The Impact of Feminism on Sociology

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Abstract

The paper investigates the impact of feminism on British sociology over the last 60 years. It focuses on changes in the intellectual content of the discipline, including epistemology, methodology, theory, concepts and the fields of economy, polity, violence and civil society. It situates these changes in the context of changes in gendered organisation of sociology, the rise of women's/gender studies, the ecology of social sciences and societal changes, especially the transformation of the gender regime from domestic to public and the neoliberal turn. It concludes that feminism has had a major impact on sociology, but that the process through which this has taken place is highly mediated through organisational, disciplinary and social processes.

Keywords: feminism, sociology, BSA, impact

Introduction

1.1 Feminism has had a major impact on British sociology. This article is a discussion of the interaction between feminism and sociology in Britain over the last 60 years and reflects on the meaning of 'impact' and on institutional as well as intellectual developments. It is informed by a long tradition of discussing the relationship between feminism and sociology (Aaron and Walby 1991; Jackson 1999; Delamont 2003; Evans 2003; Platt 2003; Wise and Stanley 2003) and indeed the nature of Sociology (Gouldner 1970; Halsey 2004; Burawoy 2005; Scott 2005; Holland and Stanley 2009).

1.2 The change in sociology has involved both intellectual content and institutional location. Feminism has had very significant implications for the intellectual content of almost all aspects of sociology, including epistemology, methodology, concepts and theory; and the analysis of the economy, polity, violence and civil society. The 'gender turn' in social science and the humanities has involved the development of separate women's/gender studies organisational and disciplinary locations, which have changed rapidly over recent years, as well as developments within specific disciplines, such as sociology.

1.3 The developments in sociology are part of wider changes. The changing ecology of the social sciences in universities is an important part of the environment in which these changes took place. Transformations in the gender regime and the intensification of neoliberalism are part of the wider societal environment in which feminism impacts on sociology.

Feminism

2.1 Feminism may be defined as a move to reduce and eliminate gender inequality, or alternatively limited to the goal of improving the position of women while still embracing gender difference, or more ambitiously as having the aim of transforming gender relations and existing gender standards (Rees 1998; Walby 2001). Feminism takes different forms in different times and places (Banks 1981).

2.2 While the aim of this paper is to consider the impact of feminism on sociology after the formation of the British Sociological Association in 1951, feminism did of course exist long before this time (Spender 1983), as did also sociology (Platt 2003; Halsey 2004). However, there have been waves of feminism, and at that time the 'first' wave had faded a little since the winning of suffrage for women in Britain in 1918 and 1928.

2.3 While the year 1951 is often considered to be at the trough between feminist waves, there were significant feminist activities at that time. In 1951, after refusal by the government to grant equal pay and prevarication by the TUC in the face of repeated motions on equal pay from the Women's TUC, there was a major protest meeting in London of three thousand people, largely women, from which several hundred went to Parliament for a mass lobby, to be met by mounted police who attempted to disperse them. In 1954 the government granted equal pay for government employees (*Civil Service Opinion*, August 1951, p. 121, cited in Walby 1986). As Spender (1983) notes, feminism rarely went away. However, the feminist surge from the late 1960s probably had more impact on sociology than the events of the 1950s.

2.4 The relationship between feminism and existing social and political relations is complicated and varies according to different circumstances. The concept and strategy of 'gender mainstreaming' has been developed in order to secure the impact of feminism on mainstream policies. The notion of 'gender mainstreaming' originated first in development politics and later in the European Union and more recently in academic analysis (Rees 1998; Walby 2005). The aim of the strategy is to mainstream gender equality into dominant policy practices and institutions. It sits alongside and is complementary to the development of specific actions, and policy and political dialogue. There is substantial debate on the success of gender mainstreaming as a strategy, in particular whether it leads to feminist agenda setting, or merely the assimilation of feminism into the mainstream (Jahan 1995; Moser 2005).

2.5 There is more than one feminist agenda and more than one mainstream. There are questions as to which of the several feminisms and which of the several mainstreams are most relevant here (Walby 2011). There is both competition and cooperation among these multiple forms.

