



The Retreat from Autonomy: Post-modernism as Generalised Conformism¹

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ABSTRACT This article, after periodising history on the basis of the imaginary significations created by and dominating each period, argues that the period after the Second World War is characterised mainly by the waning of social, political and ideological conflict and the eclipse, after the movements of the 1960s, of the project of autonomy. The decadence in the field of spiritual creation, which marks this period, is reflected in the development of post-modernism that simply mirrors and—worse—rationalises the prevailing trends through a high brow apologetics of conformity and banality.

I

The label *post-modernism* certainly does not and cannot define or characterise the present period. But it very adequately *expresses* it. It manifests the pathetic inability of the epoch to conceive of itself as something positive—or as something *tout court*—leading to its self-definition as simply ‘post-something’, that is, through a reference to that which was but is not anymore, and to its attempts at self-glorification by means of the bizarre contention that its meaning is no-meaning and its style the lack of any style.²

Nevertheless, a distinction between the terms *post-industrial* and *post-modern* is worth making. Something in reality corresponds to the term *post-industrial*. Briefly speaking, in the rich countries at least (but not only), production (whatever that may mean) is moving away from old dirty factories and blast furnaces toward increasingly automated complexes and various ‘services’. The process, anticipated at least half a century ago, was considered for quite a time to be bearing extraordinary promises for the future of human work and life. The length of work, one was told, would be dramatically cut, and its nature fundamentally altered. Automation and data processing were supposed to transform the repetitive, alienated industrial toil of old into an open field for the free expansion of the inventiveness and creativity of the worker.

1. Reprinted from *World in Fragments* by Cornelius Castoriadis, translated and edited by David Ames Curtis, with the permission of the publishers, Stanford University Press. © Copyright 1997 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University.
2. At last, post-modernism has delivered us from the tyranny of style’, a well-known architect proclaimed at a conference in New York in April 1986.

In actuality, none of all this materialised. The possibilities offered by the new technologies are confined to a limited group of clever young specialists. For the bulk of the remaining employees, in industry or in services, the nature of work has not fundamentally changed. Rather, old style 'industrialisation' has invaded the big firms in the non-industrial sectors, with rhythm of work and rates of output submitted to impersonal, mechanical control. Employment in industry proper has been declining for decades; 'redundant' workers, and youth, have mostly found employment in second-rate, poorly paid, 'service' industries. From 1840, say, to 1940, the length of the working week had been reduced from 72 to 40 hours (minus 45 per cent). It has remained virtually the same from 1940 onwards, despite a notable acceleration in the rate of increase of output per man-hour. Workers thereby made redundant stay unemployed (mostly in Western Europe), or have to fit themselves into second-rate 'services' (mostly in the USA).

Nonetheless, it remains true that something essential is changing, at least potentially, in humankind's—the rich part of humankind's—relation with material production. For the first time in millennia, 'primary' and 'secondary' production—agriculture, mining and manufacturing, transportation—are absorbing less than a quarter of total labour input (and of the working population) and could possibly absorb half of that, were it not for the incredible waste built into the system (farmers subsidised not to produce, obsolete industries and factories kept in operation, and so on). Were it not for the continuous manufacturing of new 'needs' and the built-in obsolescence of most products, 'primary' and 'secondary' production might even come to absorb a vanishing quantum of human time. In brief, a leisure society is, theoretically, within reach, whereas a society with creative, personal work roles for all seems as remote now as it was during the 19th century.

II

Granted that any designation is conventional, the absurdity of the term *post-modern* is obvious. What is less frequently noted is that this absurdity is derivative. For the term *modern* itself is very infelicitous, and its inadequacy was bound to appear with the passage of time. What could ever come *after modernity*? A period naming itself modern implies that history has reached its end, and that henceforth humans will live in a perpetual present.

The term *modern* expresses a deeply self- (or ego-) centred attitude. The proclamation that 'We are the moderns' pre-empts any genuine further development. More than this, it contains an intriguing antinomy. The self-conscious imaginary component of the term entails a self-characterisation of modernity as indefinite openness with regard to the future, yet the characterisation makes sense only in relation to the past. They were the Ancients, we are the Moderns. Yet, what are we to call the ones coming after us? The term makes sense only on the absurd assumption that the self-proclaimed modern period will last forever, that the future will only be a prolonged present—which in other respects fully contradicts the explicit pretensions of modernity.

