

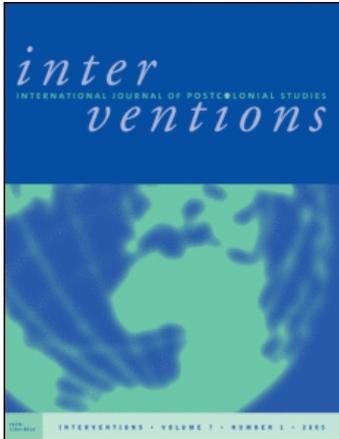
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GUADELOUPE IS OURS

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GADELOUPE IS OURS

The Prefigurative Politics of the Mass Strike in the French Antilles

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Caribbean

Guadeloupe

labor strikes

postcolonial-ism

social movements

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In the early months of 2009, the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe witnessed the largest wave of social protest in its history. A coalition of 48 different syndical, cultural, political, and civic organizations came together in order to protest against profiteering, exploitation and the ‘expensive life’ that characterizes life in the French Antilles. Armed with a list of 120 claims that spanned the terrain of disability rights, environmental policies, cultural nationalism, syndical freedom and increased wages, these Guadeloupean militants took to the streets, unified in their assertion that ‘Guadeloupe is ours, not theirs’. Through their movement they effectively asserted their right to shape the course of their social, economic and political futures – despite their ongoing colonial relationship with France. In this essay I explore the impact of this strike on the Guadeloupean political imagination and examine the glimpses it provides into the current political climate, and future political horizon, of the French Antilles.

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In the early months of 2009, the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe witnessed the largest wave of social protest in its history. For a period of forty four days the entire society was paralysed by a general strike: schools and universities were closed, all major commerce was suspended, banks shut down, government services were discontinued, restaurants were shuttered, hotel rooms emptied, public transportation came to a halt, barricades blocked major roadways, and petrol distribution was suspended throughout the entire island, forcing drivers to park their cars and become pedestrians for over a month and a half. In Guadeloupe (and the French Caribbean more generally) labour stoppages and lockouts are relatively common occurrences, and a favoured tool for the powerful labour unions in the region. However, the movement of 2009 was unique in that it was not simply a labour strike, but truly a society wide mass strike that impacted the general social fabric and political imagination of the French Antilles.

From January through March – a time usually characterized by carnival parades and the high season of tourism – the general strike took hold of the public imagination and transformed quotidian life. Rather than rushing off to school and work, Guadeloupeans found themselves at home, talking with their neighbours, and engaging in different social relationships and practices. With the large-scale supermarkets and department stores inaccessible, residents turned to local fishermen, small-scale farmers, impromptu fruit vendors, and their own ‘creole’ gardens to supplement their meals. They found themselves consuming more fruits and vegetables, realizing that they could live without the French imports they had grown accustomed to, and even without the clutter of fast-moving European cars that usually clog the island’s tiny roadways. When even propane gas distribution came to a halt, some residents turned to previous cooking practices, relighting their long-extinguished wood and charcoal stoves and ‘rediscovering’ traditional culinary practices.

Every aspect of this social revolution was documented in both traditional media outlets (newspapers, magazines, television and radio) and the emerging forms of ‘new media’ that have become increasingly important in Guadeloupe (social networking sites, blogs and other forms of interactive social technology). Negotiations with local employers and state bureaucrats were transmitted live on all local TV stations, call-in radio shows were dominated by commentary on the strike, and a new spate of blogs and websites flourished – many in direct support of the strike. The large amount of media coverage in turn fuelled massive demonstrations of popular support. During the strike, Guadeloupeans took to the streets in unprecedented numbers. First, 20,000, then 40,000, then 60,000, then up to 100,000 people (nearly a quarter of the island’s population) participated in mass marches in support of the movement. Observers repeatedly exclaimed that this was *du jamais vu* – something never before seen (or even imagined) – and many former nationalist activists

declared that they could now die in peace because they had finally witnessed ‘the awakening’ of the Guadeloupean people.

