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## Review Essay

# Agency, empowerment and culture

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Liberal political theory continues to struggle with questions of gender and culture, and insights drawn from within feminist theory continue to press liberal theory to adapt and evolve over time. The three texts that were nominated for the 2008 C.B. Macpherson Prize, an award granted to the best book in political theory by a Canadian writer published in the prior 2 years are all, in different ways, concerned with the struggles that liberal political theory continues to face in engaging with gender and culture, and in illuminating where liberal theory must be modified in order to do so effectively.

In *Just and Unjust Interventions in World Politics*, Catherine Lu deploys the ‘public–private’ distinction, so tellingly analyzed by feminist theorists, to good effect in the global environment; she argues that too many theorists of the global environment have simply translated the idea that individuals are entitled to privacy to the idea that sovereign states are equally entitled to something akin to privacy – that is, non-intervention – at the global level. Just as a too-strong respect for privacy has often operated to the detriment of women in family relationships, a too-strong respect for non-intervention operates to the detriment of the globally poor. In *Diverse Communities*, Barbara Arneil chastises social capital theory for celebrating cultural unity and solidarity, all the while ignoring the inequalities and injustice that this emphasis perpetrates on women and cultural minorities. Further, a more expansive evaluation of the ways in which women and cultural minorities participate in civil society organizations reveals, contra Robert Putnam, a change rather than a decline in participation. In *Gender and Justice in Multicultural Communities*, Monique Deveaux argues for prioritizing democratic principles over liberal principles, because in so doing we will be better able to resolve the struggles between gender equality and cultural traditionalism that concern liberal political theorists.<sup>1</sup> It is a mistake and an insult to deny agency to those women who – perhaps surprisingly from a liberal perspective – appear to participate willingly in cultural practices that, in some sense, limit their autonomy.

All three authors are concerned with the concept of agency – of individuals, cultural communities, sovereign states – and how we ought to instantiate it in democratic, multicultural communities, and it is this concept that I will use to structure this essay. The authors disagree on the central components of agency, as well as with respect to the ways in which liberal democratic communities should protect and promote agency. For example, Lu is committed to a standard liberal account of agency, according to which the protection of human rights is of paramount importance, while Deveaux asks us to consider that agency can be exercised in environments under conditions of relatively severe cultural constraint.<sup>2</sup> And, while Deveaux argues that agency can be exercised under conditions of apparent cultural uniformity, Arneil asks us to consider how a commitment to securing cultural uniformity constrains the free exercise of agency. For Arneil, we must in some sense move *outside* the realm of (apparently) shared norms and values in order to promote and then secure genuine agency or, in Arneil's terminology, empowerment.

I begin with by comparing and contrasting the concept of agency that underpins Lu and Deveaux's analysis; I continue by comparing the status of agency in environments of apparently (but often, not actually) shared norms and values, as Deveaux and Arneil articulate it; and I conclude by considering the relative importance of legitimacy for Lu and Deveaux, and how an emphasis on legitimacy informs their respective conceptions of agency. Here, it is worth noting the different ways in which Lu and Deveaux deploy the concept of legitimacy. Lu is concerned primarily with *state* legitimacy, that is, the conditions under which states are morally entitled to the non-interference in their affairs that a global commitment to state sovereignty demands. Deveaux is concerned with the legitimacy of political decision-making, that is, the conditions under which a political decision, however contentious (or illiberal), can command the willing compliance of those who are subject to it.

### **Autonomy, Agency and Empowerment**

In order to maintain its legitimacy in the international environment, says Lu, a sovereign state must sustain a genuine commitment to protecting the human rights of its citizens. Without secure human rights, she suggests, it will be impossible for citizens to exercise their agency. This 'capacity for social and moral agency' is both 'common and distinct to all human beings', and motivates Lu's defense of humanitarian intervention in sovereign states, *under the right conditions* (Lu, 2006, p. 115). A genuine focus on agency will enable us to identify political environments in which human beings are not able – because of actions taken by their own states – genuinely to exercise it freely. Too many people around the world are under the authority of 'abusive and neglectful



agents and structures of power that, in the extreme, obliterate personhood and the conditions for human and moral agency' (ibid, p. 116). Although pragmatic concerns may prevent intervention, even under conditions in which the moral justification for it is clearly present, a focus on agency at least suggests that we may be morally required to intervene across borders with the intention of protecting the conditions under which agency can itself be exercised.

