

## **From Racial Strangers to Ethnic Minorities** *On the socio-political impact of UNESCO, 1945-60*

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### **Abstract**

From 1945 and over the following decades the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was at the core of a dispute in international scientific circles over the correct definition of the concept of race. This was a dispute centered essentially on whether the natural sciences or the social sciences should take precedence in determining the origin, classification and nature of man.

The UNESCO statements on race in 1950 and 1951 – whose main purpose was to give scientific credibility to the claims of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – rejected the notion that mental traits could be used in the classification of mankind, and the concept of race consequently lost its biological potential to legitimize racial discrimination. They also introduced the culturally-rooted concept of “ethnic group” as a more meaningful category.

This paper examines the political and social impact of the two statements within a number of member states in the 1950s, and the paper shows that UNESCO efforts played a major part in imposing a new view of man in the post-war era.

### **A global dilemma**

The extent of the Nazi violence during World War II led to a widespread recognition among national leaders of the need for political leadership on a global level, and the United Nations came into existence in October 1945. Its task was to ensure collective security and create an international declaration of human rights based on the ethical principle that all human beings – regardless of their differences – were equal and shared the same fundamental rights.

The organization was to ensure peace through military, economic and social measures. But there was also the recognition that peace could only be maintained if it was based on a genuine solidarity between people. To achieve this end, in November 1945 44 countries agreed to the establishment of UNESCO. The constitution’s preamble formulated the task of the new specialized agency: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”<sup>1</sup>

The sense that racism still posed a potential danger and that it might come to dominate as a doctrine in some countries, as well as the need for a scientific approval of the claims of the human rights declaration, paved the way for a UN resolution on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in Europe, which recommended that UNESCO launched “a program of

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO (1945), preamble.

disseminating scientific facts designed to remove what is commonly known as racial prejudice.”<sup>2</sup>

On 10 December 1948, the UN human rights declaration was adopted, while the Brazilian ethnographer Arthur Ramos – an outspoken critic of racial inequality in South America – was approved as head of UNESCO’s Department of Social Sciences, with special responsibility for its new race project. Ramos immediately began designing the paper that would form the basis for a statement endorsed by scientific authorities from around the world. Ramos invited a team of ten scientists all of whom were recruited from the marginal group of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and ethnographers who perceived the race concept primarily as a social construct. Among them were Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French ethnographer from Musée de l’Homme in Paris, Edward Franklin Frazier, the American sociologist from Howard University in Washington DC, and Ashley Montagu, professor of anthropology from Rutgers University and already widely known in the US at the time as an outspoken critic of racial inequality. These men were expected by UNESCO to come up with “a global scientific consensus on race.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Race – a social myth**

In December 1949 the panel met at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris with Franklin Frazier as moderator and Montagu as “rapporteur”. In wake of the first day of meetings Montagu wrote most of his proposal for a final statement on race during the night at a nearby hotel, and over the following days the participants discussed the race concept in the light of Montagu’s draft.<sup>4</sup>

Its central argument was that mankind belonged to a single species. But the draft was also Montagu’s attempt to create a single, universal rejection of the concept of race, which he found scientifically indefensible, and he was convinced that, by discrediting the concept, UNESCO would effectively prevent any racial theories for being used for political purposes in the future.

UNESCO had a number of external people to read the preliminary results, and the conclusion that race was entirely a social myth made shocking reading for some of them. UNESCO’s first Director-General Julian Huxley in particular was dissatisfied with certain passages that he found too dogmatic or provocative. He suggested that Montagu revised the statement so that the concept of race was not reduced solely to a myth but dealt with the fact that people did at least look different in different parts of the world. If the statement only addressed racial differences that had social or cultural origins and that might be dismissed as “pseudo-racial”, or if it was too negative in its design, it would not last for long and at worst would damage the reputation of UNESCO.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ECOSOC, 6th Session, April 1948, Resolution 116 (VI) B, UN Archives, New York (UNA) and letter from Henri Laugier to Julian Huxley 20.4.1948, 323.1, UNESCO Archives, Paris (UA).

