

Intensive Program, Berlin – *Coming Together or Coming Apart*

Europe and the United States in the Sixties

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When Black America Becomes America – Black Music Goes Mainstream in the 1960s

On the 16th of April 1963, while confined in a city jail in Birmingham, Martin Luther King, Jr. sends a letter addressed to his “dear Fellow Clergymen” in which he lengthily discusses his modes of action, at the same time rejecting – if not clarifying by setting some distinctions – the critiques that have been brought forth to his attention. I believe King’s letter was not in any way caustic or ill-mannered as he was merely trying to make things clear by displaying his ideological allegiance, or adherence if that may be the case, to an already established dichotomy coming from social sciences and sociological theories. “In no sense,” King explains, “do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law”. Yet, what I find interesting at this point is not King’s elucidation of how breaking an unjust law would stir the awareness of a certain community, but rather what can be read between the lines of the statement above mentioned. What is striking at this point is that King is actually indirectly implying the existence of two communities, and, taking into consideration the social setting in which the letter was written and in which King himself lived, there is a great chance he was referring to black and white communities, and the ways in which members of the black communities were punished inside white communities. Thus, from this point of view, the lawbreaker implied in the above mentioned fragment from King’s letter is most likely black and the community whose awareness needs to be stirred is most likely, if not surely, white. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the social milieu of the American sixties with the

growing tensions inside race relations, I would personally perceive King's view of the two communities on a much grander scale and, as such bring to the fore a second, larger dichotomy.

First published in 1887, and then followed by a series of editions and reprints – the latest reprint being issued in 2005 – *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, or, as it later came to be translated in English, *Community and Society*, is one of Ferdinand Tönnies' most acclaimed and well-known works of sociological theory. As the title itself points out, Tönnies' argument revolves around the rather nuanced differences and similarities between a *community* (*Gemeinschaft*) – understood as a cluster of individuals functioning according to social laws and emotive bonds set between its members –, and a *society* (*Gesellschaft*), perceived as a construct in which individuals as distinct and separate entities are no longer bound by emotional ties. In Tönnies' view the members of a *community* perceive the formation and the preservation of that community as a goal because that would ultimately mean the perpetuation of a set of values which are of crucial importance not only for the individuals of that community but also to the community as an entity in itself (namely, things are done for the good of the entire community), while, on the contrary, for the members of a *society* creating and sustaining a mode of 'living together' does not represent the ultimate aim but rather one of the ways through which that particular mode is made equal for each and every member of that society (that is, things are done for the good of the individual). To vary his point, Tönnies adds that in a society, individuals are aliens to one another, autonomous, detached, while in a community individuals are connected between themselves by a sense of belonging to a set of values. As such, the establishment of a community, as opposed to a society, is based on such elements as bloodlines, familial/racial bonds, and proximity (i.e. neighborhood). Belonging to a certain community means not only the support of that community in case any of its members finds itself in distress, but it also implies the support of its members when the integrity of that community is under threat. Taking into consideration the aspects I brought to the fore up to this point and bearing in mind the dichotomy *community* vs. *society*, I shall try to argue that the instant in which black music went mainstream in the American sixties is essentially a coronation of a process born not only out of a shared effort on the part of black communities of resistance, but also out of a more general/ integrating frame of mind which characterized that particular historical period.

In one of his well-known works, entitled not mistakenly *Closing the Circle: A Cultural History of the Rock Revolution* and published in 1984, Herbert London tries to trace back and reconstruct a sort of horizon of expectations that may have emerged during the sixties in the United States regarding the close connection between music and the idea of revolution. His analysis not only goes through the different stages in which the idea of a cultural revolution materialized, but it also points out the diverse components which participate in that cultural revolution by constituting formative elements central to the dissemination of ideas. In London's view, one of these formative elements was the widespread popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien's acclaimed trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. "It was probably not coincidental", London explains, "that the best-selling books of 1967 were J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, a pop Spenglerian tragedy that seemed to match the tragic despair of his readers". Yet, I believe it was not only the sense of despair of its readers which catalyzed the trilogy's popularity but also a growing sense of awareness regarding the urgency of change. At the semantic crux of Tolkien's trilogy, London further explains, stands "the story of civilization's violent decline. When one age dawns and another declines, the 'little people', with their provincial narrowness, their simple love for beer and pipe smoking, rise to the occasion and come to dominate Middle Earth. This is presumably what led to the sense of recognition the books aroused in young readers of the 1960" . As London points out, many of the youths of that period saw themselves as part of that chosen group, "called upon to destroy a way of life that was alleged to be self-serving and oblivious to social truths" .

