

Occasional Paper 4

The Return of the Repressed. A History of the Political Subsoil of Athens

Zissis Kotionis

December in Greece is a symbolically weighted month, especially since it carries the burden of two of the most acrimonious and game-changing events in the modern history of the country, namely the Battle of Athens in 1944, which precipitated the Civil War, and the December 2008 Events following the murder of the 15-year-old high school student Alexis Grigoropoulos by a policeman in the neighborhood of Exarcheia.

Amidst this historical intensity appears a truly bizarre near-event: the near-bombing of the Hotel Grande Bretagne by the Resistance Army ELAS on 27 December, 1944. Thinking on the meaning of the month and its topographies, architect and faculty member at the University of Thessaly Zissis Kotionis prepared an installation entitled “Subversion ‘44” that was presented at the Art Space “Cheap Art” in Athens, as part of its exhibition series for 2013 under the general title “Urbanism for Dummies.”

The text that follows was originally written (in Greek) as a catalogue for the installation, but Kotionis reworked it specifically for Occasional Papers.

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The Return of the Repressed. A History of the Political Subsoil of Athens

**ON THE UNDER-MINING
OF “GRAND BRETAGNE/
GREAT BRITAIN”
BY ELAS (THE GREEK
PEOPLE’S LIBERATION
ARMY), 27 DECEMBER,
1944**



Multimedia installation “SUBVERSION ’44,”

In Art Space “Cheap Art”. Athens, Exarcheia

February-March 2013

Curator: “Salon de Vortex”

Exhibition Series “Urbanism for Dummies”

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“URBANISM FOR DUMMIES” / CHEAP ART

Athens 2013

The “Return of The Repressed” is a deconstructive re-membrance of the historic plan to explode the Hotel Grand Bretagne (Great Britain) in the center of Athens, at Christmastime of 1944, by the forces of the Greek People’s Liberation Army (ELAS). The hotel at that time hosted the general headquarters of the British forces that were stationed in Athens, and was also the base of the Provisional Greek government. The subversive intent was to blow up the hotel-turned-headquarters during the scheduled conference of the delegates of the Allied Forces, presided over by the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Employing a psychoanalytic lens, this interpretive approach to the events endeavors to highlight the territorial/spatial dimensions of this almost-event, especially as they implicate the political aspects of the Athenian urban subsoil. Reading the event retrospectively in this way, one can



see its resonance in events, actions, and engagements of today. The event's remembrance and archiving comprise a descent into the urban subsoil and its dark infrastructures, in order to highlight its materiality and corporeality as an assimilating terrain for the urban unconscious and inhibited collective desire. There is scarcely any data available on the planned sabotage at the Grand Bretagne by the forces of the Liberation Army. What little evidence exists in fragmentary testimonies and historical references is contradictory both in the description of the events themselves and in the appraisal of the reasons leading as much to the sabotage attempt as to its eventual abandonment.¹

A celebration of the Greek People's Liberation Army, with the Grand Bretagne in the background.

One such reference is the extreme scenario according to which the undermining of "Grand Bretagne/ Great Britain" was an idea conceived by the leadership of the Greek Communist Party in view of Churchill's visit to Greece, in order to engage in barter—the Party would willingly take a neutral position in exchange for a more favorable treatment of the Greek Left by the British leader. This extreme version appears, of course, perfectly laughable once one reviews the ineffectual record of the party's leadership not just in terms of setting up a bluff for an opponent but in steering a consistent tactical course with clear strategic goals in space and time.

Another version for the failure of the sabotage, taken up in the scenario of the film *Red Train* released in the years immediately after the junta (1981), illustrates the radical divergence between, on the one hand, the spontaneous wish of ELAS's armed fighters to shake off by any and every means, the new impending rule imposed from abroad – meaning the German occupation traded-in for the British one—and, on the other, the ineptitude of the party leadership on the bureaucratic level. Eventually, the politico-military immobilization of the Left vis-a-vis the English is chalked up as a "betrayal" of the Greek Left by the political leadership of the Soviet Union.

