



## Seeing One's Intellectual Roots: A Review Essay

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### 1. Introduction

There is a lot that is excellent in James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998). On one level, it is an extraordinary well-written and well-argued tour through the various forms of damage that have been done in the twentieth century by centrally-planned social-engineering projects—by what James Scott calls “high modernism” and the attempt to use high modernist principles and practices to build utopia. As such, every economist who reads it will see it as marking the final stage in the intellectual struggle that the Austrian tradition has long waged against apostles of central planning. Heaven knows that I am no Austrian—I am a liberal Keynesian and a social democrat—but within economics even liberal Keynesian social democrats acknowledge that the Austrians won victory in their intellectual debate with the central planners long ago.

This book marks the final stage because it shows the spread of what every economist would see as “Austrian ideas” into political science, sociology, and anthropology as well. No one can finish reading Scott without believing—as Austrians have argued for three-quarters of a century—that centrally-planned social-engineering is not an appropriate mechanism for building a better society.

But on a second level, it is an act of displacement. Friedrich Hayek, after all, won the Nobel Prize in Economic Science for making what Scott sees as his key arguments: that the bureaucratic planner with a map does not know best, and can not move humans and their lives around the territory as if on a chessboard to create utopia; that the local, practical knowledge possessed by the person-on-the-spot is important; that the locus of decision-making must remain with those who have the craft to understand the situation; that any system that functions at all must create and maintain a space for those on the spot to use their local, practical knowledge (even if the hierarchs of the system pretend not to notice this flexibility). These key arguments are well known: they are the core of the Austrian economists' critique of central planning.

Yet Scott appears to largely overlook the identity between his central themes and the central themes of the Austrian tradition. From one perspective, this is a compliment to the Austrians: their arguments are powerful and applicable, and it is striking that others looking at the same problem come up with their conclusions. From another perspective, this is distinctly odd: we all do better when we make an effort to recognize and acknowledge those who have had similar thoughts before use both because it helps our readers orient themselves in the literature, and because it keeps us from wasting lots of time and energy reinventing the wheel unnecessarily.

## 2. Seeing the forest

Scott's *Seeing Like a State* begins with a ride through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German forestry. In Germany, "scientific" forestry led to the planting and harvesting of large monocrop forests of Norway spruce and Scotch pine. And for the first century or so the pockets of forest-owners bulged as more and more valuable trees were harvested from the increasingly-ordered and managed forests.

But the foresters did not understand the ecological web that they were trying to manage: Clearing of underbrush to make it easier for lumberjacks to move about in the forest "greatly reduced the diversity of insect, mammal, and bird populations" (p. 20); the absence of animals and the absence of rotting wood on the forest floor greatly reduced the replenishment of the soil with nutrients. In places where all the trees are mature, of the same age and of the same species, storms can wreak catastrophe as trees knock each other over like bowling pins. Pests and parasites that attack a particular species find a bonanza and grow to epidemic proportions when they find a monocrop forest.

The result was what Scott calls *Waldsterben*—the death of the forest, as it becomes both a pale shadow of its previous ecological richness and an inefficient source of timber for human use. Why does Scott begin with such a tale of pseudo-scientific hubris in Germany before 1900? After all, he could have looked across the North Sea at England a century or so before, where the systematic experimentation and analysis of the agricultural revolution had led to a quite sophisticated understanding of what patterns of crop rotation, nutrient addition, and farm diversity could produce maximum sustainable and maximum economic yield. Why not tell a story about how human communities successfully managed a sustainable agriculture, rather than one about how human communities unsuccessfully created an unsustainable forestry?

Scott opens with his tale of German foresters because he argues that this type of interaction—people in rooms lined with green silk lay out complicated plans, which are then approved by the politically powerful, implemented with no regard for local conditions or local knowledge, and wind up as disasters—is typical of how states have dealt with problems and people in the twentieth century. When states—bureaucrats in offices in the capital—try to assess what is going on, they use maps: maps of territory, often with the demarcations between plots or regions made to be straight lines that meet at right angles, whether or not such lines of demarcation make any sense for those who live on the ground; maps of people—the lists of names and relationships that allow the state to track those from whom it will claim "obligations"—maps of laws, that fit human relationships of gift, exchange, and indebtedness that have both economic and emotional facets into a few well-defined categories of right and wrong.

