

Union States, Civil Society and National Symbols in the Nineteenth Century: Comparing United Kingdoms

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Abstract

This article seeks to open up an exploration of the relationship between union, nation and civil society. The two multinational union polities which are used as case studies are the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (1801–1922) and the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway (1814–1905). The article is structured around three discrete but interlinked questions or issues. First, given that the premise of the analysis offered here is the value of comparative approaches, is there in fact a basis for comparing these two united kingdoms? Second, given that the relationship between associational cultures, civil society and the democratic health of a polity has long been debated, should we now also be asking whether the condition of union states was related to the shape of civil society? Lastly, in Gramscian terms civil society is the arena in which consent for the hegemony of the dominant class is achieved: any reflection on the formation of consent raises the issue of union (or supranational) symbolism and national symbolism within civil society in different types of union state.

Keywords

union, nation, civil society, Britain, Ireland, Norway, Sweden

Introduction

This essay seeks to offer a set of necessarily provisional reflections on the relationship between different multinational unions and civil society and its unifying symbols.¹ In particular, it is structured around three discrete but interlinked questions. First, given that the premise of the essay is the value of comparative approaches, is there in fact a basis for comparing the two united kingdoms (Britain and Ireland, Sweden and Norway)? Second, given that the relationship between associational cultures, civil society and the democratic health of a polity has been debated at least since the time of de Tocqueville, should we now also be asking whether the definition and nature of union states impact upon the shape of civil society? And lastly, in Gramscian terms civil society is the arena in which consent for the hegemony of the dominant class is achieved. Any reflection on the process of consent broaches the question of union (or supranational) symbolism and national symbolism within civil society in different types of union state.

These, of course, are huge and – at least in terms of their comparative dimensions – under-researched questions. In this article, there is only an opportunity to outline possible approaches: equally, and in terms of the issue of union symbolism, there is only space to touch briefly on one case-study – the institution of monarchy and its associated symbolism – in introducing the wider theme (Jackson 2012). Moreover, similar constraints mean that the focus of the essay as a whole is on the smaller, rather than the pre-eminent, partners within each of the union polities under consideration – namely Ireland and Scotland, rather than England, in the case of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and Norway, rather than Sweden, in the case of the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway.

Comparing United Kingdoms

Taking the first of the central questions – is there any basis for comparing the two united kingdoms – Britain and Ireland, Sweden and Norway? Deborah Cohen, Stefan Berger and others have certainly

warned about the difficulties of comparative history, and there is clearly a case for caution (Berger 2010; Cohen 2001, 2004). Clearly, too, these different unions (the Scottish, Irish, Norwegian and Swedish) sat in very different places on a spectrum of intensity. As is well-known, England and Scotland constituted a long-standing personal union which became a real or parliamentary union in 1707, and then joined with Ireland to form a wider parliamentary union in the context of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. Sweden and Norway constituted a personal union, newly minted in the context of the last stages of the European war, but drawing upon an older heritage of engagement. Each had co-existed alongside Denmark in the Kalmar union (1397–1523); and after the Swedes' revolt and secession, a Danish-Norwegian union had lived on until the Treaty of Kiel (1814), when (in the context of military defeat) Denmark and Norway were separated, and Norway and Sweden now bound together. The British unions were determined by Scots and English parliamentary legislation of 1706 and a treaty of 1707, together with regular Irish and British legislation in 1800. By contrast, the union of Sweden and Norway was in part circumscribed by the Norwegian constitution of 1814 – a written or codified constitution – as well as by the Riksakten in the following year.

However, understanding the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth century simply as a uniform parliamentary union makes little sense in the light of the different types of constituent union (parliamentary and personal) as well as the overall incoherence of the enterprise. As Richard Lodge (professor of history at the University of Edinburgh) said in 1907, the Scots union 'was at its origin illogical and will probably be illogical at the end. It may well be that this is the secret of its success' (Hume Brown 1907: 173–174). The Scots and Irish (and Welsh and Hanoverian) unions were all quite distinct and were associated with different types of civil society and public sphere.