A short discussion of two contemporary attempts to give a precise content to the term *modernity* may be a useful starting point. Characteristically, these attempts concern themselves not with changes in social–historical reality but with real or supposed changes in the attitude of thinkers (philosophers) toward that reality. They are typical of the contemporary tendency of writers toward self-confinement: writers write about writers for other writers. Thus, Foucault asserts that modernity starts with Kant, especially with the texts *The Conflict of the Faculties* and *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, because with Kant the philosopher for the first time shows interest in the actual historical present, starts ‘reading the newspaper’, and the like (cf. Hegel’s phrase about reading the newspaper as one’s ‘realistic morning prayer’).³ Thus, modernity would be the consciousness of the historicity of the epoch one is living in. This is, of course, totally inadequate, since the historicity of one’s own epoch was clear for Pericles (as is apparent from the Funeral Oration in *Thucydides*) and Plato as well as for Tacitus, or Grégoire de Tours in the 6th century (*mundus senescit*). The novelty, in Foucault’s eyes, would be that from Kant onwards the relation to the present is no longer conceived in terms of value comparisons (‘Are we decadent?’ ‘Which model ought we to follow?’), not ‘longitudinally’ but in a ‘sagittal relation to their own actuality’. But value comparisons are clearly there in Kant, for whom history can only be reflected in terms of progress, and the *Aufklärung* is a cardinal moment in this progress. And, if a ‘sagittal’ relation is counter-posed to valuation, this can only mean that thought, abandoning its critical function, tends to borrow its criteria from historical reality as it is. Undoubtedly, such a tendency becomes acute in the 19th and 20th centuries (Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, even if the last two oppose the reality of today in the name of a more real reality, the reality of tomorrow: communism or the superman). However, this tendency is a *problem within* modernity: it could never be taken as summing up the thinking of the *Aufklärung* and *post-Aufklärung* period, and even less the real *social–historical* trend of the past two centuries.

Equally problematic is Habermas’s identification of modernity with the spirit of Hegel’s philosophy: ‘Hegel was the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity. We have to go back to him.’⁴ Actual history is replaced, once again, with the history of ideas; real struggles and conflicts exist only through their pale representation in the antinomies of the system. Thus, when Habermas writes that it is only in Hegel’s theory that a conceptual ‘constellation among modernity, time-consciousness, and rationality becomes visible for the first time’,⁵ what seems to bother him is that ‘rationality’ is ‘puffed up into the absolute spirit’. But this very *unification* is precisely Hegel’s *illusion*. Nor can one forget that, not only Hegel’s *ipsissima verba*, but the whole structure, logic, and dynamic of his philosophy lead to the antimodern theme par excellence, that the ‘end of history’ is already with us and that, after Absolute Knowledge has been embodied in Hegel’s system, only some ‘empirical work’ remains to be done.

3. Michel Foucault, ‘Un cours inédit’, *Magazine Littéraire*, (May 1988), p. 36.

4. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, transl. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 13.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Hegel represents, in fact, the full opposition to modernity within modernity—or the full opposition, more generally, to the Greco–Western spirit within that spirit—for it is with him that the illegitimate marriage between Reason and Reality (= the Present construed as the *restlos* [total and complete] recollection of the successive embodiments of Reason) is for the first time solemnly celebrated. Hegel writes that ‘philosophy is its own {historical} epoch conceptualised in thought’. Philosophy is the truth of the epoch and philosophy is true only insofar as it is the thought of the epoch. But the peculiarity of the ‘epoch’—already before Hegel’s times, as well as after—has been the emergence, in thought and in actual historical activity, of an explicit internal *split*, manifest in the self-contestation of the epoch, in the putting into question of existing and instituted forms. The peculiarity of the ‘epoch’ has been the struggle between monarchy and democracy, property and social movements, dogma and critique, the Academy and artistic innovation, and so on. Philosophy can be the thought of the epoch either by attempting to reconcile (in words) these oppositions—whereby it is led necessarily to a conservatism of the sort Hegel reached in the *Philosophy of Right*—or by remaining true to its critical function, in which case the idea that it merely conceptualises the epoch is preposterous. Critique entails a distance relative to the object; if philosophy is to go beyond journalism, this critique presupposes the creation of new ideas, new standards, new forms of thought that establish this distance.