Undeniably, the metaphor implied in London's example can be extended to other groups, marginalized, once considered insignificant, and which seek to evade that condition, and one of the best ways to evade the cultural conformity which characterized the fifties was that of music which, in London's way of putting it, could influence society as profoundly as politics. "It is often suggested", London adds in this sense, "that the music caused revolutionary thought and action. Of course this chicken-and-egg hypothesis is futile to pursue. Did the music cause certain conditions, or is it a reflection of conditions? It is probably both". From this point of view there is a continuous flow of information between music as a cultural entity and society thus forming a circle of inputs and outputs. "Specific social problems", London further explains, "elicit a musical response which in turn reinforces public attitudes" . In other words, the external conditions of music production influence not only the music itself but at the same time the social

circumstances in which the musical act is performed. To vary his point, London further asserts that “external conditions of life bring about changes internally. What people find they can do in society influences their perception of themselves. Music evokes this interior self. Without relying on scientific data to support this contention, I believe I can cite music as a force for human awareness” because music “weaves emotion around events and human relationships until a language and form evolve” .

Nevertheless, as London himself ultimately realizes, this change of perception through musical performance would not be possible without the presence of a figure, usually an artist, which epitomizes a common belief and which in turn would speak back to the listeners and stir a sense of “a new personal and social awareness” that “may develop as an audience shares the world view of an artist”. “Through the experience of music”, London goes on saying, “people may discover a new common thread that knits them together and thus develop a feeling of kinship with one another. This – as much as the music itself – is why the rock concert emerged as a social form and why the inner and very personal forms of the early rock performers had such a profound social impact”, and because music is imbued with emotion “a social meaning appears inherently in music’s structure” . As an example of the ways in which an artist can talk back to an audience/ generation while representing the cultural epitome of that audience/ generation, London starts by analyzing the craze created by *The Beatles*. In London’s view, 1964 was essentially the year of The Beatles. When they first came to the United States in February, *The New York Times* ironically commented they were “one-tenth hair, one-tenth music, and eight-tenths publicity”, while a Wisconsin preacher, the reverend David Noebel, described the Beatles as “anti-Christ. They are preparing our teenagers for riot and ultimate revolution against our Christian republic” (*Newsweek*, 1965). In a similar tongue-in-cheek way, in February 1964, *Life* magazine prepared for its readers a list of ways by which people could get rid of “the Beatle habit”. The list comprised such pieces of advice ranging from moving “patients as far away from Beatles as possible as quickly as possible” while trying not to mention the names John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison or Ringo Starr, to avoiding such words as “Beatles, luv, fab, gear, ciggies”, Liverpool and England. Despite the fact that in 1964 no one perceived the Beatles as carriers of a revolution they “were at once a symbol for adolescent revolt against parental authority; the search for peer-group status; sexuality – both in the way they performed and in their appeal to ‘material instincts’; success achieved by underdogs; success by youths in a world

of adults; an urgent desire to have a ‘good time’ in a world plagued with mortal danger” . In this sense, *The Beatles*, as a cultural construct, created the conditions in which youth transformed itself into a governing cultural mode because it was “not only an abdication of parental values but a desire on the part of many parents to be a part of the action, to catch a ride on the revolutionary bandwagon” . Yet, single artists, or groups as in the case of *The Beatles*, were not the only ones that would epitomize a certain frame of mind and bring together certain social attitudes in their music.

