical marker for whoever writes future ‘Geography and public policy’ progress reports – should be at the very least an acknowledgement that geographers could do more to construct a policy audience for their work, with all the caveats and disclaimers involved in what that might actually mean for academics, in terms of what they do, how they do it, and where they do it (Castree, 2000; Ward, 2006).

On the other hand, however, it is to be hoped that future debates of this kind – and they will surely come – will acknowledge that ‘relevance’ must mean more than currying favour with the latest political agendas (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2005; Ward, 2005) and that to focus on the ability of geographers to influence the decisions of government policy-makers is to focus on just one public for human geography (Pain, 2006; Ward, 2007). It is also to be hoped that future debates about ‘relevance’ and what this term means might more fruitfully involve those whose own research is performed outside of the global north. Not to attend to these issues runs the risk of missing out how a whole host of other publics is being constructed for the knowledge produced by human geographers – alone or in collaboration with others. It is to these that I turn in the next section, and in doing so I take a deliberately broad view of what is meant by ‘policy research’.

III ... to rainbow geographies: activist, participatory and policy geographies

Table 1 outlines some of the basic characteristics of the different approaches. I use the terms ‘activist’, ‘participatory’ and ‘policy’ as shorthand. Each covers a rich variety of approaches, each with their own particular histories and geographies, and with their own labels, and of course there is more than a degree of overlap between these approaches. Even the label ‘participatory geographies’ – which one could argue has the strongest identity within human geography – contains within it some not insignificant theoretical and methodological differences (Pain, 2004). I do not wish to deny the differences within these approaches. They are real and they matter. However, here my emphasis is on the differences between the three approaches – taking the labels as signifiers of particular ways of constructing ‘publics’ for geography – while accepting that what binds them together is no more, and no less, than the ideological commitment to social and personal change of one type or another (Fuller and Kitchen, 2004; Cahill et al., 2004).

The first of the three is what I am calling ‘activist geographies’. This brings together a quite heterogeneous body of work that
Table 1  Activist, participatory and policy geographies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Activist geographies</th>
<th>Participatory geographies</th>
<th>Policy geographies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Origins within ‘mainstream’ human geography</td>
<td>Late 1960s</td>
<td>Late 1990s</td>
<td>1970s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent context</td>
<td>Rejection of positivist approaches and embracing of alternative, radical and critical perspectives</td>
<td>Roots in a host of different approaches to ‘participatory research’, in both the global north and south</td>
<td>Constituent element in the emergence of the discipline in the form of ‘applied’ work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modus operandi</td>
<td>To challenge existing power structures, all forms of oppression and in some cases to move beyond academic/activist distinctions</td>
<td>To involve in a non-hierarchical way those being ‘researched’ in one or more of the different stages of the research process, from conception to evaluation</td>
<td>To feed into and shape the policy-making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Academic and public knowledges valued</td>
<td>Context-specific focusing on the production of detailed and situated accounts</td>
<td>Policy and practitioner-friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>For human geographers to get involved in activities outside of the academy – as ‘professional activists’ – using their geographical knowledges</td>
<td>Widening ownership of research and capacity building among those involved</td>
<td>Influencing and shaping the formation and evaluation of policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Designated publics</td>
<td>Designated publics</td>
<td>Clients and evaluators</td>
</tr>
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Table 1: Activist, participatory and policy geographies

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goes under this label and others, such as ‘autonomous geographies’ (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). The emphasis among this work is on action (Blomley, 1994; Tickell, 1995; Ruddick, 2004). ‘[P]artly as a reaction to the perceived retreat into the ivory tower away from both policy and the streets’ (Fuller and Kitchen, 2004: 3), since the 1990s a series of discrete but connected projects and papers on dismantling the activist-academic divide has emerged. Infused by the wider renewed interest in issues such as positionality and reflexivity within human geography, this work has argued for ‘action research’ as a means of personalizing academic geography and professionalizing personal geographies. Or, as Kitchen and Hubbard (1999: 196) put it, ‘action research methods may offer a route for geographers to combine a role of activist with that of putative academic’. While not without its precedents in human geography (see Bunge, 1979; Katz, 1992; Chouinard, 1994), the last decade has seen the beginnings of a mainstreaming of what were in the past understood and labelled as marginal concerns/concerns for the marginal (Professional Geographer, 1994; Antipode, 1995). While the boundary between politicized ‘personal’ lives and professionalized ‘public’ lives is still in place, it is perhaps now more permeable than it once was. A small but growing number of academics are able to bring into dialogue the personal and the political. Wilson Gilmore’s (2006) work on the prison industrial complex in California and Wright’s (2006) work on the myth of the disposable third-world woman are examples of the ways in which personal political concerns can be woven together with the academic production process. The work of Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) draws upon the activist experiences of both authors. Through three case studies – resisting urban gentrification, the emergence...
of social centres in the city and sustainable living communities in southwest Wales – this research emphasizes academics as professional activists and vice versa.

