

THE SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS

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Abstract

In the following paper we intend to make a synthesis of the forms of activism according to a series of criteria. The social reality shows us that we cannot discuss about a pure social activism. It has a great adapting ability and can be found in many different forms. In essence, the social activism can be an image of the society we live in. The research we carried out in 2009 showed us that in Romania are developing three forms of alternative activism, of the type: Food Not Bombs and Critical Mass. Their presence and the popularity that these forms of activism have, show us that this phenomenon might have new forms of manifestation and affirmation, different from the classic ones.

Keywords: *social activism, economic activism, political activism, voluntarism, ideology, civic spirit.*

The social activism in nowadays Romania has the bad fortune to follow the one from the communist time. The latter, being a totally vassal to the politic system and to the dominant ideology, had negative connotations with a strong resonance in the social mentality. A great amount of these representations are provided by the not too far from us history of the communist time. This explains the reserve towards those who practice different forms of activism in the democratic Romania. What is actually the social activism?

The social activism involves the existence of an individual or collective action that supports ideas, attitudes or actions that have as purpose the social change. The non violent movements, the movement for peace, the activism as a “franchise”, activism that regards animal rights or the environment, social change theatre, activism for promoting the rights of certain social categories, etc are examples that illustrate the diversity of these forms of manifestation. (Netedu, A., 2010) After all, in a democratic context, the activism is the way through which the society has the opportunity to permanently renew itself and evolve. Thus, changes can be generated at the level of thinking, perception and social action. Certain forms of activism, specific to civil societies, could give solutions that could hardly be obtained through political and juridical mechanisms. For instance, environment protection is an issue that can be solved through an efficient activism and not through laws with limited applicability. In the same manner we can think about

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other aspects of social life as those connected to identity and cultural issue, professional and statutory issue, vulnerable populations etc. (Mihalache, N., 2010; Șoitu, C., 2010)

In the case of totalitarian regime, the social activism is visibly inhibited or perverted by the dominant ideology. We consider here the famous workers' unions from the communist Romania which, in fact, have been a perfect vehicle for the party's ideology. What is really remarkable is the fact that in the conditions of a dictatorship, different forms of free manifestation cannot be totally annihilated. We mention here the groups that resisted or tried to find refuge in culture. In case of democracy, the social activism has a wider extent. It is much more diversified, being the expression of the society it develops in. An opened multicultural society has the opportunity to practice the activism on several levels. In this case the activism can have hybrid forms and at the same time some of the most bizarre. Depending on its evolution we can discover new forms of association, of identity assertion and promoting some ideas. Finally, the social activism is the most concrete expression of the existence of a social or group solidarity and of a civic spirit.

1. Forms of activism

The activism manifests a great adaptability to the realities of the social, political and economic life (Șoitu D.& Șoitu C., 2009). It can take the most unexpected forms, thus a detailed and definitive classification it is practically impossible. Thus, we made a typology of the activism according to several criteria: temporal coordinates, the sectors of the social life it promotes, the fields that are in its interest area. According to a series of variables we can identify several forms of activism.

- Based on the time variable we have: *permanent and sporadic activism*. The first is better organized, has enough audience and has personnel that are concerned with promoting ideas, programmes and activities. We mention the union organizations, organization for human rights, ecologist ones etc. The second category has weaker time persistence. From the organizational and the human resources point of view this form of activism does not have continuity and a permanent commitment. Within these categories we include a series of actions that promote walking, humanitarian actions etc. Under certain conditions the sporadic activism can turn into a permanent one.
- Based on the fields it manifests we can talk about some major forms of activism: *social, political and economic activism*.
- Based on the issues it approaches we identify: *activism that regards the human rights, activism that has in attention the animal rights, activism that*

promotes the rights of minorities, environment protection, anticonsumerism, anti corporatism etc.

