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Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. xx + 468 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7735-3199-4.

Review Essay by Michael Scott Christofferson, Penn State Erie, The Behrend College.

Julian Bourg's From Revolution to Ethics offers an important new perspective on the aftermath of May 1968 in France. For Bourg, the story of the post-1968 period in French intellectual life is, as the title of his book suggests, that of a shift from revolution to ethics. The thesis, briefly summarized, is that May 1968 had an immanent antinomian ethos that entailed a rejection of all law except the marxisant "revolutionary laws of history" (p. 340). When revolution faded and "doubts about the laws of history set in" (p. 341), May's antinomian ethos rose to the fore and was forced to face the question of limits. The end result was a turn to ethics. The process is described by Bourg not as a reversal of May, but as a transvaluation of May's contestation. Critical of both neo-liberal and nostalgic leftist interpretations of May, Bourg argues that the ethical turn in the decade after May 1968 did not result in liberalism's triumph, a betrayal of 1968's revolutionary impulses or nihilism, [1] but rather "proved 1968's success" (p. 13) and resulted in a renewal of democracy. Further, critical of scholarship on the long 1960s that has diminished the importance of 1968, [2] Bourg argues that "the events of 1968 were a watershed" (p. 28). To be sure, the democratic and ethical consequences of 1968 were ironic from the viewpoint of the intentions of the revolutionaries, but they were also a clear, if sometimes indirect, outcome of the ethos of May. This focus on 1968's success in democratizing France is a welcome reorientation of scholarship on 1968, perhaps one that reflects the perspectives of a new generation. [3]

Bourg argues this thesis by focusing on a few key episodes in the decade after 1968: the encounter of the Maoist Gauche prolétarienne and affiliated intellectuals with state repression and specifically with prisons (part one); the philosophy of desire (part two) and the tensions between its adherents and the feminist movement (part three); and finally, the phenomenon of New Philosophy (part four). In the encounter with prisons, militants in the Gauche prolétarienne and intellectuals in Secours Rouge developed a discourse of rights; and in the Groupe d'information sur les prisons, intellectually led by Michel Foucault, the concept of the "intolerable" and the focus on the self-expression of inmates pointed in an ethical direction. While repression and prison led those in part one to face the problem of unavoidable limits, the philosophy of desire and the *désirants*—who believed in the revolutionary potential of unleashed, unrestrained desire-were the most extreme expression of May's antinomianism, of the implementation of May's slogan that it is "forbidden to forbid." But, as Bourg explains in part three, the philosophy of desire would meet its limit in the late 1970s in the debate about rape (in which some feminists appealed to the law in order to impose norms against free-ranging desire and thereby protect women) and the disturbing discussion of legalizing pedophilia. The partial transition to ethics that one sees in parts one and three culminated in a complete ethical turn with the eruption of New Philosophy on the intellectual scene in 1976-78. United by historical pessimism, the New Philosophers embraced dissidence over revolution and, more generally,

ethics over politics. The culmination of part four and of the whole ethical turn is Bernard-Henri Lévy's *La Barbarie à visage humain* of 1977, which, Bourg explains, brought together "almost all the elements I have found of interest in following the turn to ethics" (p. 295). Given *La Barbarie à visage humain*'s facile arguments, the book's place in this history is somewhat shocking, but with New Philosophy we are, Bourg wisely concludes, "faced with the historical significance of tedious books" (p. 260).