III

I am not able to propose new names for the period that called itself modern, nor for the one succeeding it. But I will attempt to propose a new periodisation, or rather a new characterisation of the more or less accepted divisions of (Western) European history (which obviously includes American history). It is hardly necessary to remind ourselves of the schematic character of all periodisations, of the risk of neglecting continuities and connections, or of the ‘subjective’ element involved. The latter is to be found specifically in the basis chosen for the division in which the philosophical and theoretical preconceptions underlying the attempt at periodisation are condensed. Of course, this is unavoidable and it has to be recognised as such. The best way to deal with it is to make these preconceptions as explicit as possible. My own preconceptions are that the individuality of a period is to be found in the specificity of the imaginary significations created by and dominating it; and that, without neglecting the fantastically rich and polyphonic complexity of the historical universe unfolding in Western Europe from the 12th century onwards, the most appropriate way to grasp its specificity is to relate it to the signification and the project of (social and individual) autonomy. The emergence of this project marks the break with the ‘true’ Middle Ages.⁶ In this perspective, one may distinguish three periods:

6. On the question of the ‘true Middle Ages’, Aron Gurevitch, *The Categories of Medieval Thought* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), and Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), supply material and analyses very close to the point of view adopted here.

the emergence (constitution) of the West; the critical ('modern') epoch; and the retreat into conformism.

1. The Emergence (Constitution) of the West (from the 12th to the Early 18th Century)

The self-constitution of the protobourgeoisie, the building and growth of the new cities (or the changing character of existing ones), the demand for some sort of political autonomy (going from communal rights to full self-government, depending on cases and circumstances) were accompanied by new psychical, mental, intellectual and artistic attitudes that prepared the ground for the explosive results of the rediscovery and reception of Roman Law, Aristotle, and then the whole of the extant Greek legacy. Tradition and authority gradually ceased to be sacred and innovation stopped being a disparaging word (as it typically was during the 'true' Middle Ages). Even though it appeared only in embryonic form—and in perpetual accommodation with the powers that be (Church and monarchy)—the project of political and intellectual autonomy actually did re-emerge after a 15-century eclipse. An uneasy compromise between this social-historical movement and the (more or less reformed) traditional order was reached in the 'classical' 17th century.

2. The Critical ('Modern') Epoch: Autonomy and Capitalism

A decisive turn occurred in the 18th century, became self-conscious with the Enlightenment and lasted until the two world wars of the 20th century. The project of autonomy was radicalised, both in the socio-political and in the intellectual fields. Instituted political forms were called into question; new ones, entailing radical breaks with the past, were created. As the movement developed, contestation embraced other domains beyond the narrowly political one: property relations, the organisation of the economy, family, the position of women and the relations between the sexes, education and the status of the young. For the first time in the Christian period, philosophy definitively broke with theology (up to Leibniz, at least, mainstream philosophers felt obliged to supply 'proofs' of the existence of God, etc.). A sweeping acceleration in the work and expansion of the fields of rational science took place. In literature and the arts, the creation of new forms not only proliferated but also was self-consciously pursued for its own sake.

At the same time, a new socio-economic reality—in itself a 'total social fact'—was created: capitalism. Capitalism is not just endless accumulation for accumulation's sake: it is the relentless transformation of the conditions and the means of accumulation, the incessant revolutionising of production, commerce, finance, and consumption. It embodies a new social imaginary signification: the unlimited expansion of 'rational mastery'. After a while, this signification came to penetrate and tended to shape the whole of social life (e.g. State, armies, education, etc.). With the growth of the core capitalist institution, the firm, it becomes embodied in a new type of bureaucratic-hierarchical organisation; gradually, the

managerial technical bureaucracy becomes the proper bearer of the capitalist project.