Sociology

3.1 The history of British sociology has been told before, notably in the work by Platt (2000, 2003) and Halsey (2004). Thus, for example, the first chair in sociology in Britain was established in 1901, while the British Sociological Association was founded in 1951; women are a minority of the discipline's professors. The paper here builds on such work and attempts to go beyond it with particular attention to the transformation of the intellectual agendas as they pertain to the analysis of gender.

3.2 There are multiple forms of sociology with which feminism can engage. There is a long-standing debate among professional sociologists as to the extent to which coherence or diversity is good for sociology and its contribution to the world (Gouldner 1970). There has been concern that too much diversity and specialisation can entail a fragmentation that weakens the discipline and the contribution that it can make (McClellan 2003; Scott 2005). By contrast, there has been celebration of the diversity within the discipline, its lack of a stable core, the development of hybrydic forms (Stanley 2005), and indeed its parasitism (Urry 1981).

3.3 The impact of feminism on sociology is mediated by the changing relationship between academic disciplines and between the sub-disciplines of sociology. The changes in the relationship between academic disciplines can be illuminated by Abbott's work on the system of professions (Abbot 1988) and on the chaos of disciplines (Abbott 2001). Under particular circumstances, some disciplines thrive, while others do not. There are complex relations of competition and cooperation between diverse disciplines. There are parallels with other kinds of systems, such as in the environment. The concept of the 'ecology of the social sciences' will be deployed here to address these issues.

Impact and beyond

4.1 The concept of 'impact' is developing specific connotations in the context of the assessment of sociology through the 2014 Research Excellence Framework. However, there are alternative ways of conceptualising the relationship between feminism and sociology, including those of 'interaction' and 'mainstreaming', in the context of discussions of 'public sociology', 'epistemic communities' and the ecology of the social sciences, all which merit attention.

4.2 The concept of 'impact' is a limited one, and increasingly contentious as a consequence of its specific interpretation and deployment within the Research Excellence Framework through which British sociology will be assessed in 2014 (Research Excellence Framework 2014). In this usage, there is a focus on a one-way impact of sociology on society. One of the limitations of the concept of impact is the assumption that it is possible and sensible to identify a one way process. In practice, however, the relationship between sociology and society, between intellectual work and social formations, is at minimum a two-way process. It may be seen as more complicated when the relations between different social forces and between different academic disciplines is included. This is variously recognised in the work of Gramsci, Burawoy, Haas and Abbott, and is best theorised using developments in complexity theory. The gendered debates in this area have often been organised through the concept of 'gender mainstreaming.

4.3 The concept of the 'organic intellectual', developed by Gramsci (1971), prioritises the dynamic three-way relationship between intellectuals, political movements and social structure. Organic intellectuals are important in identifying the deep and long term interests of the disadvantaged and in interpreting the nature of social structures the better to engage strategically in contesting the hegemony of capital. Organic intellectuals both learn from the political movements in which they are embedded and also offer interpretations that are intended to assist in changing the world for the better. The traditional use of the term 'organic intellectual' has been limited to class politics, but could have potential for a broader use in relation to a wider range of social divisions.

4.4 Burawoy's (2005) development of the concept and practice of 'public sociology' is similarly concerned with the relationship between sociologists and civil society. He locates this within a discussion of four

kinds of sociology: professional sociology, which prioritises improving the discipline; critical sociology, which critiques the discipline; policy sociology, which is state oriented; and public sociology, which is engaged with civil society. The development of all four types of sociology simultaneously potentially allows for multiple directions of interaction and impact, not just one.

4.5 Haas (1992) takes the mutual engagement of social scientists and political actors with the policy world one step further, with the development and deployment of the concept of epistemic community, in which knowledge is considered to be jointly produced by a community of academics and activists. This knowledge is considered to be simultaneously scientific and value based. The notion of joint production implied by the concept of epistemic community is an interesting addition to the repertoire of relevant concepts. However, the concept of 'community' does have the disadvantage of its traditional connotation of appearing to prioritise consensus over debate and disagreement (Walby 2001b). Concepts of networks, alliances and coalitions may be more appropriate.

4.6 In order to analyse the impact of feminism on sociology it is thus necessary to move beyond a simple concept of impact as a one-way movement from one entity to another. It is necessary to analyse the mutual impact of feminism and sociology; to analyse mediating entities; and to be able to analyse multiple feminisms and multiple mainstreams.

