

GOVERNANCE AS POLITICAL THEORY

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Abstract: Political science has had a continuing debate over the need for, and existence of, a paradigm for the discipline. This paper examines the potential utility of governance as an organizing framework for political science, and especially comparative politics. While there are a number of questions about this approach there are also a number of positive contributions that governance can make to political science. In particular, it returns the fundamental question of governing to the center of the discipline that has become dominated by approaches emphasizing individual behavior.

Key words: Governance, comparative politics, political theory

Governance as Political Theory

The concept of governance has become very fashionable over the past several decades, and indeed has become one of the most commonly used terms in political science. One French scholar, for example, has referred to this term as a “fetish”. Further, the term has become used widely in the discussions and publications of international organizations, especially those responsible for improving the lives of people around the world living with poverty and oppression. The concept of governance also have been used in relation to the management of organizations in the private sector, with interest in corporate governance becoming all the more pervasive after major debacles in firms such as Enron and Lehmann Brothers.

The ambiguity of the concept of governance has been one of the reasons for its popularity; it can be shaped to conform to the intellectual preferences of the individual author and therefore to some extent obfuscates meaning at the same time that it perhaps enhances understanding. This concept is, in Sartori’s (1971) terms, often weak on intension and therefore very strong on extension. The addition of various adjectives to delineate the meaning may help with the understanding of governance (Collier and Levitsky, 1999), but even with those qualifications there are numerous opportunities for stretching the meaning of the concept beyond all utility, so that it threatens to become relatively meaningless.

The purpose of this paper is not, however, to engage in an extensive exegesis of the concept of governance but rather to make a substantially stronger claim about this concept. This claim is that if conceptualized adequately then governance can be the foundation of a significant political theory that can be important for developing contemporary political science. In particular, an emphasis on governance enables the discipline of political science to recapture some of its roots by focusing more explicitly on how the public sector, in conjunction with private sector actors or alone, is capable of providing direction and control to society and economy. The focus on

individual level behavior in much of contemporary political science has tended to obscure this fundamental task of governing, and it is important to place the behavior of individuals into the broader context of governing.

Therefore, this paper will develop governance as a broad political theory, and demonstrate how the concept could be used to address a range of contemporary concerns, both in academic circles and in the real world of governing. This argument will not attempt to persuade the reader that governance theory and analysis is as yet capable of providing an encompassing paradigm for political science or public administration. I will, however, argue that there are opportunities for developing a more encompassing approach that may have some features of a paradigm and that such an effort may be important for the discipline. Further, a focus on governance may help to bring together a range of other approaches and hence can integrate much of contemporary political science. The treatment will be balanced and will therefore include some of the important questions that continue to arise about governance and its utility for the discipline.

The Nature of Governance

The root of the word governance, like government, is a word related to steering a boat. A steering metaphor is indeed a good way in which to approach the idea of governance in contemporary societies. Societies require collective choices about a range of issues that can not be addressed adequately by individual action, and some means must be found to make and to implement those decisions. The need for these collective decisions has become all the more obvious when the world as a whole, as well as individual societies, are faced with challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and arms control that can not be addressed by individual actions, and indeed are often cases in which individual self-interest is likely to result in collective harm (Hardin, 1977; Ostrom, 1990). Governance also implies some conception of accountability so that the actors involved in setting goals and then in attempting to reach them, whether through public or private action, must be held accountable for their actions (Van Keersbergen and Van Waarden, 2004) to society.

Even for social and economic problems without the complexity and difficulty of common pool resources, there is still a need for collective action, whether to provide for pensions for the elderly, build roads, or cope with common health problems. The consequences of the absence of this capacity for collective action can be seen in “failed states” (Niemann, 20007), even if there may be private actors capable of managing some economic or even social functions.. While these forms of governance may be able to impose some policies on a population bu they can be seen as developing collective goals—the goals were selected by some largely unaccountable actors.¹ Even when usually effective political systems are not capable of providing that collective action, e.g. Katrina in the United States, the consequences are real and often devastating.