REPRESSION

The repression of the event by contemporary historiography probably means that any reference to it, however remote that reference might appear, cannot usefully serve the process of the recovery of history. In addition, the repression indicates that the period of December '44 is not yet sufficiently distant, not so much temporally as in terms of the values invested in the political subjects of that time and their symbolic relation to the present. By contrast, the blowing up, for instance, of the Turkish flagship by Greek fighters in the liberation struggle of 1821, the circumstances of which fairly resemble the intended sabotage of the Grand Bretagne in '44, is well assimilated in Greek history and historiography as a heroic act, and quite understandably so. In other words, an act of active resistance in a contestation which has been imbued with a standardized, symbolic content is considered fair historical play. The enemy is no longer here, the volcano is considered inactive. On the other hand, the reaction to an invader, the contestation with whom remains suspended in symbolic terms, is repressed in order that it might not be judged. The volcano remains active. And at the present time, the contestation remains repressed by all the political agencies, which are even today reproducing the political polarizations that gave rise to the sabotage attempt against the Grand Bretagne.

Let us consider the repression of an act within a subject's history, in tandem with a reflection on the act of sabotage itself. However, who is here the subject of the "sabotage" and who the subject of "repression"? To start with, the subject of the sabotage is a few dozen of more or less unknown partisans of the Resistance, barely visible against the grey background of history. As for the repression of history, that concerns a generalized, collective subject, which is at the same time also fairly vague—as vague, in fact, as the designation of "we, today." Who are we today who have repressed a historical event such as the attempt to (literally) under-mine, sabotage, bomb the conference at the Grand Bretagne in December 1944? I venture to say that we are that one polymorphous and contradictory subject of history that acquired its political consciousness in post-war Greece. We are precisely the subject formed on the collective trauma of the Greek civil war. What is more, within that contradictory aggregate called "we, today," a schema of the defeat's wound remains active, especially for those of its elements who locate their ideological identity today, more or less critically, on that of the "saboteurs." This potential identification of a current, reflective viewpoint with the assumed viewpoint of the saboteurs of '44, allows us to posit that the subject of the "sabotage" and the subject of "repression" is a unitary, invented subject, whose construction is based on a continuing desire. That desire, for resistance and revolt, circulates like a ghost through different time periods and imbues historical events with a meaning persisting as a protracted presence of the past.

THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

It so happens that that "the presence of the past," an eminent notion bequeathed to our vocabulary by St. Augustine (1909)² can be activated through its political as well as its psychoanalytic dimensions. "The presence of the past" could not have presented itself had our present not been populated with meanings that make it possible for the past to reside within the present. As a case in point, the incidental but also emblematic designation of the political events in Athens in December 2008 as "December of '08" already entails a kind of annexation of history through the direct, irredeemable reference to the "December of '44." The common temporal designation, that symbolically loaded "December," signifies a historical redoubling. Then, just as now (speaking in practical terms), the common element is the revolt within the borders of the city. "Revolt" is, perhaps, the paramount concept of the political vocabulary which claims within itself the intensity and explosiveness of a collective desire. And, unavoidably, the suppression of revolt claims within itself the very suppression of desire. Though this approach to the genealogies of concepts, bridging politics and psychoanalysis, may be fairly mundane, it nevertheless remains productive.

The reasons that lend support to the claim that the "sabotage" became the object of repression by the collective psychic personality of the Greek Left are twofold. One is the aborted outcome of the operation and the other is the non-effective action plan, in terms of the political vocabulary of the so-called mass movement. Even today, a contemporary historian of the Greek Left movement commenting on the event wondered: "Can you imagine what would have actually happened had the Partisans in fact managed to blow up the hotel along with Churchill and the whole of the foreign political leadership? It would have been a death sentence not just for the militant left but for post-war Greece in its entirety."³

This is yet another version of the presence of the past. The Historian cannot avoid looking at the event as something persisting, which might happen today or tomorrow, the way it happened yesterday, and which might be equally subversive, equally destructive for “us” as it was in its initial conceptualization. But there is yet another retrospective understanding of the almost-sabotage that also prompts the subject (that indefinite “some-of-us”) to repress it; it is the version of repression brought about by the frustration caused by the mission’s failure, the disclosure of the plan in the unfolding of the operation, the possible treason, the defeat of the “heroic” group of saboteurs. The mission’s abortiveness is repressed precisely because its success would have been the deep fulfillment of the desire for revolt, retribution, victory, and dominance.