Deveaux, however, cautions against relying on an 'idealized, strong conception of autonomy as independence', as well as 'more moderate views of autonomy as either self-determination or self-definition' (Deveaux, 2007, p. 161).<sup>3</sup> In order to empower vulnerable group members, we ought to focus away from this form of autonomy, and instead on emphasizing and supporting the agency that vulnerable group members are able to exercise even in situations that appear tremendously constraining to outsiders. It is a mistake to promote a commitment to a strict autonomy – a focus on autonomy runs the risk of our labeling women's apparent acceptance of gender unequal practices as irrational. Rather, we need to think about supporting a more 'minimalist account of autonomy', which doesn't require 'independence from one's social context', and which is instead 'broad enough to encompass a range of evaluative activities and forms of expression that ... speak more directly to the legitimacy and illegitimacy of cultural practices' (Deveaux, 2007, p. 178).

This rather thinner account of autonomy is labeled agency, and offers us a 'better starting point for exploring other, less visible, aspects of women's agency and empowerment in culturally traditional settings' (ibid, p. 181). As Deveaux tells it, women are more likely to transform from within, and thinking of their actions in terms of agency rather than autonomy gives us the tools we need to recognize that women's agency 'is often directed towards negotiating and transforming social and cultural practices through everyday actions, responses and choices' (ibid, p. 183). We need not think of women as pawns in a political game run by others; rather, we must think of them as agents in their own right, whose strategies may be more subtle but nevertheless successful at effecting genuine cultural change.

## Cultural Unity in Multicultural Societies

Both Deveaux and Arneil agree that it is a mistake to assume that a cultural or political community is (or must be) characterized by shared norms and values: this assumption obscures the very real diversity of views that can and do coexist within a given community. But, they disagree with respect to dangers of emphasizing these apparently shared norms and values: for Arneil, we should

worry about the often exclusive nature of these norms and values, which are unjustly imposed on minorities against their will; for Deveaux, we should worry that emphasizing shared norms and values obscures the ways in which often vulnerable minorities work, from within, to change the nature of the values and norms that define the community. An emphasis on the latter will, at least according to Deveaux, force us to rethink our emphasis on liberal values, and focus our efforts instead on realizing democratic values. (I'll say more about this in the final section.)

Arneil begins *Diverse Communities* by taking issue with Robert Putnam's 'decline of social capital' thesis. Social capital, says Putnam, refers to 'the features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). In his recent scholarly work, Putnam suggests that our willingness to participate in the organizations that give rise to the 'networks, norms and social trust' on which democracy depends is declining (Putnam, 1993). It is possible, he suggests, that the benefits we typically think are produced by democratic rule – voluntary compliance with shared regulations, for example, and political and social stability more generally – cannot be produced without widespread social capital; if this is the case, the decline of social capital may have a tremendously negative impact on the quality of life in most Western democracies.

But, says Arneil, we should not be so quick to lament the decline in social capital, if indeed there is such a decline; we must take more care before celebrating the era in which social capital was, in Putnam's view, at its peak. A more careful evaluation of the early twentieth century – the Progressive Era that occupies Putnam's analysis in *Bowling Alone* – reveals an uncomfortable truth. Insofar as social capital in the progressive era produced shared norms and values, it did so by requiring historically marginalized groups – women, racial minorities and new immigrants – to adopt norms and values that were created by, and endorsed by, White Christian men: the 'specific "American" contours of this social capital accumulation also involved the negative aspects of exclusion, assimilation and eradication based on both gender and cultural attributes' (ibid, p. 35 and see also p. 24, 27).<sup>4</sup> As a result, the unambiguous advocacy of social capital development – at least insofar as we're being encouraged to participate in traditional or conventional organizations of the kind that occupy Putnam's analysis<sup>5</sup> – may 'prove to be in tension not only with liberal notions of individual rights but simultaneously with multicultural commitments to diversity and difference' (ibid, p. 14). Celebrating social capital as unambiguously positive is therefore, she argues, a privilege limited to those in a 'position of power', as it aims at 'solidifying trust and cooperation and reinforcing the shared norms of the already powerful group and community at large' (ibid, p. 18).



