



# Writing Security

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## **OVERVIEW**

*David Campbell blends elements of critical theory and postmodernism drawn from continental European interpretive understandings. The term danger—a core concept in security studies—is hardly a neutral term. We can unpack or deconstruct the meanings assigned to danger that serve the purposes of states and those in power*

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*positions within them. Danger in the form of threats gives the state its identity and justifies its existence. Campbell also takes issue with the “epistemic realism” he observes in security studies as if the world we see is purely material—one composed of objects that are separate somehow from the ideas or beliefs about them and the narratives to which such thinking gives rise.*

### Questions to Keep in Mind

1. To what extent are the threats that motivate national security concerns merely a function of how we see and interpret the world around us?
2. Is the state created to serve the security interests of the nation or is the latter itself a product of the state that bolsters its position by fostering a sense of common identity among the people within its territorial jurisdiction?
3. Do we tend to accept at face value the claims we hear or read? How prone are we to probe both the surface and subsurface meanings of narratives on security or, for that matter, on other issues on national and international agendas?

Danger is not an objective condition. It is not a thing that exists independently of those to whom it may become a threat. To illustrate this, consider the manner in which the insurance industry assesses risk. In François Ewald’s formulation, insurance is a technology of risk the principal function of which is not compensation or reparation, but rather the operation of a schema of rationality distinguished by the calculus of probabilities. In insurance, according to this logic, danger (or, more accurately, risk) is “neither an event nor a general kind of event occurring in reality . . . but a specific mode of treatment of certain events capable of happening to a group of individuals.” In other words, for the technology of risk in insurance, “Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything *can* be a risk; it all depends on how one analyzes the danger, considers the event. As Kant might have put it, the category of risk is a category of the understanding; it cannot be given in sensibility or intuition.”<sup>1</sup> In these terms, danger is an effect of interpretation. Danger bears no essential, necessary, or unproblematic relation to the action or event from which it is said to derive. Nothing is intrinsically more dangerous for insurance technology than anything else, except when interpreted as such.

This understanding of the necessarily interpretive basis of risk has important implications for international relations. It does not deny that there are “real” dangers in the world: infectious diseases,

accidents, and political violence (among others) have consequences that can literally be understood in terms of life and death. But not all risks are equal, and not all risks are interpreted as dangers. Modern society contains a veritable cornucopia of danger; indeed, there is such an abundance of risk that it is impossible to objectively know all that threatens us.<sup>2</sup> Those events or factors that we identify as dangerous come to be ascribed as such only through an interpretation of their various dimensions of dangerousness. Moreover, that process of interpretation does not depend on the incidence of “objective” factors for its veracity. For example, HIV infection has been considered by many to be America’s major public health issue, yet pneumonia and influenza, diabetes, suicide, and chronic liver disease have all been individually responsible for many more deaths. Equally, an interpretation of danger has licensed a “war on (illegal) drugs” in the United States, despite the fact that the consumption level of (and the number of deaths that result from) licit drugs exceeds by a considerable order of magnitude that associated with illicit drugs. . . .

Furthermore, the role of interpretation in the articulation of danger is not restricted to the process by which some risks come to be considered more serious than others. An important function of interpretation is the way that certain modes of representation crystallize around referents marked as dangers. Given the often tenuous relationship

between an interpretation of danger and the “objective” incidence of behaviors and factors thought to constitute it, the capacity for a particular risk to be represented in terms of characteristics reviled in the community said to be threatened can be an important impetus to an interpretation of danger. . . . The ability to represent things as alien, subversive, dirty, or sick has been pivotal to the articulation of danger in the American experience.

In this context, it is also important to note that there need not be an action or event to provide the grounds for an interpretation of danger. The mere existence of an alternative mode of being, the presence of which exemplifies that different identities are possible and thus denaturalizes the claim of a particular identity to be *the* true identity, is sometimes enough to produce the understanding of a threat.<sup>3</sup> In consequence, only in these terms is it possible to understand how some acts of international power politics raise not a whit of concern, while something as seemingly unthreatening as the novels of a South American writer can be considered such a danger to national security that his exclusion from the country is warranted.<sup>4</sup> For both insurance and international relations, therefore, danger results from the calculation of a threat that objectifies events, disciplines relations, and sequesters an ideal of the identity of the people said to be at risk. . . . The invasion of Kuwait [serves] . . . as a useful touchstone by which to outline some of the assumptions under-girding this study. Consider, for example, this question: How did the Iraqi invasion become the greatest danger to the United States? Two answers to this question seem obvious and were common. Those indebted to a power-politics understanding of world politics, with its emphasis on the behavior of states calculated in rational terms according to the pursuit of power, understood the invasion to be an easily observable instance of naked aggression against an independent, sovereign state. To those indebted to an economic understanding, in which the underlying forces of capital accumulation are determinative of state behavior, the U.S.-led response, like the Iraqi invasion, was explicable in terms of the power of oil, markets, and the military-industrial complex.

