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The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World

by **Adrian Wooldridge**

Allan Lane, 2021.

Adrian Wooldridge is straightforward at the very beginning of his book, in the first paragraph. He emphasises that for many people the big ideas that have shaped Western societies for the past several centuries (and, the reader would add, that they have been advocating to other countries) are faltering. Democracy is in retreat, liberalism (political and economic) is struggling, and capitalism, especially its more or less free market version, has lost its lustre. What remains? The author believes that there is one idea that still commands widespread enthusiasm: that an individual's position in society should depend on their combination of ability and effort – something encompassed in the term “meritocracy”, a word invented rather recently by Michael Young (1958).

Is meritocracy today really a universal ideology or is it just the lip service provided to it that is universal? The author does not provide the answer to this question but, based on the simple meritocratic principle, offers the reader a sense of why meritocracy is so popular. “A meritocratic society combines four qualities which are each in themselves admirable. First, it prides itself on the extent to which people can get ahead in life on the basis of their natural talents. Second, it tries to secure equality of opportunity by providing education for all. Third, it forbids discrimination on the basis of race and sex and other irrelevant characteristics. Fourth, it awards jobs through open competition rather than patronage and nepotism” (p. 1). It is not surprising that meritocracy, according to the author, repeatedly scores well in public opinion surveys around the world and straddles the East-West divide. In his address to the National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017 President Xi urged the Party to select officials “on the basis of merit regardless of social background” (p. 2).

The trained economist would claim that meritocracy provides economic efficiency in utilisation of human resources, both in terms of allocative efficiency (allocation of individuals to the appropriate jobs, according to their comparative advantages), productive efficiency (incentives for increasing own labour productivity as a prerequisite to climb on the career ladder), and dynamic efficiency (incentives to be innovative, due to the appropriate reward). Meritocracy is the very seldom case in which the general public (and politicians with it) agrees with trained economists, perhaps for different

reasons. Also, for the trained economist meritocracy means competition on the labour market, a level playing field, but also fierce, unrestricted and unregulated competition. Nonetheless, as in a quip attributed to George J. Stigler, competition is like morning exercise – everyone praises it, but no one practices it. Hence, the reader expects that many incumbents – political, business, or academic – pay lip service to meritocracy but do everything possible to provide privilege for themselves and, especially, their children.

Nonetheless, the author points out that there are not only those who do not practice meritocracy, but also those who openly question it and even detest the meritocratic order in the US and other countries of the West. “The meritocratic idea is coming under fire from a formidable range of critics who roundly denounce our ruling ideology as ‘an illusion’, a ‘trap’, a ‘tyranny’ and an instrument of white oppression” (p. 5). According to the author, the left populism assault to meritocracy is embodied in the Black Lives Matter movement’s intellectual support – critical race theory (Reni Eddo-Lodge 2017; Robin DiAngelo 2018; Ibram X. Kendi 2019). In short, “Critical race theorists are fiercely hostile to the meritocratic idea, which they regard, at best, as a way of justifying social inequality as natural inequality and, at worst, as an offshoot of eugenic theory” (p. 5). It is hardly a theory, more like political activism without a clear aim, but it energises Afro-American discontent with meritocracy. The assault on meritocracy from right-wing populism, the author claims, come in the form of criticizing meritocrats for being “smug”, “self-righteous” and “out of touch”. These populists “complain that the so-called cognitive elite has done a dismal job of running the world” (p. 6). In short, the elite is a problem: only the white elite in the case of left-wing populism – although right-wing populism is colour blind and inclusive – all the elites are rotten. The strength of these movements against meritocracy in the US was signalled with the political advent of Donald J. Trump, a champion of anti-meritocracy and nepotistic practice in the recent US history, his election victory in 2016, close defeat in the effort to be re-elected in 2020, and his firm control of the Republican Party at the time this review goes to press.

