



**THE TASK MAY BE THE SAME BUT DIFFERENCES MAKE A DIFFERENCE:
REFLECTIONS ON THE MAGNA CHARTA OBSERVATORY CONFERENCE,
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Before 2014, I had never heard of the Magna Charta Universitatum and the Magna Charta Observatory. Consequently, I had a great deal to learn before the conference, “University Integrity – Society’s Benefit” which was to take place on September 18-19, 2014. I learned that the Magna Charta Universitatum is a document stating the “fundamental principles, which must, now and always, support the vocation of universities”. Drafted by Fabio Roversi-Monaco, then Rector of the University of Bologna, the document was signed by 388 European university leaders at a ceremony in Bologna on September 18, 1988. A few years later, in 2000, the Magna Charta Observatory was founded to guard and monitor these principles. The organizational backbone of the Observatory is a Council whose fifteen members come from different countries; its modest funding is from the Italian government. By 2014, the number of signatories had risen to some 800, unevenly representing more than eighty countries around the world. The list included seventy-five institutions in Kazakhstan but only two in China and a mere handful in the United States; Harvard, Princeton, and Yale were absent. The Observatory sponsors and arranges an annual conference in Bologna on or

about September 18; every second year the event includes a solemn ritual for signatories. In 2014, the conference was held outside Bologna for the first time - without the ritual alas.

While it was a straight-forward task to assemble this basic information, the Magna Charta document itself initially struck me as pompous in tone and partially problematic in content. Yet in the course of the Uppsala conference, I began to get a better grasp of what the document stands for and why there might be a need for it. Inge Jonsson, former Vice-Chancellor of Stockholm University and one of the original signatories, helped to clarify matters. In his dinner speech, he elegantly summarized the highlights of the charter, emphasizing that it formulates the “duty of the universities to examine critically” both “established knowledge” and “new discoveries and theories without being restrained by political interests or cultural trends.” It establishes, he said, the “autonomy of the universities, the academic freedom to teach and to do research ... as a *conditio sine qua non*”. Yet, autonomy does not permit isolation: a “true” university is “a vital participant in the continuous building of a better society” and a strong document is necessary, not least to uphold public trust in the university. Indeed, Jonsson implied, if it was important in 1988 to state principles of balance between autonomy and societal duties, it may be even more important to do so today, when institutions of higher learning are more complex and more in demand than ever before at the same time as they are increasingly linked to each other via unprecedented and labyrinthine global networks.

This is the framework within which issues were debated on September 18-19, 2014. Some of the nearly 150 participants from around thirty countries are central figures within the Magna Charta Observatory and are well familiar with the issues at hand. But many others appeared to be even more ignorant than I was, at least initially. Yet, the conference organizers had worked hard to combat ignorance and the program offered a variety of perspectives and components. It became increasingly clear to me that the bold declarations of

the charter and the work of the guarding council pose critical, albeit daunting and potentially divisive, questions.

On the following pages I will address a few intertwined issues that were (or were not) highlighted in the conference and use them as starting-points for reflections. I have selected issues in a self-indulgent manner, twisting them a bit to suit my own interests and instincts as an anthropologist, ethnologist and folklorist with a long past at an institute for advanced study. Two issues in particular will be on my mind. One is Fundamental Principle number four in the charter, which states that a “university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition; it transcends geographical and political frontiers, and affirms the vital need for different cultures to know and influence each other”. While it is undoubtedly the case that universities around the world, as we know them today, are linked to European traditions of knowledge formation (Burke 2000), and while one would agree to the need for cultures to know one another, I wonder what the presumed trusteeship of “the European humanist tradition” actually means. Does it mean that university professors and students everywhere are to be committed to such a trusteeship? A related point, to which I will return a few times, was made by Sijbolt Noorda, President of the Magna Charta Observatory Council. In his keynote address he said that “we all have the same task ahead of us”, although “the challenges are not the same in Ghana or Sweden” and in another context he noted that “the discussions will be different, although the challenges will be very similar”. However the slippages in the formulations are to be understood, it appears that close to the surface loomed issues of similarity and difference. If the principles are the same -- as they must be in a charter stating fundamental and joint principles --, what roles do cultural and social differences actually play? Do they make a difference? Do they affect the “European humanist tradition”?

