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# Terrorists and High-Speed Surfers:

## Towards a Sociological Conception of Performative Identity

Hartmut Rosa

### **Abstract**

This essay explores the transformative effects of social evolution from pre- or early to late-modern societies on the temporality of the life-course and on the temporal patterns of identity. It takes the temporal fabric of all forms of identity as its starting point. The main claim it seeks to establish is that the 'classical' form of modern identity, i.e. the conception of a stable personal identity, is tied up with the generational pace of social change. However, due to the effects of social acceleration the rates of change and social innovation have crossed the threshold to an intra-generational pace of change. Because of the resulting instability in the patterns of association and the culturally relevant forms of knowledge and practice, the forms of identity and the temporalities of the life-course are forced to adapt. As a consequence, the modern conception of personal identities is about to be replaced by new forms of 'performative identity'. Four empirically observable types of such an identity are presented and discussed in the concluding section of this contribution.

### **Terroristen und High-Speed Surfer:**

#### **Auf dem Weg zu einer soziologischen Konzeption performativer Identität**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Auswirkungen des gesellschaftlichen Wandels von der Früh- über die Hoch- zur Spätmoderne auf die zeitliche Konstitution des Lebenslaufs, der Biographie und der personalen Identität. Er rekonstruiert zunächst die inhärent zeitliche Verfasstheit jeglicher Identität und versucht dann nachzuweisen, dass die ‚klassische‘ Form stabiler moderner Identität nur vor dem Hintergrund eines generationalen Tempos des sozialen Wandels plausibel und realisierbar ist. Weil jedoch als ein Effekt der sozialen Beschleunigung die Veränderungsrate in den Beziehungsmustern und Praxisformen inzwischen eine intra-generationale Geschwindigkeit erreicht haben, sind die spätmodernen Biographie- und Identitätsmuster zu einer Anpassung gezwungen. Diese Anpassung erfolgt in Form eines Übergangs von stabilen personalen zu neuartigen situativen oder ‚performativen‘ Identitäten. Im letzten Teil des Beitrags werden deshalb vier empirisch beobachtbare Typen solcher performativer Identität vorgestellt und diskutiert.

## 1. Introduction

The temporal patterns of our individual life – its rhythms and speeds, horizons and durations – are closely interwoven with the temporal patterns, rhythms and speeds of society. Time is intrinsically social – whether it is the time of our lives or the time of the social fabric. Therefore, changes in the temporal patterns of society are inevitably mirrored in the temporality of the life-course and of individual identities. In fact, time is one of the key elements in linking social micro- and macro-structures: The mediation between actions and structures, between institutional imperatives and individual orientations, is regulated by temporal patterns. Thus, time is the bridge between individual action and social structure. Since subjects generally perceive time as something that is simply and naturally given, they are most of the time unaware of its implicit social steering-effects.

In this essay I aim to explore the transformative effects of social evolution from pre- or early modern to late modern societies on the temporality of the life-course and on the temporal patterns of identity. The main claim I seek to establish is that the ‘classical’ form of modern identity, i.e. the conception of a stable personal identity, is tied up with a generational pace of social change. However, due to the effects of social acceleration (Rosa 2005/2012) the rates of change and social innovation have crossed the threshold to an intra-generational pace of change. Because of the resulting instability in the patterns of association and the culturally relevant forms of knowledge and practice, the patterns of identity and the temporalities of the life-course are forced to adapt. As a consequence, the modern conception of stable personal identities, based on the idea of a set of individualized parameters of identity such as profession, religion, family, political outlook etc., is no longer feasible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – it is about to be replaced by new forms of ‘performative identity’.

In order to lend some empirical credibility to this claim, I will first sketch out the ways in which identities are constituted by time, or by temporal perspectives (2.). In the third part, I will proceed to systematically reconstruct the ways in which the temporal patterns of modern society change. My main claim here is that modernity is inherently dynamic in that it is driven by an incessant process of social acceleration. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, the three dimensions of technological acceleration, of an acceleration of social change and of a speed-up in the pace of life, interlink in a way that progressively transforms the temporal patterns of society. In this process, I will argue, two critical thresholds are crossed when the pace of change exceeds: first, the pace of inter-generational exchange and, second, the pace of generational exchange (3.). The biographical effects of these critical crossings will be explored in the fourth part (4.) of this paper before I finally sketch out the four types, or patterns, of biographical identity which appear to be compatible with late-modern social temporality (5.). As we shall see, each of these types appears to be deeply problematic, such that it is hard to avoid the diagnosis of an impending temporal crisis in late-modernity.

## 2. Times of Life: Identity and the Three Dimensions of ‘Our Time’

What do we mean when, in reflecting on our life, we refer to ‘our’ time? Which time is ‘our’ time? In fact, there are three different dimensions of ‘our time’ which are reflected in three different meanings of the term. First, ‘our time’ is the *time of our everyday-lives*: ‘I have fifteen minutes before the shop closes, so don’t waste my

time' or 'don't steal my time, I have a long list of things to do today' are exemplary instances of this usage of 'our time'. It refers to the problem of scheduling, sequencing and 'timing' the activities of our work, or of family-life, or our free-time, on a day-to-day basis and solving the problems of synchronization and coordination. 'My time' thereby is in competition with the time-budgets of other people or organizations.

Secondly, however, we sometimes step back from our routine- and day-to-day activities and reflect upon our lives as a whole. 'I have seventy or eighty years to realize my dreams' we might say, or: 'I don't want to spend my time working in a factory, I want to do something else with my life!' Here 'our time' is not everyday-time, but *life-time*, so to speak. In this perspective, we reflect on the temporal ordering of our life-course as a whole. The question of what we want to do with our life here becomes synonymous to the question of *how we want to spend 'our' time*.

This latter question, however, we cannot answer in a purely solipsistic manner: What we (want to) do with our life-time depends, at least in part, on the contexts and possibilities, on the opportunities and limitations of 'our time' in the third sense: Every individual life has to respond to the requirement of the *historical epoch* it is situated in. 'In our time, you have to be fast and flexible', we might say for example, or 'in our time, education is a primary good'. Or more specific: 'in our time, it is not a good idea to become a monk, a warrior or a shoemaker'. With this we mean that at other historical times values, goods, practices or qualities different from those that are relevant today might have been predominant. The times of our lives thus are always and at least threefold in the sense of every-day time, life-time and historical time.