<sup>3</sup> “Activities of UNESCO” [29.10.1949], 1.11.1949, 323.1, UA. Also “Committee of Experts for the Study of Racial Prejudice”, SG 76/5/05, S-0441-0401, UNA.

<sup>4</sup> Stoczkowski (2007), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Julian Huxley to Robert C. Angell 26.1.1950, 323.12 A 102, UA and Pogliano (2001), p. 347-348.

In July the final version was complete. It began by stating that all people belonged to the same biological species. There were indeed several different groups with distinct physical characteristics, but the differences between them were small and insignificant in the context of the overall similarities. From a biological point of view one could therefore consider a “race” – Montagu added the quotation marks – as a population characterized by certain overlapping features that were associated with the frequency and distribution of hereditary facilities and were a result of geographical or cultural isolation. These differences and their role were often over-estimated and seen as more fundamental than was the case, so that national, cultural, religious, geographic and linguistic groups had been called “races” on false premises. As a result the idea of racial superiority was unscientific, and the statement recommended that the race concept was replaced by the culturally-rooted concept of “ethnic group”. This concept made more sense scientifically, because people gravitated into marriage and procreation on the basis of cultural similarities and subjective feelings of belonging to the same culture, which were crucial for the spread of individual genes. This meant that culture steered human biology and not vice versa.

Due to Huxley, however, the statement ended with a passage stressing that equality between ethnic groups should not be understood to mean that all individuals were necessarily equally well-equipped in intelligence and character. In stead he recommended that people stick together. “The unity of mankind from both the biological and social viewpoints is the main thing. To recognize this and to act accordingly is the first requirement of modern man.”<sup>6</sup>

This *Statement on Race* was published on 18 July 1950 and accompanied by a press release with a headline proclaiming: “No biological justification for race discrimination, say world scientists: Most authoritative statement on the subject.” A second press release, which explained the statement’s historical background, declared that “race is less a biological fact than a social myth”, while the *UNESCO Courier* promoted the news as “the scientific basis for human unity.”<sup>7</sup>

### **UNESCO in retreat**

The first statement on race was undeniably an intellectual landmark, and UNESCO estimated that the arguments legitimizing racial prejudice and racial discrimination would collapse and disappear by themselves as the news spread.

The statement did, in fact, receive plenty of publicity. An inventory of the press clippings that UNESCO managed to collect in the year 1950 shows that it was mentioned in at least 133 news articles, 62 in-depth articles and leaders, and in eight major news reports from all over the world – and it found widespread support. “Whenever it is, whatever form it takes, racism is an evil force, and to the extent that UNESCO can kill it by the truth, it will do good,” the *New York Times* proclaimed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> UNESCO (1969), pp. 30-35.

<sup>7</sup> Press clippings in 323.12 A 102, UA.

<sup>8</sup> “The Myth of Race” (1950); Letter from Douglas H. Schneider to Max McCullough, 4.1.1951, 323.12 A 102, UA.

Nevertheless, it soon appeared that the environmentalist statement – despite Julian Huxley’s moderations – went beyond what mainstream scientists accepted as factual evidence about race, and it could most certainly not be said to represent a universal definition of race at the time.

Criticism appeared in the English newspaper *The Times* in July and again in the magazine *UNESCO Courier* in July-August 1950. It was formulated by the English anthropologist William H. Fagg, editor of the prestigious journal *Man* and president of the British Royal Anthropological Institute. Fagg expressed his disagreement with the conclusions of the statement, which he characterized as “the Ashley Montagu Statement of Race published by UNESCO”, and he was considering setting up his own panel of experts that would formulate a new statement.<sup>9</sup>

The debate caused renewed publicity, and UNESCO later concluded that the “dogme raciste” was one of the most talked-about topics in the news media over the following months. But it was far from all positive press, and the American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote an alarming letter to the Swiss-American ethnographer Alfred Métraux – now in charge of UNESCO’s race project – urging the organization to come up with immediate countermeasures, otherwise its work was in danger of being discredited and ridiculed.<sup>10</sup>

### **Race – without political implications**

UNESCO decided to have the statement revised by assembling another panel of experts to provide a “supplement” designed by anthropologists and geneticists.