But the map is never the territory. Scott reports that the first railroad from Paris to Strasbourg ran straight east from Paris across the plateau of Brie, far from the populated Marne, because the bureaucrat Victor Legrand drew the line so. The consequence was that the railroad was ruinously expensive because Victor Legrand forgot that to be useful a railroad has to carry goods and passengers from where they are to where they or their owners want them to go—not look like a pretty straight line on a map back in Paris (p. 76). By page 87 the reader is well-prepared to agree with Scott that the map is never the territory, and that what the state "sees" is only a very small slice of reality.

### 3. The critique of “high modernism”

However, these discussions of forests and maps are just the warm-up. Scott's main argument begins on page 87 as he lets twentieth-century states have it with both barrels. Scott then mounts a vicious, powerful, and effective fangs-bared critique of what he calls “high modernism”: the belief that the bureaucratic planner with a map—whether Le Corbusier designing a city, Vladimir Lenin designing a planned economy after what he thought he knew of the German war economy, or Julius Nyerere “villagizing” the people of Tanzania—knows best, and can move humans and their lives around the territory as if on a chessboard, and so create utopia. Scott sees the “idea of a root-and-branch, rational engineering of entire social orders in creating realizable utopias” as a twentieth-century idea that has gone far to making this century a dystopia.

#### 3.1. *High modernism in urban planning*

Scott's critique of “high modernism” as a mode of urban planning focuses on Brazil's capital, the now more than one generation-old planned city of Brasilia. As far as they possibly could, the designers of Brasilia tried to achieve the spatial segregation of different aspects of life—housing in a different place from work, recreation, traffic, public administration in different districts as well—as high-modernist guru Le Corbusier had commanded.

The consequences of the plan—as far as it could be carried out—are insane. As Scott writes of the central square of Brasilia:

...what a square! The vast, monumental Plaza of the Three Powers, flanked by the Esplanade of the Ministries, is of such a scale as to dwarf even a military parade.... In comparison, [Beijing's] Tien-an-Men Square and [Moscow's] Red Square [both of which are too large a scale for the foot and vehicle traffic through them on a normal day] are positively cozy and intimate.... If one were to arrange to meet a friend there, it would be rather like trying to meet someone in the middle of the Gobi desert. And if one did meet up with one's friend, there would be nothing to do.... This plaza is a symbolic center for the state; the only activity that goes on around it is the work of the ministries... (p. 121)

Scott draws heavily on the excellent work of Jane Jacobs to criticize this planned, surprise-free, every apartment building looks the same high-modernist order of pre-planned Brasilia. Jacobs argued that rigid spatial segregation of functions made for visual regularity from the bird's-eye view of the architect but made the city damn hard to live in. By contrast, it is the mingling of residences with shopping areas and workplaces that makes an urban neighborhood interesting—and livable. And this urban diversity of uses cannot be planned by the high-modernist architect. At best it can be planned for—by the government providing a framework and infrastructure for urban development instead of specifying land use down to the last square centimeter.

As Scott argues, even planners who recognize diversity will never plan it. You cannot spend your life at the office, and bureaucratic budgets are limited. Thus:

...the logic of uniformity and regimentation is well-nigh inexorable [in comprehensive urban planning]. Cost effectiveness contributes to this tendency. Just as it saves a prison trouble and money if all prisoners wear uniforms of the same material, color, and size, every concession to diversity [in the urban plan] is likely to entail a corresponding increase in administrative time and budgetary costs.... [T]he one-size-fits-all solution is likely to prevail (pp. 141–142).

### 3.2. *High modernism, the revolutionary party, and the planned economy*

Scott's second example of "high modernism" run amuck at enormous human cost is Lenin's attempt to design the revolution, the society, and the economy of Russia. To Lenin, "the party is to the working class as intelligence is to brute force, deliberation to confusion, a manager to a worker, a teacher to a student, an administrator to a subordinate, a professional to an amateur, an army to a mob, or a scientist to a layman" (p. 149): the vanguard party possesses the scientific theory—Marxism—that allows it to plan the revolution. And the transmission of information and commands must be one-way only: the only thing that the party could learn from the workers would be petty-bourgeois ideologies that would infect it as with a disease (p. 155).