Each of these characterizations is surely a caricature. The range of views in the debate over this crisis was infinitely more complex than is suggested by these two positions; there were many whose analyses differed from those with whom they might normally

be associated, and indebtedness to a tradition does not determine one’s argument in every instance. But the purpose of overdrawing these positions (which we might call, in equally crude terms, realist and Marxist) is to make the point that although each is usually thought to be the antinomy of the other, they both equally efface the indispensability of interpretation in the articulation of danger. As such, they share a disposition from which this analysis differs. Committed to an *epistemic realism*—whereby the world comprises objects whose existence is independent of ideas or beliefs about them—both of these understandings maintain that there are material causes to which events and actions can be reduced. And occasioned by this epistemic realism, they sanction two other analytic forms: a *narrativizing historiography* in which things have a self-evident quality that allows them to speak for themselves, and a *logic of explanation* in which the purpose of analysis is to identify those self-evident things and material causes so that actors can accommodate themselves to the realm of necessity they engender.<sup>5</sup> Riven with various demands, insistences, and assertions that things “must” be either this or that, this disposition is the most common metatheoretical discourse among practitioners of the discipline of international relations.

But there are alternative ways to think. . . . Contrary to the claims of epistemic realism, I argue that as understanding involves rendering the unfamiliar in the terms of the familiar, there is always an ineluctable debt to interpretation such that there is nothing outside of discourse. Contrary to a narrativizing historiography, I employ a mode of historical representation that self-consciously adopts a perspective. And contrary to the logic of explanation, I embrace a logic of interpretation that acknowledges the improbability of cataloging, calculating, and specifying the “real causes,” and concerns itself instead with considering the manifest political consequences of adopting one mode of representation over another.

As such, my argument is part of an emerging dissident literature in international relations that draws sustenance from a series of modern thinkers who have focused on historically specific modes of discourse rather than the supposedly independent realms of subjects and objects.<sup>6</sup> Starting from the position that social and political life comprises a set of practices in which things are constituted in the process of dealing with them, this dissent does not (and does not desire to) constitute a discrete methodological school claiming to magically illuminate

the previously dark recesses of global politics. Nor is it the dissent of a self-confident and singular figure claiming to know the error of all previous ways and offering salvation from all theoretical sin. Rather, this form of dissent emerges from a disparate and sometimes divergent series of encounters between the traditions of international relations and theories increasingly prominent in other realms of social and political inquiry. It is a form of dissent that celebrates difference: the proliferation of perspectives, dimensions, and approaches to the very real dilemmas of global life. It is a form of dissent that celebrates the particularity and context-bound nature of judgements and assessments, not because it favors a (so-called) relativist retreat into the incommensurability of alternatives, but because it recognizes the universalist conceits of all attempts to force difference into the strait-jacket of identity.<sup>7</sup> It is a form of dissent skeptical—but not cynical—about the traditions of international relations and their claims of adequacy to reality. It is a form of dissent that is not concerned to seek a better fit between thought and the world, language and matter, proposition and fact. On the contrary, it is a form of dissent that questions the very way our problems have been posed in these terms and the constraints within which they have been considered, focusing instead on the way the world has been made historically possible.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, in attempting to understand the ways in which United States foreign policy has interpreted danger and secured the boundaries of the identity in whose name it operates, this analysis adopts neither a purely theoretical nor a purely historical mode. It is perhaps best understood in terms of a history of the present, an interpretative attitude suggested by Michel Foucault.<sup>9</sup> A history of the present does not try to capture *the* meaning of the past, nor does it try to get *a* complete picture of the past as a bounded epoch, with underlying laws and teleology. Neither is a history of the present an instance of presentism—where the present is read back into the past—or an instance of finalism, that mode of analysis whereby the analyst maintains that a kernel of the present located in the past has inexorably progressed such that it now defines our condition. Rather, a history of the present exhibits an unequivocally contemporary orientation. Beginning with an incitement from the present—an acute manifestation of a ritual of power—this mode of analysis seeks to trace how such rituals of power

arose, took shape, gained importance, and effected politics.<sup>10</sup> In short, this mode of analysis asks how certain terms and concepts have historically functioned within discourse.