This time it was left it to the American geneticist, Professor L.C. Dunn from Columbia University, to formulate the outcome. The other experts on the panel were, like Dunn, all renowned scientists. In order to make sure that the second statement would not differ too much from the first, UNESCO clearly stated this time that the aim of the statement was to be the foundation of a “campaign against racialism” and “the abatement of racialistic ideas by the propagation of truth in the form of the findings of science.”<sup>11</sup>

The seven anthropologists and five geneticists met in Paris in June 1951, and by December 1951 Dunn had incorporated the many comments. The main conclusion of the first statement was retained since the experts had agreed that all people had the same origin and were fundamentally equal. But on other issues the new statement seemed rather vague, since the intention was to make it both politically and scientifically watertight this time. For example, it did not make much use of the race concept. On the other hand it did not reject the concept and acknowledged that it did make sense to divide humanity into three main races, black, yellow and white, as long as the division only was claimed to hold true for physical and not for mental differences.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> According to a letter from Don J. Hager to R.S. Fenton, 29.1.1951, 323.12 A 102, UA.

<sup>10</sup> Letters from Margaret Mead to Alfred Métraux, 6.11. and 9.11.1950, 323.12 A 102, UA.

<sup>11</sup> “UNESCO and Race” (1951), p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO (1969), pp. 36-43.

It could be said that the second statement was a clear retreat from the first since it came up with a way to retain race as a meaningful category, which then received official approval from UNESCO. But at the same time the concept of race was defined in a non-racist way by rejecting the notion that mental traits could be used in classifying races, which was a reinforcement of the first statement and directly opposed to Huxley's approach. In that way the concept of race lost its potential to legitimize racial discrimination and could form the basis of UNESCO's efforts to combat "the evil of racism."<sup>13</sup>

The time the criticism turned out to be on a much smaller scale and mostly by extremist groupings who did not feel that their views had been heard.

### **Fine aims – but wide of the mark**

UNESCO was, however, obliged to go further than simply reviewing the scientific fact of race. The content needed popularization to educate the public.

The following years UNESCO launched three series – *The Race Question and Modern Science*, *The Race Question and Modern Thought*, and *Race and Society* – to combat racial inequality. Each of the series consisted of a number of small pamphlets in French and English and for some of them also in other languages.<sup>14</sup>

Métraux claimed in 1952 that UNESCO's pamphlets on race were the organization's best-selling publications. The most remarkable being Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Race and History* from 1952, which sought to avoid an interpretation of cultural differences as an expression of inequality, seeing it rather as an expression of diversity developed under the influence of historical events. Today Lévi-Strauss' work is still considered to be the best selling book of the organization's entire history.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless the pamphlets did not seem to be very effective for educational purposes in the short run. They had problems reaching the "man in the street" in most of the member countries. This was first and foremost because they were written in foreign languages but also, as a study showed, because they were too difficult to understand. The reader required at least a high school degree to grasp the contents. In addition, their layout was not very compelling.<sup>16</sup>

Maybe it was naively optimistic to think that UNESCO could resolve conflicts and tragedies only by disseminating the knowledge of researchers. In the long run, however, the publications proved their ability to infiltrate national education systems because they were written by recognized scientists, were discussed and used in leading scientific journals, and represented a steady bombardment of publications that at least physical anthropologists had to deal with. In the early 1950s the pamphlets represented a substantial proportion of all the new titles published in the field of anthropology, and in the late 1950s the pamphlets had been translated into 13 languages and printed in more than 300,000 copies.