In this essay I explore the impact of this strike on the Guadeloupean political imagination and examine the glimpses it provides into the current political climate, and future political horizon, of the French Antilles. I argue that the strike generated a moment of political exploration through which new collective alternatives could be imagined, invoked and rehearsed. During this time Guadeloupeans experimented with alternative forms of community, authority and collectivity. The strike thus served as a prefigurative moment in which alternative economic, social and political configurations could be both imagined and experienced.

The notion of a prefigurative politics – of a politics that anticipates and rehearses that which it seeks to create – has been said to be one of the defining characteristics of our contemporary social movements (Graeber 2002; Polletta 2002; Juris 2008). However, the idea of political praxis – of the intrinsic relationship between thought and action – pre-dates contemporary activism, and is in fact an important element of the ‘old’ class-based politics, of which the mass strike is in many ways emblematic. As Rosa Luxemburg suggests, the mass strike constitutes a complex historical and political *process* – which takes shape in relationship to the social landscape in which it is embedded. It is thus not a universal political tool or strategy, but rather a culturally and historically specific moment of political action and exploration. Luxemburg describes the labour strike as ‘the phenomenal form’ of the proletarian struggle, and argues that it is ‘the living pulse-beat of the revolution and at the same time its most powerful driving wheel’ (Luxemburg and Scott 2008: 141). In other words, she sees the strike not merely as the expression of a collective will, but rather as a potential site for developing and prefiguring political alternatives. During a strike a new politics can materialize – both ideologically and phenomenologically.

This is not to say that labour strikes are inherent moments of revolutionary transformation. In fact, it is no longer certain whether the modernist concept of revolution remains a salient political category for our times (Scott 1995). However, it is important to recognize that labour strikes can generate a conceptual clearing by providing a break from the nexus of quotidian life. Strikes involve a suspension of work, a renegotiation of time and space, an engagement in new social relationships with co-workers and family, and a momentary rupture with the wage economy. As Walter Benjamin (1978) suggests, they represent moments of violent suspension, of the questioning of norms, and the assertion of collective and legal subjects.

In what follows I explore how the strike of 2009 served as a moment of political rupture in Guadeloupe. I argue that militants and their supporters were able to experiment with new forms of collectivity and authority that allowed them to reimagine the Guadeloupean population as a legible political

subject. I examine the strike as a particular historical and political process – embedded in both the global economic context of our times, as well as the particular postcolonial legacies of Guadeloupe. However, taking heed of the recent calls to reexamine the stories we tell about colonialism and its aftermaths (Wilder 2005; Mbembe 2001; Dubois 2004; Cooper 2005), I approach the strike as a postcolonial movement driven by neither the romance (Edmondson 1999) nor the tragedy (Scott 2004) of postcolonial nationalism. For, as we have seen, a focus on the tropes of colonial emancipation can inadvertently obscure non-normative moments of political negotiation, which are perhaps less romantic, less tragic, more pragmatic, but still imaginative, proleptic and uniquely utopian (Wilder 2009).

In the case of Guadeloupe, it is important to remember that even though its contemporary political actors are the inheritors of a previous era of anticolonial thought and struggle, they are also the product of a particular political project of decolonization through juridical integration. As such, they inhabit a privileged position from which to rethink the categories of nation, citizenship, sovereignty and authority – given that these concepts have never been successfully packaged into a (however tenuously) guaranteed bundle of rights and duties (c.f. Ong 2006; Sassen 2006). As a result, their political imagination is shaped by a cynical stance towards both the emancipatory narrative of independence (Scott 1999), as well as the high-modernist promise of economic development and social engineering emanating from the colonial state (Scott 1998). Decolonization in the French Caribbean has been characterized by political and ideological exceptionalism. It has been marked by unthinkable histories (Trouillot 1995), paradoxical citizenships (Dubois 2004; Wilder 2005) and untimely political imaginaries (Wilder 2009). In what follows, I explore the development of one such seemingly improbable project and attempt to parse out the political categories and collective possibilities it both invokes and conjures.