From Revolution to Ethics has much to recommend it. It is based on extensive research including multiple archives, countless contemporary publications, and many interviews. Bourg brings extensive knowledge of relevant philosophical traditions and debates to his interpretation of the primary source material. Clearly and lively written, the book is full of new information and insights. For example, its historical explanation and analysis of the *désirants* is the best and most complete that this reader has seen, clarifying the nearly impenetrable foundational work of the philosophy of desire, Anti-Oedipus of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, while also teasing out the concrete implications of the philosophy of desire in post-68 militancy. The discussion of the Groupe d'information sur les prisons also goes further than previous treatments of it. Particularly striking for this reader, because it fits his own general impressions of the period, is Bourg's judgment that perhaps the central figure in the 1970s debates within the Left was not Freud, Marx, or Tocqueville, but rather Jean-Jacques Rousseau (p. 333). Like all good histories, Bourg's offers much food for thought. From Revolution to Ethics greatly advances our understanding of May 1968's impact on France; but, more than that, by uncovering new information, posing new questions, and suggesting new answers, it leaves the reader with the feeling that the history of this period is more open and exciting than ever, very much still a "histoire à faire." [4]

Although an essential contribution to the history of May 1968's aftermath, From Revolution to *Ethics* is not without shortcomings. To begin with, there is its treatment of May 1968. The book does very little to explain the origins of May 1968 or explore the issue of continuity and discontinuity upstream from May. To be sure, Bourg rolls out the usual suspects such as overcrowded universities and the Vietnam War to evoke May's origins, but, beyond a brief mention of the influence of Henri Lefebvre, Jean-Paul Sartre, and former members of the revolutionary group Socialisme ou Barbarie [5] on the students, its *intellectual* origins are hardly discussed. As a consequence, May's antinomianism appears in this book as a pure product of the event, when it was, in fact, also the product of at least a decade of reflection on politics that preceded May. Because he does not relate May's antinomianism to its pre-May origins, Bourg misses aspects of its content and fails to address the question of whether the shift from revolution to ethics of the 1970s does not have pre-May origins. Related to its failure to explain May's origins is From Revolution to Ethics' lack of a sustained discussion of the history of Marxist thought in France. Although Bourg considers the overcoming of Marxism to be a precondition for the ethical turn, he says relatively little about the period's Marxism and, when it is invoked, discusses it in vague and inaccurate terms. Finally, beyond a descriptive paragraph on the strikes of May-June 1968 (p. 23) and occasional references to the workerist politics of the time, workers do not figure prominently in Bourg's account of May's ethos and are almost entirely absent from the rest of the book. For Bourg, "it was the libertarian spirit of the Sorbonne and then at the nearby Théâtre de l'Odéon that did the most to create the mythos of May 1968;" the strikes apparently contributed little or nothing to it (p. 22).

Let me explain these points and their significance in some detail. For Bourg, "French critiques of Marxism or regimes built in its name" were "postpon[ed]" "between 1945 and the mid-1970s" (p. 249). Marxism's "central role in French culture and politics" remained intact (p. 251) and, more specifically, so did a belief in "the revolutionary laws of history (class struggle, the proletariat as historical agent, violence as the handmaiden of revolution, and so forth)" (pp. 34041). In short, Marxism trundled along largely unchanged before 1968. Contrary to this view, it is precisely because Marxism was breaking down and entering into serious crisis in the decade before 1968 that May took on the character that it did. As I argued in my *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, [6] this went far beyond anti-Stalinism. Increasingly critical of Leninism and the argument that socialist ends justified the means of revolution, revisions of Marxism turned towards direct-democratic political projects. They also brought into question the proletariat's status as revolutionary subject. In short, "the revolutionary laws of history" were already breaking down before 1968. Thus Marxist revisionism might also be seen as preparing the ground for Bourg's "ethical turn." Jean-Paul Sartre's 1964 "Ethics and Society" lecture, in which Sartre states, "the historical moment has come for socialism to rediscover its ethical structure" (p. 316), should be understood in this context.

This prior evolution of Marxism helps us understand the content of 1968. The slogan "it is forbidden to forbid," which Bourg cites as the epitome of the antinomianism that he sees as defining the events, points in its paradoxical structure to limits. One of those limits, which was central to the events, was on revolutionary action. When the possibility of seizing power was raised, the student leaders, influenced by the Marxist revisionism of the preceding decade, consciously rejected it. For them revolutionary vanguardism was illegitimate; only direct-democratic politics was justified. To be sure, some would later call for a revival of Leninism in light of the failure of revolution in 1968, but their "Leninism" was often hard to recognize because of the infusion of direct democratic impulses within it. Even more striking than this abortive Leninist revival is the refusal of Leninism by a large number of French intellectuals, who no longer believed in the "laws of history" that might justify it. In short, the opposition between the ethos of May and the Marxist laws of history is a false one because belief in these laws had largely evaporated by 1968. The ethos of May was already *in* the revolutionary project and vice versa.