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<sup>13</sup> Shapiro (1952), p. 363.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from E.L. Taylor to Alfred Métraux, 31.5.1950, 323.1, UA.

<sup>15</sup> Lévi-Strauss (1952).

<sup>16</sup> Saenger (1955), pp. 21-27 and Brattain (2007), p. 1406.

Slowly the discipline of anthropology changed its content. The number of anthropologists that based the career on physical measurements or family studies was reduced, and those that were left began to characterize themselves only as physical anthropologists. Now even paleoanthropologists could only refer to the human diversity of the prehistoric man with a certain amount of anxiety.<sup>17</sup>

### **A bumpy ride**

In most European countries the, the organization was popular in the aftermath of the war, and only few of them had problems convincing politicians and educational boards to use the publications issued by UNESCO. In November 1951 the Assembly of the French Union adopted a proposal to publicize the statements on race and to include them in school syllabuses, and many other European member states revised school textbooks in accordance with the guidelines of UNESCO.<sup>18</sup>

A similar interest in UNESCO's work was to be found in other parts of the world, and some countries even came to play an active role in the race project. That happened when, in order to give instructions on how to create harmonious relations, Alfred Métraux initiated studies of places where people of different origin apparently lived peacefully together. The most ambitious of these studies was carried out by a number of Brazilian anthropologists. Later, however, a Brazilian formula of "racial democracy" where the practice of social cohesion ignored colour proved, like similar studies of other countries, to be an illusion.<sup>19</sup>

In Rhodesia UNESCO helped to found a university institute on "race relations" that would help spread the organization's pamphlets in the segregated country, and an employee in India and Indonesia, where UNESCO had permanent offices, later recalled that there had been "great interest among scientists as well as laymen in those parts of the race problem [the racial inequality] and UNESCO's pamphlets" in these countries in the early 1950's.<sup>20</sup>

In the US, the UNESCO national commission agreed that the most effective way to eliminate racial prejudice and diminish discrimination in the US was through progressive education of the public. Thus the UNESCO statements of 1950 and 1951 were distributed and were used and taught in "re-education" workshops in schools and churches all over the country.

But in the US it did not happen without some resistance. Wesley C. George, professor of anatomy at the School of Medicine, University of North Carolina, was one of the critics – being a strong supporter of segregation. "The real purpose," he declared, "is to indoctrinate people, somewhat clandestinely, with the particular ideologies of those directing the re-education." That was

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<sup>17</sup> Proctor (2005), p. 253.

<sup>18</sup> "Activities of Member States [UNESCO]", Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, France, Paris Embassy. RG 84, box 1, NARA.

<sup>19</sup> Maio (2001), pp. 118-136.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Alexander Wolsky to Rhoda Métraux, 26.3.1958, The Rhoda Métraux Papers, Box 8, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC (LOC); "Teaching of Race Relations – Rhodesia and Nyasaland", 323.12:37 (689) AMS, UA.

apparently done by the national commission controlling the distribution of information by giving “favorable press to party-line books.”<sup>21</sup>

Another outspoken American segregationist of the time criticized the fact that so many UNESCO employees were students from Columbia University, meaning that they were environmentalists and members of what he referred to as a Franz Boas cult. “The public had some familiarity with a majority of these names,” he later recalled. “Almost all the tracts on race distributed by UNESCO and similar organizations were authored by them, as were most of the books and articles available in bookstores and on newsstands. Their views were often aired on network television and radio. But their personal backgrounds were not so well known.”<sup>22</sup>

One pamphlet in particular was under attack in the US. That was L.C. Dunn’s pamphlet *Race and Biology* from 1951, which claimed that income, education, cultural advantages, and other opportunities determined intelligence and not race. That viewpoint provoked Congressman Andrew J. May from Kentucky to discredit the pamphlet and caused officials of the United States Army to ban it.<sup>23</sup>