After the revolution, according to Lenin, utopia will be built through use of the state. Quoting *State and Revolution*, Scott draws out of Lenin's ideas for economy and society the image of a gigantic ocean liner, captained by the party's politburo:

The revolution ousts the bourgeoisie from the [controlling] bridge of the "ocean liner" [of society], installs the vanguard party, and sets a new course, but the jobs of the vast crew are unchanged. Lenin's picture of the technical structure... is entirely static. The forms of production are either set or... [their] changes cannot require skills of a different order (p. 162).

Or as Lenin put it in his "Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government:

...large-scale machine industry... the foundation of socialism... calls for absolute and strict unity of will, which directs the joint labors of hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of people... But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one.... We must learn to combat the public-meeting democracy of the working people—turbulent, surging, overflowing its banks like a spring flood—with iron discipline while at work, unquestioning obedience to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader, while at work (p. 163).

And the end of the process that Lenin sees in *State and Revolution*—an end that Scott calls "chillingly Orwellian"—no one will be able to move an inch from their assigned place: "Escape from this national accounting will inevitably become more difficult... and will probably be accompanied by such swift and severe punishment... that very soon the necessity of observing the simple, fundamental rules of social life in common will have become a habit" (p. 163).

Scott contrasts the communism of Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai to that of Lenin. Luxemburg did see that when one was exploring new social territory: “only experience is capable of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescent life falls into a thousand new forms and improvisations, brings to light creative force, itself corrects all mistaken attempts” (p. 174). And Luxemburg did see that Lenin’s “socialism... decreed from behind a few official desks by a dozen intellectuals” was headed for complete disaster:

...with the suppression of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become crippled. Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of the press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution.... Public life gradually falls asleep... an elite of the working class is invited to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously—at bottom then, a clique... a dictatorship... (p. 174).

We all know the economic and human consequences of Lenin’s centrally-planned soviet vision. Scott writes that the high estimates—10 million or so—of deaths from the collectivization of agriculture have “if anything, gained more credibility as new archival evidence has become available” (p. 202). Yet he notes that from Stalin’s perspective collectivization was certainly a success:

Collectivization proved a rough-and-ready instrument for the twin goals of traditional statecraft: appropriation and political control. Although the Soviet kolkhoz may have failed badly [at efficient production], it served well enough as a means whereby the state could determine cropping patterns, fix real rural wages, appropriate a large share of whatever grain was produced, and politically emasculate the countryside (p. 203).

### 3.3. “Villagization” in Tanzania

Scott’s third major example of destructive high modernism is Julius Nyerere’s attempt from 1973 to 1976 to move all the rural inhabitants of Tanzania into villages. Five million farmers and their families were moved into newly-constructed villages set up so that the state would easily deliver social services to (and levy taxes from) the populations. Nyerere believed that Tanzanians should live in villages—rather than scattered across the countryside where agricultural resources were to be found—because: “... unless we [live in villages] we shall not be able to provide ourselves with the things we need to develop our land and to raise our standard of living. We shall not be able to use tractors; we shall not be able to provide schools for our children; we shall not be able to build hospitals, or have clean drinking water; it will be quite impossible to start small village industries, and instead we shall have to go on depending on the towns for all our requirements; and if we had a plentiful supply of electric power we should never be able to connect it up to each isolated homestead” (p. 230).

And what if the farmers did not want to live in villages, or did not want to grow the crops that Nyerere’s bureaucrats back in The House of Peace thought that they should grow?

Then: “[i]t may be possible—and sometimes necessary—to insist on all farmers in a given area growing a certain acreage of a particular crop until they realize that this brings them a more secure living, and then do not have to be forced to grow it” (p. 231).