Moreover, the multiple monarchies and unions of the United Kingdom, and of Sweden and Norway, merit comparison partly because the two United Kingdoms were contemporary creations (1800–1801 and 1814–1815 respectively), partly because the United Kingdom was an important influence on the creation of the United Kingdoms (through the Treaty of Stockholm (1813) and the Treaty of Kiel (1814)), and

partly because contemporaries also frequently made the comparison. Some – in Sweden – came to see the British union as a possible endpoint for their own union with Norway; some in Britain – like Gladstone – subsequently considered that Sweden and Norway might serve as a paradigm for constitutional reform in Britain itself (Björnsterna 1840: 19; Jackson 2017). Each was of course an asymmetrical union of large and small partners, and much of the resultant chemistry of union arose from these imbalances. Each was a unique balance of contemporary strategic or geo-political exigency and historic linkage.

Union and Civil Society

Are the definition and nature of union related to the shape of civil society and vice versa? This key question is effectively an extension of the debate on the links between associational cultures, civil society and a stable democratic polity. As R.J. Morris has argued, ‘the nature of the state and its agencies was an enabling and limiting factor in all cases [of civil society]’ (Morris 2006: 15). He has also argued that ‘the ability of an associational culture to contribute to a liberal pluralist civil society depended ... upon the spatial and cultural context of the state’ (Morris 2006: 16). We need to extend these insights by looking at the relationship between civil society and the union state – though only a very tentative start to this task may be made within the parameters of this essay.

In essence, the proposition of this essay is that each of these distinctive unions – English/Scottish, British/Irish, Norwegian/Swedish – was associated with a distinctive civil society and national symbolism; and that each ultimately was related to the condition and prospects of the union. In particular, the suggestions here are that – the origin of civil societies was critical to their relationship with union; the flexibility and representativeness of union settlements were related to the nature of civil society; and (last) the stability of union settlements was related to the symbolism of the union state – especially royal symbolism – and its acceptability to civil society. All of the three societies discussed – Scotland, Ireland, Norway – accepted to some extent the symbolism of

monarchy; but not all accepted the explicit symbolism of union, which was more contentious.

Union and Civil Society in Scotland

Looking briefly at Scotland first: this might reasonably be characterised as an incomplete but comparatively inclusive union. Civil society was defined in several senses in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Scotland. It was given one key textual definition by Adam Ferguson, who (writing in *An essay on the history of civil society* in 1767) was concerned with the problem of sustaining the liberty of the individual in the context of an ordered society (Morris 2006: 2). Samuel Smiles (born in East Lothian and an Edinburgh University graduate), published his *Self-Help* in 1859 – a work which was translated into Swedish by 1867 (and Danish by 1869) and which was strongly associated with self-improvement and associationalism. Jim Livesey (in his *Civil society and empire*) has gone further than this, arguing that the origins of civil society itself may be located in the efforts of those Scots and Irish within the eighteenth century British Atlantic empire who sought to accommodate their loss of citizenship within the conditions of union and empire (Livesey 2009: 7). In addition, Livesey has highlighted the critical distinction between the success of Scots civil society in the later eighteenth century and afterwards and the collapse of its Irish counterpart in the 1790s.

Some further expansion of these observations is clearly required. Yes, the Scottish union of 1707 brought the loss of a separate Scottish citizenship with the emergence of the union or imperial state. But it was also inclusive of the major interests in Scottish society. It allowed an essential degree of flexibility within the new constitutional relationships – stemming in part from its incompleteness. Scotland preserved its distinctive legal system (based on Roman law), its royal burghs and their privileges, its heritable jurisdictions (until 1747), and its Presbyterian church, its banking system and its universities. All of these were distinctive national institutions, which served as focuses for patriotic pride within the union state.

This particular type of incomplete and flexible union conditioned the forms of civil society, which emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The relatively limited scope of union created the space for civil society associational cultures: the ultimately inclusive and accommodationist nature of union ensured that these cultures would augment rather than subvert union. Indeed, by the mid-Victorian era Scotland's historic national institutions were complemented by a distinctive Scottish civic culture with a range of patriotically inclined voluntary associations, spanning philanthropy, religion, science, literature and commerce.