4.7 The way forward is to address the issue as one of the mutual adaptation of complex adaptive systems in an environment of other systems. This approach draws on complexity theory, which rethinks the concepts of system and of impact (Walby 2007, 2009; Urry 2003).

The gender turn in sociology

5.1 Sociology was subject to a 'wave' of feminism from the 1970s onwards and ultimately had a gender 'turn'. This process involved both organisational developments and intellectual ones. Feminist ideas in civil society were systematised and reworked in the academy. The focus here is on British sociology, though the significance of international developments, especially in the USA and France, means that there is no pure category here.

5.2 There was a multiplicity of feminist ideas, competing, overlapping and diverse. Initial differences were often characterised as those between liberal feminism, radical feminism and socialist feminism (Walby 1990; Bell and Klein 1996), to which were added differences in how to approach the intersection with other inequalities from ethnicity to sexuality (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006). A further difference between feminist ideas concerned whether there was to be an entirely new approach to knowledge or whether reform was sufficient. These multiple sets of feminist ideas engaged with a multiplicity of sociological mainstreams as well as minority traditions. These ranged from Parsonian functionalism, conflict theory and Marxism and symbolic interactionism, to schools of thought influenced by Foucault, Bourdieu and Derrida. This diversity of both feminism and sociology means that there are inevitable caveats to any claim as to the extent to which 'feminism' had an 'impact' on 'sociology'.

5.3 The changes will be analysed in two parts. First there is a review of the intellectual developments including: epistemology, methodology, concepts and theory; as well as analyses of more substantive domains and practices in the economy, polity, civil society and violence. Second there is a reflection on the organisational developments with which they were partially associated, in particular the oscillation between separate and integrated development as the initial resistance by institutionalised sociology was linked to the creation of separate organisational forms of women's/gender studies and changes in the boundary between these and sociology.

Epistemology and methodology

6.1 An important debate considered whether there was a distinctively feminist epistemology and hence feminist methodology that was important for the feminist project (Stanley and Wise 1983; Delamont 2003; Evans 2003; Oakley 2005). This position drew on the claim that women's direct experience or standpoint should be treated as the basis of feminist knowledge. The methodological implications were considered to be the prioritisation of in depth qualitative interviews with women. This claim as to a feminist distinctive epistemology and methodology underlie claims for a separate discipline of Women's/Gender Studies with organisational autonomy (Maynard and Purvis 1994).

6.2 While the development of a feminist epistemology and methodology was considered by some to be core to the feminist intervention in sociology, this was not a view that was universally endorsed (Walby 2001). For example, although Oakley's early work had appeared to support the prioritisation of the method of in-depth qualitative interviewing, her later work included a much wider range of methods, including quantitative analysis (Oakley 2005). Some of the writings on methodology are highly nuanced, engaging with practical dilemmas in the process of actually doing research (Mason 2002). The position of methodological pluralism has more recently emerged as the hegemonic position among gender researchers (for example, Hughes and Cohen 2000). Despite the recent move towards methodological pluralism, the argument for the prioritisation of qualitative methods has had a very considerable impact on the discipline of sociology in Britain, diffusing beyond its initial feminist impetus.

Concepts and theory

7.1 Perhaps the most important impact of feminism on sociology was the consolidation of the approach to gender relations as socially constituted. Given the nature of the sociological project this is hardly a major paradigm shift, but nonetheless the consolidation of this position has been important. More intriguing for its implications is the development of the concept of 'gender', pioneered among others by Oakley (1972),

which explicitly set up the social constitution of gender relations in opposition to the biological category of sex. This separation of sex and gender has more recently come in for some revision, since even the ostensibly biological is shaped by society (Franklin and Roberts 2006).

7.2 A particular development within feminist theory has been the conceptualisation and analysis of the intersection of gender with other inequalities. This has included a focus on the intersection of gender and class, which was especially important during the 1980s when class was the leading concept in the discipline for the theorisation of social inequality (Delphy and Leonard 1984; Stanworth 1984; Crompton and Mann 1986; Walby 1986). There were further developments in the analysis of the intersection of gender, class and ethnicity (Westwood 1984), the intersection of gender and ethnicity (Mirza 1997, Medaglia 2000), gender and sexuality (Adkins 1994), gender and age (Arber *et al.* 2007), as well as theoretical reflections on the concept of intersectionality itself (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006). The development of the sophisticated analysis of intersectionality is very pertinent to the wider sociological project, but other adjacent concepts, such as hybridity (Gilroy 1993) and cosmopolitanism (Beck and Cronin 2006) occupy a similar theoretical space.