Berry Gordy, Jr. former boxer and record store owner, “did what no one had been able to accomplish before – he fused black gospel and pop into an entirely new sound” . Nonetheless, his company did not develop into a “major musical influence” until 1964 when “a fledgling trio of writers, Holland-Dozier-Holland (HDH), refined its style into a distinctive musical sound that was to revolutionize the business” . By 1964, Motown – a portmanteau made out of “motor town” – as the company came to be called, began “a three-year period in which twenty-eight of their songs reached the top twenty” as such that “from 1964 to 1966 the Motown ‘hit ratio’ was about 75 per cent; in other words three-quarters of those records released made the charts”. The secret of this instant success stood in Gordy’s ability to merge different streams of music/ genres into one. “Gordy”, London explains, “had built a hit machine Detroit style. He seemed to have taken the assembly-line approach for constructing cars and applied it to the record industry”. Released in 2002 and directed by Paul Justman, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, a documentary telling the story of the ‘motor town’ musical revolution, recounts the ‘magic formula’ which essentially stands at the basis of Motown’s instant success. “People would always say that it was everything but the musicians”, one of the interviewed members of the band asserts, “they would say it was the artist, the producers, the way the building was structured, the wood in the floor, or maybe even food, but I’d like to see them take some barbecue ribs, or hamburgers, anything, and throw them down in a studio, shut the door and count one, two, three, four and get a hit out of that, the formula was the musician” . But Motown sound was not all about the sound, there was another element which struck a chord not only with the world of musicians, but also with the world outside the studios. “Steeped in soul”, London further explains, “Gordy gave black music ubiquitous appeal, reaching audiences of all backgrounds and ages” and consequently, Motown “told the world that black performers would

no longer be relegated to the race circuit. Nor would blacks be confined to roles imposed on them by tradition. The world was turning, and nothing seemed to be in its accustomed place” .

What Gordy did was to “sanitize” black music for white audiences thus extending its target audiences. Nevertheless, youngsters were generally the ones who would listen to black music because it coincided symbolically with a counter-cultural attitude. “It is not a coincidence”, London expounds “that white adolescents from the fifties and early sixties borrowed black music for their ideology, since the black was isolated from the cultural mainstream in the way adolescents perceived themselves to be” . At this point, it would be very interesting to note that in the United States the idea of counterculture almost coincides with the ‘adoption’, or at least the tendency to ‘adopt’, and legitimize features of the Negro culture, a type of counterculture which was already there, outside the mainstream norms of conformity, struggling silently against it. “Just as the black”, London further argues, who “felt that music was one way to express his frustration with racism, white adolescents turned to this music as a form of rebellion against cultural norms that seemed to ignore them” . But the appropriation of a culture which had always been underrated and maybe misunderstood naturally required an open-mindedness thoroughly lacked by older, high-brow white generations of Americans, and this particular aspect is visible especially in the case of music where “black originals” were made palatable to the white adult audiences by the so called “white crossovers”. This particular aspect showcases the resistance which the adult public displayed not only against an ‘alternative culture’ but also against the idea of change itself. However, the issues were not only generational, there were other social and political issues deeply entrenched into racial relations throughout the United States.

In one of his most important works on the ways in which black popular music reflected black public culture, entitled *What the Music Said* (1999), Mark Anthony Neal explains that the period from 1968 to 1972 is characterized by highly spread state-sanctioned repression against African-Americans. “With blatant attacks on the Black Panthers”, argues Neal, “the shootings of black students at Jackson State College in Mississippi and Southern University in Louisiana, and assaults on prisoners at Attica state prison in New York, the government made clear that being a dissenter – particularly an African-American dissenter – was very dangerous” . As such, black communities of that particular historical period were essentially defined by “random violence, a

heightened military (police and national guard) presence, and a general decline in the safety and stability of their public institutions” . “In an era best defined”, Neal goes on saying, “by the attempts of black communities of resistance to speak ‘Truth to Power’, power responded emphatically with violence and little regard for the legal rights of its critics” .

