




## The theories on inequality: class theory

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### ABSTRACT:

*This study aims to analyse class theory and its major expansions. In addition, the problems and dilemmas of class theory are discussed. Social inequality, either socially or economically, is one of the most common features of capitalist societies. Some people or some social groups have more money, more prestige, more privilege and more influence on the decision making process.*

*Two main strategies have been used for analysing and explaining inequalities. The first and most popular strategy is “class theory” which stresses ownership and control to explain class differentiation. It concentrates on the inequalities based mainly on the ownership or non-ownership of economic resources. Class theory was fathered by Karl Marx and especially developed by Marxist writers. Class analysts focus on identification of classes as the major social forces of society. There are two main schools of thought in class theory with their variations within each school: a) Marxist Class Theory, b) Weberian Class Theory*

*If the Marxist class analysis and Weberian class analysis are examined it will be seen that, two approaches are incompatible and it is impossible to synthesise them. Nevertheless, Hindess sees Weber’s view as the correction of and supplement to Marx’s ideas rather than an alternative. When the ideas of Marx and Weber are compared, it will be clearly seen that both Marx and Weber explain classes in relation to the economy. Nevertheless, while Marx defines classes in terms of the relations of production, Weber defines them in relation to the market.*

### KEY WORDS:

*Power, Class, Class Theory, Marxist Class Theory, Weberian Class Theory, Class Consciousness, Middle Classes.*

**ÖZ:**

***Eşitsizliğin Teorik Temelleri: Sınıf Teorisi***

*Bu çalışmanın temel amacı sınıf teorisini, temel açılımları ile birlikte ele alıp incelemektir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, uzun yıllar sınıf teorisi açısından sorun oluşturan orta sınıf olgusu ile sınıf teorisinin sosyal-psikolojik boyutunu oluşturan sınıf bilinci (the class consciousness) üzerinde de duruldu.*

*Çalışmada, toplumlarda var olan eşitsizlikler ile ilgili olarak bu güne değin ortaya konmuş düşüncelerin genel bir değerlendirilmesi yapıldı. Bu bağlamda, özellikle bu alandaki iki temel yaklaşımdan biri olan sınıf teorisi (öteki yaklaşım elit teorisidir) üzerinde yoğunlaşıldı. Marksist sınıf teorisi ve Weberci sınıf teorisi dikkatlice incelendiğinde, bunların birbirlerinden oldukça farklı ve sentezi olanaksız iki teori olduğu görülür. Bununla birlikte bazı düşünürler, Weberci düşünceyi Marks'a bir alternatif olarak değil de, Marksist sınıf teorisinin bir düzeltmesi ya da tamamlayıcısı olarak değerlendirirler. Her iki yaklaşım da sınıf olgusunu, ekonomi temeli üzerinde açıklamaya çalışır. Bununla birlikte Marksist yaklaşım sınıf teorisini üretim ilişkileri üzerine inşa ederken, Weberci yaklaşım pazar ilişkilerini temel alır.*

**ANAHTAR SÖZCÜKLER:**

*İktidar, Sınıf, Sınıf Teorisi, Marksist Sınıf Teorisi, Weberci Sınıf Teorisi, Orta Sınıflar, Sınıf Bilinci Elit, Elit Teorisi.*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

One of the major objectives of modern political scientists and political sociologists is to understand and to explain the socio-political structure of society. They are concerned with the power structure and power relations which are based on inequality to realise that aim. Two main strategies have been used for analysing and explaining that inequality (Arslan, 1999-b: 82-103). The first and most popular strategy is “class theory” which stresses ownership and control to explain class differentiation. It concentrates on the inequalities based mainly on the ownership or non-ownership of economic resources. The second strategy is elite theory which was historically

overshadowed by class theory. Elite theory concerns power and influence, and aims to analyse elite and non-elite (mass, public) differentiation.

