

LAST BUT NOT LEAST: THE PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS OF “INTELLECTUAL CRAFTSMANSHIP”*

*Although much has been written in the past 50 years about the pedagogical value of *The Sociological Imagination*, one section of Mills’s book has been underutilized for far too long. Namely, the essay in the appendix, “On Intellectual Craftsmanship,” has been rarely invoked by sociologists discussing the significance of *The Sociological Imagination* for teaching and learning. Given that the appendix is explicitly about doing research and engaging in the scholarly process, this oversight may be understandable; however, we argue that there is much to be found in the appendix that serves the needs of teachers and learners alike. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the pedagogical insights that are implicit in Mills’s recommendations for being intellectual craftspersons.*

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WHEN MOST SOCIOLOGISTS consider the influence of *The Sociological Imagination*, they think of such concepts as the intersection of biography and history, the distinction between personal troubles and public issues, the predilection for psychologisms instead of social structural explanations, and the pitfalls of abstract empiricism and grand theorizing. As is well established, Mills’s insights on these matters are particularly relevant to the process of teaching and learning. In addition to this special issue of *Teaching Sociology*, countless articles have appeared in the journal explaining how to spark, convey, embrace, illustrate, embody, build, stimulate, develop, and otherwise illustrate the sociological imagination (Bidwell 1995; Crowdes 2000; Dowell 2006; Haddad and Lieberman 2002; Hoffman 2006; Jacobs 1998; Kain 1999; Kaufman 1997; Mobley 2000). Moreover, a number of researchers have found that ac-

quiring a sociological imagination is the number one learning goal for introductory sociology students (Grauerholz and Gibson 2006; McKinney et al 2004; Persell, Pfeiffer, and Syed 2007; Wagenaar 2004).

Although we share the general consensus about the relevance and utility of Mills’s work, we feel that one of the major pedagogical resources of *The Sociological Imagination* has been overlooked for far too long: namely, the appendix, “On Intellectual Craftsmanship.” Given all of the work that has been written about the benefits of *The Sociological Imagination* for teaching and learning, we are surprised that none of this scholarship makes mention—much less develops—Mills’s ideas about being an intellectual craftsperson. The insights that Mills lays out in this section have certainly been well received and appreciated. For example, this appendix has been described as a “concise, practical guide . . . that is also deeply inspiring” (Wakefield 2000:18) and as “one of the finest guides available for doing intellectual work” (Reed 1989:6). Nevertheless, the extent to which teachers and students may use Mills’s ideas for strengthening what transpires in the classroom has gone largely unnoticed. To some

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degree, this oversight is understandable given that the appendix is explicitly written as a guide for being a better researcher and scholar. On the other hand, given the unsurpassed influence of *The Sociological Imagination* over the past fifty years, one might expect that every aspect of the book would have been thoroughly mined, sifted, and processed.

It is clear that Mills had the novice scholar in mind when he wrote the appendix. He tells readers that he will report in detail how he goes about his craft, what comprises good work habits, and why the best academic thinkers do not separate their work from their lives. In effect, the appendix could be read by the budding scholar as an instruction manual for producing a book or a substantial research article. Although the explicit focus of the appendix is on research and scholarship, we see it as a buried treasure of ideas that can be used to improve the craft of teaching sociology. For example, Mills (1959) describes the social scientist as “[one] at work on problems of substance” striving to increase the “chance to come out with something” (pp. 195, 211). Similarly, we view what transpires in the classroom as a joint endeavor between students and teachers working on problems of substance with the ultimate goal of intellectual illumination. And whereas Mills spoke of researchers as craftspersons working diligently to perfect their scholarly technique, we too speak of teachers and learners as craftspersons seeking ways to enrich the educational process. By taking Mills’s strategies for research and scholarship and applying them to the pedagogical process both teachers and learners will benefit. For teachers our approach to the classroom will be enlivened while for students there will be a noticeable stirring of their sociological imaginations.