At a political level, restraints of black political expression reduced the black protest movement to “dated and uncritical tropes of black empowerment and masculinity” up to the point that black political power appeared restricted and uneven as such that “by 1980 less than one per cent of elected officials in the United States were black despite the fact that the black population comprised over 11 per cent of the total” . In his *Just my Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (1998), Brian Ward argues that “despite the fact that there were many encouraging indicators regarding social development there were also clear signs that the efforts and path-breaking legislation of the 1960s had moderated, but hardly ended, the pernicious effects of racism and systemic discrimination” . As a consequence, “inadequate housing, inferior educational provision and access, compromised political power, and high rates of poverty and unemployment continued to plague many sections of the black community, North and South” . The mounting insecurity within the black community triggered by these disillusionments and complications led, as Ward himself points out, to “the emergence of the diverse, overlapping creeds and programmes usually corralled together as black power” . In this sense, Ward further argues that there was a “schizophrenic phase in the black freedom struggle”, a phase characterized by “the dense, tense interplay of black insurgency and apathy, political action and creeping despair, dogmatism and pragmatism, all wrapped up with the revived black pride which was among the most positive and enduring legacies of the Movement” . In addition to this, traditional elements both of Africa “and of a more recent spiritual and physical black homeland (the American South) served to push soul further towards the black end of the black-white musical spectrum in American popular music and thereby reflected the appeal of a new nationalistic black consciousness” . However, this return to black roots, encouraged by the sudden trend for the ideas of the black psychiatrist Franz Fanon, did not resolve any of those issues which the black community confronted but rather made them bearable. “Blacks were still being oppressed”, Ward continues, “it was just that now some endured that oppression while proudly wearing natural hair, dashikis, bubas, kente cloth, and tikis. Some even learned how to complain in Swahili” . Yet, what I am trying to point out is the fact that despite the backlash that

this return to black roots triggered against an all-white American society it also created a propitious environment for the emergence of a new black consciousness. “Perhaps the crucial point here”, Ward explains, “is that during the black power era, black pride, the quest for a common black heritage, and the celebrations of a distinctively black world-view were simultaneously a genuine reflection of a new black consciousness, and a lucrative commercial and marketing opportunity” . In other words, what one is witnessing at this point is the formation of a community and, taking into consideration Tönnies’ distinction between community and society, one could easily observe that the bonds which constitute the basis of this community are represented by this awareness of belonging to a group which has a distinct identity. In addition to this, another aspect comes to the fore at this point, namely the creation of what Neal comes to call “black communities of resistance”:

By speaking of communities of resistance, I am suggesting that various class, generational, regional, and ideological communities embraced the Civil Rights or Black Power movements as legitimate symbols to organize based on local struggles. [...] Understood in full context, the growth of the Black Panther Party and other black nationalist organizations represented the emergence of diverse communities of resistance that were not necessarily formal members of any political organizations, but that embraced the codes and symbols of black nationalist rhetoric.

Going back to the idea that there was a widespread political disillusionment among African-Americans, Neal is actually suggesting that there had been a shift from a political agenda to a more cultural/ social agenda which automatically implied a different approach to the issues that affected black communities while still maintaining “the codes and symbols of black nationalist rhetoric”. “In the context of post-King black politics”, Neal argues, “the articulation of black pride replaced the articulation of real political strategies to address the black condition” . What is more, the emergence of these communities of resistance also implied the development of a *vocabulary* which more or less constituted an important part of the identity of these new communities. However, the term *vocabulary* in this particular case has wider meaning.

As Brian Ward points out, the second half of the decade witnessed the development and triumph of a new black funk: in 1964 James Brown’s single *Out of Sight* is released, followed closely by his famous *Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag* in 1965, and *Cold Sweat* in 1967. “As in the

broader soul phenomenon”, Ward goes on explaining, “with which funk overlapped, the absence of a concrete definition of the term indicated that it was for the in-group, the cognoscenti; primarily black Americans who simply knew when they were in the presence of something truly funky” . To put it differently, the appearance of this specialized vocabulary which contained meaning only for the *cognoscenti* meant, on the one hand, the establishment of a group-awareness, while, on the other hand, it meant that there was no exchange of meaning between that particular group and other groups. In this sense, one can speak of a group which is terminologically enclosed and which would, by extension, consider any influence coming from the outside as an intrusion. Yet, funk music had a precise meaning for those who were able to recognize it.