- If we take into consideration the political variable, the activism can mark every political orientation from those of extreme left wing to those of extreme right wing. In general the political activism can be structured on several levels into: activism of the young wing, women, leaders, local or central level etc.
- In case of religion, the social activism has two components: one connected to the act of faith and proselytism and one that manifests at social level under the form of helping activities, humanitarian campaigns, religious NGOs etc. In general, the activism that a church can show, can express, in a concrete manner, the doctrinaire and religious thinking of the Church.
- A quite recent form of activism, very widespread, is the anti corporatist one. It appeared during the late 90's as a "network of activists that protected the environment, human and workers' rights, determined to show the hidden evil behind the shining foil. There have been founded tenths of new organizations and publications with the sole purpose to "unmask" those corporations that benefited from the repressive politics of the governments from all around the world."(Klein, N., 2006: 287)
- Taking into consideration the age and sex variable we discover a youth activism, an adults' activism and even an elderly activism (pensioners associations); activism of men, women, gay people. Of course, the typology of activism could go on if taking into consideration the numerous variables that make the structure of a society and which can become at some point landmarks of our existence. The thing that increases the difficulty of making a complete typology of activism is the fact, that practically, there are no pure forms of activism. The social reality shows us that activism has a remarkable power of adjustment and we can find several forms of activism (an activist that militates for workers' rights can also militate against corporations) simultaneously. An illustrative example is the one in the USA: "In May 1997, the American activists for workers' rights discovered that the sports clothing line that used the name of the TV star Kathie Lee Gifford (and which was sold only in Wall Mart stores) was produced using children from Honduras and workers from illegal workshops in New York." (Klein, N., 2006: 289) Thus they organized a campaign against the clothing line Kathie Lee Gifford.

Of course these typologies could be enlarged according to other variables, too. In general the activism shapes around some aspects that are included into the public or private agenda. They can equally express the attachment towards a fact, a principle, value and also the wish for change and new. In the contemporary, democratic societies, the activism can be considered the most concrete expression of liberty, democracy and plurality of the social life.

In order to better illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon we will emphasize a typology of the activism starting from the three great fields in which it can be found: social, political and economic.

1.1. Political activism

The classic forms of politic activism, which are rather connected to politic and party propaganda, are completed nowadays by new types of activism as: political campaigns, craftivism, lobby, hacktivism , propaganda, direct actions, the denial to obey laws etc.

- *The political campaigns* are forms of activism that suppose an organized effort with the purpose to influence the decisions during the voting process. Those who are activist into this field are those who are loyal to the cause, those who really have faith in the party, in the leaders and certain principles that define the party's doctrine. In general the activists are party members and during the political campaigns do voluntary work in order to support the party or a leader.
- *Craftivism* is a type of activism that incorporates anti capitalism elements, environmental elements or elements from the third wave of the feminine movement. The practitioners are known as craftivists. The term was first registered in 2003 by the writer Betsy Greer, and according to her, craftivism, is a way of regarding life where the opinions become fact and make you stronger, more compassionate and more willing to do justice become infinite. Also, the term craftivism is made up of two words: craft (the ability to build things) and activism. (Greer, B., 2007: 401)
- *Lobby* is the activity by which can the decisions of the government or the parliament can be influenced. A person who lobbies is the one who tries to influence legislation in favour of a group, a community or for himself.
- *Hacktivism* is the non violent form (illegal or of a doubtful legality) in which are being used digital instruments with political purposes. These instruments can be web sites, pamphlets published on sites, virtual sabotage etc. Many times the *Hacktivism* is understood as a written code in order to promote political ideologies, freedom of expression, human rights or ethic perspectives. Those who practise this activism are convinced that using right codes might have similar effects to those obtained through classic activism. In some variants the hacktivism promotes civil disobedience. One of the first acts of this type was „Strano Network sit-in”, an action against the computers of the French government in 1995.
- *Propaganda* means dissemination of the political and doctrine information of a party in order to influence the opinions and behaviour of people. The propaganda in its main meaning, often presents the information that can influence the audience. There are selected the facts that are to be presented

in order to encourage a certain analysis or there are presented messages so that will cause emotions and will not be analysed from a rational perspective. The intention is to modify the audience's attitude towards a subject, according to the political agenda. The propaganda sets in movement a whole communication and political action arsenal and has a manipulative character.