That summer there was also a hearing before the Senate Appropriations Committee on the work and costs of UNESCO, which revealed “an attitude more critical than at any previous time” and which was supported by the criticism from the general public.<sup>24</sup>

The US sentiment towards UNESCO became even more hostile when Dwight D. Eisenhower came to power in 1953. The administration announced that the United States had decided to abandon the UN human rights declaration, since it harboured communistic ideas. Anybody working on human rights now risked being labelled a Communist and thereby being politically ostracized.<sup>25</sup>

In Los Angeles UNESCO programmes and publications were eventually banished from the public school system in 1953, and this successful fight of “patriotic” groups soon led to apprehension among school administrators all over the country concerning the use in public schools of any of UNESCO’s publications, regardless of their content.<sup>26</sup>

### **UNESCO in court**

The 1950’s were, however, a time in which old attitudes changed as a result of the outcome of several legal cases on racial segregation conducted by the U.S. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Among the witnesses the defence used a number of social scientists – one being the Canadian-American psychologist Otto Klineberg from Columbia University who was deeply engaged in UNESCO’s work. Klineberg saw the opportunity to promote the work of UNESCO, and at a meeting in Paris in August 1952 he and fourteen other prominent psychologists publically

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<sup>21</sup> Jackson (2005), p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> Putnam (1980), chapter 2.

<sup>23</sup> Gormley (2006), p. 424.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Charles A. Thomson to Jaime Torres Bodet, 6.3.1952, Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, France, Paris Embassy. RG 84, box 29, NARA.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson (2003), p. 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> Hazard (2007); “The UNESCO School Decision” (1953) and Saenger (1955), p. 22.

expressed their full support for UNESCO's work on race, which had "not only scientific interest but very important practical implications."<sup>27</sup>

From now on, as the cases on segregation reached the US Supreme Court, the outcome of UNESCO's race program would play a more visible role. The first time was in the appeal argument for the Supreme Court in a case in 1952. During the appeal some of the UNESCO pamphlets were referred to, and the first UNESCO statement on race was used in an attempt to discredit the idea of racial inequality.<sup>28</sup>

A year later a social science statement on the effects of segregation and the consequences of desegregation was presented to the Supreme Court by the NAACP. It was signed by 32 American social scientists. Among the names were several actively involved in the work of UNESCO – including Otto Klineberg now Head of UNESCO's Division of Applied Social Sciences. The signatories had come to a consensus that enforced segregation was psychologically detrimental to members of the segregated group as well as to those of the majority group, and they claimed that fears based on the assumption of innate racial differences in intelligence were not well founded. The statement came to form the basis of many of the questions to which the Supreme Court Justices addressed themselves during the final hearings of the civil rights cases.<sup>29</sup>

One of these was the historic decision in the case *Oliver Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas*, of May 1954. Here UNESCO's work was referred to by the defence as the newest available scientific evidence, and was later referred to by the Chief Justice as a cornerstone of the court's decision. The conclusion was that separating children in public schools on the basis of race was discrimination and thus unconstitutional. This milestone decision marked the end of legalized racial segregation in public schools and had an immediate effect on one-third of the American states.<sup>30</sup>

All of a sudden social scientists – with the authority of UNESCO – had become social engineers. The extent of the attention paid to them during the trials had diminished the authority of biological arguments and confirmed the impression that segregation was of a political and historical character.

### **Dealing with Apartheid**

In South Africa controversies over race and intelligence had been going on for decades, and conclusions pointed in very different directions. Despite its *de facto* segregation South Africa had nevertheless become a member of UNESCO in June 1946, and the country had immediately benefited from the organization's work on adult education and its scholarships for South African

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<sup>27</sup> "Psychologists Map Unit to Aid UNESCO" (1952).

<sup>28</sup> *S.T. Bolling, et al. v. C.M. Sharpe, et al.*: October Term, 1952, US Supreme Court Records and Briefs, p. 17, LOC.