The Greek post-war personality of the Left, neurotic as it may be, is full of experiences of repression. From expectation to frustration and from frustration to new expectation, it is as if that neurotic subject is traversing a long path where, although the landscape changes, it can only register the repetition of the same narrative theme over and over again. Naturally, the repression of the subversive event by the subject that represses what it desires so formidably is of the most intensive kind. Nevertheless, this traumatic repression is no different in kind from the rest, the ones based on the feeling of self-entrapment and repulsion. The neurotic who would have liked Churchill ejected like Santa Claus up into the cold Athenian sky by the propulsion force of seven hundred and fifty kilos of explosives rising up from the sewage system underneath Syntagma Square, feels deep down that with the deferral of the explosion, he was taught his lesson. And this may be the only way that he might be able, at some future point, to have another go at the mischief.

TOPOLOGY OF THE SUBSOIL

In Freud’s well-known diagram of the topology of the psychic system, one sees the outline of an overblown humanlike figure. The more-or-less-head hosts perception and mental cognition; the upper segment, the wide body-like part represents presumably the respiratory system and the heart and is occupied by the preconscious, while in the segment below the waist resides what else but the unconscious. In the final bit, in the general area where the genitals would be, stuck at a perpendicular angle, is the “id.” Much like a scar or something carved out of the figure's shape under the balancing horizon line of the “ego” placed at a diagonal appears “the repressed.” The repressed is the only portion of the psychic system where a discontinuity is observable on the body’s outer surface, where there is an inward recessing. The diagonal shape of the recess makes it appear somewhat incongruous in relation to the rest of the elements, which have a balanced topology, above and below the horizontal line of the ego. This imposed outlet, this incongruous, unnatural duct, ushers in the real from the external world, in the form of every manner of repressed representation,⁴ and hoards it in the area of the unconscious. The picture brings to mind surgical operations in the abdominal region, even a colostomy incision.



S. Freud’s topological diagram of the psychic system from the 31st lecture in 1932, *New Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, Standard Edition. Translated by James Strachey, introduction by Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 98.

Fully aware of how risky and at the same time naive it might be, I would like to align the Freudian topology of this picture of the psyche with the diagram of the attempted sabotage as it sketchily comes down to us in the case of the historical events of the Grand Bretagne, four days before the New Year of 1945. To understand this attempt, it would help to subsume the analogy in terms of a more inclusive metaphor, the origin of which is located in the body of Freud's psychic system and its end in the body of the city as represented by the physical structure of the building (the Grand Bretagne) in the heart of Athens, together with the ground and the subsoil on which it stands. Under the surface of the city's main square, Syntagma (or Constitution) Square, in its unfamiliar terrain, a network of drainpipes temporarily sheltered the saboteurs, who started out from some part of Free Greece, (possibly even Mount Olympus) ⁵ carrying the explosives for the hotel's destruction. The historic coincidence helps the analogy between the urban body and its corresponding, psychic one.

Over the ground's horizontal line—in cross-section—lies the trunk of the building which has been designated to host the Greek political leaders' meeting led by Churchill, and which includes not only a British but also a Soviet delegation. Given the time-frame of Churchill's arrival from England for the crucial meeting on Boxing Day (December 26) '44, we might be allowed the conceptual association of him as Santa Claus (pic.3) bringing as gifts to post-occupation Greece the supremacy of the British, the disarmament of the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS, which finally happened the following month), ⁶ and the post-war ascendancy of the pro-Western, neo-colonialist political state of affairs that lasts to this day. The crucial character in the meeting is not the Empire's Prime Minister but the one intended to take on the duties of the absent king, none other than a cleric, the haughty Archbishop of Athens Damaskenos.

Much earlier in the month for two consecutive days (3 and 4 December), large demonstrations had taken place in and around Syntagma Square, organized by the Greek Communist Party and the Liberation Front (the civilian arm of ELAS), attended by upwards of 200,000 unarmed citizens, which had ended with the unprovoked attacks by the joined Greek government forces and the British army that left about thirty civilians dead. In the course of the month of December, battles took place between ELAS and the British forces that had the support of Greek government. The British imported 60,000 of their own (Commonwealth) soldiers, 80 tanks, and 200 airplanes, which bombed and pelted the city, blowing up buildings and arresting upwards of 15,000 men and boys, from the age of 10 to 60 years old. Already by month's end, victory seemed to have been decided in favor of the British, and the forces of the Left started evacuating the city and withdrawing to the countryside, taking 8,000 hostages with them. The urban soil bears the weight of the dead and of the ruins of buildings blown up in street fights.