1968 revived revolutionary politics from its gradual decline in the mid 1960s for one reason: the massive strike wave of May-June 1968. As a consequence, the encounter of the soixante-huitards with workers would be one of the central stories of the post-May period. Yet beyond a brief discussion in chapter three, this story is largely absent from Bourg's account, which has relatively little to say about the *établis* (students and intellectuals who took jobs in factories), [77] the various efforts to ignite working-class revolution, or the crucial Lip strike that began in 1973. In the leftist political vision of the time, the working class often functioned less like a Marxist historical agent than as the focal point of a Sorelian myth about the revolutionary potential of the people in general. Thus the Gauche prolétarienne believed that its exemplary action would provoke popular revolution not because of any analysis of class relations or capitalism, but rather because of the strikes of 1968 and its judgment that "on a raison de se révolter." In Marxist terms, this was pure voluntarism. To put it another way, it was an anarchisant form of "the primacy of politics." [8] In this instance, the collapse of revolutionary politics and turn to ethics (among other things) was not primarily the result of an encounter with the law or norms, but rather of the failure of exemplary action and ultimately of working class radicalism. Bourg's focus on the désirants obscures this important and rather different history that is at the heart of the post-May period and leaves the reader with a partial understanding of the turn from revolution.

As this example suggests, *From Revolution to Ethics* minimizes the specifically political dimension of the 1970s decline of revolutionary politics or subsumes it within the ethical turn. For example, Bourg considers anti-totalitarianism to be "an important part of the more widespread ethical turn" (p. 352, n. 26) and the new prominence given to political theory to be accessory to the emergence of ethics.[9] Contrary to Bourg, I think that both of these are

independent developments intertwined with, but distinct from and sometimes conflicting with, the ethical turn.

A few examples from French anti-totalitarianism illustrate the tension between ethics and some forms of anti-totalitarian thought and practice. For one, it is clear that many anti-totalitarians saw conflicts between their efforts to forge anti-totalitarian political thought and the ethical turn. When Paul Thibaud took over the journal *Esprit* at the end of 1976 and committed it to anti-totalitarian politics and political thought, he explicitly criticized the journal's past moralistic approach to politics as having led it to compromises with totalitarianism. [10] Given *Esprit*'s past, Thibaud would undoubtedly have seen an ethical turn at this moment as an insufficient antidote to totalitarianism. Something of this discomfort with an ethical turn can also be seen in the reactions to New Philosophy by those leading the revival of political philosophy. For the philosopher Claude Lefort and the future historian Pierre Rosanvallon, for example, New Philosophy's ethical turn was objectionable precisely because it closed the door to political thought.[11]