The same danger – that apparently homogeneous and unifying cultural norms in fact reflect the preferences of a dominant group – is of concern to Deveaux as well. For Deveaux, one of the central questions that we must face as liberal democratic communities concerns how to resolve the apparent tensions between certain cultural practices – arranged marriage, patriarchal customary law and so on – and our commitment to gender equality.<sup>6</sup> She worries that a too-strict adherence to liberal principles – she points to Susan Okin’s work as an example – will lead us astray.<sup>7</sup> We should of course be concerned to uphold what she terms the ‘moral minimum’, that is, we cannot accept practices that result in serious physical harm, nor can we condone practices that can only be sustained under conditions of outright coercion (Deveaux, 2007, p. 8). But, says Deveaux, it is a mistake to resolve these tensions – between liberal principles and cultural traditions that appear to limit women’s autonomy – unquestioningly in favour of liberal principles. In particular, attempts to excise unilaterally apparently illiberal cultural traditions, or declare them invalid, may serve to make members of minority groups close ranks (*ibid.*, p. 33). Cultural and religious groups who feel that their central values and norms are at risk of erosion as a result of interaction with external forces may turn inwards and attempt to enforce their distinctive – and often illiberal – norms and values more rigorously and more forcefully.<sup>8</sup> The inevitable consequence here is the privileging of those with power, who are in the position to coerce vulnerable members into sustaining cultural practices that they might otherwise reject or modify. In the same way that the valorization of social capital masks the power relations that enable some portions of the population to define the central norms and values that underpin it, the attempt to invalidate cultural practices without input from those who practice them can strengthen power relations to the detriment of the most vulnerable (Arneil, 2006, p. 33).<sup>9</sup>

The *desire* for cultural and normative unity in the first place stems from two sources. One standard reason given for advocating some sort of bond among citizens is that this bond – whether it is described in terms of unity, or solidarity, or some other concept – helps to motivate our willingness to carry out obligations towards others. But, says Lu, we can find this motivation in a kind of solidarity that does *not* rely on cultural unity – rather, she says, cosmopolitan political theory offers us an alternative, in which we focus on a kind of solidarity that we develop ‘with a multiplicity of others’ (Lu, 2006, p. 98). She continues, ‘from this plurality we derive various sources of obligation and loyalty ... To those who want to assert the moral primacy of an unproblematic allegiance to a single community, such as one’s country, the cosmopolitan identity must be disconcerting, for multiple roots translate into divided loyalties’ (*ibid.*). Lu relies on this conception of cosmopolitan solidarity to condemn the ‘acceptance of passive injustice’ masquerading as tolerance of

different moral systems (ibid, p. 105). We need, she says, some basis on which to recognize our common humanity, and therefore to act to prevent acts of cruelty and injustice across borders. In so doing, we must, as Deveaux writes, recognize the existence of ‘plural standards of moral conduct in multicultural societies’ and, presumably, across societies (Deveaux, 2007, p. 48).

A second reason to favour unity stems from the belief that political communities – especially democratic ones – are functional only insofar as their members share some values and norms in common, and this is Putnam’s central claim. As both Arneil and Deveaux observe, there is the danger that a too-strong emphasis on unity will (further) marginalize vulnerable minorities, and therefore secure their ongoing subjugation. That said, in her critique of social capital theory – as a view that appears willing to sacrifice justice in the interest of (an oppressive) cultural unity – Arneil does not fully engage with this claim, namely, that some sort of shared norms and values are indeed necessary to sustain specifically democratic communities over time.<sup>10</sup> Arneil notes, and I think this is right, that there is much to celebrate with respect to the changing nature of civil society participation. We ought, as she says, to celebrate ‘new forms of activity’ – advocacy, for example, and civil rights work – that reveal, as I’ll describe below, a new sense of empowerment and agency among vulnerable minority groups. There are positive consequences as a result of these changing forms of participation including, for example, ‘a population of independent women who are choosing to get involved more directly in business and politics’, as well as the genuine inclusion of historically subordinated groups in ‘the larger American community’ (Arneil, 2006, p. 91). In listing the positive consequences of the changing forms of participation, however, Arneil does not confront directly Putnam’s anxiety about the decline in social capital over time. There are some ‘real costs in a society that lacks trust’, says Arneil, but we are not treated to an account of what these costs are (ibid, p. 208).<sup>11</sup> She concedes, that trust is the ‘linchpin’ of a political community: trust acts by ‘facilitating social cooperation between individuals and creating civic unity in American society ... in short, it is the “lubricant” in communities’ (ibid, p. 207). Yet, whether Arneil agrees (with Putnam, and other democratic theorists) that the democratically provided goods we have come to expect are, indeed, at risk under conditions of declining trust is not clear.<sup>12</sup>