To suggest as much, however, is not to argue in terms of the discursive having priority over the nondiscursive. Of course, this is the criticism most often mounted by opponents to arguments such as this, understandings apparent in formulations like “if discourse is all there is,” “if everything is language,” or “if there is no reality.”<sup>11</sup> In so doing they unquestioningly accept that there are distinct realms of the discursive and the nondiscursive. Yet such a claim, especially after the decades of debates about language, interpretation, and understanding in the natural and social sciences, is no longer innocently sustainable. It can be reiterated as an article of faith to rally the true believers and banish the heretics, but it cannot be put forward as a self-evident truth. As Richard Rorty has acknowledged, projects like philosophy’s traditional desire to see “how language relates to the world” result in “the impossible attempts to step outside our skins—the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism—and compare ourselves with something absolute.”<sup>12</sup> The world exists independently of language, but we can never *know* that (beyond the fact of its assertion), because the existence of the world is literally inconceivable outside of language and our traditions of interpretation.<sup>13</sup> In Foucault’s terms, “We must not resolve discourse into a play of pre-existing significations; we must not imagine that the world turns toward us a legible face which we would only have to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favour.”<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, to talk in terms of an analysis that examines how concepts have historically functioned within discourse is to refuse the force of the distinction between discursive and nondiscursive. As Laclau and Mouffe have argued, “The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition . . . What is denied is not that . . . objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive condition of emergence.”<sup>15</sup> This formulation seeks neither to banish arguments that authorize their positions through

reference to “external reality,” nor to suggest that any one representation is as powerful as another. On the contrary, if we think in terms of a discursive economy—whereby discourse (the representation and constitution of the “real”) is a managed space in which some statements and depictions come to have greater value than others—the idea of “external reality” has a particular currency that is *internal* to discourse. For in a discursive economy, investments have been made in certain interpretations; dividends can be drawn by those parties that have made the investments; representations are taxed when they confront new and ambiguous circumstances; and participation in the discursive economy is through social relations that embody an unequal distribution of power. Most important, the effect of this understanding is to expand the domain of social and political inquiry: “The main consequence of a break with the discursive/extradiscursive dichotomy is the abandonment of the thought/reality opposition, and hence a major enlargement of the field of those categories which can account for social relations. Synonymy, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary, constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted.”<sup>16</sup> The enlargement of the interpretive imagination along these lines is necessary in order to account for many of the recent developments in world politics, and to understand the texts of postwar United States foreign policy. . . .

Identity is an inescapable dimension of being. No body could be without it. Inescapable as it is, identity—whether personal or collective—is not fixed by nature, given by God, or planned by intentional behavior. Rather, identity is constituted in relation to difference. But neither is difference fixed by nature, given by God, or planned by intentional behavior. Difference is constituted in relation to identity.<sup>17</sup> The problematic of identity/difference contains, therefore, no foundations that are prior to, or outside of, its operation. Whether we are talking of “the body” or “the state,” or of particular bodies and states, the identity of each is performatively constituted. Moreover, the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an “inside” from an “outside,” a “self” from an “other,” a “domestic” from a “foreign.”

In the specific case of the body, Judith Butler has argued that its boundary, as well as the border

between internal and external, is “tenuously maintained” by the transformation of elements that were originally part of identity into a “defiling otherness.”<sup>18</sup> In this formulation, there is no originary or sovereign presence that inhabits a prediscursive domain and gives the body, its sex, or gender a naturalized and unproblematic quality. To be sure, many insist on understanding the body, sex, and gender as naturalized and unproblematic. But for their claim to be persuasive, we would have to overlook (among other issues) the multifarious normalizing codes that abound in our society for the constitution and disciplining of sexuality. In seeking to establish and police understandings of what constitutes the normal, the accepted, and the desirable, such codes effect an admission of their constructed nature and the contingent and problematic nature of the identity of the body.

Understanding the gendered identity of the body as performative means that we regard it as having “no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality.” As such, the idea that gender is an interior essence definitive of the body’s identity is a discursively constructed notion that is required for the purposes of disciplining sexuality. In this context, genders are neither “true” or “false,” nor “normal” or “abnormal,” but “are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.” Moreover, gender can be understood as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” an identity achieved, “*not [through] a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition.*”<sup>19</sup>

Choosing the question of gender and the body as an exemplification of the theme of identity is not to suggest that as an “individual” instance of identity the performative constitution of gender and the body is prior to and determinative of instances of collective identity. In other words, I am not claiming that the state is analogous to an individual with a settled identity. To the contrary, I want to suggest that the performative constitution of gender and the body is analogous to the performative constitution of the state. Specifically, I want to suggest that we can understand the state as having “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality”; that its status as the sovereign presence in world politics is produced by “a discourse of primary and stable identity” and that the identity of any particular state should be understood as

“tenuously constituted in time . . . through a stylized repetition of acts,” and achieved, “not [through] a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition.”