The author emphasises that the recent attacks on meritocracy also came from the elite academic circles. Daniel Markovits (2019) claims that meritocracy in the US is now the opposite of what it was intended to be, as he points out that it has become a way of transmitting inherited privilege from one generation to another through the mechanism of elite education. The pinnacle of academic assault on meritocracy does not question the way it has recently been implemented but rather undermines the idea itself, labelling it as “toxic”. For Michael J. Sandel (2020) meritocracy is inherently toxic “because it says to those at the bottom of the pile that they deserve their fate, thereby diminishing them as human beings” (p. 7) and he looks forward to a more balanced future in which we stop fetishizing merit and put more emphasis on democracy and community (whatever that means). The author believes that this academic fusillade is the latest example of the “revolt of the elites” against the very ideology that is the foundation of their elite position.

Taking all this into account, the author asks the simple question: is there a better system than meritocracy for organizing the world? For him, the relevant question, quite reasonably, is whether meritocracy has fewer faults than alternative systems. “Meritocracy’s advocates don’t argue that it’s perfect. They argue that it does a better job than

the alternatives of reconciling various goods that are inevitably in tension with each other – for example, social justice and economic efficiency and individual aspiration and limited opportunities” (p. 9).

It is evident that the author is one of these advocates and the reader feels that Wooldridge is ready to take a deep dive both into virtues and “imperfections” of meritocracy in this book. In short: “The aim of this book is to [...] explain where the meritocratic idea came from, how it replaced feudal ideas about ‘priority, degree and place’, how it evolved over the centuries and why it eventually became the world’s leading ideology. In the process I also hope to offer some perspective on roiling debates about whether it is a mistake that needs to be rejected or a still-progressive idea that can be a force for good in the world” (p. 10).

The author keeps his promise: most of the book is about history. In the introductory chapter, Wooldridge emphasises that the history of meritocracy reveals three things that are vital to understanding our current condition. “The first is that meritocracy is a revolutionary idea, the intellectual dynamite which has blown up old worlds – and created the material for the construction of new ones. For millennia, most societies have been organized according to the very opposite principles to meritocracy. People inherited their positions in fixed social orders” (p. 11). In short, nepotism was a way of life before meritocratic explosion happened in the French, American, Industrial, and liberal revolutions. The explosion made that “In meritocratic society, people are individuals before they are anything else: masters of their fates and captains of their souls” (p. 12)¹. The author points out that the explosion shook, if not destroyed, the old nepotistic world, not only because the latter did not provide efficiency, but because it was considered immoral to deny opportunity to talent wherever it appeared. “Martin Luther King was such a morally compelling figure because he held out the hope of a future in which everyone would be judged by the content of their character rather than the colour of their skin” (p. 15).

The second lesson from history, according to the author, is that meritocracy is a “protean” idea. More specifically, “We can all agree on what ‘meritocracy’ means in a general way: allowing people to rise as high as their talents and efforts will take them. But what does this mean in practice?” (p. 16). The author suggests that the notion of “talent” has changed over time and that until the early 20th century, “talent” carried a moral as well as an intellectual connotation. Few traces of morality, if any, remain in the early 21st century, the reader ponders; the modern notion of “talent” refers to the results only.

The third lesson is that “precisely because it is both revolutionary and protean, the meritocratic idea is capable of self-correction” (p. 17). The author acknowledges that there have been notable occasions in the past when it seemed that meritocracy was degenerating into a defence of the *status quo*. But it has managed, in most of (Western) societies, to reinvigorate itself. “Today’s critics of the meritocratic idea nevertheless get one big thing right: that the meritocratic elite is in danger of hardening into an aristocracy which passes on its privileges to its children by investing heavily in education, and

¹ The quoted text after the hyphen is reference to the verse from the poem *Invictus* by 19th century British poet William Ernest Henley – “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul”.

which, because of its sustained success, looks down on the rest of society. The past four decades have seen one of the most depressing developments in the history of the meritocratic idea: the marriage between merit and money” (p. 17).

Hence from the very beginning of the book the reader is aware of what is, according to the author, the greatest challenge of meritocracy today, at least in the Western world and advanced economies. The author explains that even the title of the book is chosen to sound as a warning. “An aristocracy of talent ought to be an oxymoron. The aristocracy of talent can survive only if it is constantly recruiting new talent from the rest of society and downgrading members of the elite who don’t quite make it. The ‘aristocracy of talent’ can and should be celebrated when it upsets the *status quo*, but if it distorts the meritocratic principle, using it as a way of entrenching its position at the top of society, then it needs to be challenged” (p. 18).

