

Three Social Contracts for an Academic Collective
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The Methodological Issue

The *Social Epistemology* Review and Reply Collective (SERRC) is an experimental foundation, with several facets. Firstly, it is intended to be an experiment with more collective forms of academic work. Secondly, it is an offshoot of the journal *Social Epistemology* and is intended to develop the research program that gives that journal its title, as expounded in the work of its founder, Steve Fuller.¹ Thirdly, its members were initially drawn from graduate students meaning that, with some of those now having graduated, it is now additionally an organisation of 'early-career' or peripheral academic workers. This paper is an attempt to consider the relations among these different facets.

The commitment to 'experimentalism' means that it is intended that SERRC's agenda should be member-driven. However, in practice this has turned out to be in tension with the fact that SERRC is an artificial construction, with members recruited by *SE*'s current editor James Collier (who conceives his role more as that of supporting than directly participating in SERRC's projects). Thus in reality members share little except the fact that their academic interests may broadly be classed as 'social epistemological' (which is pretty vague), and that they thought the collective sounded like an interesting idea: they are largely strangers, without even a shared national context. Whilst this diversity should be able to provide a source of 'creative tension' and a check on the uncritical generalisation of national peculiarities, it has nevertheless become clear that over and above members' no doubt fundamental differences on theoretical issues, it is necessary to develop a sense of corporate identity, sufficient to motivate our efforts, and provide for a sense of responsibility, shared direction and a conception of the immediate tasks that need to get done. Ultimately this boils down to a need for a stronger definition of what SERRC is *for*, at least as regards its *immediate* if not its *ultimate* purposes.

This raises problems of method, for in order to guide a collective effort, what we need is not that one or another member should provide *one* particular account of the functions the collective might fulfil in contemporary society. What we need is an account we can *collectively* recognise and give our assent to, and not an individual account which would beg all the questions on which we are no doubt at variance. On the contrary, what we need to focus on is our commonalities, and whether a shared sense of purpose can be derived therefrom. In other words, SERRC stands in need of a *social contract*: for as Bentham's demythologisation (and democratisation) of Hobbes shows most clearly, the purpose of a social contract (or 'constitutional code') is to articulate shared interests, thereby clarifying what parties can expect of each other in practice. This in turn reduces the anxiety which flows from uncertainty on this point, which inhibits commitment to ambitious projects that extend into the future (Postema 1986). What interests, then, can members have in the collective? Two answers are obvious: firstly, the opportunity for collaboration and 'experiment' are attractive for young scholars, who do not readily

¹ http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/academicstaff/sfuller/fullers_index/

encounter such opportunities; and secondly, participation might possibly be of some use in the furtherance of a career.² However, ultimately neither is able to generate the kind of social contract needed. Collaboration and experiment are not ends in themselves, but only valuable when one has something worthwhile to collaborate on or to test. Similarly an academic career may be furthered only where a 'valuable' product is produced. Thus, members can hardly be expected to actively commit to collective work, unless some general value can be assigned to the project. The following essay seeks to address this issue by considering not one but three such contracts. Members are free to sign up for whichever they choose, as none are legally binding—but the last is especially commended.

First Contract: A Dialectical Experiment?

Here we should consider the aims which led Collier to organise SERRC in the first place. Though Collier did not develop these ideas at great length in his communication with recruits—chiefly due to his wish that SERRC's agenda be member-led—the original 'idea' for the collective can be broken down into two suggestions: (a) to re-establish the experimental (or better, dialectical) ways characteristic of the journal in its *naissance*; and (b) that collective work would be a suitably 'social' practice for a 'social epistemology'. Though any connection between them is not immediately obvious, both suggestions are interesting and deserve the consideration of members. However, both ultimately presuppose a stronger shared theoretical commitment among members of the collective than seems to exist. Regarding (a), the methodological orientation of the early days of the journal seems intellectually bound to the specific position Fuller's understanding of 'social epistemology'. Though members of SERRC are not all fully paid up Fullerians, the problem is not so much that this is likely to be objectionable to members, as that it relies on the developed Socratic personality of Fuller himself.

