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**Michael Stasik**

## **In the Hustle Park: The Social Organization of Disorder in a West African Travel Hub**

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of Disorder in a West African Travel Hub**

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# **In the Hustle Park: The Social Organization of Disorder in a West African Travel Hub**

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Abstract .....	2
Introduction .....	3
Accra's Neoplan Station .....	6
The Social Organization of Disorder .....	7
Hustling in the Park .....	12
Orders of Contingency .....	15
Conclusion .....	18
References .....	21
Credits .....	23

## **Abstract**

Accra's central bus station is a hub of travel and of turmoil. On its grounds, a great many people interact with each other in a great many ways. While this plenitude of actions and transactions is framed by an eclectic array of involutory-evolved organizational structures, in the combined thrust of activities, confusion and unpredictability abound. For the transient traveller, the experience of the station's turmoil translates into feelings of threat and anxiety. For those who inhabit the station, it is the very unpredictability inscribed into its space that provides opportunities and shelter. These contrastive local perceptions of the station echo the diverging academic discourses on the states of disorder that rule many spheres of everyday life in African cities, in which scenarios of unruly chaos are contrasted with visions of the self-regulating powers of social ingenuity. In this article, I explore urban disorder's ambivalent potency as it becomes manifest, writ large, in the organization and the everyday life of a West African travel hub.

## Introduction

In many recent studies that try to come to terms with the complexities of urban life in Africa, 'disorder' is a much recurring term and concept. In the broadest of strokes, this body of work can be divided into two groups: those who, in one way or the other, acknowledge 'the potency of disorder' – to call upon a thought by Mary Douglas (1966, 95) –, and those who do not. Admittedly, this rough division is somewhat short of subtlety. What it lacks in differentiation, though, it compensates with a pointed emphasis. As Douglas claims, disorder 'symbolises both danger and power'; while 'it spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern' (ibid.).

The African city assessed as 'spoiled pattern' is predominantly found in analyses in which disorder is equated with mere dysfunction. Here, the disordered-cum-dysfunctional polities of African metropolises are measured against ideal types of the sorts of Weberian political order, UN indices, or World Bank criteria. In these accounts, African cities are depicted as sites of hazardous overpopulation, deteriorating infrastructures, decaying social policies, labour market informalizations, chronic poverty, crime, violence, exploitation, epidemics and so forth (to instance: Bond 2000; Gandy 2006; Lugalla 1995; Maxwell 1999; Metcalfe, Pavenello and Mishra 2011; Murray 2008; Musemwa 2010; Naidoo 2005; Onibokun 1999). The city, as it stands, is seen as a sign full of portent. The '[e]nergy to command and special powers of healing' Douglas finds in 'those who can abandon rational control for a time' (1966, 95) is not acknowledged in its ambivalent potency but interpreted as the very cause of disaster. What is called for are intervention, regulation, (good) governance; thus rational control for all time.

Acknowledging the potency of urban disorder, on the other hand, presupposes abandoning the normative benchmark of ideal types of political, economic and social orders. In this way, analytical space is cleared for the exploration of emerging properties of social action, and for the appraisal of alter-native orders found within, or triggered by, disorder. In these accounts, states of disorder are put into well-nigh causal relationships with the self-regulating powers of social ingenuity and with the prudence of practical reason. Going beyond the mere inventory of urban Africa's endemic malaises, the creativity and inventiveness of city dwellers' responses to disordered states and dysfunctional (infra-)structures is brought to the fore (see particularly the contributions in Tostensen and Vaa 2001, and in Trefon 2004). Zeroing-in on social practices by which disorder is coped with and tentative order established, the focus shifts from stifling human misery to 'teeming human vitality' (Guyer 2011, 474). Denizens of urban disorder, caught up in situations of enduring uncertainty, are represented not as passive victims stirred up by unfathomable forces but as active agents 'manoeuvring' (Berner and Trulsson 2000) and 'navigating' (Vigh 2006) their ways through volatile terrains of unpredictable change.

In order to understand the social realities of an everyday that 'swings in tune with its proximity to disorder' (Vigh 2009, 421), we have to attune our perspective to its wayward oscillations. As Bibi Bakare-Yusuf and Jeremy Weate (2005) argue, the attempt to understand the poly-rhythmic, 'acephalous rationality' of spatial production in urban Africa by means of a 'mono-rhythmic rationality, born of the myth of Western linear causality' (2005, 333), is predestined to miss the point. The task is thus not merely to measure the scope of urban disorder's obliquity, but to approach it through the very experiences of elusiveness, disjuncture and contradiction it entails. In other words, we have to adjust our view to the ground level of the *ashawo* 'hustling' in Accra (Chernoff 2003), of youth '*dubriagem*' in Bissau (Vigh 2006, 128), or of the everyman '*sé debrouiller*' in Dakar, Abidjan and Douala (Mbembe 2000, 270). The analysis of African urbanities' heightening social entropy calls for a hermeneutics of its own.

These hermeneutics, however, are anything but new. As Jane Guyer (2011) points out in her review of three works on African cities that can be considered seminal in that regard (De Boeck and Plissart 2004; Nuttall and Mbembe 2008; Simone 2004), the call is ‘to aspire to be “realist” ethnographers in the classical sense’; thus, evoking Malinowski’s famous maxim, seeking ‘to grasp “the native’s point of view”, and to document the “imponderabilia of actual life”’ (Guyer 2011, 476). In this article, I follow in the paths of ‘classical’ ethnographic realism applied to the study of the ‘imponderable matters’ of urban life in Africa. I do this by way of an ethnographic exploration of the organization and the everyday life of a West African travel hub, the so-called Neoplan Station in Ghana’s capital Accra – a place epitomizing urban disorder’s potency and ramifications.