With the stage fully set and furnished, the play can start at earnest with – history, of course. Part One of the book (“Priority, Degree and Place”) introduces the reader to the pre-meritocratic world, in which people’s stations in life were fixed by tradition and jobs were allocated on the basis of patronage, nepotism, inheritance and purchase. Reading this part of the book is healing for all those disappointed in modern times and depressed by current developments.

In the Middle Ages, the author points out, the most important economic resource was not the brain inside your head but the land under your feet, hence the most powerful people were the ones who owned that land. The point is that the land was inherited. So, there was virtually no vertical mobility, and heirs remained at the top of the economic and social ladders, regardless of their talents. This was a given to them. As it was a given to those on the ladder rungs below, with no chance for ascent. Not only this was, in the economics parlance, poor allocation of human resources, but there was no incentive for improvement of human capital. From another viewpoint: “The social order was founded on entitlement: certain people were entitled to a certain treatment because of who they were rather than what they had achieved” (p. 30).

Political life at the time was thoroughly controlled by the ruling families. There were differences around the world regarding the details of the arrangements: the West, for example, has strongly favoured both monogamy and male primogeniture, the others did not necessary follow – nonetheless, “Dynasties [...] had one fundamental thing in common: they minimized the difference between the public and the private, or the political and the personal: all politics was family politics” (p. 38)². The author has no doubt that this pattern was counterproductive for society, but admits that it did not come out of the blue. “Dynasticism is powerful precisely because it appeals to some of the most elemental human motives: the natural desire of humans to favour their children and the willingness of people to bend the knee to well-established families that can advance their interests” (p. 46). These motives are alive and well in modern time.

Nepotism, patronage, and venality were inescapable as the principal mechanisms of allocation of human resources in such a framework, and the author provides ample

² There is a brief reference in the book to dynasties in the modern times: “The British have turned their royal family into a branch of the entertainment industry: the royals are allowed to live in their gilded cages provided they devote their lives to ceremonial functions – bringing in a Hollywood actress to add more multicultural sparkle proved to be an innovation too far” (p. 35).

evidence about specific instruments of such non-competitive allocations across the world, with some excursions into modern times. If there was a market, it was the job market rather than the labour market that operated.

Part Two of the book (“Meritocracy before Modernity”) examines the history of meritocracy prior to modernity. It was Plato’s *Republic* that provided a clear blueprint for a world run by carefully selected and rigorously trained guardians – the rule of an intellectual elite and stratified by education. According to the author, it became the inspiration for many in their quest for meritocratic society, although not all the recommendations were accepted. “Plato remains as relevant as ever. He identified the most profound problem with meritocracy: the tension between the natural instinct to look after your children and the meritocratic imperative to provide equality of opportunity. Plato’s own solution to this problem [...] – state-sponsored orgies and communal child-rearing – was clearly far-fetched” (p. 71).

Meritocracy, prior to modernity or in the age of it, has been based on the selection of those with intellectual merit. It was pre-modern China, the author points out, where the most important innovation was the introduction of a mass examination system designed to select top scholars from across the empire to serve it as mandarins. The author believes that the examination system was indirectly inspired by Confucius, who developed broad principles on how to live a good life and offered politicians advice on how to rule on the basis of those principles. As to the effectiveness of the examination system, the author suggests that perhaps the questions used in the examination at the time were not quite appropriate for the evaluation of cognitive abilities.

The Jewish people have always put significant emphasis on intellectual success for both theological reasons (they see themselves as a chosen people guided by a rabbinical elite of scholar-priests) and practical ones (with no land estate, they have often had to make a living as entrepreneurs, middlemen and fixers). Individuals have been chosen among the Chosen People to advance to the top based on their intellectual accomplishments. “They led the world in emphasizing intellectual success as a way of securing the survival of the group. They heaped honour on people who could perform demanding intellectual feats, from rabbis to scholars” (p. 88).