If trust is the lubricant, we are certainly right to be worried when trust is not present among members of a political community. But, we must nevertheless be attuned to when *distrust* is well placed: as both Deveaux and Arneil observe, distrust emerges under conditions of political exclusion and duplicity. Deveaux observes the extensive distrust between Aboriginals and the Canadian government: the recent failures to come to agreements stem from ‘a deep



and well-founded mistrust on the part of Native peoples of the Canadian state and any agreement they might propose' (Deveaux, 2007, p. 129). Relations of trust *among* Aboriginal groups are additionally strained, she argues, because traditional Aboriginal organizations have been male-dominated; Aboriginal women display deep distrust towards those who allegedly represent them.<sup>13</sup> In recent constitutional negotiations in Canada, Deveaux observes, 'the lack of deliberate and systematic inclusion of Native women and their organizations ... exacerbated the loss of political trust felt by women on this question' (ibid, p. 138). This lack of trust is certainly a problem – given trust's importance in facilitating political negotiations, and in providing democratic goods more generally – but, says Arneil, we shouldn't lament its absence uncritically. When distrust is *well placed*, she argues, we must focus on ameliorating the conditions that have generated this distrust, rather than on unthinkingly trying to enforce allegedly shared norms and values (Arneil, 2006, pp. 141–143).<sup>14</sup> Under conditions of well-placed distrust – the conditions, she argues, in which we now find ourselves – 'the central question is not so much how we increase connectedness in order to build trust, but, rather, how we overcome a sense of betrayal and create trust in order to build healthy and connected societies' (ibid, p. 128).

## Empowerment and Democratic Legitimacy

Although Arneil is certainly correct that it is a mistake to sacrifice justice for the sake of achieving a false cultural unity ('the question at stake, particularly for these historically marginalized groups, is not just whether we can build a community and social capital, but rather, whether we can build a *just* community and *just* social capital'<sup>15</sup>), it may equally be worth considering whether there is a balance to be struck between securing the cultural unity that is essential to running a smooth democracy and the principles of justice to which we are committed.

In Deveaux's view, for example, it may be better – in multicultural communities – to think of prioritizing democratic principles over liberal principles, in some instances. Legitimacy in a democratic community, Deveaux argues, depends in the main on the 'procedures of political deliberation' (Deveaux, 2007, p. 217). Deveaux rejects accounts of deliberative democracy that emphasize discovering shared values – instead, 'we should adopt a model of democratic deliberation that engages participants' strategic interests and needs' (ibid, p. 96).<sup>16</sup> Deliberations must therefore be regulated by three principles, in order for it to produce legitimate decisions. First, deliberative procedures must ensure 'non-domination', that is, participants must be prevented 'from coercing other participants in a dialogue situation';

second, deliberation must be inclusive, that is, it must ‘require substantive opportunities for participation and influence in political deliberation and decision’; and third, the emergent decisions must be revisable, that is, ‘decisions and compromises, once reached, may be revisited at a later point when warranted’ (ibid, pp. 114–116).