There are six sub-sections in the appendix. Our analysis focuses on the fourth sub-section for two reasons: First, this sub-section incorporates most of the recommendations Mills makes throughout the appendix. Second, we believe this sub-section

contains strategies that readily lend themselves to the classroom environment. In the fourth sub-section Mills offers a list of seven ways that can stimulate our sociological imaginations. To demonstrate the pedagogical benefits of the appendix we take his list of techniques—which as we noted are ostensibly constructed by Mills to guide the beginning scholar—and apply them to the classroom setting. We will show that using the seven techniques explained by Mills can build unexpected and spontaneous discoveries both for ourselves and our students. As we shall see, his suggestions can be applied to the classroom not only to cultivate the sociological imaginations of our students but also to rekindle our own pedagogical imaginations.

FROM SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION TO PEDAGOGICAL IMAGINATION

Re-Arrange Your Files

The first of Mills’s (1959) suggestions is to “gump out heretofore disconnected folders, [mix] up their contents, and then re-sort them” (p. 212). In addition to helping us view current topics in a new light, this re-arranging may lead to unexpected and unintentional discoveries. Mills’s idea is relatively straightforward and those of us who have approached our research with fresh eyes or from a new angle quickly recognize the value of what he suggests. By the same token, re-arranging our practices of teaching and learning can yield significant and surprising dividends. For many of us, it is a great challenge to keep the classroom a fresh and dynamic environment so that the motivation level of students and teachers remains consistently high (Crone and MacKay 2007). When applied to pedagogy instead of research, we see there are myriad ways of implementing Mills’s idea in the classroom.

One of the most palpable ways to “re-arrange” our pedagogy is to have students sit in different seats periodically throughout the semester. Although it has not been a

topic of much sociological inquiry, there is a well developed body of literature examining the effects of student seating on learning outcomes (c.f. Benedict and Hoag 2004; Douglas and Gifford 2001). By encouraging students to move from the back of the room to the front, from the aisles to the center, or from the seats near windows to those against the walls, we not only pull them out of their comfort zones, but we also get them to see and hear the class differently. We, too, benefit to the extent that we will not be focusing our gaze on the same faces and thus will be more inclusive in our perspective. As instructors, we can also be on the move. There is no need to teach as if our feet are planted in concrete. Walking through the classroom can keep students engaged. Although too much movement can distract students, some traveling around the classroom can be productive, especially to the extent that it holds the interest of students in the back rows. Much like a reshuffling of our research files, such a shake-up of the bodily arrangement of the classroom may lead to unexpected and even spontaneous discoveries.

We may even find it beneficial to re-arrange our pedagogy while the course is in progress. For instance, both of us administer informal course evaluations early in the semester. These instruments provide us with valuable feedback that we can use during the course. From these informal evaluations we may learn that students would like more group work, that we need to slow down when giving a PowerPoint presentation, or that a specific movie or documentary may be appropriate to highlight a course topic. By inviting students to offer their unique perspective on how the course is transpiring, we are heeding the advice Mills (1959) offers in this section to be “receptive to unforeseen and unplanned linkages” (p. 212). Re-arranging aspects of the class based on students’ recommendations goes a long way in improving our teaching and increasing students’ satisfaction with the course.

Another way to adhere to Mills’s sugges-

tion is to re-sort our curriculum. If we were to survey our colleagues, we might find some degree of inertia regarding the topics we teach, the readings we use, the assignments we hand out, and the style of instruction we employ. Some instructors cling to old syllabi, implementing few changes since they were initially developed. Some of us even have an unwavering loyalty to teaching in the same room at the same time and on the same days. Creatures of habit, we often resist change despite the possibility that revisions to our pedagogy can reap significant benefits for ourselves and our students (Green and Stortz 2006). For example, there is no doubt that switching course readings will create more work for us, but the fresh perspective that comes with change can be invigorating and lead to gratifying results in the classroom. We can also push ourselves to incorporate new active learning strategies throughout the semester. McKinney and Heyl’s (2009) workbook provides numerous examples that can be used for topics across the sociology curriculum. In a similar fashion, instructors who have resisted using new instructional technologies could strive to incorporate at least one form into their courses. Oblinger and Oblinger’s (2005) edited volume offers advice for educators navigating the technological classroom. A particularly useful strategy is to tap into the students’ expertise as the “net generation” and use them as a resource for becoming comfortable with these new learning technologies. And finally, with regards to our syllabi, wholesale changes are not always needed, but we should at least consider how the language in our syllabi is received by our students. Authoritarian, direction-laden syllabi can negatively influence the classroom environment (Singham 2005).