Part Three of the book (“The Rise of the Meritocracy”) focuses on the three great liberal revolutions that created the modern world – two of them, according to the author, bloody (the French and, to a lesser degree, the American) and one of them peaceful (the British liberal revolution, which transferred power from a landed elite to the liberal intellectual aristocracy without a shot being fired). These revolutions were all driven by the same underlying force so succinctly identified by de Tocqueville: “The mind became an element in success; knowledge became a tool of government and intellect a social force; educated men played a part in affairs of state” (p. 19). The American revolutionaries wanted to replace the “artificial” aristocracy of the land with a “natural” aristocracy of virtue and talent. It was not only post-revolutionary France, but also other European countries, most of them in the North, first of all Prussia, who opened careers to talents. The British experience was rather specific, and the meritocracy march was somewhat delayed. The United States was created as the “Republic of Merit”, but the author provides ample evidence about topsy-turvy developments in that republic in the early stages, not least related to the colour of the skin. All these case studies are rich in

both evidence and reference, perhaps with some readers skipping these pages, but certainly to the joy of the others.

Part Four of the book (“The March of the Meritocrats”) deals with recent history and a few interrelated issues: the first of them is the measurement of merit. The author points out that during the period between the world wars it was psychologists who were responsible for three big innovations in thinking about meritocracy. First, they “identified ‘merit’ with ‘mental ability’, ‘mental ability’ with ‘intelligence’ and, in the case of the most influential group among them, ‘intelligence’ with a single quality, ‘general ability’” (p. 205). Second, the psychologists placed “intelligence”, and hence merit, firmly in the natural world: people with average natural ability couldn’t become geniuses, however hard they worked, the author points out. Third, according to the author, most ambitiously of all, “the psychologists claimed to have developed the equivalent of Galileo’s telescope: a device for identifying and measuring this invaluable natural ability – the IQ test” (p. 205). IQ testing provided a convenient way of testing mental ability and expressing that ability in a single number. It is widespread empirical research, the author demonstrates, that provided evidence that intelligence is inherited, but not in the linear way. How to distinguish between innate ability and mere learning, still remains the holy grail of IQ testing.

The author has no doubts: “The Second World War turbocharged the meritocratic revolution. Mass mobilization demonstrated how much talent had been wasted in the past. The post-war expansion of the welfare state increased ordinary people’s opportunities. And the shift from a manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy increased the rewards for brainpower” (p. 234). Perhaps the most important post-war development of meritocratic revolution in the US was the GI Bill. “More than 1.6 million veterans enrolled in college in 1947 alone, a number equivalent to the total college population in 1940, and more than 60 per cent of them studied science and engineering” (p. 239). Such a change was irreversible. It was just “put into overdrive” with the launch of Sputnik on 4 October 1957 – the space race was a brain race.

It was inevitable that the meritocratic revolution, i.e. equality of opportunity for talent, has provided equal opportunity for both men and women. The author tells a story about one of them. In the summer of 1947, a young woman of a modest shopkeeper’s origin from the Midlands graduated from Oxford University in chemistry. Her name was – Margaret Roberts. A few years later, by marriage, she changed her family name to – Thatcher. The rest is history, and a hallmark of the female angle of the meritocratic revolution. Not only that, her “eleven-year premiership was one of the most consequential in twentieth-century British history, with the radical policies she pioneered catching fire across the world” (p. 257). She also made no secret of the fact that she thought that many of the men in her Cabinet were “indecisive wafflers”³. In a curious twist of history, a new British Prime minister, Mrs Lizz Truss, who just stepped into office at the time this review goes to press, appointed Mrs Thérèse Coffey as Deputy Prime Minister and Health Secretary, who, according to the news, “studied chemistry at the same Oxford college as former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, but was forced to leave the

³ The author refers (p. 257) to an unforgettable sketch of *Spitting Image*, a satirical comedy show, about her going out to dinner with her Cabinet. “Steak or fish?” asks the waiter. “Steak, of course”, she replies. “What about the vegetables?” Surveying the room imperiously, she replies, “They’ll have the same”.

university when she failed several exams”⁴. The new Cabinet has been praised as the most diverse, and time will tell how competent it is – a clear signal that meritocracy can be a delicate flower.

Probably the most interesting segment of the book is Part Five (“The Crisis of the Meritocracy”) which deals with the rebellion against meritocracy, mostly in the Western World and especially in the US – the country that for a long has been a powerhouse of meritocracy. The author points out that one avenue of the revolt against meritocracy came from the left. It came in three waves: “first, academics questioned the idea that you can measure merit with any precision; second, public intellectuals questioned the idea that meritocracy is worth having at all; and, third, progressives embraced the alternative values of ‘equality’ and ‘community’” (p. 279). The author thoroughly reviews the relevant antimeritocratic theoretic contributions, especially the one of John Rawls (1971), and his theory of justice, though without commenting them.