- *The direct action* is politically motivated and can be used at individual level by a group or by the government. The direct action can include activities that are both non violent and violent having as target persons, groups or properties considered offensive towards the participants to the direct action. Examples of non violent direct actions: strikes, taking buildings with assault, expressing through graffiti. The direct violent actions include: sabotage, vandalism, murder. In their turn, the electoral politics, diplomacy, negotiation or arbitrage do not represent forms of direct actions. The direct action can take the shape of civil disobedience. While the tactics of the direct actions are very old, the theory of the direct actions was developed much later, during the revolutionary fighting. As a principle, the direct action is often used by those who want social change, a revolutionary change. The direct action can be legal or illegal, against something / someone or for something / someone. The principle that supports the direct action is *Do It Yourself!* and the slogan used is *If not now, when? If not you, who?*) The protest in London in 1996 for environment and ecology is an example of the direct action. On the 13th of July 1996 the M41 highway in London was transformed in dancing floor. Approximately 10,000 people dressed for carnival took part in that protest. Some of them used power drills in order to make holes in the asphalt and planted trees in the middle of the highway. This action was a real success, the goal of the activities was achieved and not only for that moment. The environment issue got everyone's attention (Vinthagen, S., 2007: 461-463).
- *The assumed denial to obey certain government laws, demands or orders without using violence.* The American author Henry David Thoreau has been the pioneer of the modern theory towards this practice with his essay from 1849 "Civil Disobedience" (Jordan, T., 2002: 61). The main idea was that one does not have to fight physically with the system and that no one has to bear or to be obliged to bear what does not want to. Thus, Thoreau explains his own reasons for which he refused to pay taxes. His gesture was an act of protest against slavery and against the war between Mexico and the USA. Mahatma Gandhi is, also, a main figure of this type of activism. In essence, this denial of obeying is equal to not accepting governmental politics and they can represent the retraction of a regime, of a social order.

1.2. Economic activism

The economic activism implies the use of economic power to cause change. Both conservatives and liberal groups use economic activism in order to boycott companies and organizations that do not agree with the politics or social values. The economic activism implies boycott, divestment, cooperative movement, culture jamming.

- *The boycott* is a form of consumption activism that involves a volunteer act of renouncing to use, buy or negotiate with someone or with other organizations as a form of protest. Very often behind this type of activism there is a political reason.
- *The divestment* involves using boycott in order to put pressure on a government, industry or a company. The purpose is to determine change of politics or even to change the regime. The term was first used in 1980 and is quite found in the USA. An example of divestment is the campaign led by students and religious groups who were against Pinochet's regime (Chile) and who turned their campaign against the American company Noranda blocking it to manifest its activities during Pinochet's regime.
- The Company Talisman Energy has also been the target of divestment campaigns that succeeded to convince the company's shareholders to withdraw from Sudan until the oppressive regime in the country ceases (Burch, B., 2007: 262-264).
- *Cooperative Movement*. A co-operative is an autonomous association where people freely choose to join having the same economical and social interest and also the same cultural needs and aspirations. The control in these associations is democratic. The organization is run by a group of individuals and there are mutual advantages.
- The phrase Culture *jamming* comes from the Citizen's Band (CB), a radio that became famous because it used to interrupt illegally the broadcasting of other radio stations. Those who practise culture jamming are called culture jammers. These may be artists, activists, organizations that consider the consumerist society and the consumerist culture as being a failure of humanity and that want to raise awareness on this aspect. Umberto Eco defines the culture jammers as activists who fight a symbolic guerrilla war, making use of undermining, anti-advertising, hacktivism, media tricks, and religious parodies in order to achieve their goal. Usually, the corporation brand itself is being used against it, for example, the image already presented by the company is being used and the message conveyed by this is reworked by activists in order to force viewers to reconsider the original image. Jonah Peretti is an example in this respect. He managed to create a true phenomenon redirecting an e-mail saying that he wanted a pair of custom Nike shoes with the inscription of the word *sweatshop* (sweatshop refers to a shop or a factory where employees' rights are not respected, for

example, they are not properly paid for their work, the working conditions are poor). Thus, he managed to draw attention to the fact how Nike treats its employees.