As already noted the term 'social epistemology' is itself pretty indeterminate. On one definition, social epistemology is 'An intellectual movement of broad cross-disciplinary provenance that attempts to reconstruct the problems of *epistemology* once knowledge is regarded as intrinsically social.' (*Norton Dictionary of Modern Thought*, quoted in Fuller 2002a, ix) The tendency to see knowledge as *social* can be opposed to the philosophical epistemology of the Enlightenment (a.k.a. 'Cartesianism'), which, though not nearly as ahistorical as is sometimes thought, did tend to idealise knowledge as a product of the individual mind, with any social interaction between these minds (e.g. as mediated through language) considered a secondary, and possibly harmful feature of knowledge production (Hacking 1975). Leaving aside its own residual dogmas, this approach sought to submit established custom (and especially the scholastic discourse of the universities) to the authority of individual 'reason'. But the social epistemologist's emphasis on 'the problems of *epistemology*' equally involves opposition to the Counter-Enlightenment,

² In the current social division of labour, 'careerism' is not a vice one can be altogether without, meaning it is not an accusation that should be bandied about unreflexively: it is ever more the case that the combination of overwork and intensified sub-division of academic fields mean that even the purest seeker after truth must first pursue the opportunities to seek and propagate that truth within the career system.

which argued on sceptical grounds that the incapacity of human reason predetermined a relativist submission to the authority of religion and state. In other words, the social epistemologist seeks to retain a sense that the descriptive question of how knowledge currently is organised, and the normative question of how knowledge (and therefore society) *ought* to be organised, might have different answers. However, this still includes every major figure who has attempted to mediate the struggle between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, including the German Idealists, Marxists, neo-Kantian sociologists, and Marxisant figures like Mannheim and the Frankfurt School, the French 'positivists' from Comte to Bourdieu (via Durkheim and Foucault), and the Popperian philosophers of science (see 2002a, chpt.1, for Fuller's own sense of this history). Today, social epistemology necessarily confronts the emergence of positive programs of social scientific science studies, though as Fuller has argued, these are strongly influenced by Counter-Enlightenment attitudes, largely through the malign influence of Kuhn (1970; Fuller, 2000b), whilst philosophers have also sought to limit the radical impulse of a sociological 'secularisation of science' by constraining it within a still basically Cartesian approach.

Those involved in the Anglophone discussion on 'social epistemology'—who by no means exhaust the ranks of those committed to the general idea—have attempted to reduce this intellectual diversity in two ways (Fuller 2002a: xii-vii): either through a 'geometrical' (i.e. still basically Cartesian) approach, which seeks to intellectually develop and delimit the 'true' consequences of the socialising turn *a priori* of venturing into 'society' to 'apply' it; or, as in Fuller's own understanding, through a 'dialectical' (Socratic) approach whereby that content must emerge and be validated through worldly dialogue and political struggle, so that whatever is putatively universal in one's views must be proved so in practice. The positions of the 'geometrician' are subject to such dialectical validation nevertheless, but the geometrical withdrawal—characteristic of the classical project of 'philosophy'—serves to confine this validating discussion to the narrow 'disciplined' community of specialists (from, according to Fuller 2000b, Plato). For Fuller (as for the early Fichte) a putatively universal knowledge can only genuinely validate itself as such through its engagement of all sectors of the population (Fuller 2003). Thus Fuller conceives social epistemology less as a 'paradigm' for the production of texts, than as a 'social movement' for the democratisation of knowledge—and, thereby, a rationalisation of social reality (Fuller 2000b, chpt. 8). Much of Fuller's substantive philosophical 'position' can be viewed as a series of self-acknowledgedly corrigible attempts to articulate and argue the attitude underlying this project, as against 'philosophical' mystifications of disciplinary boundaries, and to develop its political methods and vehicles. Thus Fuller is committed to a 'rule utilitarian' orientation to science which aims to hold science to meeting the epistemic needs of society, rather than to a socially irresponsible pursuit of 'truth for truth's sake', to which society is seen as a barrier.³ Fuller's views on the university, whether as a technique for the development of 'universal' knowledge (2003), or as a vehicle for the redistribution of intellectual advantage are closely connected to this project. But whilst this dialectical approach

³ This seems, at least on Fuller's telling, to be his main difference from the more orthodox 'veristic' versions of 'social epistemology', e.g. that of Goldman (1999).

suggests that a collective of non-Fullerians might not necessarily be an anti-Fullerian institution, this Fullerian outlook cannot be considered to define the collective aims of SERRC, at least until members self-consciously adopt a Fullerian identity (which of course they may wish to do, but have not done as yet). Indeed, the Socratic species of dialectic seems more suited to defining the external attitude a Fullerian collective might take towards interlocutors with familiar or well-defined intellectual positions, than as a method of interaction for a group of inexperienced intellectuals with, as yet, relatively anonymous public identities.