Now, what I want to claim is that the challenge and problem of identity lies precisely in the successful integration of these three perspectives in a biographical orientation: What we do in our everyday-life has to be meaningfully connected to what we want to be or what we want to do with our life, and both have to be negotiated with the needs, requirements and challenges of our 'historical time' or epoch (Alheit 1988, Rosa 2005, 30-39, 352-390). This integration is achieved predominantly in a narrative mode when people tell their life-stories and life-plans. What Heiner Keupp and others have aptly called 'Identitätsarbeit' (Höfer/Keupp 1997), i.e. the on-going process of re-constructing one's identity, to a large extent has to do with precisely this: With balancing the perspectives of what we do with those of who we were and will be, or want to be, and with what is required of us or recommended to us.

Generally, these three dimensions of 'our time' only come into the focus of attention when the integration turns problematic in one way or the other; for example in phases of biographical transition, when we need to balance our personal plans against the requirements of our age, or when we suddenly realize that there is a grave misfit between our conception of our life-time and the way we actually spend our every-day-life. If it is my vision that I will become a great pianist and a family father, while I actually spend my time in solitary confinement in front of a computer all year long at the age of forty, I have to rethink both: my life-time and my everyday-time.

Thus, individual identity is always structured in a temporal way; in a sense, identity *is* temporality. If we take it that 'personal identity' in its most general sense is the answer to the question 'who are you?', then we have to realize that this answer always has to include an (at least implicit) account of *who I was*, and *who I have become*, and therefore, in addition: of who I could have been or might have been. Furthermore, there is no coherent account of *who I am* without an (at least implicit) vi-

sion of who I will be or might be, and also: of whom I do *not* want to be (Straub 1998). In this way, identity necessarily contains a biographical and a historical past and future, with the challenge of identity being the permanent re-negotiation and re-integration of these temporal horizons and perspectives.

Given this inherently temporal and social nature of identity (Lauer 1981), changes in the (temporal) fabric of society almost inevitably effect all three temporal levels of identity. Whether or not the challenge of integration is met, therefore, depends to a considerable extent on the temporal patterns and horizons of society. In the remainder of this paper I want to sketch out the ways in which the acceleration of social change places considerable stress on the individual's capability to reconcile everyday-time-perspectives with life-perspectives and historical consciousness.

### 3. Times of Change: Social Acceleration and Cultural Transformation

In a number of recent publications (Rosa 2003, 2006, Rosa/Scheuerman 2009), I have tried to establish the point that modernity is best understood, first, if it is analysed as an on-going *process* of modernization, and second, if this process is interpreted as a progressive dynamization of the material, social, and spiritual fabric of society. This process I seek to capture with the term of *social acceleration*. Since social acceleration, which always refers to the relation between two points in time, is defined as a *quantitative increase per unit of time* (e.g: more miles per hour, more produced cars per year, more bits processed per second, more job-positions held or life-partners chosen in an average life-time, or more things done within a week), it can be used as a blanket term for the escalatory logic of modernity which figures most prominently in economic growth, temporal speed-up and in increasing rates of change or social innovation. In the following,<sup>1</sup> I want to briefly define more precisely this process of social acceleration and the three dimensions that can be differentiated within it. Following this, I will try to elucidate how the acceleration of social change causes a two-step cultural transformation that has serious and systematic consequences for the shape of the human life-course and each time re-models the patterns of individual identity and biography.

#### *Three dimensions of social acceleration*

In order to understand the process of social acceleration we need to analytically distinguish three different dimensions, or types, of phenomena since the experience of acceleration can be related to the speed of goal-directed processes (a), to the rate of social change (b), and to the sense of a growing scarcity of time (c).

##### a) Technological Acceleration

The first most obvious, and most easily measurable, form of acceleration is the speeding up of intentional, *goal-directed* processes of transport, communication, and production that can be defined as *technological acceleration*. Although it is not always easy to measure the average speed of these processes, acceleration in this realm is undeniable. In fact, the industrial revolution and the recent 'digital revolution' can be

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<sup>1</sup> For this section, I draw heavily on my article The Universal Underneath the Multiple (Rosa 2006), sections II and IV.

interpreted as straightforward 'dromocratic revolutions' in this sense. Thus, the speed of communication is said to have increased by  $10^7$ , the speed of personal transport by  $10^2$ , and the speed of data processing by  $10^6$  (Geißler 1999, 89). The effects of technological acceleration on social reality are certainly tremendous. For example, as Harvey (1990) and many others have pointed out repeatedly, our perception of space and time has been significantly transformed as space virtually appears to 'contract' and gradually loses its significance for orientation in the modern world.

#### b) Acceleration of Social Change

Whereas phenomena of the first category can be described as acceleration processes *within* society, the phenomena of this second category could be classified as accelerations *of* society itself. When novelists, scientists, and journalists since the eighteenth century have observed the dynamization of Western culture, society, or history, they were not so much concerned with the spectacular technological advancements as with the (often simultaneously) accelerated processes of social change that rendered social constellations and structures as well as patterns of action and orientation unstable and ephemeral. Hence, within modernity, the rates of change themselves are changing. Thus, attitudes and values as well as fashions and lifestyles, social relations and obligations as well as groups, classes, or milieus, social languages as well as forms of practice and habits tend to change at ever increasing rates.

However, empirically measuring (rates of) social change remains an unresolved challenge. There is little agreement in sociology as to what the relevant indicators of change are and when alterations or variations actually constitute a genuine or 'basic' social change.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, I want to suggest that sociology might avail itself of approaches developed in social philosophy as well as in systems-theory and define the acceleration of social change as an on-going *contraction of the present* (Lübbe 1998). Such a contraction is the consequence of the accelerating rates of cultural and social innovation. The measure is as simple as it is instructive: If we define the *past* as *that which no longer holds/is no longer valid* while the future denotes *that which does not yet hold/is not yet valid*, then the present is the time-span for which (to use an idea developed by Koselleck) the horizons of experience and expectation coincide. Only within these time-spans of relative stability can we draw on past experiences to orient our actions, and only within such periods is there some certainty of orientation, evaluation, and expectation. In other words, *social acceleration can be defined by an increase in the decay-rates of the reliability of experiences and expectations and by the contraction of the time-spans definable as the 'present.'* Now, conceptually, we can apply this measure of stability and change to social and cultural institutions and practices of all kinds: the present contracts in the political as well as the occupational, the technological as well as the aesthetic, the normative as well as the scientific or cognitive dimensions, i.e. in cultural as well as in structural respects.