The consequences of Nyerere’s policies were predictable. As Scott summarizes:

Peasants were... shifted to poor soils on high ground... moved to [houses near] all-weather roads where the land was unfamiliar or unsuitable for the crops... village living placed cultivators far from their fields, thus thwarting crop watching and pest control...the concentration of livestock and people... encourag[ed] cholera and livestock epidemics... pastoralists [found that]... herding cattle to a single [village] location was an unmitigated disaster for range conservation and pastoral livelihoods.... [Bureaucratic] insistence that they had a monopoly on useful knowledge and that they impose this knowledge set the stage for disaster... (pp. 246–247).

The only bright spots were “the Tanzanian state’s relative weaknesses... as well as the Tanzanian peasants’ tactical advantages, including flight, unofficial production and trade, smuggling, and foot dragging” which “combined to make the practice of villagization” less destructive than it might have been (p. 247).

#### 4. Trees, forests, and roots

##### 4.1. *Deja Vu*

Well before the middle of the book this non-Austrian liberal-Keynesian economist was—as any economist would be—struck by a strong sense of *deja vu*. Scott’s declarations of the importance of the detailed practical knowledge possessed by the person-on-the-spot—of how such knowledge cannot be transmitted up any hierarchy to those-in-charge in a way to do any good—of how the locus of decision-making must remain with those who have the craft to understand the situation—of how any system that functions at all must create and maintain a space in which there is sufficient flexibility for craftsmen to exercise their local, practical knowledge (even if the hierarchs of the system pretend not to notice this flexibility)—all of these will strike any economist as very, very familiar.

All of these seem familiar to economists because they are the points made by Ludwig von Mises (1920) and Friedrich Hayek (1937) and the other Austrian economists in their pre-World War II debate with socialists over the possibility of central planning. Hayek’s adversaries—Oskar Lange and company—argued that a market system had to be inferior to a centrally-planned system: at the very least, a centrally-planned economy could set up internal decision-making procedures that would mimic the market, and the central planners could also adjust things to increase social welfare and account for external effects in a way that a market system could never do.

Hayek, in response, argued that the functionaries of a central-planning board could never succeed, because they could never create both the incentives and the flexibility for the person-on-the-spot to use the immense amount of knowledge about the actual situation

that only people-on-the-spot can know. As Hayek argued in his “Impossibility of Socialist Calculation,” the enormous amount of dispersed knowledge that individual producers know and act on in a market economy can never be mobilized by a central planner. That a central planner could—that he or she could ever “possess a complete inventory of the amounts and qualities of all the different materials and instruments of production” available to the manager of a single plant—is “a somewhat comic fiction.”

In Hayek’s view, as he wrote in “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” the fundamental economic problem is:

...the fact that knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form, but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess.... It is rather a problem of how to secure the best use of resources known to any of the members of society, for ends whose relative importance only these individuals know. Or, to put it briefly, it is a problem of the utilization of knowledge...

All of Scott’s examples are cases illustrating that the centrally-planned social-engineering that Scott calls “high modernism” is definitely not a way to solve this fundamental economic problem. The bulk of Scott’s book is spent adducing evidence for the critique of centrally-planned social engineering that had been made by Friedrich Hayek back before World War II. Yet a casual reader of the book would not find any significant pointers to the Austrian intellectual tradition—no references to works like “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” or “Competition as a Discovery Procedure” that are directly on point for Scott’s critique of centrally-planned social-engineering (the only works referred to are *The Road to Serfdom* and the collection *Studies in Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, with no references to the individual works collected in the volume).

#### 4.2. *Where is Hayek?*

So how is it that Scott can see the trees and the overall forest so very well, but largely overlook what I would see as his own intellectual roots? I should note that today almost every single economist—even those who (like me) are profoundly hostile to many of Hayek’s arguments (that government regulation of the money supply lies at the root of the business cycle, that political attempts to reduce inequalities in the distribution of income are likely to lead to totalitarianism, that the Federal Reserve should be abolished, that the competitive market is the “natural spontaneous order” of human society)—agrees that Hayek and his company (including Scott) hit the particular nail that is Scott’s central theme, the critique of high-modernist centrally-planned social-engineering, squarely on the head.