Democratic solutions, she argues, ‘are not necessarily liberal in content in the sense of privileging liberal norms of personal autonomy and individual rights’ (ibid, p. 22). More controversially, she argues, ‘deliberation and negotiation ... properly understood ... are incompatible with a normative commitment to liberal universalism of the sort employed by mainstream liberal approaches’ (ibid, p. 95). Instead, we have to be aware that in some instances what emerges is ‘an imperfect [i.e., not perfectly liberal] but viable compromise, one that can and probably should be renegotiated in the future, as social needs, interests, and political commitments evolve’ (ibid, p. 211). Although readers are treated to an elegant account of three case studies in which democratic principles are properly prioritized over liberal principles, those seeking a precise account of *when* we should be prepared to engage in this sacrifice will remain unsatisfied. Nevertheless, so long as the agency of participants in deliberative procedures is adequately protected, the legitimacy of the outcome is secured.

All three of the authors are therefore concerned with the question of including vulnerable minorities in decision-making procedures. They differ, however, with respect to the best way to secure this inclusion: while Lu emphasizes the *protection* of vulnerable groups, Arneil and Deveaux emphasize their *empowerment* (protection and empowerment are not mutually exclusive, of course).

Lu’s concern with the global realm as it is currently constructed, in which many citizens remain victims of grave injustices at the hands of their own governments, motivates a priority for protection. For Lu, it is the legitimacy of a political state – a legitimacy that derives from a sovereign state’s capacity to protect the conditions under which we exercise our agency – that grounds its right to non-intervention by other states. In arguing for this view, Lu positions herself against a large and powerful realist tradition that prioritizes the sovereignty of the nation-state above *all else*. Instead, she argues, we should understand sovereignty in terms of responsibility, rather than privacy – should a state abdicate the responsibility it has to protect the human rights of its citizens, it likewise abdicates its right to privacy, that is, its right to non-intervention. In this sense, we should understand the sanctity of borders to be robust only insofar as a state adequately cares for the rights of its citizens: ‘once the community has failed to protect the human rights or humanitarian interest of some of its members’, Lu writes, the demand that its ‘autonomy’ or ‘integrity’ be respected is no longer





a 'morally compelling consideration' for those who are considering intervention (Lu, 2006, p. 126). Political sovereignty is, therefore, 'conditional' on a state's capacity and willingness to protect human rights (Lu, 2006, p. 123).<sup>17</sup>

Rather than emphasize protection, Arneil and Deveaux elaborate the ways in which vulnerable members of communities can be, or have been, empowered even in apparently constraining political environments (Arneil, 2007, p. 36; Deveaux, 2006, p. 126). In her consideration of women's organizations that operate in the progressive era, and beyond, Arneil notes a change over time in emphasis from charity work towards attempts to secure empowerment and, consequently, political influence. Whereas Putnam worries that women's participation in advocacy groups is a sign of a less united and more fractious public – one in which social capital unsurprisingly declines – Arneil argues instead that 'the transformation in civic engagement, from service to advocacy politics, should be seen in a much more positive light' (Arneil, 2006, p. 64). Putnam is only able to declare that a decline in social capital is problematic (as well as an actual phenomenon) because he has failed to consider the relevance of new forms of political activity in which women are likely to participate: 'it may well be that women's civic participation has not declined so much as changed' (ibid, p. 91). Just as Deveaux attaches the legitimacy of political decisions to the secured agency of those who participate in making them, Arneil argues that the empowerment of vulnerable minorities is essential to securing a just – and therefore legitimate – democratic political environment more generally.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

All three of these books offer important insights into political theory and practice, at the domestic and global levels. All three writers take central concepts in liberal political theory – autonomy, inclusion, power, vulnerability and legitimacy – and problematize them via a consideration of questions of gender and culture. From Deveaux, we are warned of the dangers of too-strictly adhering to liberal norms and values as we try to confront the challenges posed to gender equality by traditional cultural practices. From Lu, we are warned of the dangers of failing to recognize the duties we have across borders, by claiming tolerance of alternative, illiberal, moral paradigms, even as it is clear that grave injustices are transpiring as we remain inactive. From Arneil, we learn that the emphasis on solidarity and unity that underpins social capital analysis negatively affects the status of women and cultural minorities, and that laments of the decline of social capital may well reveal an ongoing acceptance of gender inequality. Given their important contributions to

political theory, it will come as no surprise to readers that they competed for the 2008 C.B. Macpherson prize.