The 'modern' period—let us say 1750–1950—is best defined by the conflict, but also the mutual contamination and entanglement, of two imaginary significations: autonomy, on the one hand and unlimited expansion of 'rational mastery', on the other. They ambiguously co-existed under the common roof of 'Reason'. In its capitalist acceptance, the *meaning* of 'Reason' is clear: it is 'Understanding' (*Verstand* in the Kantian–Hegelian sense) or what I call 'ensemblistic-identitary logic', which is essentially embodied in quantification and which leads to the fetishisation of 'growth' *per se*. On the basis of the hidden but apparently self-evident postulate that economy is just about producing more (outputs) with less (inputs), nothing—physical or human 'nature', tradition, or other 'values'—ought to stand in the way of the maximisation process. Everything is called before the Tribunal of (productive) Reason and must prove its right to exist on the basis of the criterion of the unlimited expansion of 'rational mastery'. Through the unrestricted use of (pseudo-) rational means with a view toward a single (pseudo-) rational end, capitalism thus became a perpetual process of supposedly rational but essentially blind self-reinstitution of society.

For the social–historical movements that embodied the project of social and individual autonomy, on the other hand, 'Reason' initially meant the sharp distinction between *factum* and *Jus*, which thus became the main weapon in the rejection of the tradition (of the status quo's claim that it should continue to exist just because it happens to be there), and the affirmation of the possibility and the right of the individuals and the collectivity to find in themselves (or to produce) the principles for ordering their lives. Rapidly however, Reason as the open process of critique and elucidation was transformed, on the one hand, into mechanical uniforming reckoning (already manifest during the French Revolution) and, on the other, into a supposedly all-embracing and universal System (clearly legible in Marx's intentions and thereby decisively influencing the socialist movement). This transformation poses complex, deep and obscure questions, which cannot be discussed here. I shall only note two points. The first is the all-pervading influence of capitalist 'rationalism' and 'rationalisation'. The second concerns a fateful and, apparently, almost inevitable tendency of thought to search for absolute foundations, for absolute certainty, and for exhaustivity. Identitary logic creates the illusions of self-foundation, necessity and universality.

'Reason'—in fact, Understanding—then presents itself as the self-sufficient foundation for human activity, which otherwise would discover that it has no foundation outside itself. And the 'objective' counterpart (and guarantee) of this sort of 'Reason' has to be discovered in the things themselves. So History *is* Reason. Reason 'realises' itself in human history, either linearly (Kant, Condorcet, Comte, etc.) or 'dialectically' (Hegel, Marx). The final outcome was that capitalism, liberalism and the classical revolutionary movement came to share the imaginary of Progress and the belief that technical-material power, as such, is (immediately or, after a delay, in a discounted future) the decisive cause or condition for human happiness or emancipation.

Despite these mutual contaminations, the essential character of this epoch is the opposition and the tension between the two core significations: individual and social autonomy, on the one hand, and unlimited expansion of ‘rational mastery’, on the other. The real expression of this tension is the development and the persistence of social, political and ideological conflict. As I have tried to show elsewhere, this conflict has been, in itself, the central motor force of the dynamic development of Western society during this epoch and a condition *sine qua non* for the expansion of capitalism and for the containment of the irrationalities of capitalist ‘rationalisation’.⁷ This restless society—intellectually and spiritually restless—has been the milieu for the hectic cultural and artistic creation of the ‘modern’ epoch.

3. *The Retreat into Conformism*

The two world wars, the emergence of totalitarianism, the collapse of the worker’s movement (both result and condition of the catastrophic slide into Leninism–Stalinism) and the decay of the mythology of progress mark the entry of the Western societies into a third phase.

Viewed from the vantage point of the close of the 1980s, the period after 1950 is characterised mainly by the waning of social, political and ideological conflict.⁸ To be sure, the last 40 years [since 1949] have witnessed important movements with lasting effects (women, minorities, students and youth). Yet, not only have these movements ended with semi-failures, none of them have been able to propose a new vision of society and to face the overall political problem as such. After the movements of the 1960s, the project of autonomy seems totally eclipsed. One may take this to be a very short-term, conjunctural development. But the growing weight, in contemporary societies, of privacy, depoliticisation and ‘individualism’ makes such an interpretation most unlikely. A grave concomitant and related symptom is the complete atrophy of political imagination. The intellectual pauperisation of ‘socialists’ and conservatives alike is staggering. ‘Socialists’ have nothing to say and the intellectual quality of the output of the advocates of economic liberalism over the last 15 years would have made Smith, Constant and Mill turn in their graves. Ronald Reagan was a *chef d’œuvre* of historical symbolism.