Play with Words

In his second suggestion, Mills talks about taking a playful interest in words. For Mills, it is important to clarify the meaning of the terms we use, and this is particularly true when analyzing theoretical statements.

The advice Mills offers in this section parallels chapter two of *The Sociological Imagination* in which he playfully dissects and critiques the obfuscating language of Parsons by “translating” sections of *The Social System* into succinct statements. This exercise of decoding complex theoretical language and then converting it into more readily understood sentences is a useful undertaking for learners. When students grapple with theoretical statements and rewrite them in terms with which they are more comfortable, they develop the confidence and ability to read and comprehend difficult texts. For example, in a theory class we may use a complex quote such as this one by Marx: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (quoted in Lemert 2004:42). With lengthy passages such as this one it may be especially helpful to have students work in groups, with each group being responsible for just one section of the quote. After the quote is dissected in this piecemeal manner, the class can work as a whole to combine their statements into one sentence that captures the full meaning of the passage.

Another way of heeding the advice in this section is by exploring the full range of word connotations and adopting an “attitude of playfulness toward the phrases and words with which various issues are defined.” Such an attitude “often loosens up the imagination” (Mills 1959:212). We have found this advice useful in exploring common utterances—particularly those that students frequently use in casual conversations. In class and around campus we have heard our students use the following phrases: “That’s so gay,” “That’s retarded,” and “That’s ghetto.” Rather than ignore the use of these expressions, we can spontaneously seize the opportunity to explore the full range of their connotations. We can point

out, for example, that all three expressions refer to stigmatized groups (homosexuals, people with developmental disabilities, the urban poor). In the spirit of taking Mills’s advice to play with words, we can invite students to ponder why expressions such as “That’s so straight” or “That’s so middle-class” aren’t used. Along with helping our students understand how language is used to access power, such a discussion can help students grasp the importance of making purposeful choices in the language they use (Blackburn 2005). Challenging our students to consider multiple interpretations of contemporary expressions can lead to a conversation about how our understanding of people and objects are formed through language (Rasmussen 2004). Further, such an analysis not only helps elucidate why taken-for-granted phrases might be deemed offensive, it will also help students become aware that “harmless expressions” can actually serve to reproduce inequality.

Develop New Classifications

In this third point, Mills (1959) offers a key insight that can be readily applied to the classroom: we should not “rest content with existing classifications” but “criticize and clarify old ones” (p. 213). Much like the content of our research, we cannot assume that the content of our teaching will be enduringly relevant. If as scholars we continually scrutinize our findings and live by the mantra “more research is needed,” then as teachers we should embrace a similarly critical approach that leads to a re-thinking and re-interpretation of the categories, processes, and analyses of our curriculum. To some extent, this re-classification is provided for us as publishers churn out updated editions of texts every few years. Although some of these new editions are rather suspect in terms of the fresh material they offer, others do demonstrate the type of criticizing and clarifying referred to by Mills. For example, in the latest edition of *The McDonaldization of Society 5*, Ritzer (2007) adds a new chapter to consider if it would be more appropriate to title the book “The

Starbuckization of Society” given the coffee shop’s position (and influence) at the forefront of fast-food industry.

Re-thinking existing classifications of knowledge does not have to be limited to new categories nor is it exclusively the domain of scholars and theorists. The way one might cover Merton’s (1968) strain theory provides a nice example for how we can foster this type of re-classifying among students. Rather than teach Merton’s scheme the same way year after year—one can hear the SOC 101 professor in auto-pilot mode using bank robbers as an example of innovation—we can encourage students to develop new examples and new categories that do not fit neatly into any single category. Also, instead of focusing too much time on the deviant categories we can challenge students to think more about conformity. Are most people conformists? Does the intersection of race, class, and gender affect conformity? Are there multiple levels (or categories) of conformity? Does conformity change across the life course? Must we classify conformity as a micro-sociological phenomenon or are there macro-level manifestations? By developing a new classification of conformity and raising questions such as these, we encourage students to develop new classification schemas and we include them in the knowledge-production process.