Pwofitasyon: A New mot d'ordre in the French Antilles

It is important to note that the strike of 2009 in Guadeloupe was carried out not by a single trade union, but by a broad coalition of forty eight different political, economic, cultural, and syndical organizations. This included a wide assortment of labour federations, political parties, former pro-independence militants and nationalist activists, as well as what could be described as Guadeloupe's civil society: environmental groups, consumer rights' associations, advocates for disability rights, fair housing proponents, and even several cultural associations – particularly those promoting local *gwo ka* music and dance. The forging of this coalition is a significant development in an area that has long been characterized by fractured

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movements and deep political rifts. In fact, many suggested that one of the biggest accomplishments of the 2009 movement was simply to be able to bring such a variety of actors together within a shared political agenda.

Initially, the movement centred on petrol prices, which in recent years had reached astronomical levels – purportedly higher than in all of Europe. However, as different organizations joined the effort, the agenda expanded to include a wide range of issues, including the rising cost of housing, public services, banking fees, public transportation, basic necessities (milk, eggs, bread, basic hygiene products, etc.) and the various aspects of what is often described as ‘the expensive life’ (*la vie chère*) in the French Antilles. It also tackled wider problems stemming from a lack of local governance and planning, such as the decline of the local fishing industry, the lack of support for local artistic and cultural ventures, failures in the educational system, the need for environmental planning, greater job opportunities, and professional training initiatives.¹ This wide range of claims was brought together under the banner of *pwofitasyon* – a creole concept that evokes both exploitation and profiteering – and eventually the collective itself became known as the *Lyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon* (LKP), which can be loosely translated as the Alliance against Profiteering.²

In many ways this alliance resembles the kind of ‘network politics’ that are said to typify contemporary social movements (particularly international anti-corporate globalization movements). This new form of political action, which came to national attention after the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle, is known for its ability to rally a wide range of political actors and agendas (agricultural workers, labour unions, environmentalists, etc.) against a common enemy (global corporate capitalism and its regulatory institutions) and for its decentralized forms of organization and consensus-based decision-making (Juris 2008; Graeber 2002). Many argue that this new form of network activism differs sharply from previous forms of labour politics. For example, Jeffrey Juris suggests that the ‘command-oriented logic’ of traditional labour parties and unions (with their vertical structures and focus on political consolidation) stands in sharp contrast to new forms of network-based politics focused around ‘the creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse organizations, collectives, and networks converge around a few common hallmarks, while preserving their autonomy and identity based specificity’ (Juris 2008: 14).

At first glance, the LKP coalition might seem like a clear example of this new form of coalition politics. In fact, there are numerous echoes of the anti-corporate globalization movement present in both the political content and organizational form of the LKP. However, it is important to note that although the LKP was able to assemble a wide diversity of political actors, it was still mostly dominated by labour organizations. As one militant explained, the labour unions served as the *moteur* of the organization:

1 The complete platform is available at www.lkp-gwa.org/revendications.htm and has also been published (symbolically enough) in the form of a little red book (see LKP 2009)

2 It is important to note that the LKP quickly inspired the development of similar movements throughout the French overseas departments. In Martinique activists came together as the Collectif du 5 fevrier (CSF), in Réunion activists launched a strike under the name COPSAR (Collectif des Organisations Syndicales, Politiques, et Associatives de la Réunion), and in Guyana activists forged a new collective named Mayouri Kont Lesplasyon (MKL) in direct allusion to the LKP. Each of these movements took shape in response to the particular social and political context in which they were embedded; they were in contact with each other, but did not strategize or negotiate collectively.

3 As Linden Lewis (2009) suggests, this kind of political alchemy is precisely what is needed for the revitalization of Caribbean labour movements in the current era of global capital.

4 It is interesting to note that food riots against *la vie chère* had exploded in Haiti just one year prior to the Guadeloupe movement.

providing both the driving force and the navigational steering for the movement. The development of the LKP should thus not be seen as a shift away from labour organizing, but rather as an expansion of the labour movement beyond the realm of shop floor politics.³ The LKP is culmination of a powerful, dynamic and wide-reaching labour movement that emerged in Guadeloupe (and the former French colonies more generally) in the wake of an embattled anticolonial movement.