Excavation in Syntagma Square, on the side of the Hotel Grand Bretagne, where a segment of an ancient aqueduct is visible (2004).



The British Prime Minister Winston Churchill during his visit to Athens, Christmas of 1944.



The geography of the saboteurs' infiltration follows the geographical lay-out of the military and social forces on the surface of the city. At the center, Hotel Grand Bretagne, situated next to the Parliament and near the British Embassy (and in 1944 right across from the Police Headquarters), delineates Kolonaki, the part of the city that remained immune to the communist forces throughout the events and is the home-ground of the urban upper class. It is of great interest that the topological layout of social and political forces, on

Part of a map of the sewage system of the center of Athens. The sewers of Hermou and Panepistimiou streets are the same today as they were in 1944.

the boundary between the eastern and western center of Athens, has not changed since WWII. Between

Exarcheia (the bohemian, anti-establishmentarian, youth-oriented, resistant and, by now, anarchist segment of the city) and Kolonaki that borders it, the boundary still runs between the richest and the poorest, between financial robustness on the one side and wage labor and intellectualism on the other, the boundary between legality and disobedience, with everything this implies and includes today.⁹ The same boundary dynamic has been finding expression for decades in the hundreds of marches that take place yearly in Athens. They start in the west, from the lower-class Omonoia Square or the Polytechnic School, and end in Syntagma or even further northeast at the American Embassy. In the underground of Syntagma Square and around the perimeter of the hotel (pic.4), the group of saboteurs had already arrived on the evening of December 24. The explosives had been put in place, but the saboteurs were accidentally discovered through a manhole. A fight with the British soldiers ensued, and (possibly) on an order by the Greek Communist Party the mission was aborted. The underground route established by the saboteurs is still uncertain. Testimonies seem to favor a route that started at Monastiraki Square and up towards Syntagma, through the sewer system of Hermou Street.⁷ Alternate accounts give a descent from the gully of St. Daniel to Elaionas (in the western part of the city) via Omonoia Square and up Panepistimiou Street, towards the Grand Bretagne⁸ (pic 5). In either case the group came up through the sewer network from the west and from a lower ground level, and traveled eastward in an opposite direction to the flow of sewage down into the central pipeline of the river Kifissos.

It is an interesting and noteworthy fact that along the same westward route down which the urban sewage flows, but in the opposite direction, the thousands of post-war marches come up (eastward) to the city center, as if following that one-off trail of the would-be saboteurs of the Grand Bretagne. The Freudian topology refers us at this point back to the viaduct of the repressed. As we recognize the somatomorphism of the Freudian sketch and by analogy locate the viaduct of the repressed in the bowel area of the abdominal cavity, we may carry this analogy between the body of the psyche and that of the city to its full conclusion. Freud's location of the unconscious is the area between the horizontal line of the ego and the lower part of the abdominal cavity. There, in the vicinity of the genital function and elimination, is where the id is situated. In the correspondence with urban topology, under the horizontal surface of the ground—i.e. the collective, urban ego—is located the sewage system, alongside the layers of the city's ancient matter from its habitation in prehistory to modern times.

Among the relevant topological schemata Freud used to describe psychic depth, and in addition to his famous metaphor of the layers of antiquity that he borrowed from the city of Rome, lies the metaphor of the iceberg. It is well known that only 1/10 of an iceberg is visible above the surface of the water and the remaining 9/10 are its invisible continuation below the surface. The choice of the iceberg is consistent with the theory claiming that the essence, the great part of the psychic mass, is situated somewhere down below what is immediately socially visible and accessible.



Topologically, the ego is more than a region: it is a boundary. It is yet another horizon, a baseline, that differentiates the visible from the hidden, what can be uttered from what cannot.