Second Contract: From Social Epistemology to Collective Knowledge?

The second strand in Collier's initial thinking—point (b) above—relies on an inference from the 'social' in 'social epistemology' to the idea of *collective* organisation. This strategy has the advantage that it does not require extensive agreement on theories of society, etc, but only the general commitment to social epistemology in the broadest sense, which members of the collective share with each other, as well as with the journal's contributors and readers. However, it is unsuitable on two grounds. *Firstly*, it is incapable of providing useful guidance to collective work. *Secondly*, the inference is either a parallogism (i.e. it is only apparently valid) or it requires a much fuller metaphysical and social theoretical elaboration. Whilst this might resolve the first problem, members of the collective cannot all be expected to accept the worldview implicit in such a development, at least at the outset.

The first problem is that a failure to provide a fuller specification of the relation between our social epistemological interests and our collective operations has also reinforced some methodological red herrings, inasmuch as it sanctions the impression that whenever we are doing something *collectively* (whatever, and however we do it) our behaviour can claim to some higher ontological validation. Unless we provide a stronger theorisation of *what kind* of collective activity is called for, we may fall into the trap of conceiving our role as merely the *collective* performance of tasks derived from the existing academic system, against which we are supposed to be innovating. Thus, we initially began by writing collective reviews, with the expectation that the finished product would imitate the forms of contemporary 'individualist' academia—a monological argument, standard summaries of content, and a fairly limited word count, etc. However, thus confining the collective to tasks associated with the habits of an individualised labour process, seems to have defeated the purpose. Clearly a monological review is better (and more efficiently) written by a single individual or by two individuals with a shared outlook, whilst the marriage of short word count and standard requirements for summary have left very little room for interesting work or a genuine exchange of views. If the purposes of the collective are not more decisively articulated, and made the real point of departure for work, collective work risks degenerating into a sham, producing only individual contributions and thus collective in name only.

The second problem emerges when one considers that the direct inference (qua tautology) from social epistemology to collective organisation relies on an uncritical identification of the *social* with the *collective* (i.e. with group behaviour). This identification being

challenged, the inference then amounts to a paralogism, constructed through a shift in the meaning of the term 'social'. Per contra, the inference from the social character of knowledge production to the assumption of collective work practices actually depends on two further assumptions: (1) that despite the fact that all knowledge production must be 'social', current academic practice fails to *truly* correspond to the norms inherent in the fact that knowledge production must be so (i.e. it is *alienated*); and (2) that this is a bad thing. Arguably, combining this with the fact of SERRC's existence, the first inference also tacitly presupposes a second: from the valorisation of collective methods to the decision that 'early career academics' were those best placed to pioneer and develop them. Taken 'under analysis', these inferences together indicate the rough outlines of a social theory, an intellectual politics and even a metaphysics. Thus, if we consider the current system to be *alienated* (as many do, e.g. Clark 2006), and are thus tempted to view experiments with more collective forms of work as attempts to develop a *more humane* alternative, then this does suggest the following question: if this is such a noble undertaking, *why* are established academics not pursuing it, and why should it be thought that the undertaking might suit junior academics better? After all, as the academic careers system is ostensibly ordered by 'meritocratic' norms, then the seniors ought, on the face of it, to have more 'merits' (i.e. more knowledge and experience, if not basic ability), and thus to be better suited for this 'meritorious' task. If this is not the case, this can only be because there is a qualitative difference between the general character and outlook of the two groups, and not just quantitative increments of either merit (superior ability, experience, career achievements), or of some measure of institutional advancement (better pay, bigger reputations, more 'cultural capital', etc). Moreover, it is implied that the meritocratic values of the academic system are, on this point, in contradiction with those systematically advanced as more meritorious also lacking the merit necessary to transform the system for the better (perhaps because they identify with it and the professional identities it affords them, or because they are bound to it in ways which render them incapable of challenging it). As a result, one would have to conclude that the 'social contract' of contemporary academia, centred as it is on meritocratic norms, is malfunctioning, engendering rather than resolving antagonisms.