In an early ethnographic description of urban bus stations in West Africa (commonly called ‘lorry parks’ in the Anglophone parts), Polly Hill (1984) not only provides a vivid account of the station’s multitudinous facticity, she also describes how she got swept up in them; writing that lorry parks

*provide the worst field conditions one can ever encounter. It’s not just the great heat, the lack of shade, the lack of breeze [...], the multiplicity of languages, the hustle and bustle and general state of harassment and anxiety, the constant interruptions, the sneezing caused by pepper [...]. There is also the further problem [...] that one often cannot perceive order in chaos when overwhelmed by the sight of piles of produce in motion [...]. (1984, 2–3)*

Besides Hill’s early account (her fieldwork dates from the early 1960s), only few scholars have shown interest in the ‘hustle and bustle’ of Africa’s bus stations. Paul Stoller’s ‘deep reading’ of social interactions in a bush taxi station in Niger (1989, 69–83) and a recent analysis of a Nigerian lorry park as a thoroughly stereotyped space (Ademowo 2010) being among the few other studies concerned with station life per se. Most other writings related to lorry parks appear to have emerged as rather subsidiary products of research on other subjects; with descriptions of stations being scattered in studies on transport infrastructures (Hawkins 1958; Lopes 2009; Turner 1996), on the transport industry’s political embroilments (Albert 2007; Fouracre *et al.* 1994; Lewis 1970; Van Walraven 2009), and on trade and market places (Clarke 1994; Nteuwusu 2012). In a number of anthropological studies, the social significance of lorry parks is touched upon via discussions of some of its central figures; pre-eminently of taxi and lorry drivers (e.g. Jordan 1978; Mutongi 2006; Peace 1988; Van der Geest 2009; Verrips and Mayer 2001), as well as of ‘touts’ (Okpara 1988), hawkers (Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008; Davies 2008), passengers (Mashiri 2001; wa Mungai and Samper 2006), and itinerant preacher (Klaeger 2009). Yet, the everyday life burgeoning inside the station as well as the modes of interaction and organization unfolding within its realms have largely been left unmentioned.

In contemporary West Africa, as in most parts of the continent, the urban bus station is a hub in the widest sense of the word: it is a pivot of travel and transport where routes are dispensed and diverted, a major trading post and centre of commerce, a nerve centre of commuting flows, a gateway between urban and rural areas, and an intra- and international intersection. On the station’s grounds thus a great many people interact with each other in a great many ways. Because of the confusing plethora of connections and relations it accommodates, the social life taking place in the lorry park displays a good deal of unpredictability.

For the transient traveller and trader (as well as for the odd researcher), this unpredictability – fed by the ubiquitousness of actors and activities – is prone to be translated into feelings of threat and anxiety. In this sense, the ‘hustle and bustle’ Hill laments about is not simply the

product of an outside observer's perspective unaccustomed to the 'culture of congestion' (Rao 2006, 228) found across urban centres of the global South. During my fieldwork in Ghana in 2011 and 2012, many locals I talked to expressed similar sentiments about the country's major stations, describing them as sites of 'disorderliness', 'disorganization', 'danger', 'thuggery', 'filth' and 'curse'. Yet, it is in the lorry park that large numbers of urban dwellers find their main source of livelihood and a centre of life, not only in economic terms. For these people, many of whom dwell in the station permanently, its 'disorderliness' and the very unpredictability inscribed into its space serve as a shelter and a gateway to opportunity and chance. As one of these permanent station dwellers explained to me:

*In the olden days, they called this place the 'lorry park'. Now, we have a different name for it. Now, this place is the 'hustle park'. For us it's the place to hustle. [...] You see, all of us are suffermen. We come here [to the station] to succeed, to fetch money. Because this place is free for everybody. And maybe you don't fetch the money at once. But you always find a place to sit and rest. Because here in the hustle park, nobody comes to bugger you.*

These contrastive local perceptions and utilizations of the station – being a place of 'thuggery' for some, and a 'free place' for others – echo the diverging academic discourses on the African city as outlined above. Continuing along this line of synecdochic thought, it is within the uniquely dense space of the station that the potency of urban disorder finds a much prolific, much condensed ground for unfolding its ambivalent ramifications.

In the following, I explore and calibrate with each other these conflicting attributes and experiences of urban life in Africa as they become manifest – writ large – in the organization and the everyday life of Accra's Neoplan Station. I draw on nine months of fieldwork, in which I engaged with (and got swept up in) Neoplan's multitudinous facticity mainly by means of what Gerd Spittler (2001) coined 'thick participation'. Thus, in addition to the rather ordinary ethnographic toolkit of observations, interviews and conversations, my research draws much upon 'lived experience' gathered via apprenticeship-like engagements and employments in various divisions of Neoplan's 'hustle park'.

After a short introduction to Neoplan's history, location, itinerary, and its daily 'turnover' of cars and passengers, I disentangle the dense fabric of what, in the broad sense, constitutes the station's personnel. These include those organizing the transportation business as well as the many different groups and sub-groups of other service providers active inside the station, which, taken together, make for a veritable micro-economy of its own. Looking at these *artificially* segmented layers of organization made up by the station's discernable groups and actors, there is what can be conceived of as order. However, it is through the *factual* socio-spatial imbrications of the manifold layers of organization which are at work at the station's yard simultaneously that disorder is (re)created and that a dialectical process of ordering and disordering is sustained. In the following section, I re-ruffle the parts contributing to Neoplan's 'social organization of disorder' again and explore the experiential dimension of the station. Starting from a phenomenographic reconstruction of the novice traveller's experience of the station, I contrast these outsiders' experiences with the station workers' perceptions of, and contributions to, the station's hustle. In the last part, I explore several recurring forms of unpredictabilities emergent from the station's dense and disordered space by means of two related notions of contingency. The first concerns the so-called 'double contingency' inherent in human interaction, for whose ambivalent potentiality to create confusion while releasing creative and liberatory forces Neoplan's 'cauldron' of interactions provides a most fertile ground. With the

second form of contingency, which connotes the more existential understanding of the notion as ‘that what befalls and betides us’, I subsume the general theme of (urban) disorder’s ambivalent potency by showing how Neoplan’s denizens cope with and embrace both its propensity for spoiling pattern and its power to create new patterns.

## Accra’s Neoplan Station

Accra’s Neoplan Station owes its somewhat odd name to a joint venture the Stuttgart-based bus manufacturer *Neoplan* initiated with the Ghanaian government in the mid-1970s. German-produced coachworks and chassis were exported to Ghana and there pieced together, fabricating the *Neoplan Tropicliner*. Matching the image of a rough place the Neoplan Station holds today, it got established as a by-product of the revolution of June 4, 1979. Revolutionary leader Rawlings was aware of the potentially stabilising or destabilising role Ghana’s commercial bus drivers could play in his militarily-induced societal cataclysm (the so-called ‘house-cleaning exercises’; Packham 2004, 195).<sup>1</sup> Only three days after seizing power, he ordered that a centrally-located yard owned by a local industrialist should be seized and transformed into a new bus station. Hence the birth of the Neoplan Station as a violent revolutionary’s goodwill gesture to Accra’s long-distance bus drivers. In what became Neoplan’s opening ceremony, a major from Rawlings’ revolutionary guard opened the yard’s gate with a shot of his machine gun and handed over the confiscated land to the bus operators. The *Neoplan Tropicliner*, at that time the most prestigious type of coach bus found on Ghana’s roads, became its flagship vehicle and eponym.