In some ways the emergence of the LKP can be seen as a response to the effects of a larger ‘global economic crisis’ characterized by the decline of local economic markets, dependence on foreign imports, the increased cost of staple goods, stunted national economic development, unregulated banking practices, the deskilling of labour, and the depressed wages allocated to workers throughout the world.⁴ However, at the same time, the demands they formulated were also deeply rooted in the particular history of economic exploitation and racial inequality that characterizes the French Antilles. As Christine Chivallon (2009) notes, the political concept that emerged in Guadeloupe, *pwofitasyon*, semantically unites exploitation and profit, in a way that foregrounds the fundamental relationship between the search for wealth and the issue of its unfair allocation. There is no single term in English (or French) that can singlehandedly capture this creole concept, which is rooted in the deep colonial history of Caribbean societies.

It should be noted that as a French overseas department, Guadeloupe affords relatively high salaries and standards of living compared with other Caribbean societies. It has one of the highest per capita incomes in the region, and the minimum wage is the same as in France (almost \$1,200 per month when the strike began). However, these high salaries are accompanied by even higher prices on most consumer goods and services – ranging anywhere from 20 to 170 per cent more expensive than in mainland France. Merchants argue that high transportation costs, taxes and tariffs oblige them to charge more for imported goods. Local political activists contend that the high prices are also the product of a larger racial and economic history.

The fact is, the economy in Guadeloupe has long been controlled by a small white minority, commonly referred to as the *békés*, that dominates the majority of the import-export industry and most major wholesale and retail operations. These elites are seen as the direct descendants, in both biological and economic terms, of the area’s previous generations of plantation owners and slaveholders. It was partly the fear that independence from France would consolidate the *békés*’ economic dominance that led many in the region, including intellectuals like Aimé Césaire, to turn to the political project of French incorporation as a possible escape from the economic dominance of the planter class. In the face of an exploitative and racially self-segregating economic elite, the politicians of Césaire’s generation embraced the promises of political and economic equality represented by the French

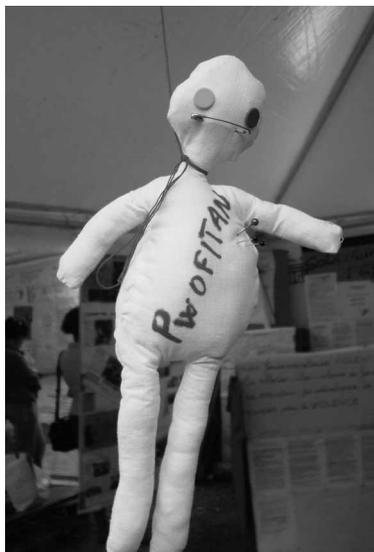


Figure 1 Effigy of a white *béké pwofitan* (photo by author)

Republic (Burton 1978; Constant 1998). As Justin Daniel suggests, ‘obtaining rights from the state was the path followed by these classes to take revenge on history and to struggle against the *békés* (white creole class) and their hegemony’ (2001: 64).

However, the project of political integration quickly proved disappointing in the Antilles. After Guadeloupe’s integration into the French Republic in 1946, the local economy collapsed, unemployment skyrocketed, residents left in massive numbers for mainland France in search of employment opportunities, and dependence on the French state deepened – while the economic dominance of the *béké* class only increased. These economic elites have proven to be surprisingly resilient, quickly adapting to global economic tides and changing economic patterns in the Caribbean. They were able to shift from a production-based plantation model to a consumption-driven, import, tourist, and service dominated economy. As a result, the *békés* continue to be synonymous with the ‘owning class’ – they have successfully morphed from planters into businessmen by continuing to control the shifting means of production in the French Antilles (Vogt 2005: 254). Meanwhile, the popular classes in Guadeloupe are faced with significant economic and social challenges: with an unemployment rate of 25 per cent, compared with France’s 8.1 per cent, and twice the French poverty rate (12.5 per cent versus 6.5 per cent), the contemporary economic landscape seems bleak, particularly for local youth (the unemployment rate is currently 55.7 per cent for those under 25).