Looking back at the seventy-year trajectory of Communism, it seems very clear that Hayek (and Scott) are right: that its principal flaw—alongside other examples of high-modernist centrally-planned social engineering—is its attempt to concentrate knowledge, authority, and decision-making power at the center, rather than pushing the power to act, the freedom to do so, and the incentive to act productively out to the periphery where people-on-the-spot have the local knowledge needed for action to be effective. So where

are the references to those—other than Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai—who have been making Scott's arguments for more than sixty years?

Scott's *Seeing Like a State's* index contains no references to Ludwig von Mises. It does contain six references to Friedrich Hayek: a favorable reference (p. 256) for pointing out that a "command economy, however sophisticated and flexible, cannot begin to replace the myriad, rapid, mutual adjustments of functioning markets and the price system;" a critique in a footnote of Hayek's belief that the market economy is a spontaneous form of social order, an approving reference to Hayek's skepticism about the usefulness of economic theory (which leads to "an arrogation of pretended knowledge, which in fact no one possesses and which even the advance of science is not likely to give us"); a note that "Friedrich Hayek himself was a skeptic" to claims about the power of economics; a reference to the "curious unanimity" between "such right-wing critics of the command economy as Friedrich Hayek and such left-wing critics of communist authoritarianism as Prince Peter Kropotkin." And two more: A supporting footnote stating that Hayek—"the darling of those opposed to postwar planning and the welfare state"—makes the same point as Michel Foucault, who said in a lecture that was then published in 1991 that: "political economy announces the unknowability for the sovereign of the totality of economic processes and, as a consequence, the impossibility of an economic sovereignty," and that this was one of the main points of liberal political economy (pp. 101–102, 381).

And a preemptive strike against Hayek in the introduction: "Put bluntly, my bill of particulars against [the high-modernist centrally-planning social-engineering] state is by no means a case for politically unfettered market coordination as urged by Friedrich Hayek or Milton Friedman. As we shall see, the conclusions that can be drawn from the failures of modern projects of social engineering are as applicable to market-driven standardization as they are to bureaucratic homogeneity" (p. 8).

This last reference seems to me to hold the key. It looks as though we are here dealing with an intellectual cordon sanitaire. Just as Scott cannot cite Edmund Burke in *Seeing Like a State*—even though much of Scott's book is in a Burkean vein—except as an "apologist... for... power, privilege, and property," so he cannot achieve contact with the principal intellectual roots of his argument. He cannot do so out of the fear that it will turn his book into a "case for politically-unfettered market coordination," while instead he believes that his argument is as much a critique of "market-driven standardization" as of "bureaucratic homogeneity."

#### 4.3. *Rubber tomatoes*

How can market-driven standardization have the same consequences as the commands of architects who have never lived in the cities they design, or as the collectivization of Soviet agriculture, or as the forced "villagization" of Tanzanian peasants? It is not clear to me. Scott has a long critique of agricultural extension services and agricultural development programs in the third world, and the scorn their "experts" had for the practical knowledge of the rural peasant (pp. 270–306). But any Austrian would agree with all of it: the claims of the experts from the center that they know everything and the peasant knows nothing about how to grow crops in Ghana is ludicrous.

Woven into the critique of agricultural development programs are asides about the destructiveness of DDT, the effect of sterile hybrid seeds in diminishing the autonomy of the farmer, the vulnerability of American monoculture farms to pests and epidemics, and the pre-packaged relatively-tasteless—but overwhelmingly cheap—rubber tomatoes developed to be machine-sprayed and machine-picked. However, people bought (and buy) rubber tomatoes because they are cheap—because relatively little social labor is required to produce them. Overall we have the “unparalleled agricultural productivity” of the industrial West, in which the U.S. is a major exporter of food products even though its economy now employs fewer farmers and farm laborers than gardeners and groundskeepers.

The argument that market-driven processes are as harmful to human freedom as state-led high modernism appears suddenly at the end of a discussion of the importance of practical, local knowledge and expertise. Scott calls this practical, local knowledge “metis,” taking the word from the skill traditionally attributed to Odysseus. He takes it to be a counterweight to the type of theoretical or technical knowledge held by bureaucrats, scientists, and others (pp. 309–341). Most such practical knowledge cannot be easily summarized and simple rules, and much of it remains implicit: the devil is in the details.