Individual members may decide for themselves whether and how far this series of deductions map onto their own experience of academia. But whilst it might be possible to generate a shared outlook by fleshing this outline out into a developed, properly grounded social theory, or even just by treating it as an itinerary for investigation, even the latter strategy is going to involve over-promoting an agenda that is too controversial for a social contract that would genuinely express an outlook shared by all members. For the somewhat classically Marxian structure of argument here is clearly *essentialist*: knowledge is, in its essence, social and for that reason we ought, therefore, to stop behaving as if it were not. But this implies an ontology in which essences have a complex relation to their particular instantiations: on the one hand, the essence must be *indifferent* to its particular instantiations, so that even isolated production can count as *social*; yet on the other hand (and in contradiction to this), the essence must at the same time be considered as especially exemplified by one of those instantiations, whilst the others are considered in some degree inferior or suboptimal. Only thus can one both acknowledge the obvious fact that the 'social' is more than the 'collective', and yet maintain that the

social character of knowledge *privileges* the adoption of collective methods, in opposition to the current system in which production in isolation predominates. The exemplary mode thus becomes the *telos*, considered immanent but not yet realised, buried in the womb, of the other modes. This structural relation of essence to existence is characteristic of classical social theory which, beginning with Adam Smith, typically imagined that a social ontology (or theory of the nature of society) necessarily implied an optimal state of social functioning (in Smith's case, *laissez faire* capitalism), which as *telos* conferred an inner meaning on the process of history, and for the more classical thinkers also some species of causal direction.⁴ Obviously, though, a 'collectivist' outlook suggests a closer relation to the less individualist, more 'socialist' versions of this approach, e.g. the Marxist or Durkheimian.⁵ However, whilst this suggests the potential for collective work to feature in some such metanarrative account, obviously such essentialist metanarratives are today the object of strong critiques (e.g. from Popperian and Foucauldian directions), and contemporary social theory largely attempts to avoid them (though perhaps unsuccessfully). Thus, though these debates have not been settled, the controversial character of this tradition makes this kind of social theory unsuitable for expressing a common itinerary for the collective.

Third Contract: Collective Organisation for Junior Academics?

The last section has sketched out the shape of a possible metanarrative which, however interesting, is unsuitable as a social contract for SERRC (being too controversial). Nevertheless, the suggestion that the junior academic standpoint is a distinct one is suggestive, as our aim is precisely to develop a 'constitution' for collective work through an articulation of our shared standpoint. Therefore it is suggested that we reverse track, leaving the question of the collective's relation to the broader project of social epistemology undetermined, whilst we take our initial orientation from our situation and experiences as 'early career academics'. We can then begin our work by taking our own social position as a theme for our early investigations, whether by reviewing relevant books, or in some other manner, as members may prefer. This project then becomes both the work of grounding our standpoint and the work expressed by that standpoint; both an inquiry into how we are to work, and work which produces the topic of that inquiry, and thus its answer. Such a focus on the problems and identity of early career academics would also give our work a natural audience and, more importantly, would give that audience an opportunity to learn something systematic about itself.⁶

It might be worried that this gives an over-narrow (and perhaps somewhat narcissistic) view of the goals of the collective, given the broad range of interests of members. On the other hand, a range of interests broader than their own immediate self-interest is surely itself a part of the situation of 'early career academics'. As a way into this topic, we can begin by noting that this last phrase is something of a euphemism, as the development of

⁴ Earlier social theories had imagined history as a repeated cycle rather than a movement with a progressive direction.