Mediating between this vibrant local culture and the relatively weak (though expanding) British state were the politics and ideology of what has been called 'unionist nationalism'. 'Unionist nationalism' embodied a commitment to the union, and indeed an interest in closer union; but this was contingent upon patriotic fulfilment within local institutions and the continuing benefits and light touch of the union government: as Graeme Morton has argued, 'because of the way in which civil society was governed in the mid-19th century Scottish nationalism was loyal to the union of 1707' (see Morton 1999: 10). The intrusion of the state or perceived inequalities within the governance of the union, could give rise to patriotic protest. But such protest accepted the principle of union – even when it was opposed to innovations within its practice (Jackson 2012: 136).

In short, the inclusive and flexible nature of union was associated with the associational cultures of a civil society, which was both patriotically Scottish and unionist. Scottish civil society, including the press, served to complement union.

Union and Civil Society in Ireland

The Irish union, incomplete yet also exclusive, shared some characteristics with its Scottish counterpart, but there were also decisive differences. Again, the layering of union needs to be seen and its importance appreciated.

In Ireland the parliamentary union of 1800–1801, like its Scots precursor of 1707, preserved a set of distinctive national institutions

- the administration (Dublin Castle), the viceregal court and executive, the courts and judiciary, and legal process. As in Scotland, there was an effort through union to connect the state to the forces of religion. But the specific intention of binding the union with concessions to the majority religious community (Catholicism) failed completely and with lasting consequences.

Union, therefore, acquired an exclusive, even sectarian, inflection almost from the moment of its promulgation. The distinctive Irish institutions which were retained after the union were in the hands of a dominant religious and social elite in Irish society - the Anglican (episcopal) landed class known sometimes as the 'Protestant ascendancy'. Unlike Scotland, the institutions of the union state in Ireland could not fully accommodate a popular patriotic or national identity. And this therefore defined a different role and function for civil society in Ireland than in Scotland. Moreover, unlike Scotland, too, the chronology of the growth of civil society in Ireland was separate from that of the union state: it certainly preceded the acts of union in 1800.

In essence, economic growth and intellectual Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century helped to generate new forms of sociability and civil society in Ireland: Michael Brown has defined the period between 1730 and 1780 as the 'apogee of the social Enlightenment': it 'saw the emergence of a literary public sphere marked by novel modes of communication (newspapers), changes in old mechanisms for divulging information (the culture of the theatre for instance) and new locations (the coffee house)' (Brown 2016: 210). Economic growth also simultaneously disrupted the precarious sectarian frontiers in a society where political authority was not only associated with propertied exclusivity, but also with religious exclusivity. Most Irish historians agree that civil society broke down in the 1790s in the context of the profound stresses created by the war. Insurgency in 1796-1798 and the imposition of union in 1800 were in part expressions of that failure.

In Ireland neither the formation nor the consolidation of union were supported by civil society, therefore. It was rather the case that union was imposed upon a society where civil society had broken down; and

that union helped (indirectly) to shape its radical and sectarianized restructuring. What re-emerged gradually in nineteenth century Ireland was a civil society which, as in the late nineteenth century Netherlands, was fragmented or 'pillarised' along confessional lines. Unlike in Scotland, where civil society functioned as a complement to union, in Ireland – as also in Norway – the civil society of the nineteenth century looked increasingly to alternative state formations.

And unlike in the Netherlands, where it has been said that 'the pillars and the pillarised voluntary associations articulated religious and political antagonisms in society but stabilised it also', this was not the case in Ireland (de Vries 2006: 116). In Ireland civil society was redefined in the mid/late nineteenth century in opposition to the union state – generating clashes between the two as well as special restrictions on civil liberty, including upon the freedom of the press, which were not generally applied in Britain. In some ways, though, the Irish experience was not unique: as Stefan Ludwig Hoffmann argues in his overview of contemporary European civil society, 'the expansion, democratisation and politicisation of voluntary associations were ... a cause of the crisis of European civil societies before World War I' (Hoffman 2006: 89).

