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Xenophobia towards asylum seekers: A survey of social theories

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a global rise in fear and hostility towards asylum seekers. Xenophobia - or 'fear of the stranger' - has become a pressing issue in a range of disciplines. Several causal models have been proposed to explain this fear and the hostility it produces. However, disciplinary boundaries have limited productive dialogue between these approaches. This article draws connections between four of the main theories that have been advanced in the existing literature: (1) false belief accounts, (2) xenophobia as new racism, (3) sociobiological explanations and (4) xenophobia as an effect of capitalist globalisation. While this article cannot provide an exhaustive review of theories of xenophobia, it aims to present a useful comparative introduction to current research into the social aspects of xenophobia, particularly as these theories have been applied to asylum seekers. In bringing together divergent models, it also invites interdisciplinary engagement.

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Xenophobia towards Asylum Seekers: A Survey of Social Theories

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Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a global rise in fear and hostility towards asylum seekers. This has been documented at the level of political and media discourse (McKay et al. 2011; Klocker and Dunn 2003; Ogan et al. 2018; Pedersen and Hartley 2005; Briskman 2015), and frequently revealed in surveys of public opinion (Carson et al. 2016; Markus 2013; Crawley 2005). Across the Western world, liberal democracies have implemented punitive 'deterrence' policies (Peterie 2019a; Mainwaring and Silverman 2017; Robjant et al. 2009). At the same time there has been a parallel increase in hate crime (Levin and McDevitt 2002; Poynting and Mason 2007; Poynting and Noble 2004). Both phenomena have subject asylum seekers to grave physical and psychological harm.

While xenophobia is by no means a new phenomenon (Poynting and Mason 2007; Briskman 2015), this climate of antipathy towards asylum seekers has led to renewed scholarly interest in xenophobia and its causes. Xenophobia – or "fear of the stranger" (Ortona 2017: 46) – has emerged as an important issue in a range of disciplines, and consequently there are a variety of causal models that aim to explain it. At times these models have directly critiqued each other (Kivisto 2008; Ortona 2017). For the most part, however, researchers have adopted a theoretical approach native to their discipline, without engaging with alternative accounts. This article describes four influential theories of xenophobia – (1) false belief accounts, (2) xenophobia as new racism, (3) sociobiological explanations, and (4) xenophobia as an effect of capitalist globalisation – and attempts to draw some comparisons and contrasts between them. In addition, it highlights important points of agreement between seemingly opposing views. While this article can provide only a selective sample – and not an exhaustive review – of contemporary models of xenophobia, it hopefully offers a useful introduction to the literature on the social aspects of xenophobia, particularly as these theories have been applied to asylum seekers.

False Beliefs

Many sociologists and social scientists studying xenophobic attitudes towards asylum seekers have examined how community fears and hostilities are produced at the level of political discourse. A key focus of this work has been the effects of misinformation. Scholars have shown that government and media discourses propagate erroneous information regarding the threat posed by asylum seekers and the legitimacy of their claims (Pedersen et al. 2006; Klocker and Dunn 2003). Government policies have also been shown to have a communicative function that influences community attitudes (Mainwaring and Silverman 2017; Pugliese 2008; Poynting and Mason 2007). This work contends that politically and discursively manufactured fears could be reduced by the dissemination of corrective information. As Pedersen et al. (2006: 105) posit, "if false beliefs about asylum seekers can be identified and corrected this may have a significant effect on changing these attitudes in a positive direction" (see also Spinney and Nethery 2013: 188). Indeed, research has found that structured educational interventions to dispel false beliefs *can* be effective in reducing negative attitudes over time (Pedersen et al. 2011).

Research from Australia shows a strong correlation between false beliefs and negative attitudes towards asylum seekers. A study by Markus (2013: 40) for instance, documented strong negative sentiment against asylum seekers in Australia, as well as the prevalence of false beliefs concerning this group. The majority of respondents in his study believed that asylum seekers were coming to Australia as economic migrants in search of "a better life", rather than to escape situations of danger and persecution. Studies by Pedersen et al. (2005) and Pedersen et al. (2006) report similar findings. Participants in both studies held a suite of false beliefs regarding asylum seekers, and these beliefs were strongly correlated with negative attitudes.