Permeating every corner of Norwegian society

In his remarks in the panel, “Magna Charta and University Integrity: Yesterday, Today and in the Future,” Sverker Sörlin, Professor of Environmental History at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, referred to a ten volume history of the University of Oslo which demonstrates that in Norway “almost every big issue is treated by people who have university links and backgrounds.” Indeed, “every corner of Norwegian society is permeated” by university activities and concerns: medicine, media, agriculture, schools, museums, business leadership, the military, and on and on. Sörlin also implied that the situation is similar in other well-to-do countries in Europe and North America. It is certainly true in Sweden, where the universities and other institutions of higher education together receive an enormous chunk of state funding. And it is also true in the United States where universities, to a much greater degree than in Scandinavia, are supported by private donations and student fees and sometimes also benefit from impressive endowments. Regardless of system, a high degree of permeation is expensive.

But, Sörlin also observed, at the same time as the universities can have a huge societal impact, academics, not least scholars in Europe and North America, often undervalue their own influence, meekly yielding to those who question the worth and value of university education and research (cf. Holm, Jarrick and Scott 2014: 52-63). These scholars tend to take university autonomy and integrity for granted without reflecting on what these mean to the societies they serve. In other words, complacent faculties and students in rich countries need to debate much more than they do, the intertwined implications of autonomy, integrity and societal duties. They need to understand that their work is crucial to the well-being of the societies in which they live. It is not difficult to agree with the significance of Sörlin’s message.

But how does the Norwegian “permeation story” compare to the “narratives of other countries?” Sörlin asked and then dropped the question, noting that it is not easy to find valid comparative information about the impact of universities across the world. While I realize that comparisons are difficult, I will nevertheless, with “permeation” in mind, briefly turn to a country that was not mentioned in the conference, namely Mali in West Africa with which I have some familiarity. This now war-torn, primarily Muslim, country of close to fifteen million inhabitants which gained independence from France in 1960 contains within itself a multitude of culturally and linguistically diverse groups. There are ancient centers of Muslim learning and libraries holding medieval manuscripts as well as a long history of trade and cultural exchanges with far-away places in Africa, Asia and countries around the Mediterranean. But the state and the economy are weak and so are the legal and educational systems. Perhaps as many as 70% percent of the inhabitants are more or less illiterate and this despite free primary education. During the last few decades young people have been crowding into the capital of Bamako and many have left for Paris and other points in Europe and North America, sometimes succeeding in crossing the Mediterranean in overcrowded boats.

A University of Bamako (also known as the University of Mali) was founded in 1996 and is a primarily state funded institution that is now divided into four. With its nearly 73,000 students it is much larger than the University of Oslo which reports 27,000.¹ According to the home-page, the University of Bamako has a “modern computer network” as well as an “educational network” with foreign universities. What this actually means in these times of civil war is unclear. Knowing a little about the difficult history of this university whose instructors have periodically not been paid at all and whose students have sometimes been on strike, it is difficult to imagine that it functions smoothly. Ever since the founding, the central faculties have been medicine and agriculture; in these fields PhD degrees have

been granted. Those who have wished to obtain degrees in the humanities and social sciences have usually studied abroad. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when Mali had a one-party military regime, academics often studied in the Soviet Union or DDR; more recently advanced students attend universities in France, francophone Canada, and also in other countries. Several have received graduate education via various “sandwich” arrangements with universities in Europe and North America. These arrangements offer students periods of intense study on their own campuses sandwiched in between longer periods in the home-country.² Yet, despite these and other efforts, few advanced scholars in the social sciences and humanities remain in Mali. Professionals, who do stay, are trained in medicine, agriculture, or business, but there are few employment possibilities for historians, anthropologists, or linguists. In the eyes of some observers the academic situation is unclear and fragmented, to others it is dismal.