## Notes

- 1 Monique Deveaux's text ultimately won the prize, which was announced in Vancouver at the 2008 Canadian Political Science Association's annual conference.
- 2 The meaning of the term 'culture' is the subject of ongoing political theoretic debate. Here, I use the terms 'shared norms and values' and 'culture' synonymously.
- 3 Although Lu uses the term 'agency', she has in mind a concept that appears to be at least analogous to the strong conception of autonomy that Deveaux cautions against.
- 4 Arneil notes, of course, that both women and men's organizations either excluded ethnic and racial minorities or required them to assimilate.
- 5 Arneil observes that Putnam focuses in particular on 32 'national chapter-based organizations', most of which are gender segregated. He chooses these organizations for good reasons – 'they are large, national, chapter-based groups that exist over a long time, enabling him to track longitudinal change'. But, she says, 'it is exactly these criteria that limit a full understanding of women [and cultural minorities'] changing civic participation in the twentieth century' (ibid, pp. 42–43).
- 6 Deveaux presents three case studies in her text, which I don't have the space to examine here: the arranged vs forced marriage debate in Britain; the debate over reformation to customary law in South Africa; and the debates in Canada over whether Aboriginal peoples – in particular, Aboriginal women – would support the constitutional changes proposed in the 1992 Charlottetown Accord.
- 7 Deveaux has in mind, in particular: Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 8 This is a worry that is dealt with, in part, in Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Chapter 3. One standard example is the successful Amish bid, in the United States, to remove their children from public school at age 14 (children are required by law to be in school until age 16). The bid was made on the grounds that these two additional years of education make it more likely that the children will, eventually, leave the cultural community, and therefore will ensure the decline and eventual disappearance of the Amish as a religious group.
- 9 Arneil writes of the emerging concern, during the Progressive Era, with what constitutes the normal, and the intense pressure to 'normalize' faced by those who were designated as 'abnormal', that is, those who existed 'at the margins of the statistical chart as well as society.'
- 10 I discuss Deveaux's account of the possibility of women's sincere acceptance of gender inequality as a product of genuine deliberation below.
- 11 Unfortunately, space constraints prevent a more extensive discussion of the relationship between participation and trust, but one central aspect of Arneil's argument is that social capital theory mistakenly conflates membership and trust. They mistakenly focus on participation as a central indicator of democratic health, when they should focus on trust relations. Moreover, she cites evidence that people who are generally trusting join civil society organizations of various kinds, rather than the reverse. She writes, at p. 132: 'this is critical because it suggests that the focus should be on trust, rather than, as most social capital theorists have argued, participation.' See all of Chapter 5.
- 12 For accounts of the role that trust plays in providing the goods we have come to expect from democratic political communities see, for example: Russell J. Dalton *Democratic Challenges*,

Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Ronald Inglehart, 'Trust, Well-Being and Democracy', in M. Warren (ed.) *Democracy and Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

- 13 For a persuasive account of the relationship between trust and representatives, especially in the context of *distrust*, see Melissa Williams, *Voice, Trust and Memory: The Failings of Liberal Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 14 Arneil pays attention to the trust gap that is well known to exist between privileged and marginalized members of political communities. She pays special attention to relatively high levels of distrust among African Americans, in comparison to White Americans. Arneil observes, in my view rightly, that there are historical conditions in which it would have been, rather, a *bad* sign had the African American community trusted the American state.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 75, emphasis added.
- 16 Deveaux does not, ultimately, reject the role that shared norms can usefully play in facilitating successful deliberation, however. She suggests that, 'for the purpose of structuring a practical dialogue', we ought to begin by identifying the set of shared norms that, ideally, enjoy widespread acceptance (Deveaux, 2007, p. 210).
- 17 Lu deploys the concept of legitimacy to describe the conditions of intervention as well, but space constraints prevent a fuller discussion here. See Chapter 7.
- 18 It is worth noting, if only in a footnote, that Arneil emphasizes the ways in which vulnerable minorities have empowered themselves, whereas Deveaux emphasizes how 'we' can support vulnerable minorities' attempts to secure genuine agency.

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