⁵ Indeed, the very term *socialism* suggests this pattern of argument, in that *social*-ism would presumably be the most especially *social* society

⁶ One proposed project involves a collective review of Gardner and Mendoza 2010.

academic systems have for some time now tended in the direction of the overproduction of PhDs relative to available careers. Thus Mark Bousquet (2002) has written of the completed PhD as the 'waste product' of a graduate education valued only for the hyper-exploited teaching cohort it supplies (see also Nelson, 2004). Beyond the exploitation of PhD students, academic cohorts can now be divided into two strata: those in permanent posts, and those on short-term contracts, with the latter condition for many less a short-term discomfort than an indefinitely extended condition. Empirical investigations have indicated significant differences in experience and attitude between the two groups (see e.g. Bryson 2004). To this writer (who does not claim expertise on the matter), the differences seem to be as follows:

In many countries the established academic 'seniors', together with professionals in general, have been under attack as part of the neoliberal agenda, though this cannot sensibly be viewed merely as a governmental imposition (Halsey 1992).⁷ This has involved a relative decline in average pay, decreasing autonomy through systems of bureaucratic control, and increasing workloads (largely due to the same bureaucratisation). This can be called the 'proletarianisation' of the professions (Callinicos 2006; Halsey 1992), so long as we emphasise that this process is gradual, and far from complete. In comparative terms, the life of the academic remains for many a satisfying one, and despite dismay over the erosion of the critical autonomy of the academic intellect, traditional academic values and self-perceptions retain an (increasingly embattled) appeal (Bryson 2004). This enhances academics' dependency, and provides an incentive to a long-established culture of caution with regards to political activity. Where academics are genuinely committed to political change, this tends to come at the cost of a tacit Faustian pact whereby they offer little resistance or impetus towards social alternatives in their immediate institutional environment, whilst developing the theoretical analyses that are a necessary condition for effective resistance throughout the rest of the social body. Indeed, it is hard realistically to see how things could be otherwise. The problem is that this is usually combined with an uncritical attitude towards the traditional form of the research university.⁸ It is precisely the traditional right (and power) to research freely that serves as the precondition for the generation of such oppositional knowledges, and it is moreover the commitment to freedom of academic opinion that grounds their solidarity with their less radical colleagues. Thus, such leftwing critics of current developments in the university often adopt an 'externalist' account, which pins most of the blame on government intervention, and does not challenge the existing form of the institution as such, or imperil their working relations with their colleagues. In doing so, they ignore the capacity of the system to marginalise the knowledge they produce (Fuller 2000a, 85), as well as the malign and infantilising political influence this ideology exercises on their students, and perhaps also on early career academics (Waters 2004). Moreover, this traditional

⁷ I model the distinction between 'senior' and 'junior' academics on Waters 2004, without being entirely happy about these terms.

⁸ The research university is, in fact, already a capitalist form: as Clark 2006 shows, 'commodification', 'marketisation', and 'capitalisation' are nothing new.

ideology has little persuasive force outside the university, when it comes to resistance to the neoliberal agenda.

Objectively speaking, things seem much worse for contract workers, given the chronic insecurity of their employment future (though they are generally spared the bureaucratic labours senior academics find so frustrating). Considered as a group, they are, by necessity, oriented to a university of the future, for no current university is big enough to hold them. They are not less dependent than the seniors, and in fact, lacking tenure, they are much more so. They are also led to identify with the seniors to the extent that they retain the hope of one day joining them. Combined with their inexperience in the face of the increased confusion and fragmentation of the systems of knowledge, much of which can itself be considered a result of political neglect rather than an appropriate mirror for the 'complexity' of the world (Fuller 2000: 78-81), this establishes the hegemony of the academic seniors (even when the most radical 'outsiders' among them) over the 'juniors'.⁹ Nevertheless, to the extent that the imagined future 'career' comes to resemble a mirage, and with the multiplication of the humiliations inherent in prolonged hierarchical subordination (but intolerable to mature individuals in a democratic culture), adjuncts are increasingly inclined to 'throw their bodies on the wheels',¹⁰ to trade in the possibility of a future career for the dignity of resistance in the present. Thus, especially in the US, adjunct unionisation is now a well-established phenomenon.¹¹ No doubt members of SERRC are caught between these two alternatives. Nevertheless, there is no good reason to evade self-consciousness of this situation. And it is perhaps in this direction that we can finally find some role which would extend, methodologically, over the whole series of 'social epistemological' topics, rather than these particular issues.