The major theories in power structure research:

1. Class Theory
  - a. Marxist Class Theory
  - b. Weberian (Mainstream) Class Theory
2. Elite Theory
  - a. Pluralist Elite Theory
  - b. Elitist Elite Theory
  - c. Democratic Elitism
  - d. Demo-Elite Perspective

## **2. CLASS THEORY**

Class theory was fathered by Karl Marx and especially developed by Marxist writers. Class analysts focus on identification of classes as the major social forces of society. There are two main schools of thought in class theory with their variations within each school:

1. Marxist Class Theory
2. Weberian (Mainstream) Class Theory

Marxist theory analyses social classes as based on the relationship to the means of production and accept them as social actors and conflict groups. All societies have at least two classes that have common relationships to the means of production: the first one is the “ruling

class” which owns and controls the means of production. Briefly, classes are defined in terms of the relations of production in the Marxist approach and described as the major social force in history.

On the other hand, Weber defines classes as the identifiable group of individuals who share a common market situation. classes are defined in terms of groupings of related class situation. The idea of class situation differentiates Weber’s idea far more than the Marxists. In the Marxist tradition, classes are a phenomena of the organisation of production. However, class situations are a phenomena of the commercial life of a society in the Weberian sense.

If the Marxist class analysis and Weberian class analysis are examined carefully it will be clearly seen that, as Abercombie and Urry have said, these two approaches are incompatible and it is impossible to synthesise them (Arslan, 1999-a: 35). Nevertheless, Hindess (1987: 48) sees Weber’s view as the correction of and supplement to Marx’s ideas rather than an alternative. When the ideas of Marx and Weber are compared, it will be clearly seen that both Marx and Weber explain classes in relation to the economy. Nevertheless, while Marx defines classes in terms of the relations of production, Weber defines them in relation to the market.

### **3. MARXIST CLASS THEORY**

As Hinds said (1987: 21), class is defined in two ways in the Marxist tradition: firstly, as a category of similarly situated individuals, and secondly as a collective social actor-a cultural and political agency. In this sense, class can be conceptualised as a social reality that its members occupy a common position in the organisation of production. Its members have the awareness of a community of interests (class consciousness). Also, they have collective ties of solidarity to realise common purposes.

Marxist class analysis can be divided into two categories (Hindess, 1993: 14):

- a) Sociological Marxist Class analysis leading by Miliband.

b) Structuralist Marxist Class Analysis leading by Poulantzas

Miliband (1969) analyses the state in the capitalist society and concentrates his view on the state elites and managers. He examines social backgrounds, values, behaviour and other characteristics of the state bureaucracy. The position of the working class or other groups in the structure of capitalist society is determined by their interests. He criticises Poulantzas' "super-structuralism" that he tries to explain everything as a matter of structures. However, the relationship between state and the classes is much more complex than Poulantzas' "structural determinism".

As Hindess said (1987: 37), Miliband criticise Poulantzas' super-structuralism but nevertheless, he uses another structural account of class in his own analysis. Structuralism is an approach which analyses the actions of structures rather than purposeful actions of individuals. According to Claude Levi Strauss, structure is not a pattern of observable social relationships, but the basic reality that shapes the unobservable logic of a social system. While Strauss emphasises the structure of the human mind, Marxist structuralists stress the structure of social formation. They focus on political organisations, ideologies and cultural forms as "representing" classes and their interests.

Marx (1970, 1974) sees the economy as the basis of the whole superstructure of society. Economy determines not only the general characteristics of the whole society, but also the characteristics of the other social institutions and the relations between them. However, to Poulantzas, these relations may vary from one mode of production to another. Political and legal structure or ideology (forms of social consciousness) may have more importance and may play the dominant role in some circumstances in society.

Poulantzas resists Miliband's ideas. According to Poulantzas, Miliband had to clarify the function of the state within capitalist society in the first place, but was not done. In this sense,

Miliband becomes hostile to Marxism, because he is putting the human subjects at the central point of his analysis.

As Etzioni discussed (1993: 14) Marxist theory analyses social classes as based on the relationship to the means of production and accept them as social actors and conflict groups. All societies have at least two classes that have common relationships to the means of production: the first one is the “ruling class” which owns and controls the means of production. As Etzioni mentioned (1993: 14), according to Marx, the class which controls the means of material production also controls the means of mental production. Therefore, it rules not only economically but also by shaping and disseminating its ideology.