- Another example of culture jamming is represented by Guerrilla Girls, a group of women who wear masks of gorillas and use names of artists, dead women in order to criticize the misogyny in the art world in particular and in the cultural space in general. (Casey-Sawicki, K., 2007: 414-415)

1.3. The Social Activism

The social activism is strictly related to the idea of social change. It includes a variety of forms: starting from the non-violent movements, the movement for peace, activism as “franchise” that is interested in animals’ rights or environmental issues, the theatre for social change, to the young people’s activism, etc

Non-violent confrontations. Non-violence is a philosophy and a strategy of social change that refuses to use physical violence. Thus, non-violence represents an alternative to the passive acceptance of oppression and fights against it. The people who practise non-violence may use different methods in their campaigns of producing social change, from critical forms of education and persuasion, to civil disobedience and non-violent direct actions aimed at communication through media. In modern times, non-violence has been a very powerful tool for social protests. An example of non-violent movement is the “Velvet Revolution” that led to the downfall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1989.

The Movement for peace is a social movement that aims at achieving its ideals, for example to put an end to wars, to minimize inter-human violence, in general and to establish world peace. For example, the protests that took place both in the United States and in other countries concerning the war in Iraq or the Gaza Strip.

The Activism as “franchise” refers to that form of activism that is done independently by individuals or groups in different locations and making use of a concept already tested. This phrase usually describes an idea that is not practised by a single organization. For example: critical mass, food not bombs etc. This form of activism involves non-profit activities and non-governmental organizations. In the economic area, the franchise is a “business system in which a franchisor provides the entire business concept together with the complete package for starting the business, the marketing is already tested and developed and the business know-how is also available”. (<http://dexonline.ro/definitie/franciza>, consulted on 12.03.2009), but the activism as franchise shouldn’t be regarded as a business.

The activism that regards animal rights is a movement that has as a purpose protecting the animals in order to be used as anybody’s properties. This is a radical movement which wishes that animals benefit from rights as well as humans, too. The first official example in this matter took place in November 1973 when two activists burned a lab that was conducting tests on animals, the losses registered

being significant. The activists responsible for these actions made their gesture public and declared that they consider themselves as a non violent organization that intends to free the animals from the cruelty and persecution they get from humans.

- *Activism regarding the environment.* This type of activism regards protecting the nature and the entire planet. One of the best known world wide organizations is Greenpeace. Since 2002 there has been a branch in Romania, too.
- *Activism as an artistic and theatrical act* intends using the theatre and the art as an instrument that leads to change. This kind of theatre encourages the participation of the public to the event. Hundreds of organizations used theatre in order to educate the population, for propaganda, therapy or as an instrument to cause change. For example, Theatre of the Oppressed that uses a series of interactive techniques created by Augusto Boal during the 1970s in Brazil. The emphasis is on the relation between actors and public. The relation between them must be sincere, opened; the public can speak about their problems and try to find solutions. (Horton,J., 2007: 1367-1368)
- *Youth activism* is best represented by young people's voice that wants change at social level. The youth represent a very important resource for promoting new ideas, values and attitudes. Their age recommends them as the perfect actors in case of movements for peace, ecologist, social justice etc. The students' movements from the 60s can be used to illustrate this. Today we identify two forms of youth's manifestations: the first corresponds to youth's involvement in certain sectors of social life (participation in activities connected to educational reforms, children rights, governmental reforms etc) and the second regards more youth's action to encourage other young people to have the courage to say what they think and to get socially involved (for example The National Association for Youth Rights in USA).

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Either it is about political, economic or social activism or it is in hybrid forms, we observe that the main purpose of activism is shaped around the idea of change at the level of collective awareness. The activism is not something intrinsic; the changes it intends to cause are at the level of the whole community. First of all, the activists want that people become aware of the existence of the alternatives.

2. Food not bombs and critical mass – two forms of modern activism

2.1. „Food Not Bombs”