It would seem to be foregone conclusions, first, that Malian society is weakly, if at all, “permeated” by the university and, second, that a rich Norway can guarantee its universities a degree of integrity and autonomy that is not possible in a poor and fragmented country. Yet, I do not think that these conclusions are givens in all respects. In Mali and the Malian diaspora, intellectuals, journalists, engineers, architects, city planners, local politicians, artists, people in the media and the music industry eagerly debate ideas of university autonomy and societal involvement to a degree that is seldom found among North European academics. The idea that universities are important is shared by many. To this I would like to add that, in addition to their importance in Mali, the stability and functioning of universities in one country are important for the world network of universities. What does it mean for an increasingly interconnected global network of universities that some universities do not at all seem to permeate the societies which they are supposed to serve, while others are said to permeate “every corner” of theirs?

A point I am trying to make is that it is just as significant to discuss a Mali as to discuss a Norway. To truly understand something about university penetration in our world, we need to embrace all societies including the seemingly peripheral ones. We cannot concentrate only on those that appear to set the standards in a perceived center of the world.

Enthusiasm, gloom, and despair

Even if Mali (and most other countries) were not mentioned in the Uppsala conference, societies outside Europe and North America were not forgotten. On the contrary, they figured in several prominently placed presentations. One of these, held by Hans Rosling, was called “Fact-Based View on Global Health”. A Professor of International Health at Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Rosling is famous for his visually dramatic presentations of the findings of Gapminder, a research organization of which he is Co-founder and Chair. In the first key-note lecture of the conference he presented findings that contradict deeply entrenched stereotypes that flourish in what he called the “Old West”. Emphasizing that “globalization has barely started”, he noted that, by 2085, two thirds of the world population will be living in Asia and Africa and that soon a majority of the university students in the “Old West” will come from countries outside Europe and North America. In addition, child mortality is falling all over the world and more and more women attend school. The improvements have taken place at an unprecedented speed. Yet, neither the universities nor the media in the “Old West” have kept abreast. Over and over, Rosling emphasized that European and North American universities are using and teaching outmoded ideas and stale clichés, such as “the developing” and “the developed” worlds. “Stop teaching the wrong things!” he exhorted the conference participants.

There is much to be said for beginning the proceedings with an urgent voice pointing to the speed with which positive changes are taking place in the world. Yet, conference participants did not seem prepared to discuss Rosling's global perspectives and their implications for the relationship between university integrity and societal benefits. At least there were few references to his lecture and its positive spirit in the sessions that I attended. Rather, several presentations and discussions were dominated by a gloomy view of world developments.

This was largely the case with Tebojo Moja's keynote address, "Academic Conundrum in Maintaining Autonomy and Integrity" which dealt with the current situation in higher education in South Africa and the United States. Moja is Professor of Higher Education at New York University and former Executive Director of the National Commission on Higher Education in South Africa. While she pointed to parallels to the United States, a great deal of her presentation pertained to South Africa. Observing that "more is expected of the universities today but for less money", she spoke about overfull African universities with severe equipment shortages and huge numbers of young people pushing to obtain degrees. These students learn via the media, they hardly ever meet their fellow students and even less often a live instructor. There is a severe lack of qualified teachers at the same time as it is hard for those who do exist to find time to conduct research and reach promotion and employment security; sometimes professors plagiarize in order to advance. The students in the underfunded South African system often end up with huge debts and, to add insult to injury, proposed laws threaten to strip universities of academic freedom. Similar difficulties abound also elsewhere, Moja emphasized, not least in the United States where undergraduate teaching is increasingly conducted by adjunct faculty who lack secure positions and where students frequently end up hugely in debt.

Moja was persuasive and her warnings are important. Yet, I think that it would have been valuable had she balanced her observations by pointing to other perspectives. Are there also signs of improvements and hope? As Rosling indicated, a great deal is happening on a positive note within higher education in Africa. To this could be added reports that a few African universities -- some of which began as colonial enterprises -- have gained greater autonomy even in countries where there have been political attempts to curtail such developments.³ This is true of elite institutions, such as Makerere University in Uganda, Capetown University in South Africa, the University of Ibadan in Nigeria and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. While these institutions have developed in different directions and have experienced ups and downs, they remain flagships in the Association of African Universities. Like lesser known African institutions they are not only state funded but also benefit from a complex patchwork of European, North American and Asian subsidies and donations. Through intense collaboration, innovative media programs have been established, among them programs that focus on collaboration between African institutions and programs for women who cannot leave their families and stay at university locations for long periods of time. Efforts such as these are obviously not sufficient. Nor are all of them laudable. Some cannot evade the stamp of neo-colonialism. Yet, according to enthusiastic accounts, many of them are contributing to positive developments.