In feudal times land was the major means of production whereas, in capitalist societies the major means of production are machinery and financial resources. Thus, while the feudal nobility who hold and control the land form the ruling class on the feudal stage, the capitalists or the bourgeoisie who control the machinery and the financial resources create the ruling or exploiting class on the capitalist stage

The second one is the “exploited class” who do not own and control means of production. The serfs who were tied to the land were a major exploited class in feudal societies. On the other hand, the exploited class is the proletariat who has no land and virtually free to sell its labour in the capitalist society. There are also some other classes in society such as the small bourgeoisie, the lumpen-proletariat, the landlords and the peasantry. As Etzioni pointed out the growth of the new petty bourgeoisie” was perceived by Marx, but it was not examined by him sufficiently.

Classical Marxist class theory comes face to face with the problem of the “new middle class”. This class cannot be defined by using the classical Marxist perspective because the majority of its members are neither capitalist nor workers in the traditional sense. Analytical Marxists try to pass over this problem. According to an analytical Marxist McLennan, the idea of the relationship

to the means of production covers not only ownership but also organisational position or control (Etzioni, 1993: 17).

According to Marx, the state is a tool of the bourgeoisie and it protects capitalist class and its favours and interests. He sees democracy as bourgeois democracy and defines it a purely developed form of bourgeois rule. Lenin sees democracy as a form of dictatorship by a class, and the parliamentary democracy is democracy for the one class which is capitalist class and against to working class. This system would be defeated by a revolution, followed by a temporary period of dictatorship of the proletariat, the real democracy would be achieved with the communist society. This would bring the classless society and individual freedom through abolishing the “ruling class” and ending of the state.

As Etzioni touched upon (1993: 68-9), Marxists distinguish the “ruling class” and the “governing class” and they claim that the state apparatus best serves the interests of the ruling class not a governing class. The governing class execute the daily routine duties of administration and political process. Whereas the ruling class hold the decisive power that compel the political process to serve the rulers’ interests. The state serves the interest of the ruling class because the capitalists and those who are in command of the state apparatus have a common social background and mentality. In addition to this the capitalists exhibit an extremely powerful interest group structure and they can pressurise the state towards their common interests.

The Marxist approach can be summarised as follows:

1. Classes are defined in terms of relations of production,
2. They are described as the major social forces in history.
3. Class structure of capitalist society is related to two dynamics:
  - a) The class struggle
  - b) Capitalist economic dynamics that effect the classes and class relations.

4. Classes exist and have effects whether people recognise them or not. The classes have conflicting interests that are shaped by the economic dynamics of capitalism (Hindess, 1987:49-50).

#### 4. WEBERIAN (MAINSTREAM) CLASS THEORY

Weber defines classes as the identifiable group of individuals who share a common market situation (Giddens, 1974: 4). He defines the classes in terms of groupings of related class situation.. To Weber, these are the basic necessary conditions to talk about the class situation:

- a) “A large numbers of individuals have in common a specific causal factor influencing their chances in life, insofar as,
- b) This factor has to do only with the possession of economic goods and the interests involved in earning a living, and furthermore,
- c) In the conditions of the market in commodities or labour” (Hindess, 1987:37).

Class situation set out in terms of the market situation of the individuals and, it may be differentiated according to the sorts of property used to obtain returns in some market or, for those without property, according to the types of services offered for sale (ibid.: 37). Similar class situation may develop common patterns of life and common interests, but this is not necessary. For American Marxist sociologist Wright the social relations between classes develop the class structure that determines the class interests. In this sense, class formation can be defined by social relations within the classes (Hindess, ibid.: 50).

The idea of class situation differentiates Weber’s idea far more than the Marxists. In the Marxist tradition, classes are a phenomena of the organisation of production. However, class situations are a phenomena of the commercial life of a society in the Weberian sense. Nevertheless, this differentiation between the Marxist and Weberian view is for pre-capitalist societies. Both of



these traditions accept that capitalists and workers are two different classes in the capitalist era. Class is the main distinctive element to understand the differentiation in capitalist society.

Mainstream theory focuses on resources and it accepts the material resources as a major basis of class division (Etzioni, 1993: 14-17). Weber (1968) stresses the three different but interrelated aspects of social stratification:

- a) **Class:** Based on property and position in the market or social life chances. According to Weber, there are three major social classes;
  - i. Owners of property
  - ii. Those who own no-property but their market position is intensified by their skills and knowledge.
  - iii. Those who can sell only their labour
- b) **Status:** Based on consumption and life style. Status provides an effective claim to social honour or prestige on the basis of some quality or life style.
- c) **Party:** A party is any organised grouping concerned to influence the exercise of power (Hindess, 1987:39). It is based on the struggle of different groups for political power.