„Food Not Bombs” works as a franchise activism. The ideology of this movement regards bringing poverty in sight of corporations and governments that are characterized by abundance. In order to demonstrate this and to reduce costs, a

great part of the food served in public places represents a surplus of aliments that come from supermarkets and hypermarkets which otherwise would have been thrown away. Within this form of activism an independent group of a community serves for free vegetarian food to other people. For example, on the 28th June of 1989 in San Francisco, Food Not Bombs volunteers offered food to street people that were protesting for their rights. (http://www.foodnotbombs.net/fnb_time_line.html) Food Not Bombs works as a global movement based exclusively on voluntarism. By its activities it intends to launch a protest against war and poverty. Those that participate in this movement start from the premise that if governments and corporations around the world would spend as much time and energy to feed humans as they do for war, no one would die of starvation. They consider that there is enough food in the world for everyone, but it is wasted. This waste would be the consequence of individualist capitalism, of arming and of war. The non violent message is promoted by volunteers by the gesture of offering food to poor and by promoting vegetarian aliments. In the opinion of this movement's adepts the vegetarian food is a healthy and non violent option. „Food Not Bombs” wishes to attract attention on lacks and poverty from different parts of the society. By sharing food in public places, the movement facilitates meetings between the people that live in the same social conditions: are poor and do not have a place to live in.

The first „Food Not Bombs” took place at the beginning of 1980's in Cambridge, Massachusetts a town close to Boston. Here, a group of anti nuclear energy activists, that had ecologist messages begun to write with a spray the message „Money for food, not for bombs” throughout the city. The slogan became „Food Not Bombs” and became the name of the group. (McHenry, K. & Lawrence B., *Food Not Bombs*, 2000)

These days the volunteers „Food Not Bombs” are found all around the world. Though it does not have a solid structure „Food Not Bombs” has three base principles that are respected by all „Food Not Bombs” volunteers: the food is vegetarian or vegan, there are no leaders, presidents or managers Food Not Bombs, every volunteer makes his own decisions according to the needs of the communities they come from and the third principle is represented by the fact that Food Not Bombs promotes non violence. In Romania the first „Food Not Bombs” action took place in 2005 in Bucharest. Since then, „Food Not Bombs” volunteers activate in several cities around the country. Food Not Bombs is a free, spontaneous, manifestation, there are no leaders and each individual is free to participate, the only demand being to respect the three principles.

2.2. „Critical Mass”

„Critical Mass” is a cyclists' global event that takes place in more than 300 towns every last Friday of each month. (Blickstein, S. G., 2007: 405-406) The movement appeared in 1992 in San Francisco. Initially, the message was of identity

nature but it also unmasked the agglomerations of the great metropolis. The first activity of this kind took place on Friday 25th of September 1992, at 18.00 o'clock in San Francisco. At that time the event was known as „Commuter Clot”. Shortly after this a part of the participants went to a local bikes store to see Ted White's documentary „Return of the Scorcher”, a documentary that has as theme cyclists' culture throughout time. In this film appeared the term *critical mass* which was assumed at the second edition of the event.

During the fourth edition the number of the cyclists raised from a hundred and the participation knows a major increase, the average being of a thousand cyclists. The name of „Critical Mass” was quickly adopted and by other activists that participated in similar events before 1992.

The media considered „Critical Mass” a form of protest, a social movement. In 2006 the magazine *New Yorker* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_Mass consulted on 12.03.2009) described in an article this activity from New York as a monthly political protest of the cyclists and characterized it as a part of the social movement. Though, the participants insisted on the idea that this type of events should be regarded as celebrations and spontaneous meetings and not as protests or organized demonstrations. This concept was the main argument so that the actions carried out under the sign „Critical Mass” would not be considered as illegal. Thus, this type of events can take place without having to call the police. Nowadays they take place in small cities. The number of the participants may vary, maybe under twenty but might be even very high. On the 20th of April 2008 in Budapest the number of cyclists was approximated to 80.000.

It is worth mentioning that the structure of „Critical Mass” is different from other social movement as it is not a hierarchical type. Many times „Critical Mass” is called an organization based on coincidence, which does not have either leaders or members. The routes the participants take are decided spontaneously by persons that are in that moment ahead of the group. Others vote a certain route according to the suggestions received which are usually drawn on flyers. The term *xerocracy* describes the process used to decide what route is to be followed, anyone can decide, those who have certain suggestions make their own map which they distribute to other cyclists that participate and the decisions are taken by mutual agreement. Apparently these events seem unorganized and they lack coherence. Exactly this fact allows that the movement will not be interdicted by the authorities and not to be considered an organized protest or a form of a parade.

