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Matteo Pasetti
(Università di Bologna)

“The cleanest, neatest, most effectively operating piece of social machinery I’ve ever seen”: On the reception of Fascist corporatism in the U.S.

Introduction

In October 1934, while visiting Rome, economist Rexford Tugwell recorded in the pages of his diary some observations about the Italian Fascist regime. This was not the first time he had traveled to Europe. As early as 1927 he had taken part in an expedition of U.S. academics and trade unionists to Russia and was fascinated by the country of the Soviets.¹ But now, in the 1930s, he had become one of the most influential members of Roosevelt’s “Brain Trust”, and his focus was on the economic policies that European states were implementing as a response to the Great Depression. Although he had previously been denounced as “Rex the Red”, and he was definitely a supporter of progressivism, Tugwell wrote that he was impressed by Mussolini’s attempt to overcome the economic crisis and modernize Italian society:

I find Italy doing many of the things which seem to me necessary. And at any rate she is being rebuilt physically in a systematic way. [...] Mussolini certainly has the same people opposed to him as F.D.R. has. But he has the press controlled so they cannot scream lies at him daily. And he has a compact and disciplined nation although it lacks resources. On the surface, at least, he seems to have made enormous progress. [...] It’s the cleanest, neatest, most effectively operating piece of social machinery I’ve ever seen. It makes me envious (Tugwell, 1991: 138-139).

¹ For Tugwell’s biography, see in particular Namorato (1988). About his expedition to Russia in the 1920s, see also Shlaes (2007: 57-90).

Tugwell's words are but one of many examples of how even among the New Dealers Fascist Italy represented an interesting political laboratory that was admired as a model of political and social order. This opinion was shared by many in United States, Europe, and elsewhere, and was based on several aspects that Fascism was displaying, including a fundamental one: the corporatist project. In the interwar period, indeed, corporatism carried Fascism to the center of the transnational political debate, in particular between the second half of the 1920s and early 1930s.² Although Tugwell did not explicitly refer to corporatist politics, it was seen as one of the key elements in the construction of "the cleanest, neatest, most effectively operating piece of social machinery". As we shall see, corporatism was considered a lynchpin of the Fascist state not only by Mussolini's regime propaganda, but also by many American observers.

In the "transatlantic century" – as Mary Nolan (2012) called the 20th century – the exchange of political ideas between both sides of the ocean frequent and continually reshaped national political landscapes. In the opinion of some scholars, during the New Deal era the corporatist model coming from Rome influenced the debate on economic planning in Washington. According to Daniel Rodgers, "corporatism's reputation was still in its high tide in the early 1930s, even among those repelled by the thuggish side of Italian Fascism" (Rodgers, 1998: 420). Actually, there is plenty of evidence of a mutual attraction between New Dealers and Fascist intellectuals and has often attracted historiographical attention. Recently, perhaps the most provocative position has been taken by Wolfgang Schivelbusch (2006).³ In a comparative study on Roosevelt's, Mussolini's, and Hitler's governments, Schivelbusch has pointed out some common elements, concerning state intervention on the economy, charismatic leadership, propaganda style, nationalist and ruralist protectionism, great public works, and finally the influence exercised by the myth of the corporatist "third way" (at least in two of the three regimes, namely Italy and the United States). However, there is no systematic research on this subject.⁴

In this article, I will frame that issue from a historical perspective, focusing on the exchange of ideas on corporatism between the two sides of the Atlantic, the main reasons for the success of the "third way" myth, but also its short-lived fortune.

² See Pasetti (2017), and in more detail Pasetti (2016).

³ Partly inspired by John A. Garraty's pioneering study (1973).

⁴ The most detailed work is still Vaudagna (1981).

A top-down, state-directed, compulsory corporatism

In the early 1920s, Fascism did not propose a new coherent corporatist doctrine, but rather a heterogeneous set of different projects.⁵ Among these, the plan of Justice Minister Alfredo Rocco prevailed, when in April 1926 the Italian parliament approved the new legal order for collective labour relations. This law must be considered a cornerstone of the Fascist state. Its provisions defined three cardinal rules of corporatist policy: first, the authoritarian regulation of labour conflict through the abolition of the right to strike and organize lockouts and the creation of the labour courts (*Magistratura del Lavoro*); second, the fascist monopoly on labour relations through the legal recognition of a sole employer association and a single trade union for every sector; and third, the creation of the first corporatist bodies through the constitution of the Ministry of Corporations and the National Council of Corporations (*Consiglio Nazionale delle Corporazioni* – which became operative only in 1930).⁶ These elements created a new authoritarian model of corporatism: a top-down, state-directed, compulsory corporatism.