. . . Much of the conventional literature on the nation and the state implies that the essence of the former precedes the reality of the latter: that the identity of a “people” is the basis for the legitimacy of the state and its subsequent practices. However, much of the recent historical sociology on this topic has argued that the state more often than not precedes the nation: that nationalism is a construct of the state in pursuit of its legitimacy. Benedict Anderson, for example, has argued in compelling fashion that “the nation” should be understood as an “imagined political community” that exists only insofar as it is a cultural artifact that is represented textually.<sup>20</sup> Equally, Charles Tilly has argued that any coordinated, hierarchical, and territorial entity should be only understood as a “national state.” He stresses that few of these national states have ever become or presently are “nation-states”—national states whose sovereign territorialization is perfectly aligned with a prior and primary form of identification, such as religion, language, or symbolic sense of self. Even modern-day Great Britain, France, and Germany (and, equally, the United States, Australia, and Canada) cannot be considered nation-states even though they are national states.<sup>21</sup> The importance of these perspectives is that they allow us to understand national states as unavoidably paradoxical entities that do not possess prediscursive, stable identities. As a consequence, all states are marked by an inherent tension between the various domains that need to be aligned for an “imagined political community” to come into being—such as territoriality and the many axes of identity—and the demand that such an alignment is a response to (rather than constitutive of) a prior and stable identity. In other words, states are never finished as entities; the tension between the demands of identity and the practices that constitute it can never be fully resolved, because the performative nature of identity can never be fully revealed. This paradox inherent to their being renders states in permanent need of reproduction: with no ontological status apart from the many and varied practices that constitute their reality, states are (and have to be) always in a process of becoming. For a state to end its practices of representation would be to expose its lack of prediscursive foundations; stasis would be death.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the drive to fix

the state’s identity and contain challenges to the state’s representation cannot finally or absolutely succeed. Aside from recognizing that there is always an excess of being over appearance that cannot be contained by disciplinary practices implicated in state formation, were it possible to reduce all being to appearance, and were it possible to bring about the absence of movement which in that reduction of being to appearance would characterize pure security, it would be at that moment that the state would wither away.<sup>23</sup> At that point all identities would have congealed, all challenges would have evaporated, and all need for disciplinary authorities and their fields of force would have vanished. Should the state project of security be successful in the terms in which it is articulated, the state would cease to exist. Security as the absence of movement would result in death via stasis. Ironically, then, the inability of the state project of security to succeed is the guarantor of the state’s continued success as an impelling identity.

The constant articulation of danger through foreign policy is thus not a threat to a state’s identity or existence: it is its condition of possibility. While the objects of concern change over time, the techniques and exclusions by which those objects are constituted as dangers persist. Such an argument, however, is occluded by the traditional representations of international politics through their debts to epistemic realism and its effacement of interpretation. . . .

## Border Crossings

Where once . . . objections to the impoverished understanding of “postmodernism” in international relations would have been made in a defensive mode, now they are put forward with an air of resigned exasperation. Where once we were all caught in the headlights of the large North American car of international relations theory, now the continental sportster of critical theories has long since left behind the border guards and toll collectors of the mainstream—who can be observed in the rearview mirror waving their arms wildly still demanding papers and the price of admission—as the occupants go on their way in search of another political problem to explore. Time has moved on for most people, and with it has come a raft of exciting new research in international relations that is indebted, implicitly as well as explicitly, to the Enlightenment ethos articulated by Foucault.

Few things are more problematic and troublesome than the naming of intellectual trends. This has to be constantly borne in mind, because the research being considered here does not constitute a neatly demarcated “school” of thought, it does not often if ever embrace the label of “postmodernism,” and many scholars who might be associated with it could easily be identified in other terms. But when considered as the whole it is not, multiple answers abound to the challenge that those who have gained inspiration from the critical themes of continental philosophy should embark on their own research agendas. Of note is work that deals with familiar issues in estranging ways, including research on the performative nature of state identity (particularly its gendered character) in the context of U.S. intervention; studies of the centrality of representation in North-South relations and immigration policies; a deconstructive account of famine and humanitarian crises; interpretive readings of diplomacy and European security; the radical rethinking of international order and the challenge of the refugee; critical analyses of international law and African sovereignties; a recasting of ecopolitics; the rearticulation of the refugee regime and sovereignty; a problematization of the UN and peacekeeping; a semiotic reading of militarism in Hawaii; and arguments concerning practices of contemporary warfare, strategic identities, and security landscapes in NATO, among many others.