7.3 Those parts of feminist theory that have drawn on a standpoint epistemology have had a tendency to shift the focus of theoretical interest away from social structure and systems to that of agency. This has powerfully resonated within the rest of sociology, so much so as to become perhaps the hegemonic position. For example, even though Giddens (1984) tried to carefully balance structure and agency through the notion of their duality, there has been a shift towards agency in sociology as a whole (Pollert 1986; Sayer 2000; Holmwood 2001). While this may be seen as a consequence of feminist interventions, there is also the possibility that this is part of the move to individualism that resonates with the intensification of neoliberalism in the wider society. However, it is important not to generalise too loosely about 'feminist theory', since it is very varied. Alongside the analyses of gendered agency, performativity and culture are those using more macro concepts, such as, gender regimes.

7.4 While the concept of gender is well established, even mainstream, in sociology, it is perhaps not yet systematically established at the heart of social theory for the discipline as a whole to the same extent that it is for many gender specialists.

Institutional domains: economy

8.1 Feminism has a tremendous impact on the analysis of the economy. Whole new areas of activity were declared, such as work, in particular housework (Oakley 1974; Silva 2000), also conceptualised as domestic labour (Malos 1980), a domestic mode of production (Delphy and Leonard 1984) and more recently as care-work (Armstrong 2006). This had the potential to mainstream the analysis of women's activities into economic sociology which had traditionally been seen as central to sociology, for example, via household time budget studies (Gershuny 2000).

8.2 Feminist ideas led to the reworking of the analysis of paid work and its transformations (Irwin 2005; Walby 1997; Scott *et al.* 2010). New forms and practices of gender inequality were analysed, including women's unemployment as a reserve army of labour, occupational sex segregation (Witz 1992), part-time work and issues of time and flexibility (Fagan 2001), all of which had implications for the analysis of inequality in employment more generally. Analyses of the ambivalent role played by early trade unions (Cockburn 1983) and of choice (Hakim 1991) unsettled previous assumptions. The intersection of gender with class (Crompton 1990) and also ethnicity (Westwood 1984; Phizacklea 1990; Bradley 1995) has been a long-running theme. Emerging and distinctive areas of the economy were analysed, such as the knowledge economy (Durbin 2007) and the role of technology (Wajcman 1991, 2004). The international dimensions of the economy were given a feminist interpretation (Elson 1991), including the emerging role of legislation from the European Union (Pillinger 1992).

8.3 The relationship between paid and unpaid work became and continues to be an important topic of analysis, variously conceptualised as work-life balance and the reconciliation of working and family life (Armstrong 2006; Scott *et al.* 2009; Wajcman *et al.* 2008), with continuing interest in the family (Finch and Mason 1992) and in motherhood (Gatrell 2004).

8.4 The sociological analysis of gendered employment issues has flourished. However, it is less frequently conducted within departments that are named as 'Sociology' and more frequently within departments within business schools. While it is possible to interpret this as the sociological colonisation of business schools, it is probably more important to look at the more rapid and substantial growth of faculties of management studies, as compared to faculties of social sciences. Gendered sociological analyses in business schools are more likely to be considering the 'business case' for equality than engaging in gendered critiques of the financial crisis. So while the development of gendered analysis of work within sociology has been important, this is increasingly framed by business-facing rather than social science-facing priorities.

Institutional domains: polity

9.1 As a consequence of feminism, there has been interest in the analysis of feminism itself, especially as a social movement, its history (Banks 1981), whether it is currently thriving or in abeyance (Bagguley 2002; McRobbie 2008; Walby 2011), and in its implications, including the question as to whether or not it has changed the mainstream (Daly 2005; Walby 2005). However, much of the analysis of gendered politics takes place more frequently within political science, where the emergence of a feminist intellectual agenda, though emerging later than in sociology, now insists that these questions are core to their discipline.