The following year, the Labour Charter (*Carta del Lavoro*) provided this model with a sort of constitutional statute, establishing the ideological framework, institutional structure and social ethics of the corporatist state. Although the document had no juridical value, it made the spirit of Fascist policy explicit – as the first article declared:

The Italian nation is an organism with ends, life and means superior in power and duration to those of the individuals or groups that compose it. It is a moral, political and economic unity, realized entirely in the Fascist state. (*Carta del Lavoro*, 1927: 136).

Moreover, from its promulgation in April 1927, the Labour Charter was heralded by its promoter as the official manifesto of Italian Fascism in the international arena. In a speech to the Chamber of Deputies on 1 June 1927, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Corporations, Giuseppe Bottai, stated that the Labour Charter should provide the *summa*

⁵ On the different ideological currents within Fascist corporatism, see Pasetti (2006), Santomassimo (2006: 51-99), Gagliardi (2010: 12-25).

⁶ On the importance of this legislation in the development of the Fascist regime, see Gagliardi (2010: 34-69), Pasetti (2012).

of principles for “a new epoch”, because it “is not only the document of great national thinking, namely Italy’s, but also a manifestation of universal value”. For this reason, he declared, “it was winning great admiration all over the world” (Bottai, 1929: 95-96).

In this way, Fascist corporatism provided a new political option, fully introduced into the public debate on the regulation of social conflict, the representation of economic interests and the reform of the state. On account of its authoritarian and state-centric imprint, the Fascist model differed from earlier corporatist plans, but it prefigured some developing directives that had universal appeal because they appeared to have been implemented with a certain effectiveness by the Italian regime.⁷ In fact, unlike some ephemeral attempts in the early 1920s, the Fascist solution demonstrated the technical feasibility of labour control by corporatist policy from above. Furthermore, the Labour Charter became a document of reference and was able to influence both theoretical debate and the implementation of institutional reforms and new constitutions.

Therefore, between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, through a transnational exchange of ideas about the authoritarian control of the organized interests, a European intellectual and political network gained not only knowledge of the Fascist experience outside Italy’s borders, but also of the renewal of Right-wing political theory, and sometimes of its practice of governance. The interest in the Fascist corporative system fostered a wide rethinking of the role of the state, and in particular of the relationship between government, lobbies, trade unions, technocratic élites, and so on. And this rethinking involved not only the political groups of the extreme Right nearest to the fascist movement, but also the ranks of the traditional Right, such as nationalist, conservative or Catholic intellectuals. Despite the anti-statist background of much of Right-wing political thought, many intellectuals and politicians embraced the idea of integrating the organized interest groups in the institutional system, giving them a juridical personality and entrusting new tasks to the state – that is to say, the function of the state had to go beyond simple control, and provide instead the monopoly of representation, the compulsory arbitration, and the effective management of a corporatist order. Especially in Catholic political doctrine, this meant a significant paradigm shift, which helped the interaction with fascism.

⁷ On the importance of the power of precedent to explain the influence of Italian Fascism abroad, see especially Kallis (2004: 22-32).

Finally, in many countries, thanks to the fascination for Fascist corporatism, this ideological renewal spawned a number of processes of hybridization. In Europe, the borders between the traditional Right and the new fascist Right became confused, indistinct, blurred. Moreover, the attention to, and often the admiration for, the Fascist experience was a geographically widespread phenomenon. From the second half of the 1920s, and even more so after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the corporatist wave crossed the Atlantic and reached the American continent.