<sup>29</sup> Jackson (2005), pp. 155-164.

<sup>30</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, 349 US 294 (1955): October Term 1954: Reply Brief 4/11/1955, US Supreme Court Records and Briefs, p. 12-13, and Papers of the NAACP, part 3: The Campaign for Educational Equality. Series C: Legal Department and Central Office records, 1951-55, LOC.



students wishing to study abroad. The issue of race did not arise as a problem until the ideology of white supremacy was institutionalized with the apartheid laws of 1948, making South Africa the only country in the world with an official racist policy.

UNESCO's race programme inevitable struck at the heart of the apartheid ideology, and as early as in July 1948 the South African government was accusing UNESCO of interference in "domestic matters" by distributing material that included views on race that conflicted with the apartheid ideology within the borders of the country. The government acted by refusing to spend further money on its national commission, which was soon to be described as "practically dead".<sup>31</sup>

From now on the tactic employed by UNESCO headquarters was to move carefully in order not to cause South Africa to withdraw from the organization. The country's continued membership would allow the organization to operate legally within its borders.

A couple of years passed with tolerant diplomacy. The South African government predictably objected to what they deemed "irresponsible" statements on the race question, and the circulation of the subsequent race pamphlets caused real concern and increased the government's already high levels of concern. In September 1952 a South African newspaper revealed that the government had banned the pamphlet *Roots of Prejudice* by the American sociologist Arnold Rose. The pamphlet outlined the causes and effects of racial prejudice and contained a passage stating that "the strongest prejudice and the largest number of false beliefs about negroes are to be found in South Africa."<sup>32</sup> The pamphlet was immediately banned as objectionable, indecent and obscene literature and caused a debate within the government over UNESCO's right to distribute its publications in the country.

Similar incidents occurred, and during a session of the South African parliament in April 1955, the Minister of External Affairs, Erik H. Louw, made it official the government had decided – as a result of the organization's interference in South Africa's racial problems – that the country would withdraw from UNESCO with effect from 31 December 1956.<sup>33</sup>

### **The aftermath**

There remained substantial problems relating to race that had to be addressed in South Africa, the US and in some of the former colonies. On the other hand there was an optimistic confidence in the impact of the existing information, and at the very same day as South Africa officially withdrew from UNESCO, the organization closed its race division.

But on Christmas Eve 1959 swastikas were smeared on a new synagogue in Cologne in West Germany. The incident triggered a wave of similar incidents,

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Union Education Department of South Africa to W.H.C. Laves, 8.7.1948, X07.21(68.01), UA.

<sup>32</sup> Memo of 29.9.1952, X07.21(68.01), UA.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from the Embassy of the Union of South Africa in Paris to UNESCO, 5.4.1955, X07.21(68.01), UA.

and in January 1960 there were, according to UNESCO, between 2000-2500 anti-Semitic incidents in about 40 countries.<sup>34</sup>

The expressions of racial prejudice made it clear to the United Nations that action had to be taken, and in December 1962 the UN General Assembly adopted three resolutions on race. One of them requested the Human Rights Commission to draw up proposals for a convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination and religious intolerance.<sup>35</sup>

During the preparation of the convention UNESCO was asked to convene a panel of experts to re-examine the concept of race in the light of scientific advances of the previous 12 years and to make a new and updated statement on race. That happened in Moscow in 1964 and repeated the main points of the previous statements. A year later the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was adopted. In the wake of the ratification and subsequent implementation of the convention in national legislation, discrimination was criminalized, and to this very day the convention represents the principle legal text against racism and racial discrimination in UN member states.

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<sup>34</sup> “Brief Summary of Interpretations Concerning the Recent Anti-Semitic Incidents”, October 1960, 323.12 A 187, UA.

<sup>35</sup> UN resolution, no. 1779-1781, 7.12.1962, UNA.

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