Effective governance, except in very rare exceptions, therefore, may be better provided with the involvement of State actors, and hence governance is an essentially political concept, and one that requires thinking about the forms of public action. The tendency of some contemporary theories of governance to read the State out of that central position in governance therefore appear misguided. Just as more traditional versions of governance that excluded non-State actors ignored a good deal of importance in governing so too would any conception—academic or practical—that excluded the State from a central role.

There are a variety of ways in which these collective problems associated in governance can be addressed.. Scholars have advanced some rather important arguments that autonomous action through voluntary agreements can solve these problems (Ostrom, 2005; Lam, 1998). This style of solving colletctive action problems is important but may depend upon special conditions, and perhaps on factors such as leadership. Given the difficulties of imposing collective governance through

¹ Those actors may be economic actors, as when multinational firms control large swathes of territory and are able to impose their own will on the indigenous populations. While this style of governing may have existed historically, e.g. the role of the British East India Company in governing India, it is now present in some enclaves of African and Asian countries. The actors involved in these processes may also be social actors, for example in patrimonial regimes.

negotiations in networks or other collections of social actions, the public sector has been the principal source of governance. Governments are the principal source of law in most societies and have, in the Weberian conception of the State, a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in society.

In addition to the monopoly of legitimate force, governments also have *ex ante* rules for making decisions. At the most basic level these are constitutions (Sartori, 1994) and then there are rules and procedures within public institutions that enable them to make decisions in the face of conflicts.² Although many of the social mechanisms that have been central in thinking about governance may be able to involve a range of actors but these mechanisms may encounter difficulties in reaching decisions, and especially in teaching high quality decisions (but see Klijn and Koppenjanns, 2004).

Lacking *ex ante* decision rules, networks and analogous structures must bargain to consensus through some means or another. This style of decision-making may appear democratic but it is also slow and tends to result in poor decisions. As Scharpf (1988) argued concerning systems in which all actors have *de facto* vetoes outcomes tend to be by the lowest common denominator, so that highly innovative and potentially controversial decisions are unlikely to emerge. This “joint decision trap” can be overcome in part by recognizing the iterative nature of decisions and by the capacity of actors involved to build package deals that enable them to overcome marked differences in preferences.

Governance as a Functionalist Argument

In the Parsonian framework for society the polity was assigned the task of “goal attainment”, developing mechanisms for making and implementing collective policy choices to achieve important goals. Thus, in this sweeping conception of the organization of society the public sector is responsible for providing effective

² Not always, of course, do these rules guarantee decisions. In some cases the rules, e.g. requirements for special majorities are in place to prevent decisions unless there is an over-whelming sentiment in favor of that decision.

guidance to the other institutions such as the economy (adaptation) and even socialization (integration). In this conception of how societies cope with their environment the public sector is assigned this crucial function. This is a rather simplistic characterization of the place of the State in society, but does identify the crucial role of states in making policy and in steering society.

At a lower level of generalization we can consider the functions that must be performed in the process of governing. The structural-functional approach, for example, argued that the basic decision-making functions were rule-making, rule application and rule adjudication.³ Political systems may differ in how they perform those functions but for the political system to function they all had to be performed. These functions are themselves, however, rather general and posed severe problems of operationalization for anyone attempting to employ them empirically for comparison.

Governance can be argued to have a relatively similar set of functional requirements, albeit expressed with somewhat greater detail and specificity. We would argue, for example, that successful governance requires fulfilling at least the four following activities:

1. Goal Selection–Governing is steering and steering requires some knowledge about the destination toward which one is steering. This function can be performed by State actors alone but also may involve social actors. We do need to remember, however, that goals are not simple, and exist at a variety of levels ranging from broad goals such as “social justice” down to operational goals of departments and programs. Therefore, effective governance requires the integration of goals across all levels of the systems.
2. Goal Reconciliation and Coordination. The multiple actors within government all have their own goals, and effective governance therefore requires

³ There were also other functions such as interest articulation and interest aggregation that occurred more on the input side of the political system rather than within government itself.

establishing some priorities and coordinating the actions taken according to those priorities.