Sé Tan Nou: Deciphering the Political Project of the LKP

The members of the LKP assert that they are united in their critique of the contemporary Guadeloupean social and economic landscape, but that they do not have a common political vision for the future. Although they offered a concept with which to describe their target of reform – *pwofitasyon* – they did not offer a parallel concept for the politic initiatives they sought to implement. Some of the organizations in the collective are known for their pro-independence ideology, but others do not share it; in fact, many of the members claim to have no political leanings at all, save for their opposition to high prices. However, as several prominent Antillean intellectuals have argued, the seemingly ‘prosaic’ search for greater purchasing power carries with it a broader ‘poetic’ gesture (Breleur et al. 2009) which has been interpreted as a desire for more local sovereignty and autonomy, if not necessarily outright independence. The LKP itself never issued a call for independence or sovereignty. However, during the course of the strike, a popular chant emerged as the quasi-official slogan of the movement:

*La Gwadeloup sé tan nou
 La Gwadeloup sé pa ta yo
 Yo pé ké fè sa yo vlé adan péyi
 an nou!*

Guadeloupe, it is ours
 Guadeloupe, it is not theirs
 They cannot do as they
 please in our country!⁵

5 I am following here Jean Bernabé’s (2009) proposed interperation of the creole term *sé* as ‘it is’ rather than simply ‘is’. He argues that this better represents Guadeloupean creole usage, and that it more properly captures the gesture of self-affirmation that the song represents.

The song – written by Jacky Richard, a local bank worker and LKP supporter, who said that the words had come to him in a dream – soon became the preferred political chant at rallies and demonstrations and was eventually recorded and released as a single by the groups Akyo and Vokum.⁶ During the strike, these lyrics seemed to echo out of every corner in Guadeloupe: they were shouted by thousands of demonstrators during mass rallies, sung by children on the playground, blasted out of car radios and open windows, and emblazoned upon thousands of T-shirts sold by informal vendors on the side of the road.

6 The song is widely available on the Internet, including at www.caribcreole1.com/news/gwadeloupe/1,1000,20-02-2009-la-gwadeloup-se-tan-nou.html.

The slogan’s ambiguity might explain its popularity, for it is unclear what exactly is being claimed or asserted in this moment of enunciation. Some have suggested that the phrase represents a simple claim to territorial ownership (Giraud 2009: 77), while others have argued that it constitutes a deeper form of self-affirmation (Bernabé 2009). The fact is that the song constitutes a complex semiotic vehicle, carrying with it multiple layers of information. The communicative power of the slogan lies partly in the indexical function of the terms ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Jakobson 1971; Silverstein 1976). As linguistic shifters, these terms both presuppose and call into being the very social categories that frame their usage (Silverstein 1976: 53). They crystallize the social relationships that they reference by simultaneously



Figure 2 Massive demonstration organized by the LKP in Pointe-a-Pitre (photo by Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

hailing and naturalizing the categories they invoke. The fact that protestors could march down the streets invoking an abstract ‘us’ and ‘them’ (and be broadly understood) presupposes a shared social understanding of who and what those categories represent. It was not the existence of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ that caused controversy, but rather the claims being made about the proper place of those groups in the Guadeloupean hierarchy. In other words, it was not simply a matter of who belonged in these categories, but of the broader implications of that belonging.

As has been suggested, the demands of the LKP do not easily fit into the traditional debates over cultural identity and political status in the French Antilles (Giraud 2009: 74). Even though many of its main leaders were known to be advocates of independence, they refused to embed the movement in a pro-independence agenda. In fact it was the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, who placed the strike within a discussion of greater political autonomy – an offer that was quickly embraced by local elected politicians, but not by the LKP. For the LKP leadership, the French government’s initiative offered no real avenues for social transformation. They argue that this project did not spring out of the needs and desires of the Guadeloupean people, but was instead part of the wider efforts of the French government to decentralize and dismantle its welfare state system. In their eyes, the presumptive move towards greater ‘local responsibility’ was a simple transfer of administrative duties, without the economic and political means to carry



Figure 3 Protestors confront French Gendarmes at a barricade in Petit-Bourg (photo by Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

out true self-determination. They argue that they are not interested in administering the current political system, but in radically transforming it.