In seeking to explain the prevalence of these beliefs, researchers have typically pointed to the existence of corresponding tropes in mainstream political discourse and media reporting. The aforementioned study by Pedersen et al. (2006: 120), for instance, matched participants' negative attitudes towards asylum seekers with the presence of false beliefs, before demonstrating that these false beliefs corresponded with "public comments made by our political leaders". When asked about their opinions of asylum seekers, participants in this study reproduced the same political tropes that Australian politicians utilise in their statements. In a similar vein, Klocker and Dunn (2003) documented a close relationship between political leaders' statements concerning asylum seekers and media reporting of these issues, showing

that media outlets reproduced government narratives which vilified asylum seekers. McKay et al. (2012) demonstrated a comparable relationship between media tropes and community attitudes, showing that participants' views reflected those presented in the mainstream media (see also Augoustinos and Quinn 2003). As Pedersen and Hartley (2017: 1) note,

> Because very few Australians have contact with asylum seekers, it is likely that much of the information that they receive and espouse comes from commentators and importantly, from politicians via the media. This information is often inaccurate and leads to what some researchers label 'false beliefs' — the acceptance of incorrect information as being true.

Put differently, this research suggests that political discourses shape media reporting, which may in turn influence community sentiment through the dissemination of misinformation (Klocker and Dunn, 2003; Klocker 2004).

Such a model of political and media effect is often implicit in broader studies of political and media discourse. Extensive work has been undertaken, for instance, regarding the false beliefs that underpin asylum seeker discourses around the Western world. This scholarship has highlighted a range of government and media 'lies', including the notions (a) that asylum seekers have broken the law by entering the country without prior authorisation, even though seeking asylum is legal under international law (McAdam and Chong 2014; Ogan et al. 2018; Burroughs 2015); (b) that asylum seekers are economic migrants not 'genuine' refugees in need of protection, even though most arrivals go on to receive refugee status (Burroughs 2015; Every and Augoustinos 2008; McHugh-Dillon 2015); and (c) that asylum seekers are dangerous individuals with terrorist affiliations, even though most forced migrants are themselves fleeing situations of violence and terror, and few asylum seekers have been convicted of terrorist offences (McKay et al. 2011; Klocker and Dunn 2003: 71; Green 2003; Ogan et al. 2018; Briskman, 2015; Pedersen and Hartley 2015: 13). In foregrounding and attempting to correct these false beliefs, scholars have sought to influence public sentiment and delegitimise the punitive policies that these claims justify.

Some researchers have extended this approach to show that government policies themselves have a communicative function. Most notably, they have argued that detaining asylum seekers in closed (often prison-like (Peterie 2018)) facilities sends a strong message that asylum seekers are dangerous criminals and would-be terrorists (Peterie 2019b). As Mainwaring and Silverman (2017: 22) write in the European context,

both the highly visible and subtler manifestations of detention imply the existence of a crisis of unregulated, undesirable migration; detention thus corroborates the populist impression that an out-of-control, unwanted, and potentially dangerous inflow of non-citizens is amassing at the gates while signalling that the state is working to identify and punish this population.

Put differently, the detained asylum seeker is transformed into a "spectacle to be witnessed and consumed" (Pugliese 2008: 210). Detention becomes *evidence* of (and not simply a response to) the danger posed by irregular migration, thus reinforcing erroneous views.

Significantly, while scholars in this tradition have at times suggested that "problematic government and media representations of asylum seekers are at the root of […] negative public perceptions" and hostilities (Klocker 2004: 13), some researchers complicate this 'propaganda model' (Herman and Chomsky 1988) by suggesting more complex causal relationships. Klocker (2004: 14) theorises a feedback loop, whereby "negative government and media representations of asylum seekers foster negative public perceptions and fears, which in turn provide justification, legitimation and electoral support for increasingly exclusive, harsh and deterrence-oriented asylum policies". Equally, Pedersen and Hartley (2015: 8) observe that "if people are prejudiced, they are more likely to believe negative reports about asylum seekers", suggesting that confirmation bias helps to explain false beliefs. This work has important connections with research on new racism.