Consider Extremes

According to Mills, some of the best insights are derived when we consider extreme and varied cases. Instead of remaining in a state of intellectual stasis we should seek out oppositional and even contradictory ideas in order to have a stronger understanding of the phenomena we are studying. We should strive to entertain as many viewpoints as possible and “let [our] mind become a moving prism catching light from as many angles as possible” (Mills 1959:214). In this section, Mills sounds strikingly similar to Berger’s famous assertion that “to ask sociological questions, then, presupposes that one is interested in looking some distance beyond the commonly accepted or

officially defined goals of human actions. It presupposes a certain awareness that human events have different levels of meaning, some of which are hidden from the consciousness of everyday life” (Berger 1963:7). For Mills and for Berger, the well-trained sociologist must be willing to explore the full-spectrum of the human condition.

Although they have not knowingly invoked this particular idea of Mills, a number of instructors have used his advice to illuminate students’ understanding of sociology. For example, Brouillette and Turner’s (1992) spit or saliva exercise, Burns’ (2003) use of bathroom politics, Higgins’ (1999) discussion of unconventional first days, and even Laz’s (1996) use of Magaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* all encourage students to consider extreme cases as a means to illuminate social life. Miner’s (1956) famous essay on the Nacirema is probably one of the most commonly used extreme examples to get students thinking sociologically. In addition to these sources, there is no shortage of sociological studies that study populations and behaviors that are considered outliers (Goode and Vail 2008; Goode 2002; Henry and Eaton 1999), and according to Mills we should use these studies to help our students make better sense of normative behavior.

Beyond exploring extreme cases and opposing viewpoints, Mills is also encouraging an interdisciplinary approach to the study of social life. He says we should be “soaked in the literature” so that we can identify both opponents and allies. Such an interdisciplinary approach has been discussed in the teaching sociology literature (Alexander and Sullivan 1996; Cleary 2001; Hendershott and Wright 1993; Lessor, Reeves, and Andrade 1997) but more attention is needed. One step we could take is to explore the scholarship of teaching and learning beyond the pages of *Teaching Sociology*. Publications such as *College Teaching*, *The Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, *Radical Pedagogy*, *The Journal of Economic Education*, *Teaching of Psy-*

chology, and the *Journal of Political Science Education*, to name just a few, may not give us ideas about our substantive curriculum areas; however, the scholars who contribute to these journals write about many of the same pedagogical processes with which we are concerned. These issues include teaching large introductory courses, establishing service learning and field work opportunities, working with diverse learners, using active learning techniques, helping ESL students with reading and writing skills, and promoting oral participation. By soaking ourselves in the literature of teaching and learning, seeing how colleagues in other disciplines approach common challenges, and then adapting these interdisciplinary techniques to our unique situations, we inevitably use our sociological imaginations to strengthen our teaching.

Another way to promote an interdisciplinary approach and cultivate the imagination of our students is by considering how other disciplines view a social phenomenon. For example, in discussing social inequality we can ask, as does Mills, how a political scientist, an experimental psychologist, or a historian would approach this topic. We can even venture further away from the social sciences and ask how this topic may be understood in chemistry, literature, music, business, and engineering. It may feel like a stretch to consider social inequality in the context of these other disciplines, but that is exactly the point Mills is making. Even though we probably do not have expertise in these other fields, we can at least brainstorm with students about the ways in which inequality is relevant to, or manifested in, these other areas of study. This type of intellectual exploration is not meant to imbue students with specialized knowledge in these other disciplines; rather, the purpose is to give them the “intellectual pivots” so that they are closer to possessing the sociological imagination— “[f]or that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another” (Mills 1959:7).

Invert Your Sense of Proportion

In this point Mills asks us to suspend reality for a moment such that “if something seems very minute, imagine it to be simply enormous, and ask yourself: what difference might that make?” (1959:215). This is a wonderful strategy that can further release the imagination of our students. Engaging in such hypothetical thinking allows us to recognize how our lives really are structured by our biographies and histories. For example, Kleinman, Copp and Sandstrom’s (2006) article about addressing students’ resistance to learning about the oppression of women offers a number of examples of what Mills suggests. These authors have students invert their sense of proportion by getting them to substitute race for sex and by having them imagine women in men’s bodies. Through these exercises, students’ resistance to seeing women as victims of systematic oppression are overcome and “students learn to analyze the social world and make informed judgments about how to act with integrity and concern for justice” (Kleinman et al. 2006:140).