The chief mechanism by which this hegemony is exercised is that of *peer review*, which is in fact the central mechanism for 'collective consciousness formation' within the current academic system. Because career success depends on recognised publications, that those who do the 'recognising' are those who dominate the system of peer review, i.e. in general the older generation, young academics must to some degree accommodate to the outlook of the older generation, which usually means adopting its problems and language.¹² This is perhaps one reason why no genuinely new intellectual movements have emerged since the 1980s. We should also emphasise the intellectual benefits (or socially constructed 'merits') which accrue to the seniors through this mechanism, namely 'cultural capital' and 'emotional energy' (Collins 1998, 33-7). The former includes the easy access to new information, as the most established academics are invited to review the hottest books, mark essays by the best students, and examine the

⁹ This is the basic explanation for the intellectual vice Fuller (2005, 67-83) has called 'one-stop shopping for the mind'.

¹⁰ These are the famous words of Mario Savio, the student campaigner of the 1960s (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcx9BJRadfw>).

¹¹ See the resources at Marc Bousquet's website (<http://howtheuniversityworks.com/wordpress/>), and the online journal Workplace (<http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/journal/index.php/workplace/index>).

¹² Fuller mentions 'gerontocracy' in the course of his examination of the pathologies of existing forms of peer review (2002b, 236). The theme of the intellectual colonisation of the younger by the older generation is central to Waters (2004).

best theses—all of which serve as sources of information unavailable especially to students, and in some degree to junior academics. The latter includes the personal confidence attendant on the sense of engaging with reality (which might be entirely unjustified) that comes from other 'leading figures' in the profession confirming your sense of self by responding to your work (even when they do so critically). By distributing these social properties more or less unilaterally, 'peer' review thus artificially stacks the cards against the 'early career academic' in an unmeritocratic fashion.

Perhaps, then, we should consider SERRC as an organisational antidote to this kind of structural malady, so that it is here that the connection of collective methods and the interests of early career academics can be found. This would involve constituting ourselves as primarily a collective for mutual peer review (or, with a nod to Foucault, 'counter-peer review'), and only secondarily for collective writing. Thus, if an individual wants to undertake a project (e.g. an interview) in which no-one else has shown a strong interest, or if in the process of its actual production an initially collective project has *de facto* fallen on the shoulders of one individual, we could nevertheless consider the result collective without sham on the basis that responses are solicited. This leads to a rationale for the following methods, which have been suggested in the course of discussions between members. First of all, it has been suggested (by Thomas Basbøll) that we should contribute:

'capsule reviews of books and articles we have recently read (not necessarily because they were recently published) and found to be of interest. Keep these reviews short (300 words is nice) and to the point. Always containing some information about the author, the basic argument, and, importantly, the reviewers opinion and sense of why the text matters. Then let a discussion emerge in the comment stream. By showing each other what and how we actually read the work of others, we'll go a long way towards defining the conversation that the collective hopes to influence. We will also get a good sense of each other's intellectual positions and personalities ... if we are reasonably disciplined about it, posting, say, three reviews a week (altogether, not individually), and commenting as we see fit (driven by interest not duty, I should emphasize).'

This should serve as a first step in the development of projects, with interesting discussions themselves perhaps being edited into article form, whilst unresolved questions that emerge in the course of these discussions might well generate shared review projects, whether designed as an overview of the available literature, or an in-depth interrogation of one text which seems particularly interesting. In addition, the current writer has earlier suggested that, in the case of more developed projects:

'we should undertake that in each case at least two of us will review each other's contributions pre-publication, with actual collaborations (collective *writing*) a more derivative form which may or many not emerge as shared interests emerge in the process of internal review. This would require some kind of semi-formal account-keeping, with a sense that everyone has an obligation to review (provide feedback) sometimes, though obviously this could be negotiable in specific cases given difficult workloads and specific interests and knowledge. The results of such feedback could, depending on the

substantiality of the response and the preference of the author(s), result in pre-publication adjustments to the text, in comments appended to it (as per the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*), or in an independent response, to which the author might or might not reply in turn.'

It is suggested that this is a social contract that members should be able to fulfil. This is not to deny the interest of the first two 'contracts', as ways of thinking about the possible social role an institution like SERRC might have, and indeed the current author finds both considerably appealing. Nevertheless, it is only the latter contract that seems capable of expressing a genuinely shared interest, that is non-trivial enough to generate and intellectually underwrite a workable method for practical collective work.

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