But how could we verify this empirically? There seems to be fairly general agreement in the social sciences that the basic structures of society are those that organize the processes of production and reproduction, which, in western societies are formed by the family and the occupational system. There is no doubt that the corresponding

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2 Cf. Sztompka (1993). Peter Laslett (1988) distinguishes between 19 (!) different rates of internal social change (economic, political, cultural etc.).

institutions build the framework for the life-course regime (Kohli 1986). Therefore, we gain some measure of change if we pay attention to indicators suggesting that change in these two realms – family and work – has accelerated from an *inter-generational* pace in early modern society to a *generational* pace in ‘classical modernity’ to an *intra-generational* pace in late modernity. Thus, the ideal-type family structure in agrarian society tended to remain stable for centuries, with generational turnover leaving the basic structure intact. In ‘classical’ or ‘high’ modernity, by contrast, this structure was built to last for just a generation: it was organized around a couple and tended to disperse with its death. In late modernity, there is a growing tendency for family-cycles to last for less than an individual life-span: increasing rates of divorce and remarriage are the most obvious evidence for this. Similarly, in the world of work, in pre-modern societies the father’s occupation is inherited by the son – again, potentially over many generations. In ‘high’ modernity, occupational structures tended to change with generations: sons (and later daughters too) were free to choose their own profession, but they generally chose only once, i.e. for a lifetime. In late modernity, occupations are no longer meant to extend over the whole of a work-life; jobs change at a higher rate than generations. As Daniel Cohen puts it: “Whoever begins a career at Microsoft has not the slightest idea where it will end. Whoever started it at Ford or Renault could be well-nigh certain that it will finish in the same place” (quoted in Bauman 2000, 116), while Richard Sennett (1998, Chapter 1) observes that the average American worker with an academic education changes his job-position eleven times in a work-life of forty years.

Hence, to formulate the argument more generally, the stability of social institutions and practices can serve as a yardstick for the acceleration (or deceleration) of social change. In the work of authors like Peter Wagner (1994) and Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994), further theoretical as well as empirical support can be found for the thesis that institutional stability is generally on the decline in late modern societies.

### c) Acceleration of the Pace of Life and the shift from work-life to work-age balance

Interestingly, there is a third type of acceleration in modern societies that is neither logically nor causally entailed by the first two, but rather seems paradoxical with respect to technological acceleration. This third process is the ‘acceleration of the pace of life,’ which has been postulated again and again in the unfolding of modernity (e.g. Simmel 1971 or Levine 1998). It is the focus of much discussion about cultural acceleration and the alleged need for deceleration. The widespread sense that *we are running out of time* and that we have to *speed up our actions* in order to keep pace with the demands made upon us, along with increased feelings of *stress*, has been well documented for virtually all modern societies (cf. Robinson/Godbey 1999). While it is hard to see why, on the subjective side, we feel temporal stress *in spite of the abundance of time-resources* gained via technological acceleration, the speed-up of the pace of life can be objectively defined as an increase in the number of episodes of action or experience that we live through in a given unit of time, i.e. in an hour, a week, a year or a life-time. This increase is obtained by either speeding up individual actions themselves (as in *fast-food*, *speed-dating* or *power-naps*), or by reducing breaks and waiting-time between episodes of action, or finally via “multitasking”, i.e. completing several actions simultaneously (for empirical evidence, see Rosa 2005).

Most interestingly, when we ask how developments such as these impinge on the times of our life, we find that the perceived need to speed up our every-day-lives by getting more things done within a day, week, month or year (which itself is a consequence of the constant growth of our 'to-do-lists' (Gergen 2000, 75; Robinson/Godbey 1999, 305)) not only affects the temporality of our everyday-patterns, but just as much the perspective on our life-time. This is because it seems increasingly impossible for the average worker to keep the work-life-balance during his or her working-life, which for many simply mirrors an endless rat-race, people seem to seek compensation in a shift in their life-time perspective. Given that the average life-span increases and many people reach retirement-age in a state of full mental and physical sanity, they start to postpone the 'life-'part in the *work-life balance* to that period of their life. This shift from the synchronic *work-life-balance* to a new, diachronic 'work-age'-balance might explain the embittered protest with which political initiatives to raise the retirement-age are met in many countries.

#### *A Two-Step Cultural Transformation*

If we accept the idea that with the advent of modernity the speed of social change starts to increase continuously – even though, of course, empirically, social acceleration comes in waves and meets resistances and partial, temporary reversals – we are pressed towards the conclusion that this process of dynamization meets critical thresholds beyond which there appear qualitative shifts in the social space-time-regime as well as in the experience of history and society; and hence in the predominant forms of self-perception, identity and the life-course. Most importantly, as authors like Jan Assmann (1992) or Koselleck (1985) have shown, communicative social memory and the collectively shared awareness of past and present are limited to a period of about 80 to 100 years, since this denotes the time-span which the three (or maximally four) generations living together at any one point in history actually can oversee and communicate from their own experience. This implies that the divergence of the horizons of experience and expectation, so characteristic in Koselleck's account of modernity, and hence the actual experience of *a contraction of the present*, can only become a cultural reality and gain social relevance when significant processes of endogenous social change occur within the life-time of these three (or four) generations living together, i.e., when the speed of social change crosses the threshold from an inter-generational to a generational pace. In other words: Only when grandparents, drawing on their own experience of the past, expect the future of their children and grand-children to be significantly different from their own, the perception of a progressing history, and of a society in change, can actually take hold. On the other hand, when processes of fundamental social change occur so rapidly that the basic conditions appear to be unstable even within the life-time of a single generation (when social change, in other words, reaches the threshold of an *intra-generational* pace), the relationship between generations is obviously fundamentally altered once again (cf. Mannheim 1964) and the erosion of the stabilities and certainties of the life-world takes on a new character, once more transforming the experience of history and the patterns of identity. Hence, the prominence of postmodernist ideas in our time might well signify the crossing of such a threshold, beyond which the transmitted forms of narrative, linear and cumulative experiences of the world can no longer be sustained (Jameson 1998).