Union and Civil Society in Sweden-Norway

Like the Scots and Irish unions, the Swedish-Norwegian union was formulated in the context of the flexing of military muscle by the dominant partner. Like the earlier two unions, the Swedish-Norwegian union was partly anchored in the geopolitics of international warfare and its settlement. Like the earlier two unions, it drew upon a complex set of historical associations and rivalries, and sought to reconcile these. Like the earlier two unions, though more so, the Swedish-Norwegian union was limited and therefore offered an opportunity for the creation of associational cultures and the wider development of civil society. Unlike the Scots and Irish unions, which were enacted by regular parliamentary legislation, the Norwegian was circumscribed by a written constitution (of 1814) and by an act of the Storting which had constitutional status.

Unlike these earlier unions, therefore, the Swedish-Norwegian union was a relatively constricted or tightly defined settlement. Attempts to revise the union either informally, through the action of the monarch (such as Carl XIV Johan), or formally, through the work of recurrent joint union committees, generally failed. Successive union monarchs flexed and swayed, sometimes (as with Carl Johan) pushing a relatively assertive and unionist agenda but often (again as with Carl Johan) accepting defeat at the hands of the Storting (Michalsen 2014: 214ff).

Still, these constraints on union and on the state created space for civil society in Norway as well as for the nation state. Torkel Jansson of Uppsala has suggested that in the United Kingdoms 'the state ... dissociated itself from a number of functions it had previously fulfilled, and that society consequently had no choice but to associate itself': Norwegian society through the nineteenth century certainly came to be strongly marked by 'private civic associations' or, alternatively, 'a new "association spirit"' (Jansson 2016: 687; Langholm 2016: 972). Most historians argue that the principles of voluntary association were spreading in Norway from the 1820s and 1830s, and that they were linked with economic growth – including the emergence of a newly commercialised agricultural economy in the nineteenth century. Emphasis has been laid (by Norbert Götz) upon the role of poor relief organisation, Protestant revivalism and temperance within these evolving associational cultures. Götz, indeed, has defined the period from the mid-nineteenth century through to c.1930 as the 'pre-corporatist' heyday of autonomous associational activity (Götz 2003: 42–43).

Different forms of civil society and public sphere activity flourished in Sweden. A trope of contemporary British comment was certainly the contrast between democratic Norway and aristocratic Sweden: for the radical Scots traveller, Samuel Laing, journeying in the later 1830s, 'Sweden [in the first decades of the union] is still under its *ancien regime*, while Norway is practically in advance of the age in its enjoyment of institutions favourable to political liberty' (Laing 1836: 134). In Sweden, Laing observed, 'the press is under a very strict censorship'; while in Norway 'the most entire freedom of discussion exists' (Laing 1836: 136).

The associational cultures of Norway and Sweden (as of Ireland and Scotland) were of course linked to improved communications (telegraphs, national postal system, rail networks) – and (from 1850) a rapidly expanding press. The ‘growth of local newspapers in the 1850s turned the press into a major instrument of national unification’ in Sweden (Petterson 2016: 987). More than in Scotland or Ireland, the press in Sweden and Norway was characterised by a national rather than a union appeal.

Was there any evidence of union civic cultures or a union civil society in Sweden and Norway? It was certainly the case that up to the 1860s Scandinavianism, while by no means co-equal with union feeling, was linked with some associational cultures which looked to the maintenance of the United Kingdoms (e.g. the rifle club movement in Sweden) (Hemstad 2010; Petterson 2016: 989). But these tended to be exceptional.

In short, the restrictive, constrained, light-touch union created more space for civil society. But it was a national civil society which was the result, rather than a supra-national or multinational union version such as may be said to have existed in Scotland. Moreover, given religious homogeneity, it was a coherent national civil society, unlike its pillarised equivalent in contemporary Ireland.

Civil Society, Monarchy and the Symbolism of the Union State

How much did civil society accept the symbolism of the union state – taking that associated with the monarchy as a preliminary case-study? In Scotland an agreed and inclusive union permitted (on the whole) the infiltration throughout civil society of the symbolism of union, often casual or implicit. In Ireland, however, the exclusive, incomplete and dynamic nature of union created confrontations between the symbols of the United Kingdom and those of the growing national movement. There are some similarities between Ireland and Norway in this respect: on the whole, however, the clash between Irish national and United Kingdom symbols was greater because the presence of the Union state weighed more heavily there than its counterpart in Norway.