The condition for there being a vast audience for this ‘neoliberal’ discourse (in the Continental sense of conservative free-market ‘liberalism’) is a widespread and rising collective amnesia. Two striking instances of this tendency are offered (1) by the disappearance of any critique of ‘representative democracy’ and (2) by the total disappearance of the devastating criticism the best academic economists

7. See C. Castoriadis, ‘Modern Capitalism and Revolution (1960–1961)’, *Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 2, (1988), pp. 226–343.
8. Castoriadis added to the French version at this point: ‘To be sure, Communist totalitarianism is still here, but it appears more and more as an external threat and its “ideology” is undergoing an unprecedented pulverization’. On this theme see ‘The Pulverization of Marxism–Leninism’, in C. Castoriadis, *World in fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 58–69 (Transl.).

of the 1930s—Sraffa, Robinson, Kahn, Keynes, Kalecki, Shackle—had previously directed at the would-be ‘rationality’ of 20th-century capitalism. We live in a period of appalling ideological regression among the *litterati*. As for the society at large, beneath the celebrated ‘consensus’ all investigations and polls show a deep distrust and cynicism regarding all the instituted powers (politicians, business, trade unions and churches).

Without attempting to establish ‘causal’ links (which, anyhow, would be meaningless), I have noted above the concomitancy between the social, political and ideological restlessness of the 1750–1950 epoch and the creative outbursts in the fields of art and culture. For the present phase also, it suffices to note the facts. The post-1950 situation goes together with a visible decadence in the field of spiritual creation. In philosophy, historical and textual commentary on and interpretation of past authors have become the substitute for thinking. This starts already with the second Heidegger and has been theorised—in ways apparently opposed but leading to the same results—as ‘hermeneutics’ and ‘deconstruction’. A further step has been the recent glorification of ‘weak thought’ (*pensiero debole*). Any criticism here would be out of place; one would be forced to admire this candid confession of radical impotence, were it not accompanied by woolly ‘theorising’. The expansion of science continues, of course—but one wonders whether this is not just a sort of inertial movement. Theoretical achievements like those of the first third of the century—relativity, quanta—have no parallel over the last 50 years. (A possible exception may be the triad of fractals, catastrophe and chaos theories.) One of the most active fields of contemporary science, where results of paramount significance are expected, is cosmology; its theoretical framework is relativity and Friedmann’s equations, which were written in the early 1920s. Equally striking is the poverty of the theoretical–philosophical exploration of the tremendous implications of modern physics (which put into question, as is well known, most of the postulates of inherited thinking). Technical progress, on the other hand, continues unabated, if it has not even accelerated.

If the ‘modern’ period as defined above can be characterised, in the field of art, as the self-conscious pursuit of new forms, this pursuit has now explicitly and emphatically been abandoned. Eclecticism and the recombining and reprocessing of the achievements of the past have now gained pride of programme. Donald Barthelme got the dates wrong, but the sense right, when he wrote ‘Collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century’ (Proust, Kafka, Rilke and Matisse had nothing to do with ‘collage’). ‘Post-modern’ art has rendered an enormous service, indeed: it shows how really great modern art had been.

IV

From the various attempts to define and defend ‘post-modernism’ and from some familiarity with the *Zeitgeist*, one can derive a summary description of the theoretical or philosophical tenets of the present trend. In Johann Arnason’s excellent formulation, these tenets are:⁹

9. Johann Arnason, ‘The Imaginary Constitution of Modernity’, *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, Vol. 86 (Autumn 1989), pp. 323–337.