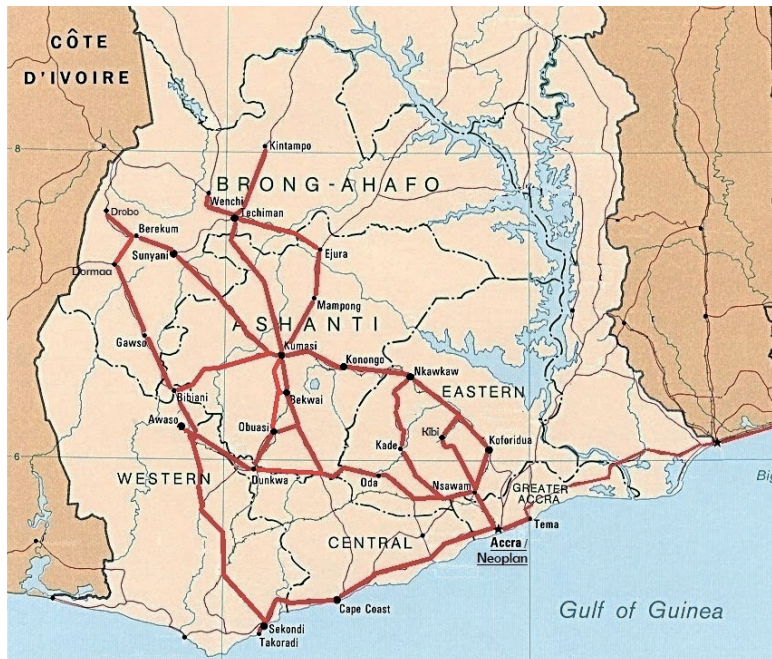
Located near Accra’s main road intersection, the Kwame Nkrumah Circle, or simply ‘Circle’, as aptly called in the urban vernacular, the Neoplan Station lies in an area that sprawls with petty trade during daytime and with petty crime during nighttime. Comparable to Ojuegba in Lagos, Circle functions as ‘a vortex for the all flows’ (Bakare-Yusuf and Weate 2005, 326) within Accra. Scattered around the roundabout’s tentacular assembly of roads are some two dozen inner-city, interregional and international bus stations; the Neoplan Station representing the queen of them all. Of particular importance for this sort of imperial status is its role in plying the most important route in the country: connecting Accra with Kumasi, Ghana’s second main city. Today, thirty-four destinations are served from Neoplan’s yard directly, dispersing mainly across Ghana’s central and western regions, and furthermore linking Accra with the two port cities of Tema and Takoradi and with Lagos in Nigeria. Neoplan thus represents Accra’s gateway to all major commercial and economic hubs in Ghana and, through the many feeder routes branching off from its destinations, also in the West African sub-region at large. As much as this strategic ‘roadmap’ mirrors the station’s vital role in Ghana’s transportation infrastructure, as much does it also feed back onto its perpetual state of turmoil and disorder.

The numbers of passengers and vehicles that traverse through the station each day further highlight its role as Accra’s major hub both of travel and of turmoil.<sup>2</sup> Though subjected to

1 For the further involvements of Rawlings’ regime in matters of Ghana’s main road transport societies, see Gyimah-Boadi 1994, 132–135, and Ninsin 2000, 130.

2 There is no centralized accounting system at the Neoplan Station. I gathered the following numbers through counting, re-counting and cross-checking the numbers of cars (along with the number of seats and thus passengers) departing from the station over extended periods of time.





*Neoplan's roadmap*

considerable fluctuations of weekly, monthly and seasonally-conditioned rhythms and to various aperiodic perturbations (e.g. heavy rains, major sport events), three main instances can be distinguished: during particularly dull days, usually Sundays and mid-week, there are about 10,000 passengers that flock into the station's yard; during the other days of the week, the number doubles to about 20,000 people; during peak times of travel, as on the last weekend of the month (thus after payday) and during holidays, the number rises to some 30,000 and more travellers. As for Neoplan's fleets of vehicles, which range from small 5-seater saloon cars to old 39-seater Benz busses through to modern Chinese-produced coaches carrying 50 people, the numbers vary between some 700 cars on dull days and up to 2,500 cars departing from the station on exceptionally busy days. Not included in this count, however, are the taxis, delivery trucks, and truck-pusher entering Neoplan's yard each other minute and supplying its 'channelling machinery' with new passengers and goods. Neoplan's yard covers an area of about one hectare only, stretching over some 150 by 60 meters. In other words, measured against its quantity of incoming and departing passengers and vehicles, it is remarkably small and narrow.

## **The Social Organization of Disorder**

In stark contrast to the bureaucratically and top-down organized travel hubs in North Atlantic regions, Neoplan's transportation business is organized by a meshwork of overlapping, often conflicting, and much idiosyncratically segmented organizational units. The thirty-four destinations served from its yard are run by altogether thirteen sub-stations, locally called 'branches'. These thirteen branches – which are operated exclusively by small to middle-scale private entrepreneurs – form part of larger bodies of nationwide operating, cartel-like transport



*In the thrust of floor activities*

societies.<sup>3</sup> While they are framed, and licenced, by these larger associations, regarding their respective business practices ‘on the floor’, each branch represents a virtually independent enterprise; an independence which in turn lays the ground for the stiff competition for passengers they are engaged in with each other, and often also within each one of them. For, out of its 34 destinations, 19 are served by only one branch, while the passengers for the remaining 15 destinations are fought over by at least two different branches, with the cars plying to Kumasi being in the toughest scramble, as this most important route is served by altogether four of Neoplan’s branches.