Some Weberian thinkers analyse class in terms of status, prestige, market and work situation, occupation, income and education. Dahrendorf is one of the mainstream sociologists. He explicitly criticises the Marxist class analysis and tries to develop his own alternative theory. He analyses classes as interest groups that arise from structural conditions and effect structural social changes through their actions. The structural conditions concern the distribution of authority within necessarily co-ordinated associations. Classes are dichotomous interest groups which are related to participation or non-participation in the exercise of authority (Hindess, 1987: 44).

Dahrendorf agrees with Marx's view of society as divided into classes that stand in conflict with each other. In addition to this view, he points out a structural conflict theory that class conflict is based not on the relationship to the means of production, but rather on the resource of authority and power. He sees two important class divisions in society. They are based firstly, on the exercise of state power, and secondly control within industry. Ownership and control have been differentiated in industrial society. Whereas ownership is spread amongst a large number of shareholders, control is monopolised by a few managers, and the managerial class becomes the dominant class in society.

Another Weberian sociologist, Bell, stresses skills and knowledge. In his view, capital was the central resource and the capitalist was dominant in industrial society. However, knowledge has become the major resource and the "knowledge class" occupies the dominant position in post-industrial society. Parkin is another Weberian class analyst. As Hindess (1987: 46) said, he is Weberian because, firstly he uses Weber's argument and tries to elaborate it. Secondly, he analyses class differentiation in terms of distribution rather than production.

Parkin accepts classes as the socially significant collectivities and, stresses the inequalities which provide a potential for exclusionary or usurpatory forms of collective action (Hindess, 1987: 45). He puts Weber's concept of social closure at the centre of his analysis. He does not give any privilege to any type of inequality in society. The most powerful groups which are the privileged groups preserve their position by debarring those who are on a lower scale.

Parkin (1968) views classes as the basic political actors in a society, as Dahrendorf and Marxists did. Another contemporary sociologist Giddens uses Weberian tradition to develop the three major classes in the capitalist society. As Hindess said (ibid.: 49), Gubbay named Giddens as "neo-Weberian" although Giddens sees himself as being extremely sympathetic to Marxism.

To Giddens, the formation of social classes is directly related to the pattern of opportunities for social mobility in society. The opportunities and limitations on mobility are related with

property ownership, educational qualifications and professional skills. They develop the three basic classes in capitalist society:

1. **Upper class**; the class of the property owners
2. **Middle class**; the relatively heterogeneous class which exists on the basis of educational qualifications and professional skills.
3. **Working class**; A very large class of wage labourers.

To Hindess, Giddens' analysis is fairly theoretical whereas Golthorpe's is rather empirical. Goldthorpe gives great attention to social mobility in his study "Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain". Therefore, mobility effects not only the degree of "openness" of society but the prospects for political action to achieve greater openness. The more open society can be realised by the class struggle. The working class is the major social vehicle.

## 5. CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Class consciousness can be defined as "the awareness, amongst members of a social class, of common interests which are based on their own class situation and are in opposition to the interests of other classes" (Jary & Jary, 1991: 80-1). Class consciousness is seen as the socio-psychological part of class analysis by some sociologists. It is related to how people locate themselves and others in the stratification hierarchy. Some power structure researchers who stress the upper classes are usually interested in private schools, social clubs, retreats and policy group functions to understand and define class cohesion and consciousness (Domhoff, 1970: 17).

Class consciousness is usually measured by the self class identification or self-placement. Most of the researchers who conduct a study of class consciousness usually direct the same kind of questions to respondents to measure it: Whereas Schreiber and Nygreen (1970) use the question of "Do you ever think of yourself as being in one of these (middle or working) classes?". Rinehart and Okrahu (1974) direct the question "If you were to use one of these names (upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, working, lower) for your social class, which would you say you belong to it?" (Domhoff, 1980: 78).