Now, as I have tried to point out in the last section, the idea of a progressive acceleration of social change in the process of modernization supposes precisely such an increase in the speed of social change, from an inter-generational pace in pre- and early modernity to, roughly, a generational pace in high- or 'classical modernity' and on to an intra-generational pace in our late-modern age of globalization. I have pointed out how such a claim could be empirically validated by referring to the decreasing stability and durability of ideal-type family- and occupational structures. Therefore, I restrict myself here to noting that on the level of normative ideals, this shift can also be observed: In pre-modern societies, individuals were expected to perpetuate the familial and occupational (as well as the religious and political) structures of their forbears, whereas a core-idea of 'classical modernity' is that every individual should found his or her own family, find his (and later on, her) defining job, a political and religious stance towards the world and so on. Thus, renewal, and not perpetuation, was a generational challenge, but – in its core as well as its peripheral dimensions such as hobbies and consumer-habits – this task of self-invention and choice was taken to be a once-and-for all challenge of adolescence: The possibility of conversions notwithstanding, the normative ideal of classical or 'high' modernity involved the stable adherence to a once defined and then gradually developed individual life-plan or life-project. Thus, whereas the life-course was individualized with respect to substantive decisions (job, family, religion, politics etc.), it was gradually re-standardized with respect to its temporal form (Kohli 1986). In late-modernity, by contrast, such an ideal is considered to be utterly out of touch with the requirements of a highly dynamic society: To strictly adhere to life-choices once made, or to a life-plan, appears to be not only utterly boring (who would want to stay with the same job (or partner) once and for all, or to stick to a life-long political conviction?!), but also dangerously inflexible and immobile in the age of dynamic turbo capitalism (Bauman 2000; Sennett 1998).

Now, it is a core-assumption of this essay that the progressive dynamization of social conditions leads to a twofold reversal in the cultural experience of time and history, which is closely connected to the generational and the intra-generational thresholds of social change identified above. Considering all we know about pre- and early modern societies, it is not implausible to assume that for them, historical time (despite the Christian expectation of an apocalyptic *end of all times*) appeared to be very much *static* in character: The horizons of experience (*what is known from the past*) and of expectation (*what is to be expected from the future*) extensively overlapped, the vast and often uncontrollable contingencies and the cyclic character of every-day life notwithstanding. Hence, historical time appeared to be like a 'container' for manifold *histories*, which oftentimes repeated themselves, such that history could be the teacher of life (*historia magistra vitae*, as Koselleck (1985) points out incessantly): One could learn from the past how to act in the future.

Quite to the contrary, in the rather short period between 1750 and 1830 termed 'saddle time' by Koselleck and the editors of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, a wholly new form of experiencing time and history emerges. For observers and commentators of culture, politics and society alike, the past and the future became notably *different*, expectations started to diverge from experience, and hence, history *started to move* as if it were, Koselleck notes, a 'singular subject': *History* as such, becomes almost as an independent force with an identifiable direction, and the great "judge" to

human actions. I do not want to cite all the historical testimonies Koselleck and his colleagues adduce for proving this shift. Rather, I want to repeat my point that such a break in the cultural experience of time, history and society is an almost ‘natural’, expectable consequence of the acceleration of social change from the inter-generational to the generational level: i.e. for the speed of endogenous social change crossing the first critical threshold of cultural perception. This threshold is crossed when basic conditions appear to change endogenously and regularly within less than 80 to 100 years. Beyond that threshold, actors are convinced that the future will be structurally different from the past, and that change is driven endogenously, i.e. not by contingently exogenous events such as war or drought. Thus, Koselleck’s main point is the identification of a historical “temporalization” of history and politics.<sup>3</sup> He leaves us in no doubt that this temporal shift was essentially connected to the perception of an acceleration of history and society themselves. Acceleration, he assures us, was the core-element of the new conception of society and history, and the idea of *progress* was a necessary and complementary element of this new cultural conception: it signalled the *direction* of social change.

However, what Koselleck, being a historian, could not and did not foresee, is the emergence of a second significant break in the modern perception of (historical) time towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even though this second break – just as monumental and essential as the first one – was heralded by various writers from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it only became the dominant mode of cultural experience, I would argue, after 1989 following the end of the Cold War and the digital revolution culminating in the *internet*. From then on, history is no longer perceived *to be moving*: even though, of course, there will be more wars and more failed and re-built states, and new coalitions and movements and so on: i.e. even though there is frantic change there appears to be no more *history in the singular*, a history with a direction, a *moving history*. History stopped to be an evolving process. This is what all the heralds of *the end of history*, of post-histoire, tell us from Gehlen to Fukuyama, from Baudrillard to Virilio. But it is also what innumerable testimonies from high as well as dominant pop-culture tell us, from Coupland to Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters or to Imre Kertész.<sup>4</sup> In the late-modern perception of time, history is *frantic* as well as *static* in its pace: It is once again opening up to give space to myriads of *histories* which do not amount to a progressing history, thus resembling the pre-modern state except for the fact that change and contingency (producing the episodic histories) are now endogenous.

This second fundamental transformation of the modern conception of time can be understood as a de-temporalization of history: Social, political and cultural events are

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3 However, Koselleck remains ambiguous as to the causes of this shift: He finds empirical evidence for social acceleration only in the period after the industrial revolution, i.e. considerably later. So he attributes the cultural transformation to the political crisis and the emerging political expectations of the time, leading to a rapid series of disruptive events. However, this explanation remains wholly unsatisfactory since the political ruptures themselves are explained precisely by the shift in the social conception of time and history, thus leaving the argument in an explanatory circle. The reason for this conundrum, in my view, lies in the fact that Koselleck only examines technological acceleration as an empirical dimension of change, whereas he neglects evidence from the other two dimensions identified in section two above. For my own account of the causes of social acceleration, see Rosa 2005, Part III (243-332).