Funk, then, was in every sense a music of motion, with a lot of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic cross-currents scuttling around, yet all somehow locked into a common groove which variously drove or seduced fans onto the dance floor. The key to this locked-in groove was the magical ‘one’ – the unifying downbeat at the start of each bar which funk’s first major chronicler, Rickey Vincent, treats with almost religious veneration. The ‘one’ served to organize the maelstrom of musical activity into a coherent, propulsive sound. It was the sound of rootedness, a rhythmic anchor at a time, and in a music, of great turbulence.

In a way, Ward is pointing out that already with the emergence of funk one witnesses this backward movement towards rootedness a movement which at the same time reaches out to a larger (outside the group) social environment by making a statement and, of course, by constituting itself as “a rhythmic anchor at a time [...] of great turbulence” . Nevertheless, the statement which would translate this specialized vocabulary into an acknowledged vocabulary was yet to be made.

Not coincidentally, the demands for a type of music that would interact socially while at the same time permitting the translation of meaning between two groups, and by extension between community and society, came from a black audience. These demands, Ward explains, “for more explicit racial and social commentary in soul lyrics coincided with the industry’s recognition that not only was this a necessity in order to maintain credibility and sales among black consumers whose collective annual income topped \$1,000 in the early 1970s, but that such

songs would not automatically alienate the white market” . Of course, the best way to avoid alienating a possible white market was to “divorce black popular music from its organic meaning” by corporate annexation and as such by pushing it towards the white end of the black-white musical spectrum . Mass commodification of black music not only managed to ‘sanitize’ black music for white audiences but it also succeeded in opening new ways for spreading that racial and social commentary that Ward was talking about.

The cornerstones of corporate America’s annexation of the black popular music tradition were the implementation of strategies developed by Berry Gordy himself; namely to market soul music, if not blackness itself, to a young mainstream consumer base and as a purveyor of youthful sensibilities for older audiences, but also as a measurement of racial and social difference that could be construed as enticing, appealing, or wholly repugnant, as market taste demanded, particularly when mediated through that various prisms of race, class, age, geographical location, and sexual preference.

Separated from its political and organic connotations, Neal goes on explaining, black music became “a malleable market resource merchandised to black and white consumers alike” . However, as Neal points out, the mass commodification of black music “reduces blackness to a commodity that could be bought and sold without the cultural and social markers that have defined blackness” . In Neal’s view, Motown “made no secret about its investment in the mainstream consumer public as a vehicle for black middle-class mobility – a mobility that would remain largely symbolic for Motown’s core black constituency” . Nevertheless, this did not change the actual conditions in which African-Americans lived as “black music was still enthusiastically admired when it fulfilled romanticized white expectations about black grace and ease with leisure, pleasure sex and style” . “But this still required”, Ward further adds, “no real consideration of, or sympathy with, the frequently unromantic circumstances from whence those qualities in black culture emerged” . Yet, despite all these aspects, the most important achievement was to get the message through and to stir a considerable amount of awareness.

Going back to the idea of cultural resistance and that of embedding racial and social commentary into cultural gestures such as music, the rhythm and blues of the later 1960s and early 1970s was strongly imbued with influences coming from a socially tense atmosphere as more and more songs dealt with the social, political, and economic struggle of black Americans,

and, most importantly with the status of race relations in the United States. In 1971, “in the midst of blatant state repression of black political expression, singer Marvin Gaye would, against Motown’s wishes, record and release what has come to be recognized as the quintessential black protest recording” . “You know we’ve got to find a way”, Gaye sings in the title track of his 1971 album *What’s Going On*, “to bring some lovin’ here today”, and then again “don’t punish me with brutality/ talk to me, so you can see/ oh, what’s going on” . Gaye’s recording exerted a major influence on later artists who taped compositions from his recordings which in a way reflected a particular commitment to enhance from a musical point of view the black protest tradition of the later 1960s and early 1970s.

With *What’s Going On*, Gaye, with the assistance of modern recording technology and a bevy of co-writers, crafted a musical tome which synthesized the acute issues within black urban life, with the prophetic and existential vision of the African-American church. [...] Dealing with the personal demons of drug addiction, depression associated with the death of singing partner Tammi Terrell, and his brother Frankie’s service in the Vietnam War, Gaye produced a singular protest statement readily accessible within mass consumer culture. [...] I maintain that the centrality of Gaye’s recording to the black protest tradition and mass-market culture should be interpreted as one incarnation of the nonviolent mass civil disobedience that Martin Luther King demanded shortly before his death.