‘Participatory geographies’ refers to that work which draws on one of the many participatory research approaches (Pain and Francis, 2003). These have as their common element that ‘research is undertaken collaboratively with and for the individuals, groups or communities who are its subject’ (Pain, 2003: 653). Research is carried out by community or group members on issues decided and defined by them as relevant to them; collective education follows as they collect, contribute and disseminate information; and the potential for collective action is maximized as members of the community or group think through their own problems, develop solutions, and act on them (Fuller et al., 2003). There are a number of histories behind its adoption by human geographers in the late 1990s, where it has been seen to enrich a ‘more relevant, morally aware and non-hierarchical practice … which engages with inequality to a greater degree’ (Pain, 2004: 652). These range from studies of young women growing up in New York (Cahill, 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c), through to work on reimagining the Latrobe valley and the surrounding area’s economy in Australia (Cameron and Gibson, 2005a; 2005b), from studies of disabilities (Kitchen, 2001), through to health research on the Mexican border (Monk et al., 2003), from studies of the conditions under which Canadian nurses labour (Pratt and Kirby, 2003; Pratt and Johnston, 2007; Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of B.C. and Ugnayan ng Kabataang Pilipino sa Canada/Filipino-Canadian Youth Alliance, 2007) through to work on children on Buffalo’s West Side (Cope, 2005; see also http://www.geog.buffalo.edu/research/geokids/index.htm), and studies in Doncaster on local residents’ understandings of the places in which they live (Crookes, 2006). And, reflecting this approach’s roots in the global south, rich and detailed accounts continue to be published in journals such as Development in Practice (Resurreccion et al., 2004; Eversole and Richard, 2005; Vernooy et al., 2006). That there is not more work by geographers using participatory approaches in the global south published in ‘core’ or even ‘marginal’ geography journals perhaps speaks to wider issues over the way some knowledges are universalized and others are not, to put it rather bluntly (Robinson, 2003a).

The place of participatory research has been sealed within human geography – at least in the UK – by its institutionalization in the form of the establishment of the Participatory Geographies Working Group (PGyWG) of the RGS-IBG. According to the Group’s site, ‘participatory geographers … often seek to work in bottom-up ways with the goal of actively engaging and benefiting groups outside academia so that traditional barriers between “expert researcher” and “researched community” are broken down. A key ethical tenet of their work might be not just to do no harm, but to do good (on participants’ terms, rather than academics’)' (http://www.pygywg.org/). A soon-to-be-published edited collection by three human geographers is likely to reconfirm the place of participatory research approaches within the discipline (Kindon et al., 2007), and perhaps open up new audiences within it.

The third of this trinity of approaches is ‘policy geographies’. Apparently regarded by some human geographers as ‘the reactionary cousin of activist and participatory research’ (Pain, 2003: 653), this work consists of a highly differentiated set of contributions to the involvement of human geographers in ‘policy’, from inputting into its formation to tendering for its evaluation. Dating back to the early 1970s, human geographers have been questioning the policy ‘relevance’ for the geographies they produce. When reflecting on the consequences for UK geographers of the ‘new’ radical revolution that was spreading across US geography, Dickinson and Clarke (1972: 26) argued that ‘we [geographers] should seek more influence with policy-makers
and the general public’, a concern that has reappeared in a series of papers over the last decade. To some, human geography – and by inference human geographers – has still not been ‘punching its weight’ in policy research and influence (James et al., 2004). Its ‘impact … on the public policy realm has in general been disappointingly limited’ (Martin, 2001: 191). For others, there is already plenty that is being done by geographers (Banks and MacKian, 2000; Pollard et al., 2000; Pain, 2006). Underlying these different views on the success or otherwise of human geographers to get involved in ‘policy’ is a set of divergent views on the meanings attached to this word.