Each of Neoplan’s thirteen branches is made up of the ‘office staff’ and the ‘yard staff’. The office staff represents each branch’s administrative body. The latter group of yard staff includes all those who run the transport on the floor, which basically means ‘hustling’ for passengers. This group is further divided into yet smaller sub-units, which are in charge of the various destinations served by each branch respectively. While each sub-unit operates on the basis of an individually adjusted schedule of shifts and duties, their overall number varies according to the inflows of passengers, ranging from around twenty sub-units during the night-shifts on dull weekdays to sixty and more sub-units operating during peak times of travel.

The basic composition of a yard staff sub-unit includes the ‘bookman’, who is in charge of dispensing the tickets for the respective bus, his group of ‘loading boys’, whose main task consists in enticing passengers ahead of other branches’ sub-units, and the station master, who supervises the work of the sub-unit staff and who acts as the main intermediary between the yard and the office staff. The highly competitive atmosphere that marks the relations between Neoplan’s thirteen branches and their many sub-units triggered the emergence of a multitude of additional, often most intriguing figures to its structure of organization; above all, of the so-called shadows.

3 The Neoplan Station is ‘divided’ between the two largest of these societies: the ‘Ghana Private Road Transport Union’, to which ten of its thirteen branches belong, and the ‘Progressive Transport Owners’ Association’, with which the remaining three branches affiliate.



*'Shadowing'*

The shadows owe their function to Neoplan's system of departure, in which busses leave only when the last seat has been taken. As passengers are more prone to embark on a full bus, reckoning on a short waiting time until departure, the main and in fact only task of shadows consists in sitting in the loading bus and pretending to be passengers. And as 'real' passengers begin to buy tickets and to enter the bus, the shadows begin disembarking from it unnoticed one after the other. At the Neoplan Station, the system of 'shadow passengers' – driven by the branches' and sub-units' fierce competition for passengers – evolved to a degree that a 22-seater bus is already filled with twelve shadows before the first ticket has been sold.

Another, equally large but much more dispersed group is composed of men who act as additional intermediaries between the two basic organisational levels of the office staff and the yard staff. A fair portion of these positions follows from what might be called a 'kin economy'. As, in many instances, the appointment of a new position results from a favour rendered by a senior branch member to a relative or friend, without the newly-employed worker knowing much about the tasks and responsibilities assigned to his position. With the passing of time, most of these workers find some tasks for their newly invented position – usually as sorts of sub-coordinators, dispatchers and henchmen. The thereby created new labels of work echo the underlying inventiveness; including the rather familiar designations of 'overseer', 'collector' or 'shift master', and furthermore a potentially endless spectrum of derivations of existing designations, such as 'floor master', 'floor leader', 'gang leader', 'chief porter', 'first porter', and so forth.

A third main group in the large appendix of Neoplan's transportation personnel are the so-called balabala. The balabala give an example of a newly-created niche for station work that can be considered a direct outcome of the long-lasting (and ongoing) fragmentations of Neoplan's organizational structure. For, these processes yielded a complexity – and 'disorderliness' – which, for outsiders, particularly for passengers, is hard to navigate their way through. Within this highly complex structure, the balabala emerged as a sort of unsolicited, self-employed class of station workers whose main task consists in 'capturing' the incoming passengers at the station entrance and escorting them to the vehicle they want to travel with while carrying their luggage for a small fee. They serve as guides that help in the passengers' navigation through the confusing structures of Neoplan's competition-driven fragmentations. With the balabala,



the cycle of increased organizational fragmentations, complications and confusions turns full circle. While – ideally – the balabala serve outsiders as guides and helpers, in practice, it is not uncommon that they take advantage of their position and trick the passenger by running off with the piece of luggage entrusted to them.

The figure of the balabala conveys a larger dialectical process at work on the station's grounds: attempts of ordering yield states of increasing disorder which in turn bring forth new ordering attempts and so forth. In Neoplan's dialectic of ordering and disordering, however, there is no sight of sublation whatsoever. To give but one example of the increasingly strained and complex divisions of labour that follow from that dialectic: on busy days, there are up to twenty-two separate sub-units of station workers from four different branches, along with a fluctuating number of coordinating supervisors, sub-supervisors, and often more than a hundred shadows, that all, at the same time, compete for passengers travelling to Neoplan's main destination only (Kumasi) – with the 33 remaining destinations being run by a varying number of other sub-units. Here, we approximate the roots of what can be described aptly as 'the social organization of disorder'.

The organizational structure of Neoplan's transportation business is thus highly organic, complex and competitive. The dynamics underlying these fragmentations are reminiscent of what Clifford Geertz describes as processes of 'involution' (1963). In his case example of Javanese farmers, the combination of abundant labour and scarce land makes for 'introversive tendencies', 'absorbing increased numbers of cultivators on a unit of cultivated land' (1963, 32). The same holds true for Neoplan. The station is a major centre of attraction for unskilled workers, day labourers, and petty foremen, absorbing, so to speak, an ever increasing number of 'cultivators' who plough its evermore densely-populated land. Their influx is mainly spurred by the system of revenue distribution deployed at the station, which conveys the promise of fast moneymaking. Linked to the number of tickets being sold by each sub-unit and branch, and for the most parts disbursed right after the departure of every single bus, it is a system run on petty cash. It is this reign of a hand-to-mouth economy that aggravates both the severe competitiveness between Neoplan's branches and sub-units and the 'introversive tendencies', frictions and fragmentations that feed this very competitiveness.

Linked to the promise of 'fast money' – and to the struggles to make it – is another main feature descriptive of Neoplan's everyday realities: it is a space open to everybody. Every kind of person is free to enter its yard, and a great many kinds of people make use of this freedom. Besides being a 'channelling machinery' for bulks of travellers that attracts a proliferating number of workers who run the transport business, the station serves as a major haunt for all sorts of traders, vendors and hawkers, for itinerants, sex-workers and beggars, as well as for thugs, thieves and dealers.

Its narrow yard accommodates an abundance of services and institutions; some of which are linked directly to the needs of travel and transport (e. g. workshops and spare parts dealer, shops selling provisions and merchandise, eating parlours and drinking spots), while others emerged through rather indirect links (e. g. herbalists, pharmacists and hairdresser, a football, cinema and video game centre, a church, a mosque, and the odd insurance company). While each of these informal entrepreneurs is free to ply his and her trade inside the yard, certain codes of conduct do exist within their respective niches.