Before we credit modern psychoanalysis with the discovery of the self's lower topological field though, let it be noted that in an older, emblematic humanist representation, Leonardo da Vinci's well known "Vitruvian Man" we find the subject's center situated low on the human body. Da Vinci correctly perceived that this is the geometric center of the circumference and the square wherein the human body is inscribed. Whereas literally speaking that center appears to be situated in the umbilicus (the symbolic identification of the beginning of the body with its geometric center) in geometric representation, the center is somewhat lower, exactly at the root of the genitals of that ideational body. In

his late humanist writings, Freud projected the variation of the somatomorphic topological model that we are considering now. In a popularized sketch of the iceberg, in the area below the horizontal line of the ego, where the bottom of the psychic sea begins, we encounter the following psychic material: fears, violent motifs, non-acceptable sexual impulses, immoral pursuits, irrational desires, selfish needs, and shameful experiences. How much clearer and more fecund than that can the description of the psychic under-world be?



"The Vitruvian Man,"
drawing by Leonardo
da Vinci.

An application of the Freudian topological design of the structure of the psyche in the form of an iceberg.

THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

Even though in the Freudian model (and the description it provides) the "scar" of the repressed seems to receive a number of the representations from the exterior world onto the interior of the unconscious, it appears that Freudian theory also admits to the reverse process. The process "by means of which repressed elements, never having been neutralized by repression, tend to resurface and manage to do so, though in the form of a compromise," is defined as *the return of the repressed*.¹⁰ It might very well be the case that the above definition sufficiently describes the history of post-war Athens. Attempting an interpretation of the sabotage of the Grand Bretagne, there is an effort to locate the historical continuity of the post-war city within the critical horizon of possibility. The beginning, near the umbilicus, is situated precisely at the wake of the German evacuation of Athens and right at the intervention of the British Imperial army during the month of December of 1944.

Diagram of the
possible underground

The aborted sabotage of the Grand Bretagne signifies as an event, as a representation, the primary process of repression of that inaugural period in the war's aftermath. And the repression of the event of the sabotage, as I attempted to show at the beginning of this text, radiates through the whole of the constituent parts of urban subjectivity, a subjectivity that has formed both the Right and the Left. We might then want to read the event as a manifestation of the return of the repressed. That return is neither singular nor momentary, but rather it is repeated with the frequency of a ritual. It is, to remember Nietzsche, an "eternal return." From December '44 to today, in every protest march, in every such event whether small or large that obstructs the normal flow of life in the city—in a reverse direction to that of the sewage flowing from Kolonaki to the river Kifissos and, thence, to (the water-treatment plant) Psytallia—the route of the saboteurs is reiterated, except as a "return of the repressed." In other words, the manifestation of the repressed elements takes on the form of a compromise. The city's history and its social determination, irrespective of the fluctuations of the seasons, the euphoria of progress or the pessimism of crises continuously throws up, "the coming of current events which recall the repressed material" as Freud has delineated it (249), precisely because the return of the repressed "takes place in the guise of symptoms, dreams, parapraxes" (83). Thus, it would be perfectly consistent to call the interpretation of the sabotage of the Grande Bretagne symptomatic, to understand it as a mnemonic parapraxis, to allocate it, after its eventuation, to a realm other than the real, in the category of forgotten yet active dreams.



route of the Partisans of the Greek People's Liberation Army, through the sewer system of central Athens. The flow of the sewage and the route of the post-war protest marches move in opposite directions.



British paratroopers ensconced in the Acropolis Museum. In the background is visible a fragment from the Parthenon frieze. December 1944.



Ancient well within the archaeological space of the Ancient Agora.

Certainly, the story of the attempted sabotage against the Grand Bretagne in December 1944 is an isolated and unrepeatable event in the long history of the Athenian subsoil. The subsoil of Athens, nevertheless, remains a constant source of “returns of the repressed.” A major factor in these returns is the ground’s antiquity. Not only each time that an archaeological find surfaces from the ancient body of the city, but also every time a subject of the city or a traveler discover, to their personal surprise and joy, an ancient element in the light of day, the repressed returns. The compromise with the city’s extremely ancient unconscious is part of the experience of every resident and visitor. Yet it seems that it is still too early for us to appreciate this: within the general hoarding of the dark subsoil, the datum of the near-sabotage of the Grand Bretagne in 1944 possesses a libidinal energy equivalent to a possible viewing of the limb of an ancient Kore, or even the viewing of an ancient well’s opening, scarred by the friction of the rope releasing the bucket and bringing it back up from the dark water below.