(New) Racism

Research regarding representations of asylum seekers in political and media discourse has not only underlined the misleading character of these portrayals; it has also shown that asylum seekers are discursively constructed as cultural Others. As such, racism – or prejudice against members of other racial or ethnic groups – has been a key analytical lens in discussions of xenophobic attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Scholars, working in a range of contexts, have drawn attention to deeply-held national narratives that portray the country as homogenously Anglo-Celtic (Jackson 2018; Klocker 2004: 3; Papastergiadis 2004). From this perspective, asylum seekers with different skin colours have been interpreted as a threat to the national self. Writing in the European context, for instance, Linke and Smith (2009: 11) note that "blackness and criminality" have become

conflated, such that people of colour "are forced to inhabit the figure of the 'illegal alien', the enemy 'outsider', the 'welfare sponger', 'pimp', 'drug dealer' and the 'diseased body'". "In this panoptic theatre of race", they argue, "the figure of the black-terrorist-criminal is conjured on sight" (Linke and Smith 2009: 11).

However, much of the racism that underpins hostile asylum policies and discourses is disguised. Overt reference to race and skin colour have been replaced by 'dog-whistle' condemnations of 'cultural' (as distinct from biological) difference.

> There is cross-disciplinary agreement that blatant forms of prejudice, commonly referred to as 'old-fashioned racism,' have been recently supplanted with a more subtle and covert variety […] Increasing social taboos during the past 50 years against openly expressing racist sentiments have led to the development of discursive strategies that present negative views of out-groups as reasonable and justified while at the same time protecting the speaker from charges of racism and prejudice (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 124)

While 'new' racism inherits many characteristics from 'old-fashioned' racism, it is distinguished in the literature by at least three characteristics. First, new racist discourses avoid making reference to biology. Prejudice and negative sentiments are still expressed, but they are justified with respect to the Other's culture rather than their race or skin colour (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 133). Second, new racism involves appeals to what is portrayed as 'fact' (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 133). This strategy aims to portray negative attitudes as empirically justifiable judgments; race-related fears and hostilities are framed not as emotive opinions, but as evidence-backed truths (Every and Augoustinos 2007: 414). Finally, new racism is marked by the use of verbal disclaimers to explicitly deny that the judgments expressed are a product of prejudice (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 125). As van Dijk (1992: 87) observes, these disclaimers often take the form "I have nothing against blacks, but …". They aim to pre-emptively defend the speaker against allegations of racism. The international body of literature concerning new racism (Every and Augoustinos 2007: 412) shows that these rhetorical strategies function to rationalise race-related fears and hostilities, while allowing public figures – as well as the listeners who hear and appropriate these discourses – to avoid the social faux pas of overt ('old-fashioned') racism.

In understanding xenophobic attitudes towards asylum seekers through the framework of 'new racism', scholars have observed that physical markers of ethnicity are rarely evoked in

mainstream migration discourse. Instead, negative portrayals of asylum seekers centre around notions of cultural and religious difference. Asylum seekers are frequently presented as cultural Others (Said 2003) – that is, as people "against which one's own identity can be defined, either explicitly or implicitly; and […] against which one's social practices, conventions and customs, values and beliefs can be contrasted" (Poynting et al. 2004: 35).

In documenting the shift from biological to cultural characterisations of Otherness, scholars have often used the concept of 'Islamophobia' to describe the way that asylum seekers have been homogenised as uniformly Muslim, and to show how racial fears and hostilities have thus been projected onto the Islamic faith (Jackson 2018; Randell-Moon 2006; Maddox 2004: 2; Dunn et al. 2007: 574; Klocker 2004: 10-11; Poynting et al. 2004; Ogan et al. 2013; Poynting and Briskman 2018). Negative portrayals of Islam are prominent in Christian majority nations, as are broader claims of links between the Islamic faith and terrorism (Dunn et al. 2007; Jackson 2018; Nagel 2016). While these pejorative discourses typically take on "national particularities" (Jackson 2018: 141) – for example, Islam is framed as a threat to free expression in Denmark, to sexual freedom in the Netherlands, to tolerance in Switzerland and to gender equality in France (Jackson 2018: 138) – themes of danger and Otherness have been ubiquitous. Furthermore, asylum seekers are not only ascribed a monolithic (Islamic) religion, but 'Muslim' has become synonymous with 'Arab' (Poynting et al. 2014: 59), such that Islam has come to denote a "racial category" (Ogan et al. 2013: 42).