On the one hand are those who would like to see human geographers ‘apply’ more of their work to ‘real world’ issues through exerting influence on policy-makers. This seems to mean having the ear of ministers, as Peck (1999) puts it. For Martin (2001: 193) ‘the scale of involvement of geographers in, and their influence on, public policy remains comparatively limited’. Others too have commented on the apparent inability or unwillingness of human geographers to ‘influence policy’ (Dorling and Shaw, 2002; James et al., 2004; Johnston and Plummer, 2005; James, 2006). The targets for human geographers and the geographies they produce are clear: it is those who make and evaluate policy. On the other hand, for others the notion of ‘policy’ is less clear-cut for others. Pollard et al. (2000), for example, argue that human geographers are involved in all manner of ‘policy work’. Policy is made by a range of social and political actors, so the argument goes. Private and third sectors as well as those in government are involved in different ways in ‘policy’. Any ‘policy (re)turn’ (Martin, 2001; Dorling and Shaw, 2002) must be less parochial. Writing about social geography, Pain (2006: 250) identifies what she sees as ‘seven deadly myths in policy research’, drawing attention to how a series of dualisms pervade human geography. These construct and represent certain different types of policy geographies in ways that do injustice to the rich and varied policy work produced by human geographers.

Having provided short summaries of these three differing approaches to popularizing and publicizing human geography, I now want to reflect on the different ways in which ‘publics’ are constructed in each approach.

First, activist geographies – here human geographers are members of the public they want to call forward for their work. The distinction between academic and activist – one of Pain’s (2006) myths – melts away. Following on from the feminist movement of the 1970s and Smith’s (1976: 84) observations (and, more recently, those of Chouinard, 1994; Routledge, 1996; Maxey, 1999; Cloke, 2002) that ‘the real world requires involvement in social change, for we are among the “actors” ourselves’, the drawing of lines around the ‘professional’ and the ‘personal’ is rejected. Rather, academics include themselves in the ‘public’ they invoke through their representational strategies. In addition to talking and writing – the most common representational strategies performed by human geographers (Ward, 2007) – those pursuing activist geographies act their geographies. Whether in social centres in Italy (Mudu, 2004), or the UK (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006), the public is produced through the performance of geography. There is not the researcher–researched distinction that has characterized much of human geography. Rather, those writing about activist geographies are writing about themselves, and their own experiences. Chatterton’s (2006) account of his own involvement in blocking off access to an oil depot in Nottingham reveals the emphasis on activity and involvement, and on rethinking the positional issues that come from the representation of the ‘public’ as something ‘we’ – academics – construct. Pickerill’s (2004; 2007) internet activism work is also revealing, as is that of Elias (2006) in Burkina Faso with women’s shea butter cooperatives, Wills (2004) on living wages in London, and Fuller (1998) on financial exclusion in the northeast of England. All share understandings of the
publics for their work being produced through their work. All also share a commitment to changing the particular bits of the world they occupy as activist-academics.

Second, participatory geographies – here the emphasis is on the construction of publics through participation. Again, like activist geographers, this work strives to move beyond the dualism of academic-activist, participatory approaches putting the emphasis on involving publics – children, residents, etc – from outside the academy in changing the world in which they live. Academics work with community or group members in an empowering and facilitating role. Using a range of techniques (Pain and Francis, 2003; Pain, 2004), such as ‘participatory diagrams’, human geographers working in this area stress the collaborative and non-hierarchical nature of bringing forth publics through teaching and research activities (Fuller, 2005). Underlying these techniques is a desire to access ‘publics’ that are typically ignored or underrepresented and to work with them, to give them a voice in debates over their futures. Fuller et al.’s (2003) work with graffiti artists in the northeast of England over the role of public space, Pain et al.’s (2003) work with young people over their sense of safety and violence, crime and disorder, in the city, Cahill et al.’s (2004) work with a group of young women of colour in New York who have sought to challenge stereotypical representations, rejecting the label ‘women’ and replacing it with the alternative, ‘womyn’ (www.fed-up-honeys.org), and Cope’s (2005) work with children in low-income neighbourhoods in Buffalo and their efforts to think through and articulate what a ‘child-friendly city’ might look like (http://www.geog.buffalo.edu/research/geokids) all are examples of involving geographical or social groups previously marginal in the making of mainstream ‘policy’ through participatory methods and techniques.

Finally, policy geographies – here the public that is being targeted, that is to be brought forward, are those that make, evaluate and experience policy, even if, in some cases, the emphasis is on countering-policy (Pain, 2006). For some, the emphasis is on ‘the role of geography in public policy’ (James et al., 2004: 1901), and feeding into and shaping policy formation. This necessitates constructing a very particular public, government ministers and others who make policy. This is not about those who are marginal but about those who are central to decision-making. Bringing forth these publics involves academics doing human geography that is ‘germane to policy issues’ (Martin, 2001: 191). It also means human geographers theorizing and writing in ways that are understood to be accessible to policy-makers (Peck, 1999; Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Johnston and Plummer, 2005). So there is a very particular set of representations and practices that accompany the production of these policy geographies (Ward, 2007).