Nevertheless, it has been seen through experience that, these kinds of techniques are insufficient to measure class consciousness. Susan Ostrander has argued that "class awareness may

take the form of a denial of the existence or reality of classes” (Domhoff, 1980: 80) because, self declared class awareness techniques use self placement of individuals within social stratum. Within this context, class may be seen as an ideological concept by the respondents and this may decrease the reliability and validity of the answers.

Therefore, to get more valid and more reliable results, in addition to these kinds of techniques, the view of life, the life styles and the class ties of the respondents can be searched to define class consciousness. From an orthodox Marxist perspective, it is impossible to talk about class without class consciousness. As Anderson did, some contemporary Marxists use the three components which are defined by C. Wright Mills (1956, 1963):

1. An awareness of one’s own class interest and identification
2. An understanding of the inherent conflict of interest with other classes.
3. A willingness to engage in political struggle to realise class interest (Domhoff, 1980: 81).

Class consciousness as described by the Marxists is considered to be class oriented political action directed toward fundamental change in the economic structure of capitalism. As Susan Ostrander stressed (Domhoff, 1980: 81), class consciousness develops under specific structural conditions that relate to the nature of capitalist production and conflicts between capitalists and workers.

Ostrander sees the recognition of class differences as a recognition of class conflict that requires taking political action to defend ones own collective interests. In this sense, she accepts the Marxist perspective as being more empirical and adequate than the non-Marxist because non-Marxists focus on more subjective terms such as awareness, understanding and willingness (Domhoff, 1980: 84).

Ostrander focuses on class related behaviour and values to interpret class consciousness. She sees meaning and behaviour, awareness and practice, thought and action, subjective and objective as being inseparable for understanding and explaining class consciousness. Class consciousness directs the people to behave in their everyday life in class related ways. In addition to the Marxist approach, she uses symbolic interactionism (George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer’s ideas) and phenomenology (Alfred Schutz’ views) to generate her own view. She tries to synthesise Marxist and non-Marxist approaches on class consciousness using symbolic

interactionism and phenomenology. To her, “meaning is action, in the broad sense of behaviour or conduct. They are not two sides of a coin, but rather one and the same” (Domhoff, 1980: 92).

She aims to understand and bridge both objective behaviour and subjective meaning by using symbolic interactionism. Class consciousness can be understood by examining class related behaviour and daily life activities. People act in class-defined and related ways . Furthermore, the theory should be carried out from the practice of everyday life. In this sense, class consciousness must be identified in terms of everyday life rather than awareness of class position in the social hierarchy or potential for revolutionary action.

## **6. MIDDLE CLASSES**

The traditional middle classes or “petty bourgeoisie” have been examined by both Marxists and Weberians. Traditional middle classes comprise small property owners, independent artisans and professionals. They usually subsist by the sale of goods or services, but nevertheless, they are not either employees or employers of the others.

The major problem for class analysts occurs with “the new middle classes”. It is difficult to put them into one category. They are neither capitalist nor ordinary paid-labourers, but they play a very important role in capitalist production. This class includes academics, civil servants, professional and managerial employees and other white collar workers.

### **6.1 THE MIDDLE CLASSES IN THE MARXIST APPROACH**

As discussed in before, Marx describes the social classes of capitalist society as the capitalists who are the owners of means of production and the proletariat who are the non-possessors, by using the relations of production. Some neo-Marxists accept the new middle classes as a part of the proletariat by using this idea, but this result is seen as insufficient by some Marxists.

Marxists do not have any problem in explaining the old middle classes which are the petty bourgeoisie. Marx describes the petty bourgeoisie's relations of production as "petty production". The petty bourgeoisie resemble the capitalists because they are the owners of means of production. Nevertheless, they are different from capitalists because they are dependent on their own labour rather than exploiting the labour of others. Classical Marxist analysts come face to face with two major difficulties relating to the new middle class: Firstly they have a problem with the definition of the new middle class, and secondly its location within the class structure is not clear enough.

Marx distinguishes two categories of labour in terms of productivity:

1. Productive labour; those who produces value,
2. Unproductive labour; those who do not produce value.

Surplus value is generated by productive labourers who are members of the working class. By departing from this point, it can be said that those who do not produce value cannot be members of the working class. Nevertheless, this disparity is not sufficient adequate in analysing advanced industrial societies because, it is difficult to locate the labourers who work in service sectors.