In the middle of this discussion of “metis” we suddenly read that:

The destruction of metis and its replacement by standardized formulas legible only from the center is virtually inscribed in the activities of both the state and large-scale bureaucratic capitalism (p. 335).

But when we look around at modern large-scale bureaucratic capitalism, we see what Scott calls “metis” everywhere. Everything from the flick of your wrist so that the supermarket laser-scanner reads the bar code (try it some time), to the virtual experience at flying 747's that airline pilots gain in simulators, to knowing when you have lost your lecture audience and need to back up, to knowing when it too risky to try to cross the Donner Pass—all of these are forms of metis. Attempts to design-out metis—to turn workers into efficient, pre-programmed automatons as in the imagination of Frederick W. Taylor—usually fail. They fail precisely because they do not make allowance for the importance of local, practical knowledge. And when they fail businesses that recognized the importance of their workers' skills take up the slack.

We have lost many forms of metis. But as Scott points out, many of them are well-lost:

Once matches become widely available, why... know... how to make a fire with flint and tinder. Knowing how to scrub clothes... on a stone in the river is undoubtedly an art, but one gladly abandoned.... Darning skills were similarly lost, without much nostalgia, when cheap, machine made stockings came on the market... (p. 335).

And, to me at least, overall local, practical knowledge does not seem to be vanishing because of large-scale bureaucratic capitalism. Indeed, the modern forms of metis whose destruction Scott mourns on pages 337–339 were the creations of (previous generations of) large-scale bureaucratic capitalism.

I cannot escape the conclusion that Scott's claim that he is not aligned with Hayek—that “[p]ut bluntly... the conclusions that can be drawn from the failures of modern projects

of social engineering are as applicable to market-driven standardization as they are to bureaucratic homogeneity”—is, at best undemonstrated.

## 5. Conclusion

The key fault of what Scott calls “high modernism” is its belief that details don’t matter—that planners decree from on high, people obey, and utopia results. Note that Scott’s conclusion is not just that attempts at high-modernist centrally-planned social-engineering have failed. It is—as von Mises argued 70 years ago—they are always overwhelmingly likely to fail. As Scott puts it:

...[the] larger point [is that]... [i]n each case, the necessarily thin, schematic model of social organization and production animating the planning was inadequate as a set of instructions for creating a successful social order. By themselves, the simplified rules can never generate a functioning community, city, or economy. Formal order, to be more explicit, is always and to some degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognize, without which it could not exist, and which it alone cannot create or maintain (p. 310).

Yet even as he makes his central points, Scott has difficulty contact with his intellectual roots. Thus he is unable to draw on pieces of the Austrian argument as it has been developed over the past seventy years. And his book is, I think, the weaker for it. I smell, I think, some anxiety: fear that recognizing that one’s book is in the tradition of the Austrian critique of the twentieth century state will commit one to becoming a right-wing inequality-loving Thatcher-worshipping libertarian (even though there are intermediate positions: you can endorse the Austrian critique of central planning without completely rejecting the mixed economy and the social insurance state).

And when the chips are down, this recognition is something James Scott cannot do. At some level he still wishes—no matter what his reason tells him—to take his stand on the side of the barricades with the revolutionaries, and against those of us who think that political democracy, individual liberty, and private property must always take priority as better tools to build utopia than revolutionary dictatorship. He ends the penultimate chapter of his book with what can only be called a political pledge-of-allegiance:

Revolutionaries have had every reason to despise the feudal, poverty-stricken, inegalitarian past that they hoped to banish forever, and sometimes they have also had a reason to suspect that immediate democracy would simply bring back the old order. Postindependence leaders in the nonindustrial world (occasionally revolutionary leaders themselves) could not be faulted for hating their past of colonial domination and economic stagnation, nor could they be faulted for wasting no time or democratic sentimentality on creating a people that they could be proud of (p. 341).

But then he returns to reality with the chapter’s final sentence: “Understanding the history and logic of their commitment to high-modernist goals, however, does not permit

us to overlook the enormous damage that their convictions entailed when combined with authoritarian state power” (p. 341).

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