However, what one might describe (adapting the Freudian formulation) as the narcissism of small national difference was still a feature of both United Kingdoms and both Ireland and Norway (and even to a lesser extent) Scotland. This has a particular relevance for union states, which often (if not invariably) brought together peoples and polities who were essentially similar. In these circumstances, the symbols of difference naturally acquired a much greater significance than might otherwise have been the case.

With Sweden and Norway, even at the mid-nineteenth century zenith of the United Kingdoms, flags, coats of arms, and royal titles all fed into a festering rancour with union. Norway underlined its independent existence within the context of the union state through a separate national flag, which was devised in 1821. Oscar I famously introduced a compromise arrangement for the flag in 1844, which remained in place in Norway until 1898–1899 (and in Sweden until 1905) – but it was a continuing reminder to patriotic Norwegians of the compromises inherent in union.

Equally, in an age when heraldic emblems mattered, coats of arms could accelerate resentments. Heraldry was not just a matter of royal or aristocratic flummery, but (as Fridtjof Nansen observed in 1905) was associated with a range of everyday official institutions, including (crucially) the coinage (Nansen 1905: 28 n.1). The representation of the kingdom of Hungary on the Habsburg armorials was an issue of contention until 1915 – virtually until the end of the Dual Monarchy. The coat of arms of Sweden and Norway, which originally rendered the rampant Norwegian lion merely as a quartering of the Swedish arms, generated the same kind of animus as the flag question. This was only partly resolved with Oscar I's tactful uniting of the Norwegian and Swedish emblems on equal terms within the royal coat of arms (after 1844). Even then, Nansen complained that the Swedes had represented Norway in this way 'just as though Norway were actually a province of Sweden ... [and that] it was only after considerable opposition from Norway that this [heraldry] was given up' (Nansen 1905: 28, n.1).

Focusing on monarchy and its symbols, generally these have served as critical binding agents within the multinational unions of nineteenth century Europe, often infiltrating all aspects of civil society. Oszkár

Jászai, the great chronicler of the fall of the Dual Monarchy, saw the Habsburgs as a clear centripetal force within Austria-Hungary: other, more recent commentators, looking at the symbolism and supra national identities generated by loyalty to the monarchy have echoed this judgement (Jászai 1929).

Scotland and even Scottish nationalism worked largely within monarchical frameworks: the parliamentary union of 1707 was built on a union of the crowns of England and Scotland, which had been formulated in 1603, when the king of Scotland, James VI, had assumed the throne of England. Scottish ownership of the British monarchy and union was therefore profound – it was a Scottish dynasty which ruled Britain until 1714, and in the nineteenth century successive members of the new Hanoverian ruling family sought to emphasise their supposed historic linkages with Scotland and Scottish culture. The symbolism of monarchy was accordingly a pervasive and accepted feature of civil society throughout Scotland.

This was only true in a highly limited way for Ireland. Here the stamp of the union monarchy certainly infiltrated the ‘pillarised’ civil society of late nineteenth century Ireland, but primarily within its Protestant and middle class aspects. For Catholic Ireland the lack of any clear ownership of the national monarchy (in contrast to Scotland), together with the apparent political and economic failure of the union, created divisions over the institution and its symbolism. Royal visits were contentious occasions: royal statues and street-naming were equally contested. British monarchs like Queen Victoria responded by showing a clear and obvious preference for Scotland above Ireland. In short, the Scots had ownership of the British monarchy and its symbolism, where the Irish did not (Jackson 2012: 153–163, 199–207).

What of Norway? As with other unions, monarchy was an important binding agent in Sweden and Norway – indeed, given the nature of the Norwegian and Swedish Rikssakten (1815) the crown is often regarded as the only binding agent: Dag Michalsen has observed that ‘the legal relationship between the two countries was defined only through the common king’ (Michalsen 2014: 213; Derry 1973: 18). The monarchy had been a keystone of the union between Norway and Denmark (Arnold Barton has said that ‘the Norwegian peasants were proverbially

loyal to the king in Copenhagen, regarding him as their protector against bureaucratic abuse’) (Barton 2003: 7). The institutional binding of the monarchy with Norway was further tightened by the fact that until 1891 the heir to the throne served conventionally as the Norwegian viceroy, while the king also appointed a statholder – an office held originally by Swedes (until 1829) but later (1836–1856) by two prominent Norwegians, successively Herman Wedel-Jarlsberg and Severin Løvenskiold until its final abolition in 1872.