The Fascist “experiment” seen from America

In the early 1920s, Samuel Gompers, the powerful leader of the American Federation of Labor, was one of the first to welcome the advent of Fascism in Italy because of its corporatist project. Gompers had devoted some of his writings to the subject but nevertheless did not have time to see the developments of corporatist policy.⁸ Thereafter, several American intellectuals looked with sympathy on Mussolini’s seizure of power and the construction of the Fascist dictatorship. Indeed, the Fascist laboratory seemed to be heading in the same direction that many American social scientists were envisioning: for example, the idea that “classical” democratic representation should be replaced by a type of “functional” representation – that is, a form of political representation related to labor and professional skills – converged with the main goals of Fascist corporatism (Borgognone, 2015: 194). A similar debate had already taken place on the Guild Socialism theory of G.D.H. Cole and other British Labourists, which had also been echoed in the United States.⁹ But now, in the second half of the 1920s, from Fascist Italy came both new theories and a first attempt to implement a corporatist policy, which renewed interest in this project.

For example, Herbert W. Schneider – a Columbia University philosopher and student of John Dewey – was one of the most staunch supporters of the Fascist corporatist theory elaborated by Edmondo Rossoni and Sergio Panunzio, which was based on the synthesis of syndicalism and nationalism. In their version of the ideology – according to Schneider’s interpretation – the aims of corporatism consisted in the nexus between labor

⁸ Gompers died in 1924. Among his writings, see in particular Gompers (1923). About his sympathy for Fascism, see Diggins (1972: 217-221).

⁹ See, for example, the critiques made by Lippmann (1922).

and social citizenship, harmonious union of the productive forces, organic conception of the nation as an entity superior to individuals and classes, incorporation of union organization within the institutional framework of the state. Thus, the main goal of corporatism was to offer an alternative to liberal individualism by prioritizing the national common interest (Schneider, 1928a: 146-164).¹⁰

Schneider's view – like that of other pundits – invoked the myth of corporatism as a “third way”, although in reality Mussolini's regime was moving in a different direction, proposing an authoritarian model of corporatism that aimed not so much to mediate the interests of labor and capital as to impose control over the world of labor. On the other hand, the Italian regime itself organized effective propaganda abroad, making use of the diplomatic corps, cultural institutes, academic-intellectual networks, and migrant Fascist groups (the *Fasci italiani all'estero*) to propagate this myth all over the world. This Fascist propaganda machine also worked in the United States and played an important role in spreading the idea that an epoch-making experiment was taking place in Italy to find an alternative path to both liberalism and Soviet collectivism. But there is one aspect of this propaganda that needs to be emphasized. Its aim was not only to promote an idea, or to launch a slogan, but also to show that the fascist regime was implementing a program, was putting into practice an experimental, successful politics. And the very concept of “experiment” was often used in the American literature on Fascist corporatism. For Charles Merriam (1931: IX), it was a “striking experiment” that ensured political control of society. Others called it an “amazing experiment”, “unique experiment”, “vital and vivid experiment in social control”, “great experiment”.¹¹

In a disputed book published in 1928, Professor William Yandell Elliott – who would later serve on Roosevelt's Brain Trust, and accompany the President all the way to the Yalta Conference – did not hesitate to place Italian Fascism in a heterogeneous current of anti-liberalism thought, which included Georges Sorel's syndicalism, Harold Laski's pluralism, G.D.H. Cole's guildism, and Leon Duguit's theories about the *droit objectif*. The difference was that Mussolini had moved from words to deeds, and was carrying out a “pragmatic revolt” in the name of state efficiency:

¹⁰ By the same author see also Schneider (1928b), and the volume co-signed with a historian from Columbia University: Schneider and Clough (1929).

¹¹ See Borgognone (2015: 197), who quotes Hill and Stoke (1935), Wilson (1936), Schneider and Clough (1929), Buell (1929), Ogg (1936).

The organic social morality which relies upon fear and force to achieve its ends is the necessary apology of Fascism. Pragmatism becomes an economic interpretations of social solidarity that rules out of consideration all ends for the state that interfere with the efficient functioning of the State as a productive organism. That is the philosophy of Fascism (Elliott, 1928).

Elliott's thesis, his emphasis on the "pragmatism" of the Fascist experiment, aroused various misgivings in academic debate.¹² But it represents an example of how, viewed from America, the Fascist corporatist state could appear "as a productive organism", which certainly had sacrificed freedom but in favor of order, efficiency, productivity, social harmony.