The other drawback was created by corruption of the meritocracy. The author emphasises that the new elite – “cognitive elite” – regarded itself as “the meritocratic spirit made frequent-flying flesh. It was significantly bigger than the old meritocracy: high-IQ jobs expanded rapidly in these years, in both the public and the private sectors, and universities expanded even more rapidly in order to (over) supply the new market for academic talent. It was also significantly different in its attitude to money. The old elite had been primarily a professional elite that despised new money; the new elite regarded money as a measure of success” (p. 306).

According to the author, the new elite was fashioned by three powerful forces: (1) the marriage of merit and money as the new rich found clever ways of buying educational privileges for their children while the old rich embraced meritocracy; (2) the globalization of the elite as surging flows of goods, information and, above all, money tied the world together; (3) the decline in overall levels of social mobility, as the destruction of old avenues of upward mobility made it more difficult for poorer children to make it to the top. A new stable plutocratic-meritocratic equilibrium was established, the sarcastic reader would comment.

The advent of the global and wealthy cognitive elite was an ideal scapegoat for all not-so-well-educated, mainly manufacturing workers who were the losers of globalisation and technological progress, as demonstrated by Anne Case and Agnus Deaton (2020). They were the powerhouse of populist revolt against meritocracy and cognitive elite. Perhaps the embodiment of this movement has been Donald J. Trump, who has openly despised not only the “cognitive elite”, but knowledge as virtue, being proud of never reading books, and practitioner of straightforward nepotism, as he appointed relatives and cronies to powerful positions in his administration on a scale not seen in modern times, even allowing his daughter, Ivanka, to sit in for him for a while at a G7 summit.

The author believes that two events supercharged (right-wing) populist revolt against the cognitive elite and meritocracy in the US. One was the Iraq War and its calamitous aftermath. The Iraq War was all the more triggering for the populists because

⁴ NPR. 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/08/1121610336/uk-liz-truss-diverse-cabinet> (accessed September 11, 2022).

it was the brainchild of the (old) Republican Party, hence a new (populist) version was in high demand. The other was the 2008 Financial Crisis, as it was the cognitive elite that before 2008 had assured everyone that it could not happen, and that very elite was bailed out by government, with the aim of preventing a financial meltdown. This is the reason why the new right is quite distinctive from the old. “The populist right thinks of itself in radically different terms from the old right – as representing the people against the educated elite (which incorporates most of the establishment) rather than defending the existing order against socialist subversion” (p. 333).

Meanwhile, Asia has rediscovered meritocracy. The author starts the chapter on Asia with Singapore, a role model of meritocracy, but turns to, for the world, a much more important country – China. After the Cultural Revolution – a perfect rebuttal of meritocracy – the country gradually but steadily reintroduced examination and become quite a different country. “Today, China is a land of ‘trophy mania’. Everybody dreams of getting ahead – of being number one in school, of making a fortune as an entrepreneur, of rising up the ranks of the company – and everybody knows that getting ahead can mean trying harder and thinking smarter than the next person” (p. 356). In short, labour market competition at its best. The author is convinced that this is one of the origins, if not the principal one, of China’s economic success in recent decades, so the author believes that the more the West abandons liberal meritocracy in favour of plutocracy modified by affirmative action quotas, the more it will cede the future to China.

For the author the questions are how the West should revitalize meritocracy, which is degenerating into plutocracy, and how to live with this most demanding of taskmasters. The final chapter of the book offers some guidelines for answering these questions.

These guidelines are twofold. The first one is more meritocracy: we need to redouble our efforts to remove formal advantages for the rich while also developing better ways to distinguish between innate ability and mere learning. The second is wiser meritocracy. “We need to civilize and direct the competitive principle. We also need to make sure that the ‘winners’ of the meritocratic competition have much more of a sense of responsibility to the wider society – and that the ‘losers’ have alternative paths to dignity and self-fulfilment” (p. 376).