NOTES

1. The present text relies for its information on Dominique Eudes 1975. I have also relied on the oral testimonies collected by Giorgos Priovolos in *Μια αλυσίδα μνήμες. Αχαΐα και Βόρεια Πελοπόννησος 1940-1949*.

2. What is now plain and clear is that neither future nor past things are in existence, and that it is not correct to say there are three periods of time: past, present and future. Perhaps it would be proper to say there are three periods of time: the present of things past, the present of things present, the present of things future. For, these three are in the soul and I do not see them elsewhere: the present of things past is memory; the present of things present is immediate vision; the present of future things is expectation. If we are permitted to say this, I see three periods of time and admit there are three. Still, it may be said three periods of time do exist-past, present and future-just as custom falsely put it; it may be so expressed. See, I do not care, or make any opposition or criticism-provided the statement be understood: that there is no existing now either of what is to be in the future or that which is past. There are few things which we express properly; more frequent are those that we express improperly, though making our intentions understood. (Saint Augustine, 350-351).

3. From a private conversation with a Greek academic historian of the Left (December 2012)

4. Cf. J. Laplanche, J.-B. Pontalis, 1986, 79.

5. See the description given in Eudes, 274, where one of the ELAS captains, Captain Vratsanos, stationed on Mt. Olympus at the time, seems to have received orders to send to Athens “three experienced pyro-technicians to take part in an important act of sabotage.”

6. On 12 February 1945, the Plasteras government and EAM (Greek Liberation Front) signed the infamous Varkiza Agreement, which stipulates, among other things, the full disarmament of EAM without the disarmament of the other forces.

7. Whereas Hermou Street was not central in the post-war political narratives about the center of Athens, in the unrest of December 2008 it suddenly acquired a leading role, as several shops and buildings were burned down there, indexing thus the anti-consumerist rage of the crowd at a time just prior to the collapse of hyper-consumerism, as is also attested in the following testimonial “Clashes break out in Hermou Street from the Church of Evangelistria down, where commercial venues are targeted along with the Police Precinct of the Acropolis.” See also *Athens, City Without Walls*, 66

8. Cf. Eudes, 274f.

9. In the course of the battle of Athens, in December 1944, an English tank was stationed on the border of Exarcheia and Kolonaki, at the intersection of Skoufa and Sina streets, aiming at targets to the west, towards Omonoia Square, Kaningos Square, and Exarcheia. Correspondingly, after the war years and more intensely today, police squads are stationed two streets below, on Asclepios Street, overseeing and patrolling the same boundary between the two Athenian regions with their opposite social and political positions.

10. Laplanche and Pontalis, 1986, 248.

ILLUSTRATIONS

pic.1. A celebration of the Greek People's Liberation Army, with the Grand Bretagne in the background.

pic. 2. S. Freud's topological diagram of the psychic system from the 31st lecture in 1932, *New Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, Standard Edition. Translated by James Strachey, introduction by Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 98.

pic. 3. The British Prime Minister Winston Churchill during his visit to Athens, Christmas of 1944.

pic. 4. Excavation in Syntagma Square, on the side of the Hotel Grand Bretagne, where a segment of an ancient aqueduct is visible (2004).

pic. 5. Part of a map of the sewage system of the center of Athens. The sewers of Hermou and Panepistimiou streets are the same today as they were in 1944.

pic. 6. An application of the Freudian topological design of the structure of the psyche in the form of an iceberg.

pic. 7. "The Vitruvian Man," drawing by Leonardo da Vinci.

pic. 8. Diagram of the possible underground route of the Partisans of the Greek People's Liberation Army, through the sewer system of central Athens. The flow of the sewage and the route of the post-war protest marches move in opposite directions.

pic. 9. British paratroopers ensconced in the Acropolis Museum. In the background is visible a fragment from the Parthenon frieze. December 1944.

pic. 10. Ancient well within the archaeological space of the Ancient Agora.

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