This structuring narrative of threat and Otherness is seen in the political and media discourses described earlier, and has thus been seen, by some, as part of the elite's dissemination of false beliefs and phobia. The discursive construction of Otherness is central to both 'false belief' approaches to xenophobia and new racism. A key point of difference between these models, however, is whether current discourse is held to be productive of xenophobia, or whether it is understood as a transformation and redirection of older fears and prejudices.

Sociobiology

Evolutionary approaches to xenophobia claim that moral dispositions – including tendencies towards xenophobia – are deeply rooted in the human psyche. Sociobiologists hold that 'prosocial' drives such as altruism and empathy, as well as seemingly 'antisocial' tendencies towards xenophobic fear and hostility, are behavioural traits that had survival value for early humans and were thus selected and passed on to future generations (Daly 2015).

As Haidt (2013, 2012) explains, the argument for this view begins with an understanding of the conditions in which human character evolved. Early *homo sapiens* lived in small, tight-knit groups, and while there was some intra-group competition, each individual's survival depended absolutely on that of their tribe (Haidt 2013: 293; Wilson 2002). The tribes that survived – and whose members therefore lived to pass on their genes – were those whose members manifested trust and cooperation towards fellow group members, and hostility towards outsiders (Haidt 2012: 151; Darwin 1998: 134). The result of this competitive environment is a human character that is both selfish and (within tribal constraints) capable of profound self-sacrifice.

> When I say that human nature is selfish, I mean that our minds contain a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our own interests, in competition with our peers. When I say that human nature is also groupish, I mean that our minds contain a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our group's interests, in competition with other groups. (Haidt 2012: 151).

From this perspective, contemporary xenophobia is an effect of the inherently tribal character of human psychology: that is, of a basic disposition towards 'groupishness' at the expense of 'outgroups' or members of other 'tribes' (Haidt 2012: 151).

Social scientists have at times argued that evolutionary understandings of xenophobia are at odds with empirical research regarding the socio-political dimensions of negative attitudes towards outgroups. Kivisto (2008: 3), for instance, rejects the sociobiological model on the basis that xenophobic attitudes differ across time, increasing during periods of crisis and when political and media discourses actively incite fear. This evidence suggests that xenophobia should "be viewed as socially constructed and not as an inevitable feature of the human condition". Ortona (2017: 39) makes a similar point, arguing that "were xenophobia a universal feature, we should expect to find it whenever one meets a stranger, as a basic imprinted trait. Empirical evidence suggests that this is *not* the case". These criticisms, however, misconstrue the evolutionary argument, positing a false dichotomy between the biological and the social. The sociobiological literature demonstrates, however, that latent psychological tendencies are only *activated* in some circumstances. While these scholars suggest that groupishness is innate and can be observed everywhere from the playground to international politics, social context therefore remains important. Different behavioural traits are said to emerge in response to different environmental circumstances, and the form in which a behavioural characteristic presents is shaped by social conditions.

Evolutionary perspectives have associated xenophobia with resource scarcity. In his emblematic work, Wilson (2004: 107) reflected on behaviours in the animal kingdom and argued that 'territorial' behaviour is typically associated with limited resources. More recently, scholars have suggested that prejudice against outgroups increases during periods of resource scarcity. Asylum seekers might thus face greater hostility during economic downturns, or from groups who perceive themselves to be comparatively disadvantaged (Sanchez-Mazas and Licata 2015; Crawley 2005: 16). As MacKenzie (2016: 32) explains,

> Humans think of their support systems as a zero-sum game – so if one person gains, another must lose out. Such perceptions were accurate during our evolutionary history as hunter-gatherers when the appearance of others on our patch meant fewer mastodons or mushrooms for us […] Modern capitalist economy is not a zero-sum game – if you add more workers, it grows. Regardless of this, our evolutionary hang-ups make it difficult to accept the economic sense in welcoming immigrants.