For all the differences, nuances and subtleties, this work incorporates many of the key achievements of “poststructuralism” (meaning the interpretive analytic of “postmodernism”), especially the rethinking of questions of agency, power, and representation in modern political life. . . .

## Notes

1. Francois Ewald, ‘Insurance and risk,’ in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmental Rationality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, Hemel Hempstead, 1991, 199.
2. Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*, Berkeley, 1982.
3. ‘The threat is posed not merely by actions the other might take to injure or defeat the true identity but by the very visibility of its mode of being as other.’ William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Ithaca, 1991, 66.
4. I am referring here to the policies of the recently curtailed McCarran-Walter Act which excluded from the

United States, on ideological grounds, writers like the Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

5. See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, 1987, especially chapter one.

6. See ‘Speaking the language of exile: dissidence in international studies,’ edited by Richard K. Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, *International Studies Quarterly*, XXXIV, 1990, 259–416.

7. The charge of ‘relativism’ has become a mantra-like repudiation employed by realists and others seeking to delegitimize an argument such as this. The logic behind this criticism is that any position concerning itself with the constructed nature of reality has to assume (implicitly or explicitly) that all positions are relative to a specific framework, paradigm, or culture, such that we can make no judgments about right and wrong, good or bad, etc. Furthermore, it is often maintained that such an assumption is contradictory, because the relativist is said to resort to a universal: i.e., that all things are relative. For two reasons, I think such a charge is mistaken and misleading. Firstly, the meaning of relativism is usually ascribed by the objectivist critic, but in a way that refuses to question the terms of the debate. Specifically, the charge of relativism, rests on the dubious assumption that there is indeed some overarching, universal framework to which one is relative. For all the efforts of philosophers and others over the centuries, I am not aware of any agreement on the existence or nature of such an Archimedean point. Indeed, those factors which are sometimes cited as ‘universal’—such as tradition or culture—invoke the very intersubjective qualities that the so-called relativist is concerned with. Secondly, the characteristics subsumed under the term relativism by realist critics usually bear the hallmarks of subjectivism rather than relativism. The concern for the lack of standards and truths is usually said to derive from the alleged moral solipsism that results from so-called relativism; the idea that the abandonment of universals leads to an ethical anarchy in which anything goes. But the so-called relativist is concerned with the social and intersubjective nature of paradigms, practices, and standards, and thus rejects the idea that these are the property of individuals. My thinking on these issues has been most influenced by Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*, Oxford, 1983.

8. See Jim George and David Campbell, ‘Patterns of dissent and the celebration of difference: critical social theory and international relations,’ *International Studies Quarterly*, XXXIV, 1990, 269–93.

9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, New York, 1979, 31.

10. See Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Brighton, 1983, 118–20.

11. For a good account of these formulations see Judith Butler, ‘Contingent foundations: feminism and the question of “postmodernism”,’ in *Feminists Theorize the*

*Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, New York, 1992.

12. Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: pragmatism and philosophy,' in *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays 1972–1980)*. Brighton, 1982, xix.

13. This is different from the claim that there are 'alternative conceptual frameworks' through which we can know the world, for such a position eventually collapses into a Kantian understanding, whereby 'the world' is a thing-in-itself thoroughly independent of our knowledge. See Rorty, 'The world well lost,' in *Consequences of Pragmatism*.

14. Michel Foucault, 'The order of discourse,' in *Language and Politics*, edited by Michael Shapiro, Oxford, 1984, 127.

15. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. by Winston Moore and Paul Cammack, London, 1985, 108.

16. *Ibid.*, 110. White has expressed a similar sentiment: 'Tropic is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee. This flight, however, is futile; for tropics is the process by which all discourse constitutes the objects

which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively.' Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, 1978, 2.

17. For a general discussion on this theme see Connolly, *Identity/Difference*.

18. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, 1990, 133.

19. *Ibid.*, 136, 140–1, 145 respectively. Emphasis in the original.

20. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, New York, 1991.

21. Charles Tilly, *Capital, Coercion, and European States, A.D. 990–1990*, New York, 1990.

22. In his account of the importance of speed and temporality to politics, Paul Virilio observed, somewhat grandiosely, that '*Stasis is death* really seems to be *the general law of the World*.' Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti, New York, 1986, 67.

23. 'In a social configuration whose precarious equilibrium is threatened by an ill-considered initiative, security can henceforth be likened to the absence of movement.' Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 125.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

### ■ On Positivism

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