9.2 When the concept of polity is broadened, then a wider range of feminist contributions come into view. There are analyses of the intersection of gender politics with those of nation (Yuval-Davis 1997), ethnicity

(Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992), religion (Woodhead (2007) and citizenship (Soysal 1994). There are analyses of the implications of gender for the development of the various agencies of the welfare state (Charles 2000; Daly and Rake 2003). There have been important feminist contributions to the analysis of health services, including maternity and reproduction (Doyal 1995); and to the analysis of education (Deem 1978; Arnot, David and Weiner 1999).

Institutional domain: civil society

10.1 The analysis of culture and civil society has been a major area of development in gender analysis that has had a major impact on sociology. There has been not only the gendering of this field of study, but also its growth within sociology itself. Since the field of cultural studies is usually gendered, so the expansion of this field in sociology has entailed the expansion of gender analysis within sociology. This simultaneous growth of feminist analysis and cultural studies interacted in a way that created major changes in the nature of British sociology. In addition, the field of cultural studies has developed outside of as well as inside sociology, further spreading gender analysis.

10.2 This development can be understood both as a 'cultural turn' in sociology, in the sense that the discipline as a whole became inflected with the theoretical concepts and agendas centred in culture (for example, interpreting the economy through the lens of culture, Skeggs 1997), as well as the development of new substantive topics of enquiry within sociology. Theoretical developments here have been informed by readings of writers such as Foucault and Bourdieu (Adkins and Skeggs 2004) and involved a turn away from the more materialist concerns of Marx and Weber. The turn to culture and away from more social analysis has not been uniformly welcomed (Jackson 1999). Substantively, there has been the development of gendered analysis of intimacy (Jamieson 1998; Jamieson *et al.* 2009; Weeks *et al.* 2005), sexuality (Jackson 1999; Richardson 2000; Weeks 2007), identity (Fortier 2000; Adkins and Lury 1999), film (Stacey 1993), the body (Witz 2000; Ahmed and Stacey 2001) and consumption (Lury 1996).

10.3 The mainstreaming of gender issues in culture and civil society might be regarded as having become mainstreamed by the publication by Giddens (1992) of a book on intimacy. Culture is perhaps the field through which feminism has made its greatest impact on sociology.

Institutional domains: violence

11.1 Violence is an institutional domain that is of considerable importance for the analysis of gender inequality, but which has been analysed in a rather fragmented manner, if at all, within the discipline of sociology. In the social sciences the analysis of violence tends to be split between criminology (interpersonal violence), international relations and political science (war) and women's/gender studies (violence against women). The analysis of gender-based violence within sociology has been developing under the impact of feminism. Many of the studies combine a description and interpretation of inter-personal gender violence, critiques of current social responses and analyses of potential social, political and policy interventions (Dobash and Dobash 1980; Hanmer, Radford and Stanko 1989; Stanko 1990; Lees 1996; Hearn 1998; Hester and Westmarland 2005; Turner and Kelly 2009). Some have extended into gender violence in the context of war (Cockburn 1998, Roseneil 1995; Jacobs *et al.* 2000) and political struggle (Morrell 1981; Kelly 2005). There are some attempts to build more general analyses (Hanmer 1978; Kelly 1988; Mooney 2000; Walklate 2004); and to mainstream it into social theory (Walby 2009; Ray 2011). Despite these latter attempts to produce more general analyses, much of the research is based in specialised units surviving on soft research funding, rather than mainstreamed into sociology departments.

Is feminism mainstreamed into sociology?

12.1 The analysis of gender relations is thriving in British sociology. This is a mix of specific analyses in specialised spaces and the mainstreaming of some issues into sociology as a whole. The following summary of the developments discussed above needs to be prefaced by the caveat that there are multiple feminisms and multiple sociologies, rather than a single orthodoxy into which feminism can be mainstreamed.

12.2 Gender analysis is unevenly mainstreamed into parts of sociology. Feminism has had a major impact on cultural studies and qualitative methodology, being core to these fields. Feminism has had implications for the rest of sociology, but less strongly. Gender is present in some social theory, but relatively absent from the 'core'. Gender is present in economic sociology and political economy; but these fields have become less central to sociology with the rise of the business schools. Gender is present in political sociology, but this is not central to the discipline, being more often found in political science. Gender is important in the analysis of violence, but this field is rather on the margins of sociology (and indeed also gender studies), being more often treated as a separate field.