One question on my mind is how the many European academics at the Magna Charta conference reacted to Moja's presentation. As Rosling told the audiences in no uncertain terms, most Europeans remain remarkably ignorant about the southern parts of the globe. If they know anything about African higher education, it is via the gloom and negativism that dominate the news media. It seems to me that for many in the Uppsala audience Moja's presentation must have merely confirmed the image of misery that they formed long before they entered university, not least in geography and history lessons in

primary school. In a sense, Moja's presentation might have further cemented clichés about Africa and other parts of the South.

Another kind of sadness and despair resonated through the presentation by Jordanian anthropologist Seteney Shami in the workshop entitled "Integrity in Changing University Landscapes". Shami who is Program Director at the Social Science Research Council in New York City and Founder and Director of the Arab Social Science Council in Beirut, addressed complex issues pertaining to universities in the Arab world. Like Moja, she linked her observations to developments in higher education in the United States. Calling her talk "Academic Integrity in Times of Insecurity", Shami wondered how one is to think about academic integrity in situations when one cannot assume "stability in social and political relations" and when one cannot assume "a bounded society or state". In the Arab world today, she said, the universities are in the eye of the storm. The established national universities are in decline and all the universities are fractured. Education is interrupted and insecure for young people, some of whom are now living under the rule of the Islamic State.

Yet, in this fragile situation transnational educational forces are swiftly moving in, not only in the form of sandwich set-ups and on-line learning and moocs, but also in the form of new academic institutions. The United States and some European countries are swiftly establishing new universities, colleges, and "boutique" extensions of existing institutions. Shami mentioned that there are one hundred new establishments within one third of the Arab region. Some of these institutions are founded to accommodate the shrinking academic market in the United States. Best known is New York University in Abu Dhabi, billed as "a global network university". Here all students are paid for in advance and no one is in debt. One could not miss the criticism in Shami's voice, regarding the role that the United States and Europe have come to play in the Arab university worlds. She was particularly critical of the lack of concern with local cultures in the new establishments and of

the narrowing of the university experience for many students and, most of all, of the commodification of the idea of the university.

Seteney Shami's talk was compelling. That the establishing of new educational institutions in Arab countries is a potentially divisive issue was further illustrated toward the end of the conference when David Lock, Secretary General Designate of the Magna Charta Observatory, reviewed plans and ideas for the future. He noted that one of the things he brings to his new position is a passion for expansion, not least regarding the "huge opportunities" for development in the East. He pointed to all the universities that are now emerging the Middle East with British support, among them business schools "that would operate to British standards". It seems to me that much debate and much reflection are in need here, not least in the light of the alarm that Seteney Shami voiced. One would have to ask many questions. What is invasive entrepreneurship and what is academic support and guidance? How do you navigate between the guarding of such values as university integrity, on the one hand, and the demands from local cultures and politics, on the other? What is the role of Magna Charta Observatory in these respects? Is it enough to stress the fundamental principles and dismiss the rest as "differences" and "challenges" to be overcome? I regret that I could not attend the workshop session on "Scholars at Risk" which might have shed some light on these dilemmas.

As much as I think that Seteney Shami's presentation was powerful, I am critical of it in one respect and that is in terms of balanced information. It is undoubtedly true that, at the moment, there is little that is positive to report regarding higher education in the Middle East. However, the Middle East is also world with a long and illustrious history of learning. It is doubtful that all of the participants in the Uppsala conference realize that. As was the case with Moja's presentation, many may have come away having had deeply entrenched negative assumptions reinforced.

An A+ university for B students?