Like the myth of the "third way", this too was an image popularized abroad by regime propaganda, but out of line with the reality of Fascist Italy. Some observers were also trying to point this out to the American public. As Carmen Haider wrote from Columbia University, the corporatist system had been "built on the lack of interest on the part of the masses and realized only in its outward forms", so it was proving incapable of containing the widespread agitation in the country (Haider, 1930: 224). Moreover, the representative system based upon Fascist syndicates of employers and of employees was still unfinished and subordinate to a political body, namely the Grand Council of Fascism (*Gran Consiglio del Fascismo*):

It is true that the conception of the corporatist state calls for an economic chamber, and that the Fascists declare that they are working towards such a system, but at present Parliament is political, even according to the Fascists, and furthermore the idea of the corporatist state, as it is advanced by the Fascists, does not take account of the existence and predominating position of the Grand Council (Haider, 1930: 266).¹³

It was by no means true, in short, that the Fascist experiment had generated a perfect social control machine. But this story was now in circulation.

¹² For a couple of examples, see the reviews of Elliott's book by George E.G. Catlin (1929) and Harold D. Lasswell (1929).

¹³ A few years later, an even more radical and corrosive critique of the "great humbug" of Fascist corporatism was proposed by Italian antifascist Gaetano Salvemini (1936: 10-11), while he was in exile in Massachusetts at Harvard University.

Was the New Deal “fascistic”?

In the early 1930s, as Italy seemed less affected by the economic crisis than other states, the impact of the Great Depression increased the popularity of the Fascist option, transforming corporatism into a possible response to the crisis of capitalism as well, like a system of political intervention and governance of the economy through equal bodies (named *Corporazioni* by the Italian regime, envisaged by the 1926 law, and finally established in 1934). In actual fact, historical research has amply demonstrated that even Fascist Italy suffered an important economic slump.¹⁴ But at that time the idea that the Italian economic and social situation was far less dramatic than others was widespread. Mainly for this reason, intellectuals and politicians from the progressive area – just like Tugwell – turned their eyes toward Fascist Italy. Whereas in the 1920s the corporatist experiment had drawn the attention of some social scientists and other intellectuals, in the 1930s it also became the subject of reflection in political circles, and especially within President Roosevelt’s entourage. Although evidence is fragmentary, historiography has unearthed several clues about the interest in Fascism by not only the aforementioned Tugwell, but also by others members of the Brain Trust, starting with James Farley, Harry Hopkins, Donald Richberg, and the head of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), Hugh Johnson.¹⁵

This attention engendered a new public debate concerning the similarities between the dawning New Deal and Italian regime, with a particular focus on corporatism as a commonality¹⁶. In his book *The Coming American Revolution*, for example, liberal *New Republic* editor George Soule pointed out the analogy between Fascist policy and economic reforms outlined by the New Dealers, but stressed the advantage of the United States not suffering from the “social and political problems” of Mussolini’s Italy (Soule, 1934: 294). Similarly, in a 1935 book edited by the international organization scholar

¹⁴ For two recent summaries, see Frascani (2012: 101-119) and Felice (2015: 192).

¹⁵ See among others Diggins (1972: 367), Vaudagna (1981), Garraty (1987: 191), Whitman (1991), Schivelbusch (2006: 34), Patel (2016: 91).

¹⁶ Furthermore, corporatism was seen as distinguishing Fascist Italy from Nazi Germany: see Florinsky (1936). In American public opinion, as Benjamin L. Alpers (2003: 64-73) pointed out, until the mid-1930s the definition of the corporatist state prevailed for Fascist Italy, while the concept of totalitarianism was introduced in reference to Nazi Germany.

Norman L. Hill and political scientist Harold W. Stoke – who also worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority – the Italian corporatist system was juxtaposed with the NRA: in both cases these were “schemes devised for the purpose of securing peace and economic justice and providing economic planning” (Hill and Stoke, 1935: 495). For several opinion makers, economy management and inter-class collaboration were the two main aims that the most important New Deal agency could achieve by following the Fascist example.¹⁷

Meanwhile, similar judgments about Fascist corporatism were appearing in the American business press. As John A. Garraty (1987: 147) argued, the failure of the capitalist system to break out of the depression caused many US businessmen to worry lest their workers be radicalized, and this concern encouraged them to consider bringing labor into a kind of corporatist coalition too. The best-known proposal of this type was the one advanced by Gerard Swope, the president of General Electric, which explained that “production and consumption should be coordinated [...] preferably by the joint participation and joint administration of management and employees”.¹⁸ The corporatist solution was not necessarily Fascist, and most businessmen who found the idea attractive envisioned it as a way of using government authority without creating a dictatorship (Garraty, 1987: 148). However, at least until the mid-1930s, some of them declared that they were in favour of, or not totally hostile to, the Italian model.