Sociology, gender and the ecology of the social sciences

13.1 The impact of feminism on sociology is mediated by changes in the institutionalisation of gender analysis in the academy and the changing relationship between social sciences. The effect of feminism on sociology is not only one that is direct, but is also affected by the development of and changes in adjacent disciplines. The success story here is the growth of new field of cultural studies inside and outside of sociology, in which gender analysis is centrally embedded. By comparison there has been a loss of considerable parts of the field of the economy to the rapidly and substantially expanding business schools. It is the case that gender is not totally neglected in this new location of the economy, but is more likely to be confined to those areas where there is a 'business case' to be made with less space for critique. There has also been a tendency for the analysis of politics to take place more in political science than sociology.

13.2 The most important issue in the ecology of disciplines has been the development of women's/gender studies as a specific institutional and disciplinary site.

Organisational developments

14.1 The analysis of gender has taken place both within existing disciplines and also in a new field or discipline of women's/gender studies. During the 1980s, frustration at the slow pace of change in existing disciplines fed the development of new organisational and institutional structures to support gender analysis. These were usually intended to be inter-disciplinary.

14.2 In Britain, many groups, units and centres were set up within universities to coordinate the activities including both research and the teaching of undergraduate and postgraduate modules and degrees. A national network, the Women's Studies Network (UK) was established in 1989 to further assist coordination, for example by running conferences and a newsletter, the *Women's Studies Network (UK)* was established in 1989 (see Aaron and Walby 1991 for papers from the first two conferences). Specialist women's/gender studies journals became established, including *Women's Studies International Forum* (initially edited in UK in 1978), the *Journal of Gender Studies* (established in 1995), and *Feminist Theory* (established in 2000).

14.3 Within Sociology itself, there were a number of organisational developments. Within the British Sociological Association a women's caucus was formed, which met especially at conferences, although this no longer operates. In addition there were conferences themed on gender issues, starting in 1974 (see Leonard Barker and Allen 1976 for papers from this conference), and the establishment of BSA study groups on gender issues.

14.4 As sociology and adjacent disciplines adopted some gender analysis, the separate institutions were often, but not always, absorbed back into sociology and other adjacent disciplines, or developed closer, less autonomous, relationships. The autonomous units that survive usually have clear sources of funding either from research projects or from international postgraduate students.

14.5 Despite these changes, there has not been a reduction in feminist research or teaching. Indeed there has been an increase in the proportion of those in the discipline whose work is inflected by gender analysis. Further, organisational changes do not necessarily map onto intellectual changes, although there is a relationship between them, so caution should be exercised in reading off intellectual trends from organisational ones.

Societal changes

15.1 The impact of feminism on sociology is mediated by wider societal changes. The most important of these are the transformation of gender regime and the neoliberal turn.

15.2 The transformation of the gender regime from domestic to public form and the associated increase in the proportion of women in education, employment and politics are linked to an increase in interest in the analysis of gender issues by both students and funders of research. In this context, feminism has a conducive environment for the mainstreaming of gender into the discipline of sociology.

15.3 The neoliberal turn by contrast creates a much less conducive environment for the development of feminist analysis. The financialisation of universities and the pressure to engage in business and governmental agendas diminishes the capacity for critical research, which is the terrain of gender analysis. The polarisation that is the outcome of the increased social inequality generated by the neoliberal turn may feed interest in feminist analysis even as the resources for it are diminished.

15.4 These two major societal changes pull in opposite directions. The outcome is uncertain.

Conclusion

16.1 Feminism has changed sociology. The route along which this transformation has proceeded has been highly mediated, not least because of the complex interactions between disciplines in the ecology of the social sciences. The outcome has been the mainstreaming of gender analysis into sociology, but this is highly uneven and there are significant remaining gaps. The most impact can be found in the field of culture and civil society. The successful gendering of the analysis of the economy within sociology has been compromised by the movement of much of this field to business schools. The gendering of the analysis of the polity and politics has been partial. There is an emergent field of violence in which gender analysis is present, but this is not yet fully institutionalised in sociology.

16.2 The future depends in part on the relative significance of the gender turn and the neoliberal turn in society and its implications for feminism and the social forces that form an important part of the environment within which sociology changes.

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