Another way to have students invert their sense of proportion is to ask them to think critically about the experiences of students with physical disabilities. Most of us take for granted the straightforward path we walk to buildings on campus. Do we ever consider the extra time and stress accrued by those who access buildings in a wheelchair (Holloway 2001)? One exercise we have used is to ask students to come to the next class by using the route they would need to take if they were in a wheelchair. By having them navigate the social geography in this manner, the students’ perception of spatial arrangements may be radically altered. This could then lead to a discussion about how campus spaces are designed and how the institution could improve accommodations for individuals with disabilities. To influence students to change their sense of proportion, we can ask them what they think the campus landscape would look like

if most members of the university were in wheelchairs. By encouraging students to temporarily take the perspective of disabled individuals this exercise and discussion promotes greater respect for diversity.

Besides these direct, experiential strategies we can also adapt Mills's suggestion by considering counter or sub-cultural examples such as the anti-consumerists who are called "freegans." Freegans are described as "scavengers of the developed world, living off consumer waste in an effort to minimize their support of corporations and their impact on the planet" (Kurutz 2007). Freegans search through supermarket trash, eat bruised produce, and use expired canned goods. Such individuals may also "dumpster dive" to acquire items such as lamps and paintings. In discussing this phenomenon in the classroom, we can use the freegans as an obvious example of deviant behavior. But by heeding Mills's advice to invert our sense of proportion we could raise very different issues: What if freeganism became a major social movement? What would happen if hundreds of thousands of people took on this way of life? What difference might that make for social, environmental, and political processes? Inevitably, the type of questions that arise out of this discussion echo the three sets of questions that Mills (1959) suggest are characteristic of those social analysts who are "imaginatively aware of the promise of their work" (p. 6).

Get a Comparative Grip

As sociological researchers we learn very early that it is usually not sufficient to limit our analysis to a sample size of one. Even if we are studying a social group, a culture, or a nation, we are encouraged to broaden our scope by incorporating comparative cases—be they from the past or present. On this point, Mills is adamant. A comparative-historical perspective is "indispensable to the sociologist; without such knowledge, no matter what else [one] knows, [one] is simply crippled" (Mills 1959:215). The comparative-historical framework is particularly

important to bear in mind given the ubiquity of globalization as both a world-wide economic process and an analytical lens. All social phenomena, from micro interactions to macro institutions can (and should) be tied to the forces of globalization. If we are hoping to equip our students with the analytical skills necessary to successfully navigate their post-graduate professional lives, then it is crucial that we impart to them some knowledge of the world beyond the United States (Vickers and McClellan 2004).

The need for a comparative-historical focus in the classroom has definitely gained popularity in recent years. For example, more than 15 years ago Ferrante's (1992) *Sociology: A Global Perspective* was the only introductory textbook that used an explicitly cross-cultural and comparative perspective. Today, Ferrante's book is in its seventh edition (2008) and there are a number of competing introductory texts that use a similar framework (c.f., Cohen and Kennedy 2007; Kimmel and Aronson 2009; Schneider and Silverman 2006). Most other introductory textbooks make use of comparative cases such as Henslin (2007) who draws on his own experiences traveling abroad and offers a chapter on global stratification.

In addition to global-oriented texts, there are many Internet resources that facilitate the development of a comparative grip among students. For most of the commonly taught courses in the sociology curriculum there are numerous web-based resources that will allow students to study topics such as poverty, discrimination, social institutions, environmental issues, and human rights in a global context. A good place to begin finding resources on a variety of social issues is the United Nations—particularly the CyberSchoolBus Page (<http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/>). Although a lot of material on this site is tailored to students in the K-12 range, there is an abundance of useful information for college students. Another good starting point for generating global awareness is the

“Get Involved” section that is found on most of the homepages of large, multi-national NGOs such as Amnesty International, CARE, Oxfam, and Greenpeace.