Second, anti-totalitarian practice was often far from ethically informed, as the example of the Comité des intellectuals pour l'Europe des libertés (CIEL), founded in January 1978, illustrates. For Bourg, CIEL "was created to champion human rights against the force of states and nations" (p. 307) and is an example of an "ethical stance toward politics, which could be seen variously as anti-political, non-political, or supra-political" (p. 306). In fact, CIEL's founding manifesto, declared "la crise présente, son aggravation même, demeurent préférables à l'issue dont la tentation apparaît à chaque détour de doute : la certitude totalitaire." [12] Published six weeks before the legislative elections of 1978, in which the socialists and communists seemed likely to win, this was, in context, hardly non-political. Later, after the Left came to power, CIEL came out against communists in the government, calling their participation "moralement inacceptable." [13] Increasingly opposed to France's left-wing government, CIEL ultimately abandoned its pretense to be non-political and announced in February 1983 its intention to "s'engager directement dans la vie politique" against the danger of totalitarianism it saw in France.[14] The same shift toward explicit politicization can be seen in CIEL's engagement in favor of human rights outside of France. Although at first careful to raise human rights issues in non-communist countries such as Argentina, [15] this state of affairs did not last long. By the 1980s, CIEL's exclusive focus was on repression under communism, a choice justified by its judgment that while all human rights violations are condemnable, "l'oppression la plus menaçante par son étendue, sa quotidienneté, son cynisme sans faille, sa volonté et sa capacité d'expansion, est celle du totalitarisme soviétique." [16] Paul Thibaud likewise argued when comparing Latin American military dictatorships to communist regimes that one does not put "tous ceux qui portent atteinte à la liberté sur le même plan." [17] Like Ronald Reagan's United Nations Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, CIEL, Thibaud, and many other French antitotalitarians gave priority to condemning human rights violations in communist regimes because they were "totalitarian." Thus, contrary to Bourg, anti-totalitarianism was not a subspecies of the ethical turn. Nor can we follow Bourg in saying that "the Cold War ended in Paris before the Berlin Wall fell" (p. 9). [18]

Finally, I would like to raise a few issues regarding Bourg's discussion of the relationship between French electoral politics and New Philosophy. In *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, I argued that New Philosophy and the debate about it in 1977 were centered on an antitotalitarian critique of the Union of the Left, expected to win the 1978 legislative elections and thereby return the communists to government for the first time since 1947. For Bourg, the Union of the Left is rather less important. For him, the key domestic political question was not the Left coming to power, but the role of the post-Gaullist state (p. 251). The target of the New Philosophers was "loftier and more immodest" than the Union of the Left; it was politics in general (p. 252). For Bourg, the Union of the Left "was a particular case handled in the pursuit of their larger objectives" (p. 255), and the New Philosophers "targeted the Union of the Left in only a roundabout way, a few direct comments notwithstanding" (p. 256) For Bourg, relating their books to French electoral politics is less important for understanding their content than for understanding the controversy around them. Electoral politics "served as the accelerant for the conflagration of the New Philosophy affair" (p. 248). Further, the New Philosophers' reputation for linking Marxism with Soviet totalitarianism is "a reputation due as much to their critics' summary judgments as to their own occasionally flip stances" (p. 247).

While Bourg is right to point out the broader anti-political and anti-state ambitions of the New Philosophers—a point about which my book probably should have said more—I generally disagree with his reading of this episode in French political and intellectual history. For one, it seems to me that the New Philosophers, particularly Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann, addressed the debate about the Union of the Left and its affiliation with totalitarianism very directly.[19] The introduction to Lévy's *La Barbarie à visage humain* described his intended audience as follows:

C'est à la gauche, hélas ! à la gauche instituée que je m'adresse ici, car c'est elle que je vise, sa passion du leurre et de l'ignorance. C'est à elle, bien sûr, que je *parle* puisqu'elle est ma famille, que je parle sa langue et que je crois à sa morale à défaut de sa science... Je songe à ces socialistes qui ont le courage et la dignité, en ce temps de veillées d'armes et d'ivresses politiciennes, de s'appeler 'belles âmes' et de tenir très haut le flambeau de la lucidité : c'est pour eux que j'écris car ils sont les sentinelles d'un monde qui, sans eux, irait plus mal. Je songe à ces politiques qui savent, chaque jour davantage, le cours des choses indéchiffrable et qui ont la sagesse de penser dans la forme de l'Histoire sans croire pour autant à la sûreté de son dessein : c'est eux que je veux inquiéter, et au moins interroger, car ils auront bientôt notre destin entre leurs mains. [20]