At times the sociobiological model thus adopts economic language. The groupish nature of humans is explained as an evolutionary strategy for the protection and maintenance of resources, particularly under conditions of scarcity.

In addition to stressing the role of material conditions in manifestations of xenophobia, sociobiological perspectives are broadly compatible with the aforementioned arguments regarding the role of misinformation and false beliefs in producing fear and hostility. Outgroup prejudice may be triggered by *perceptions* of scarcity, regardless of whether those perceptions are true (Sanchez-Mazas and Licata 2015: 805). In this context, discursive narratives that frame asylum seekers as (for example) 'economic migrants' take on added significance (Burroughs 2015; Every and Augoustinos 2008; McHugh-Dillon 2015). Discourses that frame asylum seekers as competitors for scarce resources may activate evolved triggers for outgroup hostility. Rather than portraying sociobiological approaches as guilty of a reductionist biological determinism, it is therefore important to see how this research can lend weight to sociological claims about the dangerous effects of xenophobic discourse. Finally, many contemporary sociobiologists recognise that group loyalties exist for many types of groups, not just kinship groups. The tribal response can be activated by socially constructed groups such as political parties, sports teams, religious communities and nation states (Haidt 2012: 292). As such, the *social* processes through which the 'self' and 'Other' are constituted remain in the foreground.

Capitalist Globalisation

A prominent political-economic analysis of the global resurgence of nationalism and xenophobia understands these developments as part of a broader trend towards unbridled capitalism. Xenophobic fear and hostility, on this view, is a function of structural inequalities and, more specifically, a result of deliberate political strategies to maintain public support for capitalism despite the harms that it inflicts. This theory thus begins with a nuanced critique of the global economy and the way it produces inequality and precarity.

As Badiou (2015) observes, contemporary humans live in an era of triumphant capitalism, which, since the 1980s, has progressively imposed a neoliberal logic of production and exchange on all corners of the globe. The construction of global economic structures to realise a world system of resource mining, manufacturing and trade has seen entire societies reorganised to facilitate wealth extraction; it has also brought about the weakening of states (Badiou 2015: 6; McGrew 2010). The relative power of states and the transnational corporate behemoths that rule the world economy has shifted, such that corporate interests largely direct state policy in all matters that affect profit. The post-war welfare state sought to tame the more corrosive excesses of capitalism: to guarantee a basic suite of services and citizen rights, to preserve a measure of union power, to break up monopolies, to limit moral hazard in the activities of financial institutions, and to address the environmental externalities of manufacturing. In the last three decades, however, these constraints – and even the very capacity of the state to *impose* limits on capital – have been dismantled, such that it is now nearly impossible to make the largest corporations accept even minimal tax obligations in the countries where they are nominally based (Shaxson 2011; Monbiot 2016). Capitalism's victory has also been won at the level of ideas: "It is the total eradication of the very idea of any other path" (Badiou 2015: 8). There is no effective opposition to capitalism; alternative visions of economic organisation are seen as forms of dangerous extremism and consigned to the fringes.

For theorists such as Badiou (2015) and Smith (2016), unfettered capitalism is realising a new brand of imperialism. When colonial powers divided up continents, they managed their territories through a metropolitan power installed in the dependent state. Rather than taking on the responsibility of proxy government, contemporary capitalism is, in some cases, best served by the *collapse* of states. Resource rich geographical zones are therefore transformed into 'anarchic zones' where there is no effective state power and access to resources is controlled by warlords and armed gangs. The sale of resources from these zones is rarely inhibited by the

manifest illegitimacy of the groups selling those assets. For example, in 2014 ISIL, despite designation as a terrorist organisation by the UN, were selling US$1 million per day of oil from captured Iraqi wells (Leigh 2014; Crane 2015). The priority has become the extraction of wealth, rather than the protection of human life.

From this vantage point, failed states – which are themselves the source of many asylum seekers – are the direct and non-accidental result of neo-colonial exploitation.