IV Conclusion
I end this third ‘Geography and public policy’ progress report with a confession. I was one of the thousands who last November voted in the online competition to decide who would edit Radio 4’s ‘Today’ programme on the first day of 2007. My vote, of course, went to ‘in search of the G spot’. This group of three geographers consisted of a geography teacher, Dan Raven-Ellison, one of his GCSE students, Hannah Bosher, and the Chief Executive of the UK’s Geographical Association, David Lambert. Their ‘editorial line’ was to ‘focus on the “space” in which we live, places and what makes them special and on understanding our interconnected lives’. This mirrored the thinking behind the establishment by Raven-Ellison and Lambert in early 2006 of the ‘Give Geography its Place’ campaign and website (www.passion4geography.co.uk) with its twin objectives: (1) to raise the profile of Geography in all forms of the UK media (newspapers, magazines, the internet, TV, radio, advertising, etc); (2) to increase awareness of the importance of Geography
and the vital role that it plays in schools, colleges and universities in preparing young people for life in the twenty-first century.

The 1 January 2007 ‘Today’ programme itself consisted of a number of stories in which the geography was emphasized. Vanessa Lawrence (Director General of the OS and Hon Vice President of the GA) talked about maps and GIS, Richard Schofield (Kings College London) talked about the idea of Europe, Duncan Fuller (Northumbria University) talked about his ‘Mywalks’ project (http://nuweb.northumbria.ac.uk/mywalks/intro.php), Hannah Bosher talked about ‘teen space’, and there were features on diasporas, remittances and global connections, and on European expansion. The show ended with a three-minute essay by Doreen Massey (Open University) on the importance of geography, and an interview of the three members of the ‘G-Team’ by the Radio 4 presenter, Edward Stourton. I am not sure of the listening figures for the ‘Today’ programme, but it is probably fair to say that through their editorial efforts the ‘G Team’, for two hours at least, managed to bring into being a sizeable public for geography. They championed the discipline in a way Massey (2006) had done only a couple of months earlier in her talk at the Liverpool Festival of Ideas.

The policy consequences of these two geographical contributions are far from straightforward. There was no commissioning of research. There was no end report. Rather, both were more public than policy interventions. Yet it is impossible to say with any certainty that there are not, or never will be, any policy implications of the G Team’s hosting of the ‘Today’ programme or Doreen Massey’s lecture in Liverpool. And the same goes for the myriad other forms of public engagements performed regularly in different parts of the world by human geographers. Do not be misled by the pages of the ‘core’ geography journals. ‘Specialist’ interdisciplinary development journals stand testament to the ways in which human geographers continue to engage with anthropologists, economists and sociologists over issues of ‘relevance’ and so on, beyond the gaze of the majority of the discipline.

‘Activist’, ‘participatory’ and ‘policy’ geographies are bound together by the need to bring forth publics (Ward, 2006; 2007). Different types of publics for sure, but all in need of being constructed. In light of this, the third of my reports has reviewed and compared three different ways in which human geographers have sought to put their geographies and those of others to use. Whether through working as, with or for a particular public, human geographers continue to think through their roles and what they produce. While the precise details of the debate clearly changes over time, there is, nevertheless, also some continuity, as confirmed by a quick look back at issues of Area from the 1970s. This is set to continue into future work on ‘geography and public policy’, as human geographers carry on grappling with many of the same sets of issues that have troubled them for four decades. Nevertheless, and irrespective of how you position yourself in relation to the different types of geographies – ‘activist’ and/or ‘participatory’ and/or ‘policy’ – that the discipline is replete with, a rich and diverse array of examples of human geographers still striving to dismantle the myths that Pain (2006) writes about is no bad thing. And, of course, so much more is done but does not make the pages of the journals or the powerpoints of the presentations – activities that do not make it into print or on to the internet, for example, or articles that are not published in English. There is a whole set of publics for geography that is not acknowledged in many accounts, but which will need to be in the future if we are to avoid partial representations being generalized in distorting and unfortunate ways.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to all those who have spoken and written to me about the many states of the discipline and the variegated ‘publics’ that geographers bring forward day in and day
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