4 Cf. Douglas Coupland’s celebrated novel *Generation X* (1991), Roger Waters’ Solo-Album *Amused to Death* (1992), or Imre Kertész noble-prize winning book *Fateless* (1992).

no longer interpreted as being links in a progressive chain, but rather as contingent episodes in a highly contingent universe. A random succession of events, fragmented episodes and contradictory developments (such as secularization and de-secularization, democratization and de-democratization, nation-building and nation states falling apart, the evolution of the welfare-state and the return of Manchester-Capitalism, the return of torture and the global acceptance of the UN human rights Charter) has taken the place of what were thought to be historical sequences of social development (or *progress*). This is reflected in the fact that the political concepts Koselleck identifies as signifying the idea of (irreversible) dynamic movement in saddle time – all the -isms of the age – today just represent a ‘static’ array of reversible political alternatives: socialism, fascism, conservatism, liberalism etc. In this sense, the politico-historical time of the globalization-age is at once timeless and ‘temporalized’ in the sense that the *sequence of events* is not pre-determined by any meta-historical logic or principle. No social theory or philosophy of history could foretell the course of history or identify an underlying logic of progress. Thus, history in the singular, as a subject and judge, is only conceivable within a certain “speed-frame” of social change. In ‘saddle-time’, it appears, its lower threshold was crossed and history began to move, whereas in late-modernity, the upper barrier is transcended and history seems to fall back into inertia, albeit a highly dynamic one this time around.

Now, even though it might appear so at first glance, this return of timeless time is not a simple return to the pre-modern conception of static-cyclical time: There is no ‘natural cycle’ of progression as in the constitutional model of Polybios, and frantic change on the level of events and associations is caused by *endogenous* social forces, not the least of which are technological and scientific innovations. This, in my view, helps to explain why at the turn of the millennium, the experience of frantic change and radical social contingency on the one hand, and perceptions of radical (structural) inertia on the other, came to flourish simultaneously: Society is changing, but *it is not going anywhere* (cf. Niethammer 1989). Due to the modern logic of dynamic stabilization, it needs growth, acceleration and constant innovation just to keep the status quo, to ensure its structural reproduction.

This second change in the socio-cultural conception of time, I want to argue, is the consequence of the pace of social change crossing the critical threshold of intra-generational speed: After the wave of social acceleration emanating from the political and digital revolutions around 1989, individuals in advanced societies can no longer expect their basic life-worlds to provide stable background conditions for their evolving life-course. Rather than developing or enacting a conception of personal identity over a life-time, the accelerated life-world structures now demand that subjects are ready to change their self-conceptions, political convictions etc. in accordance with a changing environment. Therefore, let us now turn to the biographical effects of this two-step-transformation.

#### **4. Biographical Effects: The Temporalization and De-Temporalization of Life**

With the crossing of the identified critical thresholds, not only the perception of time changes but with it the whole fabric and cultural substance of self and society are also transformed. This is due to the fact that society and self in their very essence are tem-

poral and processual rather than static and solid (Lauer 1981). This provides the basis for my claim that substantive transformations of identity are not only compatible with, but an inevitable *effect* of, the continuous abstract process of social acceleration.

The classical or 'high-modern' conception of individual identity dominant in Western societies for most of the twentieth century is based on the idea that each individual could and should find his or her place and stance in the world: *find a profession, found a family, work out a political and a religious conviction that are 'true to yourself' and 'authentic', and then grow and develop according to your individual life-plan based on these elements*. This, in a nutshell, is the modern conception not only of identity, but of individual autonomy, of authenticity, of the life-course and the good life as well. Basically, the challenge of identity each individual faces is to find his or her place, his or her *position*, in and towards the world. Of course, such a conception is unimaginable within a social world that is intended to remain stable from one generation to the next, i.e. for which the basic productive and re-productive structures as well as the political and religious order are not meant to change dynamically from one generation to the next, but to be invariantly transmitted over many generations. With a *generational pace* of social change, individual life itself is experienced as 'progressing' along developmental lines (of the life-course, the family-cycle and the carrier-path, cf. Kohli 1986, Rosa 2005, 352-362). The experiences and events of the life-course are interpreted and narrated as the cumulative elements and links of an evolving, directed life-history, as a story of growth, development and fulfilment (Sennett 1998).

However, this conception becomes untenable and unappealing once the speed of social change crosses the intra-generational barrier. As I have already pointed out, just as politics turns situationally in the late-modern age, identities, too, lose the character of 'temporalized projects': *What we are* is something that has to be decided from context to context and from one chronological stage to the next, not over the course of a complete individual life-time. Identity is no longer about (professional, familial, political or religious) *positions* sought and reached, but about (professional, familial, political and religious) *performances*: Synchronically as well as diachronically, who and what we 'are' has to be (re-)negotiated performatively. The idea of living out a – professional, familial or political – life-plan seems strangely anachronistic in a world of incessant economic, occupational, cultural and political change. This transformation of late-modern identities can easily be traced even within ordinary language. Today we either temporalize or renounce identity-markers all together: We no longer *are* bakers, New Yorkers, husbands, Republicans or Catholics tout court – rather, we work as bakers right now, we are New Yorkers for five years, we live with such and such (for now), voted Republican last time and attend Catholic services. All these building-blocks of identity might change at any time, due to our own decisions or to changing circumstances, even though *they might* just as well remain unchanged for quite a long time. In any case, they have become *unstable and contingent* even if they don't change. *What, where and with whom* we will be next (and how long our current self-definitions will remain valid) will be decided as time evolves, in a 'performative' mode, not according to a life-plan. Thus, as identities (just as history and politics) are *de-temporalized*, time itself is *temporalized* in the sense that the order, duration and sequence of events are now open to the temporal process itself. Importantly, this change has not just been forced upon us – it has just as much been embraced by late-

modern culture. Hence, a new conception of *flexible, experimental, reversible, relational, situationalist* or even *multiple* identities – as postmodernist authors have been advocating for a long time – appears to be a ‘natural’ complement to an intra-generational pace of social change<sup>5</sup> (cf. table 1).