> The first thing is to recall that most refugees come from 'failed states', states where public authority is more or less inoperative, at least in large parts of the countries in question (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Congo, and so on). In all these instances, this disintegration of state power is not purely a local phenomenon but the result of international economics and politics; in some cases, such as in Libya and Iraq, it is even a direct outcome of Western intervention. It is clear that this rise of 'failed states' in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries is not an unintended misfortune; rather, it is one of the ways in which the great powers practise their economic colonialism (Zizek 2016).

The triumph of capitalism has thus, this reading suggests, produced profound inequality and instability at both the macro and micro levels. The richest one percent own 47 percent of the world's wealth, and the top ten percent possess 85 percent. By contrast, the poorest 50 percent of population own just one percent of global wealth (Shorrocks et al. 2018). From a capitalist perspective, there are over two billion people in the world who "count for nothing", because "they are neither consumers, nor a labour force" (Badiou 2015: 14). At the level of daily existence, feelings of fear and vulnerability are ubiquitous (Bauman 2016) – not only for those who 'count for nothing', but also for the masses of workers who fully understand their expendability within this system (Standing 2014).

From this political-economic perspective, the global economic order is largely culpable for the conflicts from which people seek asylum. At the same time, the neoliberal world order is responsible for the production of a population of workers and consumers who feel vulnerable, fearful and angry about their circumstances. The loss of job security and protections and the decline in labour's share of social wealth are economic facts. However – in encouraging workers to identify surplus labour from migration as the cause of this precarity, conservative politicians make asylum seekers into the target for these emotions. In this context, the xenophobic discourses described earlier can be seen as conscious political strategies. The

propagation of false beliefs regarding supposed 'economic migration' serves powerful political interests, protecting capitalist hegemony while (ironically) fuelling the rise of the very forms of reactionary politics that typically erode the rights of workers (Smith 2016: 155). The proper targets of workers' fears and anger are the governments and global corporations that facilitate exploitation, but the maintenance of capitalist power relies on the redirection of this hostility onto a scapegoat (Zizek 2016).

This model of xenophobia connects with those described earlier in that it provides an overarching explanatory narrative regarding *why* governments around the world perpetuate false beliefs, appeal to racial prejudice and push psychological 'buttons' to produce xenophobia. While the form that these strategies take is always conditioned by local political, cultural and economic factors (Poynting and Briskman 2018), this model argues that it is also essential to grasp the explanatory importance of global economic forces for understanding xenophobia.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed four of the main causal theories that seek to explain contemporary xenophobia – particularly as it effects asylum seekers. In doing so, it has made a case for the multifactorial character of xenophobia. While this article has highlighted some differences in how xenophobia has been theorised from different disciplinary perspectives, it has also demonstrated that these research programs do not have to be seen as competing or opposing models. In some areas they furnish mutually reinforcing arguments that help to illuminate the complexity of xenophobia.

This characterisation of xenophobia has implications for theory as it suggests opportunities for greater interdisciplinary engagement. It also raises important considerations for those seeking to combat xenophobia. On one hand, this review reinforces existing research regarding the effectiveness of localised anti-prejudice interventions (Pedersen et al. 2011). Alarmist discourses may function to validate (and provide a script to obfuscate) racist perspectives, or to activate underlying psychological predispositions towards xenophobia. As such, efforts to correct misinformation – even at the individual level – may have merit. Equally, given social psychology's consistent findings regarding the instinctive nature of xenophobia (Haidt 2012, 2013), interventions that speak to the individual's emotions and moral intuitions – for example, by facilitating humanising relationships between opposing parties – may do more to erode or

redefine group boundaries than purely informational campaigns. As Haidt (2013: 289) notes, "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second".

On the other hand, this article offers an important caveat to such arguments by highlighting structural explanations of xenophobia. From this perspective, local manifestations of xenophobia should be understood as symptoms of a much broader disease rather than a discrete malady. It may be tempting to focus exclusively on local factors such as the prevalence of specific false beliefs as such causal narratives appear to offer clear remedies, but to do so would be to oversimply a complex and multifactorial phenomenon. An adequate account of xenophobia needs to resist the reductionist tendency to mono-dimensional explanations. Xenophobia is always a local and a global phenomenon, a psychological and cultural phenomenon, and a problem that is simultaneously politically manufactured and constraining of political possibility.

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