Although Glucksmann was less explicit in his *Les Maîtres Penseurs*, his statements in the mass media engaged very directly in the debate on the Union of the Left. Further, if one puts Glucksmann's 1977 interventions in the diachronic perspective of his trajectory since 1968, his targeting of the Union of the Left becomes much clearer. In his first major post-gauchist publication—a March 1974 *Nouvel Observateur* article that put him on the map outside of extreme-left circles and was the template for his *La Cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes* of 1975— Glucksmann argued that if the Left refused to listen to Solzhenitsyn, it was because it did not want to "désespérer du Programme commun" of the Union of the Left.[21] The critique of the Union of the Left was a constant preoccupation for Glucksmann beginning in 1974. The same could be said for his linkage of Marxism with Soviet totalitarianism, which begins in 1974 as well. Given this longer history and Glucksmann's affirmation that the "soixante millions de morts du Goulag" are "l'application logique du marxisme," [22] it is hard to accept Bourg's arguments that the Union of the Left was a secondary issue for the New Philosophers or that the New Philosophers' reputation for linking Marxism with Soviet totalitarianism is not entirely due to their own statements.

As this analysis suggests, a diachronic perspective on the New Philosophers is lacking in *From Revolution to Ethics.* Bourg explains New Philosophy by relating it to the Jansenist tradition and presenting its criticism of the philosophy of desire, but he does not explore in any detail the pre-New Philosophy development of the thought of Christian Jambet, Guy Lardreau, and André Glucksmann.[23] Explaining their history is important because all three came out of the Gauche prolétarienne and were as much (and I think likely more) concerned by its attempt to spark popular revolution as by its encounter with prisons upon which Bourg focuses. The failure of popular revolution and the critique of the Gauche prolétarienne's efforts to provoke it are the

main foci of these figures, and explaining their thought on these issues requires exploring the history of French leftism's relationship with popular revolution: the grand absent of Bourg's book. Unfortunately, Bourg has, if I am not mistaken, nothing to say about Lardreau's Le Singe d'or of 1973, considered to be a synthesis of the Gauche prolétarienne's thought at the time. [24] Nor does Bourg much explore Glucksmann's thought on revolutionary politics, which he could have traced from Glucksmann's Stratégie et révolution en France 1968 [25] through La Cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes of 1975 to Les Maîtres Penseurs of 1977.

To conclude this discussion of New Philosophy, I would like to comment on the broader question of the relationship between New Philosophy and the Union of the Left. For Bourg the Union of the Left is more a factor in New Philosophy's reception than in its birth and content. This interpretation underestimates the importance of the Union of the Left in 1977. The Union of the Left was not just an episode in electoral politics, but rather the last standing serious political project that promised to radically transform France. Further, central to the Union of the Left was a French Communist Party whose Leninist politics, state-centered socialism, and orthodox Marxism had already fallen into disrepute among intellectuals before 1968. The Union of the Left made the questions posed by Glucksmann and Lévy seem urgent; and it radicalized their attacks on politics in direct proportion to the extent to which the Union of the Left (and specifically the Communist Party) seemed to represent everything against which the vast majority of intellectuals of the non-communist Left had been fighting for a decade or more. Without the rise of the Union of the Left at the precise moment when the leftist revolutionary project was disintegrating, there simply would not have been the New Philosophy of 1977. If the issue in question were simply the post-Gaullist state, the descent from heights of revolutionary politics would have ended in a much softer landing than that of 1977.

This review has focused more on criticism than on praise of *From Revolution to Ethics*, but the reader should not conclude from this that it is a bad book. Rather, it is one of the most important works on the aftermath of 1968 in France. It will be essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand this period. If it fails to convince in certain areas, this shortcoming reflects the period's complexity and its lack of a developed historiography. By virtue of both its strengths and its weaknesses, *From Revolution to Ethics* will hopefully lead other scholars to write the history of this period, building on the work of its pioneers, among whom is Julian Bourg.

## NOTES

[1] Positions that Bourg identifies with Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68: l'héritage impossible* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998) respectively.