In his eloquent keynote address, Magna Charta Observatory Council President Sijbolt Noorda spoke about some of the essential values and virtues without which no university can function: trust, openness, honesty. There must be, he said, a never-ending ethical debate as well as never-ending strivings to affirm integrity. While trust and honesty are essential to all societies and societal institutions, from hospitals to private businesses, two additional special values and virtues are necessary within institutions of higher education, namely the quality of teaching and the quality of research. In the course of emphasizing this, Noorda turned to the demands for excellence that flourish in many societies today, not least in universities. All kinds of educational institutions around the world claim that they are excellent and that their students are excellent. Excellence centers and excellence clusters are founded by universities everywhere. Of course, the striving toward excellence is nothing new; throughout the centuries universities have worked hard to achieve it. Yet, Noorda noted, only a few individuals or institutions can be truly excellent, if the word is to have any meaning at all. The hunt for excellence becomes destructive and self-defeating when inflated curriculum vitae and boastful statements regarding personal accomplishments pile up in admissions and employment offices. Sometimes these documents contain outright lies. In the concluding panel discussion Bengt Gustafsson, who is Professor of Theoretical Astrophysics at Uppsala University, wondered if we are not in fact “teaching our students to lie”.

To illustrate the futility in overblown demands for excellence, Noorda told an anecdote about a college president whose institution had ended up as number 127 on a ranking list: *“You must be so disappointed?” someone said to him. “But why?” he answered, “did you not see the motivation: ‘this is an A+ college for B students’? And that is exactly what we want to be.”* And, Noorda added, universities must be able to serve many more students than the utterly small numbers who, in accordance with some evaluative procedure or

other, are labeled excellent. Indeed, if we continue catering to excellence as an essential virtue, “we are betraying our own values”.

While I certainly agree with Noorda’s views on the destructive aspects in the hunt for excellence, I also find the anecdote full of ambivalent messages, as anecdotes and other forms of folklore usually are. There is more to the brief story than at first meets the eyes and ears. Perhaps this was Noorda’s point. In my view, the anecdotal college president’s response is both cynical and arrogant. In effect, it pre-brands young people as A+ or B students. It classifies them and places them inside closed boxes from which they cannot escape. The statement seems to be part of an instrumental and short-sighted theory of knowledge formation (cf. Ekström and Sörlin 2013: 62) that leaves students and institutions in self-defeating hierarchies. Of course, some students are bound to accomplish better scholarship than others. Yet, educational institutions must keep their minds open. What about late bloomers? What about students with odd talents and rare gifts which are not immediately recognizable? The labeling defeats important tasks of all educational institutions: to challenge students and encourage them to discover their strengths. Such processes call for nurturance and patience on the part of institutions and instructors, a willingness to wait for developments to take place. University teaching and research are in the dynamic business of creating change and discovering new knowledge. To accomplish that hope and care are needed.

University home pages and public relation folders often boast that at their institutions all students receive “individual attention”. Yet, such attention is not always put into practice; nor is it a matter for discussion, at least not outside departments of education. The disregard for nurturance seems to be particularly present at European institutions (with some exceptions among colleges in Britain). By contrast, nurturance is often important the United States, both in wealthy schools with top academic ratings and in schools, such as

denominational colleges, that cannot dream of the highest rankings. These institutions place a priority on tutoring and personal attention by individual professors and instructors. Often in European institutions individual attention is discussed in terms of the risks of abuse for example by professors who take advantage of student labors. Yet, cases of unethical conduct must not overshadow the insight that all learning, all scientific discoveries, all scholarly insights materialize in an atmosphere of nurturance, hard work, cooperation, and mutual trust, not when students and faculty are constantly pre-branded and placed on hierarchical scales. Trust involves faith that people can learn, that seemingly mediocre students can produce interesting research. These things were implied in Noorda's keynote address. In my view, he and the conference as a whole could have emphasized even more strongly the need for institutions to achieve balance between strivings toward outstanding results and the need to guide and nurture.

Issues, such as trust or pre-branding or nurturance, assume additional meaning when looked at from the point of view of universities and societies outside the "Old West". What does trust, for example, mean in different cultural contexts? What does it mean in societies in which the only people you really trust are your own relatives or your own kin group (however kinship is defined)? What does it mean in the universities in these societies? Or take the issue of pre-branding of young people as excellent or merely adequate. What do these mean in countries where primary and secondary schools vary widely and where some students never meet a live professor, as Teboho Moja showed? Once again, the upshot is that is important to understand and discuss not only the joint tasks and values of universities but also the many differences and variations. What is the role of local variations in relationship to the fundamental values?