As emblematic of a certain attitude to take seriously the Italian option, the prestigious economic magazine *Fortune* focused on the corporatist state in a special issue of July 1934 entirely devoted to Italy. On the one hand, the report did not shy away from hiding a number of worries, especially for the impact on the powerful businessmen to whom Henry Luce’s monthly was addressed. The chapter carried the significant subheading: “[The corporatist state] is not yet the be-all but is certainly the end of all of the Fascist conception of statehood. It binds all Italian labor. Does it also bind capital?”. The question clearly troubled American capitalists. Although corporatist legislation was considered to be an efficient means of stifling worker agitation and thus protecting the interests of entrepreneurs, within this solution there was a latent danger of excessive state interference in the free market. On the other hand, the *Fortune* dossier explained the benefits that

¹⁷ See for example Welk (1933) and Wright (1934).

¹⁸ Quoted in Garraty (1987: 149).

could be drawn from an authoritarian adaptation of corporatism, giving to the state enough powers to promote industrial expansion and to shield the national economy from slump. Actually, according to certain judgments, there were not many differences between the Italian and the American anti-Depression policies: “The corporatist state is to Mussolini what the New Deal is to Roosevelt”, declared *Fortune*.¹⁹

This was a common opinion of that period. Some of Roosevelt’s opponents used exactly the same criticism to disapprove of the economic and social reforms program. But also some intellectuals close to the new administration, like liberal lawyer Gilbert Montague, asked whether NRA was a “fascistic” institution. In this regard, he claimed that “probably the simplest explanation is that hastily, absent-mindedly, NRA snatched at a form of executive lawmaking that was unconsciously but nevertheless essentially fascistic” (Montague, 1935: 159). Likewise, in *The North American Review* Roger Shaw had already replied to the same question, claiming that the idea of the New Deal recalled British laborism, but its instrumentation had been “borrowed” by Italian fascism:

The New Deal uses the mechanics of Italian Fascism to combat the spirit of Fascism in American business. [...] The New Dealers, strangely enough, have been employing Fascist means to gain liberal ends; while their Old Guard opponents are strongly in favor of liberal and constitutional means to gain Fascist ends. [...] Fascism is, in many respects, the most significant political and social development of the entire post-War period (Shaw, 1934: 559).

Meanwhile, from the other side of Atlantic...

From the other side of the Atlantic, meanwhile, ever greater attention was being paid to Roosevelt’s program, along with the persuasion that the New Deal represented the American way to the corporatist state, and therefore an epoch-making turn in the history of the United States. For example, Eduardo Aunós Pérez, Spanish former minister of labor under Miguel Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship, wrote that the New Deal would become “the beginning of the corporatist system in the country with the most individualistic mentality in the world” (Aunós Pérez, 1935: 208). Also Giuseppe Bottai, interviewed by *Foreign Affairs* in July 1935, stressed some similarities between the Fascist corporatist

¹⁹ All quotes from *Fortune* in Diggins (1972: 163-164). On Henry Luce’s attraction for Mussolini, see also Augspurger (2000).

state and New Deal reforms, though reclaiming the greater systematic complexity of the Italian experience (Bottai, 1935). In the same days, Giovanni Selvi heralded on the pages of *Gerarchia* that the NRA “bore the mark of Fascism” and realized a “corporatism without corporations” (Selvi, 1935: 576-7).