Norway, like Scotland, was heavily infiltrated by, and accepting of, the symbolism associated with the central institution of the union, namely the monarchy. The popularity of the monarchy and its symbols in Norway was certainly repeatedly observed and noted, including (for example) by British commentators and travellers like H.D. Inglis, Samuel Laing and R.G. Latham – all writing in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Latham observed in 1840, for example, that lithographs of the future Oscar I and his wife were conventionally displayed in Norwegian homes alongside the Eidsvoll constitution (Latham 1840: i, 100; Latham 1840: ii, 102)

The success of royal visits to Norway was a staple of (even radical) British commentary in the nineteenth century, and these visits generally elicited impressive displays of support and loyalty which had a clear physical or symbolic manifestation. But a striking feature of British narratives was not only the detail that they captured: they also often explicitly compared royal visits to Norway to a critical epiphany in the history of the British monarchy – namely George IV’s coronation tour in Scotland and Ireland of 1821–1822. Samuel Laing was present when Carl Johan visited Levanger in Norway in January 1835, and he was keen to contrast the easy and natural relationship between the Norwegians and the monarchy with the evidently ‘pretentious, laboured and theatrical efforts of the Hanoverian court in Scotland’ (Laing 1836: 385).

Of course, this Norwegian loyalism and monarchism was not synonymous with unionist sentiment. Later monarchs were treated respectfully, if not enthusiastically. But it is striking that, despite republican sympathies in the Storting, Norway ultimately voted to retain its monarchy – the symbolic continuities being underlined by

the new king's choice of royal name, Haakon VII, following on from Haakon VI of Norway (who had died in 1380).

In short, Scotland had ownership of the British monarchy and of the union. The Irish had a weaker hold over the monarchy, though there were efforts by some national leaders (pre-eminently John Redmond between 1900 and 1918) to redefine the monarch as a national rather than exclusively a supranational (or union) asset. In this and other respects, Norway was a model for Redmond, since the ruler of the united kingdoms was as much a national monarch as a union phenomenon. And (as certainly British commentators regularly noted) the Bernadottes worked hard in Norway, like the Hanoverians did in Scotland, to make themselves both national *and* supranational monarchs.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to pose some fresh questions about multi-national union states. But if the questions are fresh, the answers (however provisional) may be sometimes familiar. In particular, as with other aspects of the debate on civil society, these answers tend to be highly contingent. One-size taxonomies will not do.

Could a unifying civil society transcend the nation, developing within the parameters of the nineteenth century multi-national union state? The answer to this is a tentative 'yes' – but that the possibility depended upon the nature of the union in question. In Scotland associational cultures and civil society developed after the union. The union, in turn, was linked to economic liberty, progress and the consolidation of the Scottish nation. The relative flexibility and inclusivity and incompleteness of union in Scotland created space for associational cultures and a civil society which in turn worked to support union. Royal symbolism heavily infiltrated civil society.

In Ireland, union was instituted on the ruins of one form of civil society. As in Scotland, so in Ireland, union was incomplete and left space for associational cultures and civil society. But union was also associated with social and religious exclusivity. And it was therefore associated with the evolution of another, sectarianized and pillarised,

form of civil society – one which was not only unsupportive of union but which represented a challenge and counter-state.

In Norway, definitions of union were much tighter than in Ireland or Scotland, determined as they were by the constitution. This gave space for associational cultures and the public sphere; but it meant that the opportunities for the disruptive advance of union, while not eradicated, did not exist in the same way as in Scotland and Ireland. As in Ireland, though for different reasons, civil society was organised along largely national rather than union lines. But in Norway civil society and the union state generally did not conflict – largely because there was so little of the union state with which to fight.

In short, in Scotland and Ireland union was able to flex and adapt – but in the Irish case with bloody consequences. In Norway, the tight constitutional parameters of union were vigorously policed by the Storting and ultimately facilitated a largely velvet divorce. Little wonder, then, that Mr Gladstone looked longingly at Norway in reflecting on Home Rule in 1885.

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Endnotes

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