For example, there are four discrete associations of itinerant preacher and herbalists that regulate the access for preaching and selling inside the busses plied by four of Neoplan's biggest branches. Another, less formalised code exists amongst many of the women selling provisions around some of the bigger coach busses, whereby only those are allowed at these lucrative



*Hustling for passengers*

selling points who regularly sweep the floor where the coaches are parked. However, these codes are restricted to particular, spatially-confined areas within the yard, and even there executed only in patches. In this sense, the itinerant preacher can opt for preaching in other busses (or at another station), while the saleswomen is free to change her location or resort to hawking.

The point being that inside the station there is no single, superordinate authority that would regulate or restrict the access to its space. On the contrary, its unrestricted accessibility is a feature imperative to its functions, integral to its conducts, and fecund to its economic pursuits. Passengers attract vendors, who make use of the condensed market the passengers generate. Vendors serve the passengers' convenience, who make use of the vast panoply of products offered to them before departure. More passengers, in turn, lead to more vehicles being brought in by Neoplan's branches, which lead to more branch staff being employed and to more vendors pouring into its yard, dispatching and serving (ever)more passengers. Thus goes Neoplan's virtuous circle of self-perpetuating densification and disorder, goading itself by means of feedback that feeds back onto itself.

The last main feature of Neoplan's complex and confusing, multi-layered and evermore involuted organizational structure is marked by an absence; namely: the absence of state authorities inside its yard. In fact, there is a small unit of officers collecting trifles of tolls from each vehicle that enters the station. Though, these altogether four clerks, who work only during office hours and who regularly lose out to the drivers' reluctance to deliver the asked payment, are rather reminders of the state's absence in regulating the station than prosecutors of its authority and control. Furthermore, while the whole area surrounding the Neoplan Station makes for a sort of battle field between petty traders and municipal tax collectors (Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah 2008), inside the station yard it is only the owners of the bigger shops and stores from whom the city authorities gather a sort of annual rent-cum-tax.<sup>4</sup> All hawkers and petty traders are free of any

4 These annually-collected levies are of a rather symbolic kind; for, in most cases, the collected sum dates back to the initial establishment of the respective shop, mostly in the early 1980s, without any inflation-adjustment proper.

tax control. In this sense, the Neoplan Station equals a sort of enclave-like space, autonomous in its affairs and autarchic in its housekeeping.

A metaphor well-suited to summarize the relation between Neoplan's spatiality and its diverse socialities can be drawn from the mosaic. Though, the station is thereby not to be imagined as a stable, fixed mosaic, but as one with shifting parts, constantly changing and rearranging their position in relation to each other – and scrambling over it –, while their movements are governed by collectively-pitched rhythms rather than by formal rules or regulations (such as timetables and clocks).

## Hustling in the Park

Based on this dissection of Neoplan's main layers of organization, I will now put back together, thus re-ruffle, these layers again and explore their experiential dimension. In other words, how do people experience, manoeuvre through, and thereby co-constitute the moving parts of Neoplan's dynamic mosaic? I start by reconstructing the novice traveller's experience of coming to the station and finding the way to the bus he or she intends to travel with.

At the moment of setting foot on the yard, the traveller is raided by workers from various branches and sub-units. For them, this is the crucial moment to entice the potential passenger ahead of any other emissary of a competing branch. Vociferously approached by a gang of men who are competing for the traveller's luggage, pulling arms, and shouting directions, the traveller is prone to experience this procedure as a sort of ambush. Accordingly are the traveller's reactions, which range from instances of panic to efforts of self-defence through to masterfully enacted forms of ignoring the surrounding turmoil.

As the traveller progresses further inside the yard, the already present gang of station workers is augmented by other station folks, in turn taking their chance for poaching the traveller into their bus, for peddling some product, for soliciting alms, or for touting the gospel. In the corridor-like setup of the yard, the emerging image recalls the run through the gauntlet: the form of punishment wherein a convict is chased through two rows of men beating the victim with clubs and whips. In the context of the station, this procedure, violent as it appears even without any beating, follows a strategy as rude as it is sophisticated. While shouting, running and rumbling with each other over the passenger's attention and luggage, the workers co-create an aggressive atmosphere which is centred on the putative victim: the passenger. Embroiled in this turmoil and confusion, the traveller naturally seeks for options to escape. And the most obvious escape on offer being inside the bus, thus exactly where the station workers participating in that hunt want the passenger to end up. The traveller is virtually scared into the bus. What is reckoned a place of rescue is in fact the trap.

Of course, there are experienced travellers, too; such as market women who frequently ply to or from Accra to stock up their produce, or clerks working in Accra who commute home upcountry during the weekends. Passing through the station regularly, they know their ways to manoeuvre through its yard safely, avoiding much of the hustle and most of the possible pitfalls. A feature by which experienced travellers can be distinguished from inexperienced ones is their ability to tell when a bus is filled with shadows. While the novice traveller will embark on such a shadowed bus without much hesitation; the seasoned traveller, spotting a car filled with a dozen young men and no luggage, will brush aside any offer to enter. In this regard, the constant



*Competing for an  
incoming passenger*

high number of shadows working at the Neoplan Station is indicative of the equally constant high number of novice travellers coming to its yard.

It takes time and commitment to become one of these veterans of Neoplan travel, though. And often, the traveller's experience of the station that follows the first initiation is marked by even more anxiety and agitation. This phenomenon of a heightened hazard of conflict in follow-up encounters has its roots in what Karl Weick describes as 'enactment as self-fulfilling prophecy' (1979, 159). Traumatized by the first encounter with the station and its riotous folks, the traveller braces himself for the next encounter. Drawing on the initial experience of hustle, threat and aggression, he prepares himself to act, and to react, with the same repertoire of conducts. Entering the yard for the second time and acting according to what he deems apt, his aggression is met with responses that comply with his behaviour, setting in motion a potentially endless cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies.