Obviously, in Italy, this parallelism was primarily used for propaganda purposes, in order to legitimize the Fascist regime in the eyes of the moderate wing of public opinion. Luigi Villari, a civil servant in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, appeared to be fully convinced in emphasizing the convergence, considering the United States as the only country, in addition to Italy, where the government was launching a new economic policy after the failure of *laissez-faire*. Comparing the two political responses to the crisis, he argued that the analogies were “perhaps unintentional, but significant”: they concerned the dimming of individualism without the abrogation of private property, collaboration between the various branches of the economy under state control, the opening of public works to cut down unemployment, the establishment of labor courts, and the substantial elimination of class struggle (Villari, 1934: 20-23). Likewise, another Fascist civil servant considered the National Labor Relations Board as an agency for the reconciliation of collective labor conflicts, inspired by Italian law, although democratic procedures made it less functional (Anselmi, 1937).

Finally, as a last example, we can even take some of Mussolini’s interventions. Though with due caution, even the Duce himself emphasized the similarities between Fascism and the New Deal: in July 1933, commenting on Roosevelt’s *Looking Forward*, he concluded that “the atmosphere in which the entire doctrinal and practical system moves is certainly related to that of fascism” (Mussolini, 1933). And a year later, reviewing Henry Wallace’s book *New Frontiers*, he repeated that Roosevelt’s reforms were “corporatist solutions” and that with all the evidence “America went to the corporatist economy, that is, towards the economy of this century” (Mussolini, 1934).²⁰

However, it’s worth noting that since the 1930s other opinions on the American New Deal were widespread in Europe, which were more articulate and more fundamentally correct than the “analogy theory”. In France, for example, some progressive thinkers considered the New Deal as a real “third way”, an alternative not only to liberalism and

²⁰ In these two articles, the books reviewed by Mussolini were Roosevelt (1933), translated in Italian in the same year, and Wallace (1934), translated in 1935. On Mussolini’s judgments, see also Schivelbusch (2006: 27-29).

bolshevism, but also to Fascist corporatism. Among them, Georges Boris defined the “Roosevelt Revolution” as an “intermediate solution”. Unlike Fascism, this way preserved democracy because it had no need of authoritarian control of class relationships, proposing instead a gradual reduction of social inequalities, and hence the removal of the main cause of conflict, through a program of reforms and public interventions (Boris, 1934).²¹ Maybe the New Deal’s most controversial bill, the 1933 National Recovery Act, was another example of corporatism, or another “third way”. However, although encouraged by the state, it lacked the element of compulsion and the elimination of democracy characteristic of Fascist state.²²

Concluding remarks

Some decades later, comparing the New Deal and Fascism, certain historiographical interpretations have confirmed the existence of a political affinity between these two experiences. In the words of an Italian scholar, for example, “the similarities were real and mainly concerned the relationship between state, economy, and society, as well as the changes in the distribution of power within the institutional framework” (Vaudagna, 1981: 202). Undoubtedly, despite the growing polarization between Italy and the United States in the field of international relations, the Fascist corporatist order provided a point of reference also for the New Dealers, at least until the mid-1930s. After 1935, the political meaning of the Fascist corporatist experiment started to change. Business journals began to equate Fascism with Communism, denouncing both the Italian system and the NRA as “state socialism”. At the same time, supporters of Roosevelt began to deny the similarity between the New Deal and Fascist corporatism (Alpers, 2003: 35). Indeed, in several key respects, these two political experiences were proceeding toward different and divergent horizons. Just as an example from United States labor law, it is sufficient to recall that the Wagner Act of 1935 ruled on the recognition of basic rights, guaranteeing freedom to the workers’ organizations and tools for collective bargaining, including strikes. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of institutional reforms, among the New Dealers there was never any temptation to replace the Congress with a new form of

²¹ On this topic, see in particular Boltanski (1982: 170-179), according to which this reading of the New Deal experience was the origin of postwar stability. See also Salsano (1987 and 2003).

²² See Nolan (2012: 119), Patel (2016: 101-104).

corporatist parliamentary representation – while the Fascist regime aimed to integrate and complete its corporatist system with the Chamber of Fasces and Corporations (*Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni*), inaugurated in 1939 after a long procedure.

Within the transatlantic exchange of political ideas, which over the centuries contributed to the creation of the “Western World”, for a short time the Italian laboratory gained a primary position. Nevertheless, although before and during the Great Depression the corporatist experiment had admirers in the United States, both among the opinion makers and within the ruling class, the Fascist model remained a topic of discussion and comparison, but with little influence on policy making.

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