- (1) The rejection of an overall vision of history as progress or liberation. In itself, this rejection is correct. It is not new, but it serves, in the hands of the post-modernists, to eliminate the question: Are, therefore, all historical periods and all social–historical regimes equivalent? This, in turn, leads to political agnosticism, or to the funny acrobatics performed by the post-modernists or their brethren when they feel obliged to defend freedom, democracy, human rights, and so on.
- (2) The rejection of the idea of a uniform and universal reason. Here again, in itself the rejection is right; it is by far not new; and it serves to cover up the question that opened up the Greco–Western creation of Logos and Reason: What are we to think? Are all ways of thinking equivalent or indifferent?
- (3) The rejection of the strict differentiation of cultural spheres (philosophy and art, say) on the basis of a single underlying principle of rationality or functionality. This is at best muddled, and it cuts through many important questions. To name but one: the differentiation of cultural spheres (or the lack of it) is, each time, a social–historical creation, part and parcel of the whole institution of life in the society considered. It cannot be approved or rejected in the abstract. Nor has the process of differentiation of the cultural spheres in, say, the Greco-Western stretch of human history expressed the implications of a single underlying principle of rationality, whatever that may mean. This would be, strictly speaking, the Hegelian construction. The unity of the differentiated cultural spheres, in ancient Athens as well as in Western Europe, is not to be found in any underlying principle of rationality or functionality but in the fact that all spheres embody, in their own way and in the very guise of their differentiation, the same core of imaginary significations of the given society.

What we have here is a collection of half-truths perverted into stratagems of evasion. The value of post-modernism as ‘theory’ is that it mirrors the prevailing trends. Its misery is that it simply rationalises them through a high-brow apologetics of conformity and banality. Complacently mixed up with loose but fashionable talk about ‘pluralism’ and ‘respect for the difference of the other’, it ends up glorifying eclecticism, covering up sterility, and providing a generalised version of the ‘anything goes’ principle, so fittingly celebrated in another field by Feyerabend. To be sure, conformity, sterility, banality and ‘anything goes’ are the characteristic traits of the period. Post-modernism, the ideology adorning them with a ‘solemn complement of justification’, is the latest case of intellectuals abandoning their critical function and enthusiastically adhering to that which is there just because it is there. Post-modernism, both as an effective historical trend and as a theory, truly is the negation of modernism.

I say this because, as a function of the antinomy outlined above between the two core imaginary significations of autonomy and ‘rational mastery’, and despite their mutual contaminations, the critique of existing instituted realities never stopped during the ‘modern’ period. And this is exactly what is rapidly disappearing at present, with the ‘philosophical’ blessing of the post-modernists. The waning of social and political conflict in the ‘real’ sphere finds its appropriate counterpart in the intellectual and artistic fields with the evanescence of a

genuine critical spirit. This spirit, as was said above, can only exist in and through the establishment of distance with respect to what there is, which entails the conquest of a point of view beyond the given, therefore a work of creation. The present period is thus best defined as the general retreat into conformism. This conformism is typically realised when hundreds of millions of TV viewers all over the world daily absorb the same inanities but also when theorists go around repeating that one cannot ‘break the closure of Greco–Western metaphysics’.

V

It is thus not sufficient to say that ‘modernity is an unfinished project’ (Habermas). Insofar as modernity embodied the capitalist imaginary signification of the unlimited expansion of (pseudo-) rational (pseudo-) mastery, it is more alive than ever and it is engaged in a frantic course pregnant with the severest dangers for humankind. But insofar as the development of capitalism has been decisively conditioned by the simultaneous deployment of the project of social and individual autonomy, modernity *is* finished. Capitalism developing while forced to face a continuous struggle against the status quo, on the floor of the factory as well as in the sphere of ideas or of art, and capitalism expanding without any effective internal opposition are two different social–historical animals. The project of autonomy itself is certainly not finished. But its trajectory during the last two centuries has proved the radical inadequacy, to say the least, of the programmes in which it had been embodied—be it the liberal republic or Marxist–Leninist ‘socialism’. That the demonstration of this inadequacy in actual historical fact is one of the roots of present political apathy and privatisation hardly needs stressing. For the resurgence of the project of autonomy, new political objectives and new human attitudes are required. For the time being, however, there are but few signs of such changes. Meanwhile, it would be absurd to try to decide whether we are living through a long parenthesis or we are witnessing the beginning of the end of Western history as a history essentially linked with the project of autonomy and co-determined by it.

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