On the side of Neoplan's station personnel, the spectrum of possible reactions to the different eruptions of turmoil and aggression on the yard can be scaled along a continuum constituted mainly by work experience, and, closely related to that, by seniority, serenity, and stoic aptitude. At one end of that continuum, there are the legions of inexperienced, predominantly young and quick-tempered new station recruits. Toiling mostly as loading boys, shadows, assistants, and in related low-qualified and low-paid yard staff positions, they represent a large cluster of station workers who are most susceptible to irritable and aggressive behaviour while, somewhat ironically, also being about the most present group on the floor. From the perspective of these novices (with whom I gathered many of my experiences in the station's drudgery), the station's atmosphere of rush and competition is prone to be perceived as an utterly hostile social environment. The expressions they use to paraphrase their work with – drawing much on military terminology – bear ample evidence of the underlying attitudes, and of the subsequent patterns of action; including emphatic interjections such as 'we are at war', 'we fight to kill', or the much reiterated self-description as an *asafo*, an Akan term designating young warriors. While their concurrent scramble for passengers involves various forms of reciprocal verbal and physical abuse, the main conditions to succeed in that scramble are keen wit, corporeal agility, as well as cunning ways of cheating: passengers are lured into cars with lies about fixed





*Fighting with an incoming passenger*

times of departure, with false assertions about renewed engines, or with arbitrary allegations about competitors' contaminated vehicles. As low the conditions of employment for most of these low-ranking station workers are, as high are their rates of resignation and dismissal; a continuous flux of employment which in turn maintains the large number of inexperienced toiler on the station's floor as well as the 'general state of harassment' (Hill 1984, 2) they are largely responsible for.

At the other end of the above-established continuum, there are the long-serving and much hardened station workers. Immunized to every imaginable form of commotion, agitation and upheaval, their unswerving tranquillity speaks of the school of hard knocks they passed through. Only few of these veterans of station hustle remain in lower positions among the floor staff. As, generally, long-term employment leads to a position far off the yard's racket, chiefly as part of the office staff. One long-experienced station worker, who toiled through all of Neoplan's occupational levels, now serving at the highest level as a branch chairman, explained to me the prerequisite for advancement and survival inside the station as follows:

*To work at the station, you need a strong heart. Too many different people come here. They come from everywhere, and everyone has his own mind, his own way of going about things. You need to keep cool with all the different minds. If you force, you will not succeed, not in the long run. [...] If you lose your temper, you will get lost yourself. In all the confusion here, you need to keep your mind in order.*

According to that senior worker's practical wisdom, the task is thus to anticipate on the diversity of attitudes and actions, both of passengers and of co-workers; and furthermore, to evolve practices that allow for accommodating the frictions emergent from this very diversity. Surely, the wealth of experience of these more seasoned workers provides the basis for prompt adaptiveness to the station's fast-changing environment, a sort of visceral versatility acquired with age and practice. Still, the key prerequisite is not the facility to control or 'tame' the many different and erratic minds, but the ability to balance the outside's confusion and disorder with



ones inside composure and order – thus an ability the majority of the young station workers to whom most of the hustling on the floor is delegated still need to acquire.

And that is the crux of the matter in regard of the station workers' contribution to Neoplan's self-perpetuating state of 'disorderliness'. Those who lay down the grand rules of the game, versed with experience and farsightedness, tend to confine their presence to the backsides of Neoplan's busy yard, from there interfering if circumstances so require. Those who play these rules out on the ground, in turn, are the ones whose sights are narrowed by inexperience, hustle, and fierce competition. On the one hand, this division of work and responsibilities induces much innovation, adaptation and change; as, spurred by conflicting ends, the floor workers are anything but reluctant to bend, reinterpret, or simply ignore the rules. On the other hand, it is this very proclivity for ever-present change and perturbation that produces a ground most fertile to the emergence of a great many kinds of unpredictable occurrences. In the remainder of this article, I explore various recurring forms of these unpredictabilities in relation to the station's disorder, and to the ambivalent potency inherent in states of disorder, by means of two related notions of 'contingency'.

## Orders of Contingency

The term 'contingency' drags along a large and eclectic array of applications in the history of ideas (see, e.g., Makropoulos 1997). In the following, I make use of two fairly basic, related applications of its versatile meaning, which both draw upon the constitutive indeterminacy of human attitudes and actions. The first form of contingency at work at the Neoplan Station is constituted by the cardinal dilemma of social interaction, which Niklas Luhmann (1984, 148–190) coined the 'double contingency' inherent in every interaction of two individuals: when two or more people, by whatever accident, come together and have to deal with each other, both know that *both know* that the other could also act differently. There is a circularity of expectations that leads to indeterminacy, which in turn opens up the possibility of all kinds of misunderstandings and conflicts. According to Luhmann, people solve this problem through a self-referential process: by ways of communication a social order is produced which in turn enables communication which helps to further adjust the established social order and so forth.

In the social world of the Neoplan Station, with its mosaic of shifting and conflicting ordering attempts and with the masses of novice and seasoned travellers pouring into its yard continuously and having to find (and make) their way through this self-rearranging maze of organization constituted by novice and seasoned station workers, the problem of double contingency gets never close to being solved but remains in a constant mode of arising anew, and of being tackled anew. However, that is not to say that there is no communication taking place at Neoplan's yard. On the contrary, there is a continuous babel of it. But it is through this very multiplicity of communications, rendered fortissimo and in a 'multiplicity of languages' (Hill 1984, 2), that most of these phonetically patterned ordering attempts are drowned out in each other's counterpoints. Whether it is a loading boy shouting out directions to the bus he struggles to fill, or a station hawker extolling the crispness of the take-away fried chicken wing he tries to sell, or a balabala chumming up to every other passer-by while offering his assistance; more often than not, there will be another porter, another hawker, and another balabala jostling for the same piece of attention and, most crucially in that regard, interfering with and

cutting across the others' offers, bids and proclamations. And it is through the synergies of all of Neoplan's co-existing and co-reacting attempts of ordering, and through the drizzles of frictions emerging in-between them, that ever-new conflicts and misunderstandings become unleashed and that the double contingency of social interaction becomes embroiled in on-going processes of trial-and-error.