As to the first guideline, the priority for the author is to provide the poor with equal opportunity in education. “The best way to help the poor as a whole is early childhood education. Multiple studies show that going to pre-school gives young children a leg-up in all kinds of learning, not just academic but also social skills, listening, planning and self-control” (p. 389). As to the second guideline, the author’s answer is – vocational education. It is inspired, no doubt, with German experience – a long tradition of vocational education and rather moderate backlash against meritocracy.

The main message of this book is, according to the author, “that the best way forward lies in the meritocratic idea rather than in collective rights or enforced egalitarianism – that is, in treating people as individuals rather than as members of groups; in distributing opportunities and jobs on the basis of ability and achievement; and in removing barriers to the free trade in ideas and talent” (p. 349).

The book provides ample food for thoughts about meritocracy and its future. The text is evidence and reference rich. The less patient readers might skip some pages –

they should not. The book provides ample evidence that enemies of meritocracy would like to undermine it, for whatever reason, ideological or personal benefit, but they would also, by the same token, like to preserve the main outcome of meritocracy – the economic efficiency that has created wealth in the advanced economies. This is as incoherent as blueprint for capitalism provided by Thomas Piketty (2014) – massive progressive taxation that would decrease economic inequality but without affecting allocation of resources and incentives for inefficiency. It seems that some undoubtedly well-meaning advocates against meritocracy, emphasising community and democracy, perhaps are not aware of the incoherence and inevitable costs of their proposals to economic efficiency.

As to the first of the guidelines for the future – more meritocracy – provided by the book, the reader concludes that perhaps the proverb “necessity is the mother of invention” is relevant wisdom⁵. It is the overwhelming self-confidence of the West, the complacency that it has created, and many people spoiled by the wealth that are the main source of the criticism of meritocracy. It is the competitive pressure from Asia on the collective level and Asians on the individual level that will perhaps bring more incentives for meritocracy driven efficiency and diminish demand for affirmative actions, quotas, community values, a ridiculous level of political correctness, woke movements, critical race theories, etc. When the (economic) enemy is on the gates, perhaps the social priorities will change.

As to the second guideline, for the reader one word is missing from the book – empathy. It is one thing in short supply but in high demand in modern Western societies. With the population becoming older, the demand will be higher. For empathy to be provided on the market, regardless of who foots the bill, cognitive intelligence and college education are not decisive – it is social and, especially emotional intelligence that matter. And with manufacturing having moved to the emerging economies and automation processes, many of the jobs will be available in personal services, such as home healthcare workers. What is needed for these services to be provided properly is empathy based on emotional intelligence. A light touch of the hand on the shoulder of an older person in the right moment can do miracles. It is emotional intelligence, and proper training, that is crucial for the proper timing of the touch⁶. And perhaps emotional intelligence is linked to morality – to basic human instinct that it is desirable to do good deeds. Perhaps it is time to go back to the early, pre-20th century definition of talent, which was composed not only of cognitive ability, but also morality. For some duties, for some jobs in personal services that will not be replaced by robots in foreseeable future, there is a room for Pareto improvement. The people who do not excel in cognitive, but rather in emotional intelligence and in morality will get a decent social status (including wages) and the demand for empathy based personal services will be met. Should we start to redefine talent along these lines after all, the reader wonders. Perhaps IQ tests are not enough.

⁵ It is Plato that strikes again. The proverb is just substantially rephrased statement from *Republic*: “our need will be the real creator”.

⁶ This reasoning is in line with the suggestion in Barry J. Eichengreen (2018), that what is needed for these jobs is adaptability, collegiality and communication, and that the appropriate training of labour should develop situational adaptability, interpersonal skills, and oral communication ability.

For the end of the review, as expected from a *The Economist* columnist, the book is written in stylish, flamboyant, unmistakably British English. For the reader who enjoys such a style, this is quite a refreshing change from a highly technical jargon that has become regular in top notch, i.e. high impact factor academic economics journals, which even to a trained economist has come to sound like an air traffic control (ATC) conversation with the airline pilots: “United 123 heavy, descend to FL 150, and maintain speed at 200 knots. You are cleared for ILS approach to runway 29L and contact Ground Control on 127.3”. “Copy that, Approach Control. United 123 heavy”.

To keep the last “communication” ATC-short: Well done, Wooldridge! Very well done!

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