What Gaye did through his album, Neal explains, was to summarize “the hopes and despair of an entire generation of African-American freedom fighters whose primary icons were common, God-fearing, everyday black folks whose primary revolutionary charge was to transcend absurd and bizarre circumstances immediately and often” . Taking into consideration that the political expression of African-Americans was obviously under a blockade, Marvin Gaye manages to transcend this blockade by adopting a totally different language of resistance which no longer tries to speak ‘Truth to Power’ but rather to speak truth to other people. Being granted access to a powerful means of communication Gaye seems to be speaking to that particular sector where the Negro-issue is actually situated. Gaye’s *What’s Going On*, Neal further elaborates, “represents a clear transgression of historical assumptions about the limits and parameters of black political discourse, particularly in a moment when such discourse is clearly under siege” . My sense is

that Gaye had actually found that music as expression was indeed able to transcend the limits of a community by creating a system of signs which was intelligible not only for the members of that particular *community* but also to the members of a *society* (speaking in Tönnies' terms). In this sense, Neal suggests that Gaye "not only synthesized an era of black protest narratives but perhaps documented and era's passing, framing the African-American experience through the very prism of postmodernity that has come to define contemporary American culture and in effect produced an aural and commodified text that could be appropriated by later generations". Of course, the main risk which was implied in this mass commodification of social/ political messages was for the music to be separated from its social and political content and this is particularly visible if one is to take into consideration the first official Stax-Volt tour in Europe.

In the spring of 1967, the *New Musical Express* heralded the arrival of the American music giants by saying that "just in case you haven't heard – the Stax show must be one of the raviest, grooviest, slickest tour packages that Britain has ever seen. And if you haven't seen it already – pull your finger out". "To the British", Peter Guralnick asserts in his *Sweet Soul Music* (1999), "it was no doubt a logical enough step and one that, like Elvis's long-promised (but never realized) English tour, was perhaps overdue; to the participants, who embarked upon this rash adventure with a mixture of trepidation and almost childlike delight, the whole expedition must have seemed a little like Columbus's in reverse, with each step eastward taking them perilously closer to the edge of the world as they knew it". What they discovered was totally different treatment compared to the one they got at home as most of the British papers signaled their arrival with interviews and reviews that were "so laudatory as to be almost embarrassing". The Beatles themselves "sent limos to the airport to pick up the entourage and tried in vain to arrange for a jam session, but they were in the midst of finishing up their long-awaited *Sergeant Pepper* album and were never able to do anything more than attend Carla Thomas's show at the Bag O'Nails, where, upon meeting Steve Cropper, 'the four Beatles stood in unison and bowed from the waist'". Yet, despite this wave of appreciation coming from the British press, there were also some dissenting voices, and among them was Bill Millar, "an astute critic and longtime fan" who started to wonder whether Eddie Floyd's "overriding talent is to see how many times it is possible to scram 'Let me hear you say yeah' into three songs", and even more than that, Millar was seriously "concerned about the direction that Otis Redding's talent was taking" simply because "he felt that Otis's vocal style was becoming increasingly mannered, his gestures more

and more aimed at pleasing the crowd rather than expressing honest emotion”, and that Otis was maybe and overrated singer . What I am trying to point out and what is probably coming out of all these accounts of the 1967 European tour is that they were treated solely as musicians because their music, taken out of context had lost its social substratum, it is no longer *addressing* but rather *performing*.

To conclude, the process which I tried to describe outlines a movement from protest, to disillusionment and to a change of tactics which essentially meant the translation of a specialized meaning which pertained to particular communities into a discourse which could address members outside of that community. At the same time, going back to King’s discussion about the lawbreaker and the unjust community, and to Tönnies’ dichotomy community/ society, it seems that where political practices have failed cultural gestures have managed to stir the attention of the community. The only question that remains open is whether cultural gestures, such as for instance Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On*, can have a durable and sustainable effect on a particular society such as the American one.

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