Yet, these processes produce more than just confusion. As Chris Dunton (2008) argues in his analysis of Nigerian novelists' accounts of the everyday realities in Lagos – in which 'the dispersal of concentrated management, the atomization of individual and group life and effort' merges into one 'shimmering cauldron of noise' (Dunton 2008, 73): every newly increased level of entropy induces new corrective, creative and liberatory forces that try to counter that entropy. In Douglas' (1966, 95) terms, while disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of new pattern. And so is every double contingency arising in Neoplan's disordered 'cauldron' of communications countered with ever-new attempts to soothe it, or to utilize its ramifications. Loading boys invent catchy neologisms for arousing incoming travellers' distracted attention (e.g. 'Travel with Obama!'<sup>5</sup>); hawkers 'employ' beggars for luring potential donors into buying them a cheap piece of chicken in order to share the profit afterwards, and to re-sell the uneaten chicken wing; balabala play in a lottery of the 'politics of belonging' by aligning the phrase they approach new entrants with to markers of religious, ethnic or linguistic affinity (e.g. by welcoming them in Twi, Fante, Ewe, Ga, Dagbani, Hausa, Yoruba, Arabic, French, English, or Pidgin respectively). Here, communication does not adjust any pre-established order. Rather, it serves as a means to adjust the respective actor's actions to a sustained state of disorder, by this helping to sustain that very disordered state.

The second form of contingency manifest at Neoplan's yard relates to a more existential understanding of the notion as 'that what befalls and betides us' without being the result or the effect of our own action – life's uttermost 'imponderabilia'. Driven by the unpredictable, they engender ambivalences. On the one hand, they create disorientation, uncertainty and danger. On the other hand, they may as well facilitate freedom, opportunity and chance. Neoplan's well-established turmoil and its organizational disorder serve as a hotbed for both sides of the contingent moment. A somewhat harmless and basic form of contingency (as imponderability) present at the station arises from its system of departure, in which busses leave only when they are full, making it thus impossible to foresee the actual time of departure, and of waiting. For the passenger, the implied uncertainty may translate into negatively-connoted feelings of impatience, nervousness or fear, and, with the passing of hours, into conditions of thirst, hunger and fatigue – if the bus is not filled quickly that is. If it is filled quickly, the passengers may well feel lucky, gratefully praising Neoplan's expeditious velocity. Neoplan's hawkers, on the other hand, utilise this uncertainty and turn it into a chance to market their goods, offering to the passengers drinks, food and produce for pastime. They thus create forms of adaptive and creative practices which enable them to accommodate the emerging contingencies and to turn them into opportunity and profit.

This pattern of anticipating the moment of contingency, and embracing it when it occurs rather than trying to eschew it, recurs at the station in many guises. Often, it involves two sides wherein the one, usually the passenger, becomes a victim, while the other emerges as a beneficiary of chance. Among the most common incident of that kind is the spontaneously emerging

5 'Obamas' designate fast minivans that were introduced to Neoplan's fleet of vehicles at the time president Obama visited Ghana.

occasion for petty theft, as during collective quarrels and fights. Though, from the perspective of the thief, the possible enrichment derived from preying on a moment of contingency brings in its wake a great potential of danger, too. For, once a thief is caught, the repercussions can take on gruesome scales, such as the floggings of an agitated mob. The point being that, with few exceptions, there is no *agent provocateur*, no one who actively incites or perpetuates the turmoil that begets the evanescent occasion. The ‘chaos-mongering’ is, if at all, on the side of the collective. In this sense, the random larceny befalls the potential victim in a similar way as it befalls the potential culprit. With regard to that ‘being befallen’ by a chance and seizing it when it occurs, Neoplan’s balabala represent a sort of vanguard group. In a talk with me, one balabala paraphrased the underlying attitude of being receptive to (the station) life’s imponderabilia in an aphoristic statement: ‘We get what we take, and we take what we get.’

For most of the people who work at the station, these moments of contingency ‘befall and betide’ them *en passant*, so to speak. They may form part of their daily tasks, struggles and activities, for better or for worse. But they are not the main reason for their presence at the station. For other people, it is the very potential of contingency (as imponderability) that attracts them to its yard. These are the ones who come to the station without any apparent purpose. Neither do they intend to travel nor do they come to work. Rather, they pilgrim into its yard to seek fortune disguised in the unforeseeable, to provoke it with their bare presence. Mostly, these are people from society’s margins: the crippled, the unemployed, or the foreigner – ‘those whose lives are already atomized’, as Dunton (2008, 73) frames their liminal category. Hanging around idly on the station’s grounds, they literally wait for something to occur to them, for something to betide upon them. Coming to the station and exposing themselves to the dynamics unleashed by its shifting constellations, its ever-changing configurations, and the ensuing unpredictable occurrences equals a strategic move performed in order to enhance their chance for change and luck. At the same time, they also hazard the possible dangers this move may entail.

The example of the blind man whom I regularly encountered at the station serves well to elucidate that kind of contingency-seeking, while depicting it in a most allegorical manner. Coming to the station, the blind man positioned himself right at the centre of turmoil and friction, right at the ever-busy yard. There, he was shoved around by people and regularly hit by passing cars. When somebody tried to lead him out of the dangerous location, he resisted vehemently; even more so when somebody offered him alms. What he was looking for – without seeing that is – was neither help nor assistance but the proximity and touch of women. And once a woman got lost in the turmoil herself and fell into his arms, he reached for her, palpating her hips and breasts and enjoying this moment of contingency bestowed upon him.

Some words put into Zarathustra’s mouth by Nietzsche embrace this form of anticipation, appreciation and exploitation of the unexpected in a concise and most vigorous fashion; they read: ‘I still cook every chance in *my* pot. And only when it has been well cooked in there do I welcome it as *my* food. And truly, many a chance came to me imperiously’ (2006, 136; original emphasis). Accra’s Neoplan Station resembles Zarathustra’s pot. Its virtually unrestricted inflow of people, goods and services provides the ingredients, which are then stirred up, cooked and served by the contingent forces of its self-serviced cuisine.

## Conclusion

Despite all the self-imposed pitfalls and obstacles, the self-induced hazards and perils, and the self-perpetuating state of confusion Accra's Neoplan Station is caught up in – it works. Whether appraised in its function as a hub of travel and transport or as a centre of commerce and trade, there is little to no reason for denying its efficacy. Since its somewhat loutish inception during Rawlings' first revolution, myriads of passengers were despatched from its yard, while myriads of workers and hawkers made a living from it. Neoplan persisted economic and political crises alike; it weathered droughts, floodings, strikes, currency devaluations, and chronic petrol shortages. Competitors surfaced in the form of state-run transport enterprises, private bus companies, and public-private initiatives for 'moving the nation'<sup>6</sup>, all trying in vain to challenge Neoplan's dominant position. Its 'hustle and bustle' continues unperturbed. Seen within the broader context of urban Africa's zealous economies of the so-called informal, the Neoplan Station stands as a condensed, synecdochic representation of both their boisterous appearance and their stubborn efficacy.