Table 1: *The Speed of Social Change and the Perception of Time*

	<b>Pre- and Early Modernity</b>	<b>“High” Modernity</b>	<b>Late Modernity</b>
<b>Speed of endogenous social change</b>	Change-rates below the speed of generational exchange ( <i>inter-generational pace</i> )	Change-rates approaching the speed of generational exchange ( <i>generational pace</i> )	Change-rates above the speed of generational exchange ( <i>intra-generational pace</i> )
<b>Indicators: family- and occupational structures</b>	Inter-generational stability ( <i>family as economic unit</i> )	Changes according to generational pace: Individualization of work and family ( <i>generations as bearers of innovation</i> )	Successions of jobs and intimate partnerships replace life-time commitments ( <i>‘serial monogamies’ of work and family</i> )
<b>Perception of everyday time</b>	Congruence of the horizons of experience and expectation ( <i>cyclical time</i> )	Separation of the horizons of past, present and future ( <i>linear time</i> )	the sequence, rhythm and duration of events is contingent on the course of time ( <i>‘timeless’, yet ‘temporalized time’</i> )
<b>Conception of historical time</b>	Historical time as a “container” for “histories” ( <i>Static conception</i> )	History as an intelligible and directed process prone to political shaping; temporal index of politics: progressive vs. conservative ( <i>Temporalization of History</i> )	“End of History” in the high-modern sense: non-directed, erratic, yet frantic change; “situationalist politics” no longer historical “pace-maker” ( <i>De-temporalized history</i> )
<b>Conception of life-time</b>	centred around day-to-day challenges on the one hand and based on substantive, <i>trans-individual identities</i> on the other ( <i>‘situative-static’ perception of life</i> )	Perspective of a progressively evolving life-course on the basis of stable, yet self-determined <i>individual identities</i> ( <i>Temporalization of life</i> )	Perspective of a contingent and reversible life-course, episodic addition replaces narrative of cumulative growth; <i>performative identities</i> ( <i>De-Temporalization of life</i> )

5 In a similar vein, Zygmunt Bauman (1993, 240 f.) compares the ‘modern pilgrim’, who feels that he or she is on his/her way to a destined end, to the post-modern vagabond, who is ‘a nomad without an itinerary’ or a destination, and the tourist who “knows that he will not stay for long where he has arrived. And as in the vagabond’s case, he has only his own biographical time to string together the places he visits; otherwise, nothing orders them in this rather than another temporal fashion.”

Obviously, this account of the history of modern identity is overtly simplified and schematic. Nevertheless, I believe, it provides empirical research with a fruitful yardstick for further explorations in the sense of Max Weber's *ideal-types*. Before I turn to the possible shapes of late-modern 'performative' identities, I therefore want to summarize the three historical forms of individual identity that result from my temporal analysis of modernity along the three dimensions of 'our time' – everyday-time, life-time and historical time – defined in part two of this paper.

*Pre- and Early Modernity: Stable identity 'a priori'*

Before the pace of change reached a generational-tempo in the sense defined above, i.e. before 'classical' modernity institutionalized its mode of dynamic stabilization, life for the individual was often both: erratic or random as well as static and inert. This pertains to the level of everyday-time as well as to the structure of the life-course. In many respects, time was experienced as cyclical and activities were routinized. There was a significant overlap between experience and expectation. While it was impossible to foresee exogenous contingencies (such as disease or drought or wars or accidents etc.), the estate-based world itself, in its structural features, tended to remain the 'ever-same'. It was unforeseeable on the level of events, but inert on the level of structures. This is why Koselleck maintains that the *historical world* is perceived to be 'timeless' in pre-modern societies: Filled with unpredictable *stories* which have no historical order and which can inform future generations by way of historical examples. *Identity* and the *life-course* were pre-defined by birth: Who one is, what one believes in or what one does, in a traditional society, is answered not through looking inward, but through looking 'outward': for example, into the stratified world and social order of nobles and craftsmen, beggars and monks etc., and into the 'holy scripture'. Thus, the position of an individual in and towards the world is also prefixed. This I call a 'stable identity a priori'.

*High-Modernity: Stable and positional identity 'a posteriori'*

As I have tried to point out by referring to Koselleck, with the advent of high-modernity the perception of time changes significantly in that the horizons of experience and expectation diverge: The future is supposed to be different from the past, and therefore, historical time is no longer predominantly cyclical but *linear* and *progressive* in nature. In the course of this *generations* become the bearers of innovation: Identity is constitutively gained not by taking the positions of the fathers (and mothers), but by finding and defining them anew along relatively fixed lines. As Kohli (1986) and others have pointed out, in this process the life-course gets 'standardized' and institutionalized. Finding one's professional, familial, political and religious etc. positions is the challenge of 'adolescence'. In later life (although conversions remain a possibility) these positions are deepened and pursued along pre-defined 'career-paths'. As Kohli (2009, 81) puts it, "the claim to individual growth is institutionalized in the form of basic cultural codes". High-modern identities therefore are easily captured in the narrative form of stories of growth and/or progress.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while the question of *who one is* gets actually dynamized (to a generational pace of change) and

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6 This is exemplified beautifully in Richard Sennett's account of Enrico (the father) in Sennett (1998).

individualized, everyday-time as well as life-time become surprisingly predictable and even standardized: On the level of everyday-time, fixed schedules (working-times, meal-times, shopping times, family-times, bed-times etc.) gain hold, while the life-course follows pre-scheduled and institutionalized patterns (kindergarten, schooling, military service, work-life, retirement etc.). Life in this sense is 'temporalized': History seems to be moving and has a (predictable) direction, and so do individual lives.