In order to participate in such a movement there are no material costs. But in order for the event to go on, the only request is that there are interested people that will participate and occupy a space as big as possible from the one destined to drivers. The New York, California and Oregon authorities expressed their concern regarding the difficulty to control the cyclists as there is no leader.

„Critical Mass” takes place everywhere around the world without an official route or sanctions. The participants from different cities practise most of the times

a tactic which is known as *corking* in order to maintain group's cohesion. This technique, also allows the movement to engage into different activities, for example to form a cyclone, lifting the bikes in a traditional way known as *Bike Lift* or to perform a *die-in*. An interesting behaviour of the cyclists is to lie down on the ground. The gesture is understood as a symbolic death but it also is a significant of the insults they receive from the other traffic participants.

„Critical Mass” is considered a controversial movement and deals with public opposition. The ones that criticize the movement state that the Critical Mass is nothing more than a volunteering way of obstructing the traffic and of undermine the normal activity of the town. They support their point of view arguing that their purpose is to celebrate cycling, being a non polluting transportation alternative. Also, the nowadays Critical Mass is a symbol of the right to associate in public spaces and to speak freely.

In Romania the first „Critical Mass” action took place in 2006 in Timisoara, since then cyclists from other cities being solidary with this idea.

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The two forms of activism succinctly presented above, Food Not Bombs and Critical Mass are somewhat unprecedented within the social activism area. As they present themselves they are far from assuming a certain way of organization, and ensuring a coherence of actions and ideas which they promote. Mainly, the essence of these movements gravitates around two main ideas: people's will to act freely and to manifest a group the voluntarism.

Although they are not really associations and organizations, in the classic meaning of the word, the two movements represent alternative forms of social activism, which shows a certain attitude towards what we understand by organization, leader and social action. Moreover, the participants to these events express a high level of availability to participate in other social actions, too, which subscribe to the same category of manifestations.

The research we carried out in Iasi, Romania in May 2009 on twenty participants (thirty questionnaires for each from of activism) at the two types of movements, demonstrates this fact. The answers to the questionnaires showed that it is about active people, who are involved in other forms of social activism, too, somewhat similar. For example, an important part of the participants in „Food Not Bombs” will participate in „Critical Mass”, too.

Data analysis showed that more than half of the respondents are not members of any organization, association or political party. Practically, the answers show a denial of any form of organization, but there is the availability to accept to participate in activities connected to information and education. As far as the participants' receptivity to different organizations' messages is concerned, the results showed that the activists are not interested in being volunteers for different organizations. The motivation is a foreseeable one: the lack of trust in state's institutions and in other types of organizations like NGOs. What matters for them

is the message they can send. What makes them activate within „Food Not Bombs” and „Critical Mass” are the principles they are based on and the messages they send. Furthermore, regarding the questions about the trust in state’s institutions, the negative answers had a high quota, so this justifies absenteeism to voting and participation in protests. All these show certain receptivity towards a series of concepts like: vegetarianism, feminism and anarchism to fight against war, sexism, human or animal rights.

Regarding the political implication of the participants at Food Not Bombs and Critical Mass, it can mainly be seen under the form of marches, demonstrations, protests, petitions and by participation at voting or supporting a political party as a member or volunteer.

Even lacking a coherent ideology and organization, the participants at „Food Not Bombs” and „Critical Mass” that were included in the research, answered in proportion of 70-80%, that, what makes them participate in these actions, are the principles that characterize the two movements. For example, one of the base principles of „Food Not Bombs” was that “anyone can cook and offer food”. Though they do not have a well organized propaganda, the two movements easily gain adepts because of the friendly attitude the activists have towards the other participants and of their solidary gestures.

The research carried out in Iasi shows that the participants to these movements are young people (80% of the activists are between 18-25 years old). In their majority they are males, pupils, and students, unmarried. Their incomes are not very high.

Food Not Bombs and Critical Mass are two forms of activism that indicate a change of attitude among young people, toward the organization forms within the society and a lack of trust in the institutions. This challenging attitude is specific to the youth. It shows in a new light the idea of activism and voluntarism, showing that young people are highly inventive when they freely express their ideas and options.

Thus, in the modern society the social activism takes alternative forms, which sometimes escape to social clichés and usages. The fact that these coexist with other forms of activism, shows a living civic spirit and an active society.

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