Poulantzas analyses classes in respect to economic, political and ideological characteristics. He identifies the new middle classes as those who produce surplus value for capitalists from the other employees. In addition to that, the managers and technical specialists may be productive from the point of view of capital. From this perspective, he describes the new middle class as those who execute political or ideological tasks on behalf of capital (Hindess, 1987: 56).

As Hindess mentioned (1987: 62), for Poulantzas, supervisors and managers exercise the power on behalf of the capitalist. They reproduce political relations between the capitalist classes and the working classes. They are the new form of the petty bourgeoisie. Both the traditional form and the new form of the petty bourgeoisie create a single class. The other Marxist social scientist Wright uses two major bases which are exploitation and possession to identify and locate the working class. In this sense, he sees the new class as the unexploited and on the side of owners in the capitalist relations of production.

## 6.2. THE MIDDLE CLASSES IN THE WEBERIAN APPROACH

The increasing division of labour and specialisation in industrial society created a huge number of new occupations. For this reason, it became too difficult to locate people into classes within the class structure of a modern capitalist society and to draw the relative lines between the classes. Another problem is how many lines are needed to distinguish the classes in society. As mentioned before, whereas Parkin describes two classes, Giddens identifies three classes and Goldthorpe uses seven classes.

Non-Marxists try to solve this kind of puzzle in two ways. Firstly, they use both market and class situation. According to Weberians, everybody has a market situation and a class position in society. Secondly, they use the term “service class”.

Lockwood uses the term life chances which are the functions of the market to modify Weber’s class situation and to distinguish white collar occupations. Income and career opportunities affect life chances. The opportunities for career mobility differentiate the lower white collar occupant from the working class. He divides the white collar occupations into two categories in terms of opportunities for autonomy and independent decision making on the one hand, and position in a hierarchy of control on the other. These categories comprise those who exercise independent decision making and control, and those who do not (Hindess, 1987: 69).

Some other Weberian researchers use Karl Renner’s term of “the service class”, to analyse the new-comers. Karl Renner who is a Marxist researcher defines the white collars as “the service class” because they are not capitalists but only working for the capitalists. He locates them in a place between the bourgeoisie and the working class. Also, Dahrendorf uses “the service class” in his analyses of the new middle classes. Nevertheless, he prefers to focus on the function of authority as different from Karl Renner’s idea. On the other side, Abernethy and Urry examine the service class in terms of control, planning and conceptualisation for capital. They locate this class on the more advanced level of the social hierarchy as Goldthorpe did.

## SUMMARY

There are two main schools of thought in class theory: Marxist class theory and Weberian class theory. Marxist theory analyses social classes as based on the relationship to the means of production and accept them as social actors and conflict groups. Class is defined in two ways in the Marxist tradition: firstly, as a category of similarly situated individuals, and secondly as a collective social actor-a cultural and political agency. Marxist theory analyses social classes as based on the relationship to the means of production and accept them as social actors and conflict groups. The members of each class have collective ties of solidarity to realise common purposes. All societies have at least two classes that have common relationships to the means of production: the first one is the “ruling class” which owns and controls the means of production. The second one is the “exploited class” who do not own and control means of production.

According to Marx, the state is a tool of the bourgeoisie and it protects capitalist class and it's favours and interests. He sees democracy as bourgeois democracy and defines it as a purely developed form of bourgeois rule. Marxists distinguish between the “ruling class” and the “governing class” and they claim that the state apparatus best serves the interests of the ruling class not a governing class. The governing class execute the daily routine duties of administration and political process. Whereas the ruling class hold the decisive power that compel the political process to serve the rulers' interests.

On the other hand, Weber defines classes as the identifiable group of individuals who share a common market situation. Classes are defined in terms of groupings of related class situation. Class situation is set out in terms of the market situation of individuals. Weber does not agree with the Marxist' idea of class struggle that “history is the history of the class struggles”. For Weber, of course the class struggle may be important in some circumstances, but nevertheless, there is no reason to accept the class struggle as the dynamo of history. Classes take place within the markets and the formation of market relations cannot be explained by the class struggle. Classes provide only one possible basis of collective action amongst others. Whereas Marx aims at generating a



general theory of the history and particular theory of the dynamics of capitalist society, Weber's approach seems more classificatory.

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