[2] The most important work along these lines is Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[3] Bourg identifies himself as a member of Generation X and sees his book as a contribution to a "a critique of the 1960s generation." (339) I called for a somewhat similar refocusing of the historiography in my "The French 'Sixties'." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 26, 3 (winter 2008): 123-40, a review essay written before the publication of Bourg's book. Scholarship on the German and international sixties is also reaching the conclusion that the period had a democratizing impact. See, for example, Nick Thomas, *Protest Movements in 1960s West Germany:*  A Social History of Dissent and Democracy (New York: Berg. 2003); Konrad Jarausch, After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995, trans. Brandon Hunziker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), chapter six; and Philipp Gassert, "Narratives of Democratization: 1968 in Postwar Europe," in 1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977, ed. Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 307-24.

[4] *Mémoires de 68: guide des sources d'une histoire à faire* (Lonrai [Orne]: Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine, Mémoires de 68, Verdier, 1993).

[5] Bourg includes among the former members of Socialisme ou Barbarie Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Edgar Morin. (26 and 29) Morin was not to my knowledge a member of the group, although he did publish an article in the March-April 1965 issue of the group's journal according to "Cornelius Castoriadis Agora International Website," http://www.agorainternational.org/toc.html (accessed November 23, 2009).

[6] Marxist revisionism and the issues discussed in the next two paragraphs are treated in more detail in Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 44-64. This book is now available in French translation as *Les Intellectuels contre la gauche: L'Idéologie antitotalitaire en France (1968-1981)*, trans. André Merlot (Marseille: Éditions Agone, 2009).

[7] For an introduction to the phenomenon see Donald Reid, "*Etablissement*: Working in the Factory to Make Revolution in France," *Radical History Review* 88 (winter 2004): 83-111.

[8] Sheri Berman, The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[9] Bourg writes on the latter point, "one of the most important accessories to the explicit emergence of ethics was the fact (and, as important, the pervasive *sense* of that fact) that intellectual fields marginalized by Parisian intelligentsia in-crowds—such as political theory, history, and philosophy—made a comeback in the mid-to-late 1970s." (309)

[10] Paul Thibaud, "Aujourd'hui," Esprit 463 (December 1976): 755-75.

[11] Christofferson, Intellectuals Against the Left, 216 and 219.

[12] "La Liberté ne se négocie pas," *Le Monde*, 27 January 1978. CIEL was an important phenomenon in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Including many prominent intellectuals among its founders, it had 1400 members (40% of whom were teachers) by June 1980 (*Le Monde*, 17 June 1980).

[13] Le Monde, 5-6 July 1981. After the declaration of martial law in Poland, it called for the departure of communist ministers saying that their presence is "dangereuse à trop d'égards: elle est inadmissible" (*Le Monde*, 3 February 1982).

[14] Le Monde 23 February 1983.

- [15] Le Monde, 19 May 1978.
- [16] *Le Monde*, 6 February 1982.

[17] Paul Thibaud, "Et le Salvador?" *Esprit* 63 (March 1982): 98.

[18] These issues are discussed more fully in Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, 267-74.

[19] For more on this topic see Christofferson, Intellectuals Against the Left, chapter 5 and passim.

[20] Bernard-Henri Lévy; La Barbarie à visage humain, livre de poche, biblio essais edition (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1977), 10.

[21] André Glucksmann, "Le Marxisme rend sourd," Le Nouvel Observateur 486 (4 March 1974): 80; André Glucksmann, La Cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes: Essai sur l'Etat, le marxisme et les camps de concentration (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975).

[22] André Glucksmann, "Questionnaire," TF1, 18 September 1977. Consulted at the Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA).

[23] Nor does Bourg do this with Bernard-Henri Lévy, but in his case I do not think this would be a very fruitful line of inquiry because Lévy was much more of an opportunist and much less of a leftist than the other figures discussed here.

[24] Guy Lardreau, Le Singe d'or: Essai sur le concept d'étape du marxisme (Paris: Mercure de France, 1973). See the comments on it in Christofferson, Intellectuals Against the Left, 59.

[25] André Glucksmann, Stratégie et révolution en France 1968: Introduction (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1968).

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