Concluding thoughts

After my initial bewilderment and after a period of post-conference reflection, I have come to believe that a charter and a monitoring organization are potentially indispensable as contexts for critical debates concerning the daunting issues that universities around the world are facing. A surprising number of difficult issues were also raised during the short conference. Most often, autonomy was in focus. If audiences had not thought about the subject before, they were repeatedly told that university autonomy is neither God-given nor automatically granted. The university has “always” been conditional, as Sverker Sörlin emphasized and Marika Hedin demonstrated in her engaging exposé of the history of Uppsala University. Autonomy must be debated and negotiated over and over as societal conditions change and new issues emerge. Nor is autonomy the same everywhere. High degrees of autonomy are often enjoyed in rich institutions with a long history and more seldom in poorer and newer ones. But even if universities vary widely in degrees to which autonomy has been achieved, it must be a *conditio sine qua non*, a state to strive for. Also other central concepts and ideas formulated in the Magna Charta Universitatum must be the subjects of on-going debates. Integrity and societal benefit are not natural givens, they must be striven for and earned, over and over. The conference made this clear, just as speakers emphasized that all universities are deeply a part of the countries and cultures that they serve. Societies and universities are joint accomplishments, they create each other, they permeate each other. The participants in the Uppsala conference seemed to be in agreement about this and about the need for a document stating the fundamental principles valid for all universities.⁴

While all this appealed to me too, other aspects of the Magna Charta Universitatum and of the conference did not. The idea that a “university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition”, appeared to be even more problematic after the conference, than it did before. Many scholars working outside the “Old West” have long been deeply

frustrated by the thought that universities, as they are known and function around the world, have such strong roots, not only in European theological and philosophical traditions, but also in European nation building and colonial expansion. Not least scholars within the Bengali Subaltern Movement have struggled to come to terms with these frustrations. Among them is the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty who concludes that the dilemmas surrounding the European foundation of universities everywhere cannot really be solved. Rather, he says, if the global discussions about universities are to go forward, their focus has to shift: Europe needs to be decentralized and provincialized (Chakrabarty 2008). This is truly significant. It centralizes societies which to Europeans and North Americans may seem “different”. The perspectives of Mali have to be seen as just as telling and significant as those of Norway. Europeans and North Americans cannot take for granted that all important discussions begin in their parts of the world. This decentralizing and provincializing of Europe entails much more than the “need for different cultures to know and influence each other” as we read in Principle Four of Magna Charta. It requires shifts in perspectives, and in ways of thinking about the world and talking about it.

Despite the many attempts to highlight different areas of the globe, the Magna Charta Observatory Conference in Uppsala did not venture to decentralize and provincialize Europe. A necessary step in such a process would be to make substantial changes in the wording of the charter text. I am not the first to call for such changes. As key-note speaker at the Magna Charta Conference a few years ago, Sir Peter Scott -- Professor of Higher Education Studies at the University of London -- remarked that if the Observatory is going to be a more global organization, “there is room to update the Magna Charta Universitatum” and “to move beyond the European-focused rhetoric” (Abendorff 2012). But more than a change of rhetoric is needed. What is needed is a radical change in perspective and outlook and ways of thinking. It is a matter of discussing in earnest the “perplexing multiplicity” in the world

(Wittrock 2014). It means to try to view the world from the points of view of many centers of learning, north and south, east and west. It means realizing that some differences must make a difference also when fundamental principles are being formulated.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Mamadou Diawara (Professor of Anthropology at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University in Frankfurt/Main and Founding Director of Point Sud in Bamako) and to Dr. Moussa Sissoko (Co-Director of Point Sud in Bamako), not only for providing me with up-to-date figures for about the University of Bamako but even more for many years of generous collaboration. Many thanks also to Sten Hagberg, Professor of Anthropology, Uppsala University.

² In the Uppsala conference “sandwich universities” as phenomena were mentioned a couple of times, not entirely in appreciative tones. Yet, sandwich arrangements can work well in certain fields and less well in other ones. For students in anthropology, for example, who need to do fieldwork, these arrangements have long been practiced with success.

³ Most of the information in this paragraph concerning recent developments in African higher education is drawn from *Weaving Success* by Megan Lindow (2011).

⁴ An important immediate task would be to increase the visibility of the Magna Charta Universitatum and the Magna Charta Observatory. Most colleagues I meet are as unfamiliar with the two as I was.

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