*Late-Modernity: Performative identity*

In many ways, the patterns of late-modernity seem to reverse the features of high-modernity: The predominant experience of time is no longer linear and progressive, but fragmentary and episodic. Cyclical, linear and static elements are on a par in this world of intra-generational change. As I have pointed out, on the level of historical time, progress is no longer an experiential reality: For the first time in modernity, parents in Western societies no longer expect a brighter or better future for their children, but rather an intensified struggle to keep to standards and avoid disasters. Consequently, conceptions of an 'End of History' abound. Interestingly, we find the same 'de-scheduling' on the level of everyday-time and life-time, as well: In a 24/7-society, working time, family time, recreational-time, shopping-time etc. blend into each other. Each sphere of life no longer has a pre-fixed temporal window, but sends its demands and offers its opportunities simultaneously. Thus, *what is done when* is no longer a matter of time-plans and schedules, but is answered 'performatively', as we move along. And the same can be said about the life-time-perspective: Times of work, of (re-)education, of (enforced or voluntary) idleness follow each other in no particular or predictable order, and whether or not we marry, separate, have kids etc. is no longer pre-fixed either. We decide it (or suffer it) 'as we move along'. This performative attitude also pertains in the world of religious and political orientation: As we know from electoral research, people tend to decide about their votes according to the performance of parties and politicians. They no longer define themselves as conservative, liberal or socialist and, similarly, they re-negotiate their religious leanings and preferences (Beck/Beck-Gernsheim 1994). On both levels – the everyday as well as the life-course – individual time-experience gradually shifts from a pre-structured to a more episodic character. This is particularly relevant with respect to the life-time perspective: Instead of *being* a married, catholic baker living in Detroit, one might *have been* a married, catholic baker living in Detroit, one *is now* a single, protestant broker on Wall Street and one *might be* a gay atheist artist in Washington. Of course, these identity-markers do not all shift simultaneously, but independently of each other: One might have turned an artist before one became an atheist etc. And of course, most people remain fairly stable in most dimensions of identity; nevertheless, they can no longer take any one position for granted.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This is exemplified, by contrast, in the story of Rico (the son) in Sennett 1998. If the reader finds my examples too extreme, he or she might be referred to the spectacular case of a violent, right-wing German man who became a left-wing woman and nurse running for a seat of the Baden-Württemberg state-parliament in 2011 (Badische Zeitung, March 13th 2011: [www.badische-zeitung.de/kreisemmendingen/monika-strub-ich-moechte-glaubwuerdig-sein--42600857.html](http://www.badische-zeitung.de/kreisemmendingen/monika-strub-ich-moechte-glaubwuerdig-sein--42600857.html)).

In fact, one could call this a de-positionalization of identity, but this term is not wholly accurate since, of course, positions still are important in a competitive world. Nevertheless, it is the capacity and the willingness to (performatively) *re-position* oneself that is decisive for the late modern types of identity. Both, capacity and willingness for a flexible re-definition of identity, however, cannot be taken for granted. It is precisely here that we can distinguish four different types or patterns of late-modern identity I will try to briefly sketch out now by way of conclusion.

### 5. Conclusion: Four late-modern patterns of identity

What I have tried to point out in this paper is the structurally caused pressure towards a form of identity that thrives on intra-generational stability. Because of the fast pace of social change (with respect to practices, knowledge, patterns of association, positions, institutions etc.), the defining predicates of identity such as family position, job, hometown, political or religious convictions, hobbies (or even peripheral markers such as bank-account, daily newspaper, insurance company etc.) can no longer be supposed to be *stable for a life-time*. Even if, with hindsight, some of them actually *did* remain stable for the whole of (an adult) life, it is risky to consider them essential to one's identity. Those who actually try to pursue a life-plan are always in danger of becoming anachronistic and frustrated by the course of events. Thus, individuals, in leading their lives and maintaining an identity, have to react or adapt to this structural requirement of 'their (historical) time' in one form or the other. At present, we might – in a very tentative and preliminary mode – heuristically reconstruct four emerging types of reaction in late-modern (Western) societies which create four possible types of identity.

#### *The Surfer: Mastering the waves*

The first late-modern type can be termed the 'Surfer': What he actually does is to cling to the modern, enlightenment promise of autonomy, but to redefine it in a way that coheres to his 'historical time'. Contrary to the 'high-modern' character, the surfer does not try to define a life-plan, a life-project or a life goal. He does not seek to give his life an overall direction or shape. Rather, he acquires the capacity to 'master the waves': i.e. to recognize and 'jump' when a great wave comes along and when the wind and tide are favourable. Kenneth Gergen makes this point very aptly when contrasting his old, 'high-modern' conception of self or identity with his new surfer-self:

*I am also struggling against my modernist training for constant improvement, advancement, development, and accumulation. Slowly I am learning the pleasures of relinquishing the desire to gain control of all that surrounds me. It is the difference between swimming with deliberation to a point in the ocean – mastering the waves to reach a goal – and floating harmoniously with the unpredictable movements of the waves. (Gergen 2000, XVIII)*

The latter remark, however, in my view blurs the distinction between the *Surfer* and the *Drifter*: The surfer is not the passive object, let alone victim, of the 'unpredictable' play of waves and winds: He decides for himself when he is ready to jump (to another job, company, city, partner, party or church), and whether or not the other



wave is worth the try. Thus, he has a clear set of priorities, even though these priorities might change 'performatively', and he has sufficient economic, social and cultural resources to 'jump' when he sees fit. This logic dominates his everyday-time just as much as his life-course perspective. As Hörning, Ahrens and Gerhard (who refer to this type as 'the gambler' (Spieler), 1999) have pointed out, the Surfer is not running on pre-fixed schedules, he does not adhere to any form of time-management: He decides spontaneously when to accelerate, slow-down, finish or repeat activities; and the same goes for questions of timing or sequencing. (With respect to everyday-time this means, for example, that one day he works first and long, then does the shopping and afterwards the running, the next day he spontaneously starts with shopping, then works a bit, stops for some exercise and then goes on working, whereas the third day he might start jogging without having any plans for what to do afterwards etc.). In this way, he still can present himself as the master of his life, even though not as the author of a life-story. He clearly is an 'other-directed' character in that he leaves the goals he sets for himself to the uncontrollable play of opportunities and hindrances, he does not try to pursue an 'authentic', inner-directed conception of life. Nevertheless, he stays on top, and he is mastering the waves. In this sense, the Surfer represents a successful form of performative identity. This, of course requires the capacity, flexibility, creativity and willingness for constant 're-definition' and 're-invention'. By definition, only a small, elite minority can develop a surfer-identity, for it takes considerable resources to jump the waves this way – and the power to define situations and to decide on changes rather than being simply exposed to changing circumstances. Besides, the unpredictability and ultimate non-reliability of the Surfer would lead to disastrous consequences if this identity-style was actually adopted by everyone. The jet-set flexible elite still needs solid, stable and reliable ground-crews to pursue their wave-riding. Thus, those who cannot be Surfers probably end up as *Drifters*.