The LKP movement thus indexes the exhaustion of current political models in Guadeloupe, where both political incorporation and political independence have lost their promise and have become what can be described as ‘futures past’ (Koselleck 1985; Scott 2004). This movement emerges out of a desire for new political projects and formulas. It does not represent a new political doctrine, but an attempt at political improvisation and the rehearsal of collective formulas that have yet to take on concrete form. As Raymond Gama, one of the spokespersons for the LKP, explains:

People like us are in the process of inventing new relationships ... we are in the process of saying for example that we can be in the UN without being French, and without necessarily having a Guadeloupean state. It’s a bit of a paradox, but we are trying to create a new concept of political organization. Maybe we will find it within the French collectivity – not being French while at the same time being in the French ensemble ... I don’t know What I do know is that we are creating something that has already been promised, but which no one can imagine except us. We feel it, we live it, but we don’t have the concepts with which to delimit it.

As Gama’s words suggest, this new political project is in the process of its own conceptualization; it is yet to be imagined, yet to be constructed, and exists only as a possibility. The 2009 strike was thus not the manifestation of this new political subject but its prefiguration. As Gama suggests, it is during this time that a new form of community is ‘lived’ and ‘felt’ even before it can be

articulated. The mass strike served as a moment of experimentation, through which activists were able to imagine, construct and inhabit (even if only temporarily) a new social and political collective. In fact, one Internet commentator suggested that the ambiguous *nou* invoked in the LKP song was nothing other than the manifestation of this collective spirit, the effervescence and fervour of the crowd marching and chanting in unison. It represents a figure that is both actual and imagined, emergent but unguaranteed. As Gama suggests, it has only been promised; it has been glimpsed, but never fully seen.

Conclusion

At a time when political leaders throughout the world were heralding the arrival of an epic economic crisis and an allegedly unforeseeable financial apocalypse, Guadeloupean activists dared to spark a massive political and economic upheaval that brazenly ignored global calls for economic and fiscal restraint. In the process, they shed new light, not only on the current economic landscape, but also on the deeper economic, racial and colonial legacies that have underpinned the global economic infrastructure of our age. In addition, they provided a glimpse, however fleeting, of an alternative political subject – a new Guadeloupean collective spirit that responded not to the political categories of revolutionary or nationalist political scripts, but to a uniquely pragmatic and strategically utopian quest for economic and political self-determination, unconstrained by the traditional constraints and boundaries of postcolonial politics in the Caribbean.

In the end, the strike of 2009 can generally be considered fruitful: LKP leaders reached an agreement with the government on 120 different points of reform, including a 200 euro monthly salary increase for minimum-wage workers, fixed prices on basic food items, reduced public transportation costs, rent control for public housing, and a review of public utility rates (among other gains). After forty four days of social paralysis the strike was lifted: schools, petrol stations and businesses reopened and Guadeloupeans slowly returned to their quotidian routines of life and work. However, it is impossible to say what the true outcome of the strike will be. At this point, negotiations with employers still continue, many of the concessions that were won have proved difficult to implement, demonstrators face significant legal charges, food prices have been lowered on some items but they have spiked on others, and promised development projects have yet to materialize. LKP leaders assert that the strike has been ‘suspended’ rather than completed, and in fact the new slogans on the T-shirts and banners in Guadeloupe do not proclaim victory, but offer instead yet another ambiguous slogan: ‘nothing will ever be like it was before’ (*ayen pé ké kon avan*). Many residents assert that the strike transformed the political and social fabric of their society. They argue that

after a month and a half of disengagement from the consumer economy and of re-engagement with their family and neighbours, they will never be the same. As David Graeber suggests, ‘It’s one thing to say, “Another world is possible”. It’s another to experience it, however momentarily’ (2002: 73).

Whether or not the political opening created by the LKP flourishes, its significance as a historical act is undeniable. As Gary Wilder (2009) has shown, even political alternatives that are foreclosed can still serve as important political legacies for the future. In fact, he suggests that herein lies the power of strategic utopianism: by acting as if the future was already here one can awaken imminent possibilities in the present (Wilder 2009: 105). Thus, rather than focusing on the revolutionary politics of a ‘future past’, the strike in Guadeloupe encourages us to explore the new futures of our present – those new political alternatives that become possible at the very moment in which they are prefigured.

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