The station's organizational 'disorderliness' forms the basis of this efficacy. Though conceivable as a 'system at war with itself' (Douglas 1966, 141), it is precisely the institutionalized state of disorder resulting from its internal 'warring' which lays the ground for an organizational structure whose 'potential for patterning is indefinite' (*ibid.*, 95); a potentiality its workers and hawkers tirelessly tap into, thereby fostering their own as well as the station's subsistence. Every newly introduced pattern is destabilized and soon after 'spoiled' again by the continuous emergence of evermore newly invented and intervening patterns. Behind these processes, there is no sort of petty 'political economy of disorder' (Chabal and Daloz 1999) by which some quasi-neopatrimonial clique would seek to maximize its benefits at the expense of awestricken townsfolk-cum-travellers. Within the confusing plethora of actors and activities as which the station tends to present itself, there are more or less clear-cut structures of organization set up to serve as patterns in guiding actions and interactions. From that observation one could infer, as several authors studying comparable spaces of urban 'hustle' in Africa have argued, that '[t] here is order in the disorder' (Trefon 2004, 2; see also Bakare-Yusuf and Weate 2005; Koolhaas 2002; Koolhaas and Harvard Project on the City 2001; Rakodi 2002).

As for Neoplan's 'hustle park', this inference appears too short-sighted for it would leave out the aggregated outcome of its manifold ordering attempts, thereby missing to account for the very thrust of its multitudinous facticity. Though its organizational structure does exhibit a great many semi-formalized laws, by-laws and regulations, hierarchies, sub-hierarchies, and differentiations of tasks and responsibilities, the result is not any overall order that would establish or enable the predictability of actions. Rather, the result is to be described as an overly complex social situation caught up in the self-perpetuating, multi-layered and 'un-sublated' dialectical process of ordering and disordering. That process evolved and is sustained by ways of an involutory process of growth, whose introversive tendencies are further intensified by the station folks' many attempts to accommodate the conflicts, frictions and idiosyncrasies that the diversity of incoming passengers – as well as their very own involuting diversity – entails. In the

6 'Moving the nation' is the slogan of the most recent public transport enterprise, the Metro Mass Transit Ltd, initiated in 2003 by former president Kufour. 55 % of the company's shares are held by private companies, while 45 % remain with Ghana's government.

*agglomerated* result, most of the ordering attempts initiated by the numerous groups, sub-groups and individuals active at the station tend to work against each other, in turn setting in motion ever-new ordering attempts. Following on Christopher Taylor's (2003) heuristic use of chaos theory for social science analysis: while underneath the appearance of Neoplan's disorder lurk fragments of order; beneath these fragments of order, disorder pushes itself to the fore again.

The acknowledgment of Neoplan's 'functioning' disorder, however, should not lead to its extolment, or, as Okwui Enwezor has reproached Rem Koolhaas' interpretation of Lagos, to a 'glorification of informality, the unstable and the culture of make-do' (Enwezor 2003, 116). Though, in the end, Neoplan's disorder 'works out', its workings beget a much contradictory set of experiences. The potency of (urban) disorder thus ought to be assessed not only in its promise of power, but also in its propensity for creating danger. 'Classical' ethnographic realism (Guyer 2011, 476) holds ready quite adequate methods for the nuanced comprehension of urban confusion's incongruous social realities. Hence, questing to grasp the ground level-perspective – inclusive of its ambivalences and 'imponderabilia' – of the people hustling and striving at Neoplan's yard, we find that its disorder works differently for different people, a much obvious finding at first. Some groups of people are more prone to embrace the liberties it yields (e.g. hawkers, balabala, thieves), while others shudder with fear even before setting foot on its yard (e.g. novice passengers, passers-by, municipal tax collectors). Though, when delving deeper into the differing experiential dimensions the station's moving mosaic engenders, a more nuanced and more complex picture comes to the fore. Zeroing-in on moments when confusion arises and the unpredictable is fermented – which I framed here by two related notions of 'contingency' –, we see that also for the very same person these 'moments of contingency' can bear much contradictory implications. Shoved into the station's 'cauldron' of communications, the traveller may run straight into a multilingual trade of insults, but he may as well become perplexed by sudden feelings of belonging when approached by a station worker in his own remote vernacular (and only then begin with the exchange of insults). In much the same manner, the common loading boy may fall into despair after hours of vain attempts to fill his sub-unit's bus, but any sudden shift in the erratic inflow of passengers may well manoeuvre him into the position of a powerful broker managing the distribution of seats and tickets.

Finally, the active seeking of moments of contingency of Neoplan's denizens, implying a readiness both for exploiting and for enduring their unforeseeable consequences, reminds us of the versatility of human attitudes and actions. The need to keep that versatility in mind and focus becomes of particular importance with regard to the rapidly increasing amount of research conducted on (and in) African cities, and – even more so – with regard to the possible 'regulatory' policy implications the research might set the stage for. A good deal of recently conducted research appears rather unreceptive to that versatility. Leant onto the ephemeral persuasiveness of quantitative data on macroeconomic trends and infrastructural deficiencies, that branch of the urban research agenda carries with it two tendencies of an especially worrisome character. Firstly, there is the tendency to invoke spirits of developmentalist teleology by apprehending urban disorder as an *a priori* 'problem', without expending much effort to first try to understand the 'disordered' processes at work and the practices that keep these processes working. Secondly, there is the tendency to construct a particular assumption about human nature, which in turn appears to invoke an anthropological constant; namely, that humans *always* strive for reducing uncertainty and to increase predictability by means of ordering. Further implied in that assumption is the equation that the more uncertainty a person is caught up in, the more will (or should) he or she pursue in the quest for establishing order and predictability.

The ground-level perspective of urban disorder, such as from inside Neoplan's turmoil, urges us to refute both invocations. On the one hand, this perspective reminds us that uncertainty – along with its next of kin: unpredictability and contingency – is not to be conceived of as an intrinsically 'problematic' and exclusively negatively connoted attribute of human experience which inevitable triggers the drive to eschew it or to try to reduce its ramifications. On the other hand, it helps us to keep a balanced view of both sides of disorder's potency, thus not to misconstrue its danger of spoiling pattern, but also not to discount its power of creating new pattern.



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