#### *The Drifter: Pulled under and pushed around*

Whereas the Surfer decides when it is time to 'jump the waves', most people very often cling to, or are content with, what they have but are exposed to unexpected situational changes. Thus, they might lose their job, or their company closes down, they are left by their boy- or girlfriend, forced to move etc. An additional push- or pull-factor might be their own moods and desires. They might in fact spontaneously quit their jobs, hometowns or families, but – contrary to the Surfer – without a good, let alone a better, alternative at hand. In this way, they do not jump the waves, but are in danger of being pushed around or pulled under by the heavy waters of late-modernity. Just as the Surfer, the Drifter renounces the idea of having a life-long set of values and allegiances, or a life-plan or project he or she pursues. But contrary to the Surfer, Drifters are the victims rather than the masters of the waves of life. They are exposed to risks and changes they can neither calculate nor determine. This is the sense in which Richard Sennett defines the 'Drift' in his *Corrosion of Character* (1998). And in fact, his main characters are Drifters rather than Surfers: They erratically drift from job to job, or from place to place and from one temporal moment to the next without being able to gain any form of autonomy with respect to their lives. This is not to deny that there can be very strong and passionate temporary (situationalist) identifications (with one's football club, one's nation, church or rock-group), but all the plans Drifters make or the goals they set for themselves, the associations

they build and the experiences they acquire, are progressively devaluated and nullified by the incessant dynamics of modern society. Hence, they yearn for the old form of the high-modern, stable identity.

Drift can be a strategy for everyday-time, too, but, as Robert Lauer (in accordance with Sennett) argues, the loss of structure and purpose in everyday-life quickly results in social decline or even chaos (Lauer 1981, 37 and 114). Thus, most Drifters follow routines and schedules in everyday-life, but they fail to integrate their everyday-time-perspective with an overall conception of life-time.

*The Depressive: Exhausted, burnt-out selves and 'temporal suffocation'*

Because of this failure, both Drifters and Surfers are threatened by the permanent possibility of a psychological exhaustion that can lead to *burn-out* or *depression*. Such a state of affairs can be the result of the 'weary' surfer-self who is wasted by the permanent need to re-invent, re-present and re-constitute identity and the perceived lack of any overall-meaning or direction of life (Ehrenberg 2010). But of course, it also threatens the Drifter who feels that he or she has no control over his or her life: Low self-efficacy and lack of control over the circumstances of one's life are among the main sources for psycho-somatic problems and feelings of alienation (Schwarzer 1992). In fact, there seem to be good reasons to assume that the resulting forms of depression are the pathological consequence of a permanent failure to integrate life-time and everyday-time perspectives in the context of a historically situated life. As a result, the vital connection between past, present and future that defines personal identity breaks down. As Lothar Baier observes: "For depressives, time is tied up in knots, it feels like temporal suffocation. There is no meaningful connection between past, present and future, no temporal 'flow'. This in turn re-enforces the feeling that one is cut-off from historical time" (Baier 2000, 157 f., my translation, H.R.). Quite generally, depressives appear to feel that they live in 'frozen time' (Levine 1998, 36 f.). This, of course, quickly extends to everyday-time, too: In depression, all relevances are lost behind a great veil of indifference and inertia, hence it is extremely difficult to structure even everyday routines. Thus, this type of 'performative identity' clearly is pathological in that it is a stress-reaction to the psycho-social requirements of late-modernity rather than a viable solution.

*The Fundamentalist: In search of a transcendent anchor*

For those who do not want to be Drifters and who are not capable (or willing) to become Surfers, there might be an alternative to Depression. Subjects who still cling to the idea of a stable, life-long and reliable identity and a 'rooted' as well as directed, progressing life (in the sense of the *high-modern* conception of identity) can no longer safely base their substantive identities on parameters such as jobs, families, hometowns etc. If in late-modernity, the 'turbillon sociale' (Rousseau) is too strong and dynamic to allow for generational steadiness, stability can only be taken from some rock-bottom, transcendentally anchored truth or certainty. Thus, if there really is a (empirically measurable) 'return of religion' in late-modernity, this, in my view, is the most plausible reason for it. If not just my family, my party and my boss, but even the welfare-state-provisions can desert me any time, I can only find my permanent anchoring in a transcendent realm such as God or the Bible. *Whatever may happen to*

*me, thou shalt be with me* is the formula that works as an identity-insurance against even the worst forms of earthly contingency. I may not know where I will live tomorrow, what I will do for a living and whom I shall be living with, my nation-state might have dissolved and my temple might be burnt down, but I will still be a Jehovah's Witness, or a Jihadist, a Hindu or a Satanist for that matter.

In a way, to some extent at least, such a 'fundamentalist' definition of identity might be compatible with the actual life-performance of a Surfer. Since stability is not gained in the parameters that can be affected by endogenous social change such as hometowns, family-structures, hobbies, political parties etc., one might be a 'wave-rider' in all of these dimensions and still feel rooted in a stable identity. However, there clearly arise problems for the temporal integration of the three-levels of biographical time. If our confessional identity is completely detached from our everyday-practices and the biographical course of our life, and eventually even from the historical time we live in (since in late-modernity, the idea of an eternal truth and validity is inevitably somewhat anachronistic and counter-intuitive), its capacity to integrate the three time-perspectives remains limited.

Thus, adherence to the idea of a stable identity in late-modernity cannot but lead to (fundamental) opposition to the modern social order. Such fundamentalist opposition is displayed, most strikingly, in the conception of the *Taliban*, for example, whose prospect of social order clearly rejects any form of *dynamic* stabilization.

Such opposition need not be defined in religious terms, however: There are other candidates for quasi-transcendent anchorings of identity, such as nationalism, racism or political radicalism. Perhaps this helps to explain the strange attraction or fascination that the left-wing terrorist organizations of the 1970s – such as the German *Rote Armee Fraktion* or the *Brigade Rosse* in Italy – have for youths (and adults) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In straight opposition to the demands for incessant reversibility, flexibility and adaptability and to the terminal insecurity and uncertainty about values, positions and convictions that haunt late-modernity, these terrorists placed all their cards, their whole identities, and their lives on one bet: They did not leave any opportunities or possibilities for future reversals. Thus, they acted in open rejection of the late modern categorical imperative to always try to increase one's range of options and opportunities. Instead, terrorists take the reverse route of radically and performatively narrowing down options and opportunities. In this, the Terrorist is the ultimate antipode of the Surfer. Neither type of identity, however, appears to be very attractive or viable. Therefore, the search for positive types of performative identity is still open.

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