Beyond these textual and web-based supports some on-going trends in higher education may also make it easier for instructors to follow Mills’s suggestion. For at least the past twenty years, there has been a steady increase in U.S. students studying abroad as well as foreign students studying in the U.S. (Institute of International Education 2007). There has also been an increase in adult students returning to college (National Center for Education Statistics 2006) and senior citizens auditing college classes (Bernstein 2008). As a result of these developments, more students who have traveled the world or who are from different generations will enter our classrooms providing us with excellent resources to tap into the comparative-historical well that Mills encourages.

Distinguish between Themes and Topics

In the last point of the fourth sub-section of the appendix, Mills (1959) makes a point that “has more to do with the craft of putting a book together than with the release of the imagination” (p. 216). On the surface then, this last point seems largely unrelated to the process of teaching and learning. However, Mills (1959) goes on to say that “how you go about arranging materials for presentation always affects the content of your work” (p. 217). This idea is equally true for the research process as it is for the pedagogical process. The ways in which we prepare our curriculum, gather materials for instruction, and decide on a method of instruction affects and is affected by the subject of our course. In discussing these ideas Mills actually makes a point that is particularly useful for the process of teaching and learning: the distinction between topics and themes. For our purposes, we may say that courses revolve around master themes while particular class periods are the focus of specific topics.

Although this distinction is one that may seem obvious, it is one that can easily be

forgotten especially given our familiarity with the subject matter. Presumably, we understand how all of the various points throughout the semester connect to the larger whole. Such assuredness is not the case for students who enter the classroom with little knowledge of the subject matter. It is, therefore, particularly important that we continually emphasize the topic of each day and how this topic connects to the more general theme of the course. For example, when teaching Introduction to Sociology, it is worth emphasizing that inequality is a master theme in the course. We can make time to directly point out that the topics covered in the course are not a random assortment of ideas; rather, each is a piece of a puzzle designed to show how inequality is pervasive.

Given that Mills’s advice on this matter is offered in the context of preparing our research for publication, this last insight really brings us back full circle to the symbiosis between teaching and research. Whether it is our own writing or the writing of our students, we would expect a similar type of organization: a clearly elucidated thesis statement (theme) followed by a series of supportive arguments (topics). Without a well planned out curriculum that uses various topics to illuminate a more general theme, our classes will resemble the type of book that is full of topics, methodologies, and theories but lacks any overarching theme: a book (or course), according to Mills, that lacks intelligibility.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we detailed in this paper, Mills’s ideas in the appendix to *The Sociological Imagination* can be valuable to the process of teaching and learning. Whether by taking a playful attitude toward words and phrases used by our students or by refusing to teach existing classifications in stodgy ways, Mills’s suggestions for being an intellectual craftsperson can be applied in many ways to refresh our pedagogy. Although taking stock of our teaching techniques and making

changes to our curriculum requires a lot of work, we believe the process can be rejuvenating. Students will benefit to the extent that we creatively engage them with the sociological perspective and, in the process, help them loosen their imaginations. Instructors will also reap dividends as they experience an enlivening of their classroom practices.

Midway through the appendix, Mills reiterates one of the key themes of the whole book: that to have a sociological imagination implies one is able to move fluidly from one perspective to another. He (1959) goes on to suggest that although acquiring the sociological imagination is frequently the result of “a great deal of often routine work,” to truly capture it requires a “playfulness of mind” because “its essence is the combination of ideas that no one expected were combinable” (p. 211). We believe that the style and substance of our paper meshes with the spirit of Mills’s sentiment. As we noted, “On Intellectual Craftsmanship” is an essay explicitly geared toward scholars. There is no indication that Mills expected his ideas about the research process would be combinable, much less applicable, to the pedagogical process. This perhaps explains why most of the sociologists who have used *The Sociological Imagination* to enhance the classroom experience have neglected to focus on this section of the book. Yet, we feel strongly that Mills’s comments about being an intellectual craftsman have much to tell us about the process of teaching and learning. By shifting Mills’s perspective in the appendix from research to teaching we have tried to demonstrate how such an approach helps us cultivate both our own, and our students’, sociological and pedagogical imaginations.

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