3. **Implementation.** The decisions made in the first two stages of the process above must then be put into effect, requiring some form of implementation. This stage of the process is more likely to be performed by State actors along but also may involve social actors.
4. **Feedback and Accountability.** Finally, individuals and institutions involved in governance need to learn from their actions. This is important both for improving the quality of the decisions being made and also important for democratic accountability. Therefore, some well-developed method of feedback must be built into the governance arrangements.

These functions are rather basic to the process of governance, and can be elaborated further by considering the processes involved, such as decision-making, resource mobilization, implementation and adjudication.⁴ The functions themselves may be excessively broadly conceived, but the process elements involved in them can be detailed to a much greater extent and can also be related to many processes discussed in other areas of political science. Further, the need to focus on processes will force the discipline to think more about that element of political activity that has often been ignored.

⁴ Although often ignored in discussions of governance, the legal processes within the public sector may be important for performing some of these important tasks. This is especially the case as governing becomes increasingly judicialized (Kanishka, 2011) in many areas of the world, including some such as the United Kingdom that have long eschewed the role of courts in governing..

The Contributions of Governance to Political Theory

The functionalist basis of much of governance theory has been questioned, especially in relation to earlier approaches such as structural functionalism (but see Lane, 1994; Smith, 2003), governance theory, or theories. Despite that rather fundamental problem, governance theory can still make a significant contribution to contemporary political theory. Like the earlier efforts to construct general functionalist perspectives on political life, governance approaches do have wide applicability. The problem may be, however, that like those approaches there is insufficient specificity to make meaningful comparisons.

I am arguing, however, that there is sufficient detail and sufficient attention to different varieties of governance to warrant greater optimism about this approach to political phenomena. The several versions of governance theory that have been developed make the approach appear incoherent and excessively open. On the other hand, these varieties of theory all address a fundamental and common problem and the several answers provided may enrich the study of governance. The problem is that many approaches to social theory tend to focus on a single explanation or actor, rather than on how the possible explanations can be brought together in a more comprehensive explanation.

For governance theory to make the contribution that it appears possible, the style of thinking about the issues may need to change from “or” to “and”, and attempt to combine the explanations. Much of contemporary theory has stressed the role of social actors as opposed to the role of the State in governing. While that emphasis has been useful to dispel the idea that governing is entirely a function of the formal public sector⁵, it has gone perhaps too far in denying the role of State. What is needed has

⁵ In fairness relatively few scholars had adopted such as simple idea, especially given the important of corporatism as a political theory, but still questioning the role of the State has been useful.

been an integration of the various approaches and finding a more complete understanding of governance.

1. A Basis for General Comparison

For the development of empirical political theory perhaps the most important attribute of governance approaches is that they can be applied in a wide range of settings. As argued above, all societies have to find some means of governing themselves and providing some collective direction, and governance asks questions about how this is done. We have identified a number of dimensions that can be used for comparison and which can be used to specify more exactly how governance in different settings, and the consequences of choices made about governance structures and processes.

Governance approaches are also useful beyond the usual pale of studies of government, or state-society interactions, and can be a means of approaching issues such as failed states (Risse and Lehmkuhl, 2010). While conventional state institutions and processes are not effective in these settings we have to inquire about what can replace those institutions. In many more effective governance systems many governance functions may be delegated, the informal institutions made responsible for policymaking and implementation function in a “shadow of hierarchy” (Scharpf, 1997) with the formal institutions always having the capacity of recapturing their formal control. In the weak or failed states

Even when there are effective formal institutions in a society, these may be augmented or perhaps contested, by informal institutions. There is a tendency to think of formal and informal institutions for governance as somehow strictly alternatives, but these structures may assist one another in providing governance, Helmke and Levitsky (2004), for example, point to the variety of different ways in which the formal and the informal may interact in governing. For example, some informal instruments can supplement the formal actions of governing organizations, while others may contradict those actions.

The same basic governance logic can be applied when attempting to understand “global governance”. As the range of governance activities at the transnational level continues to increase there is a need for a framework to interpret those activities and link them to a more generic understanding of governing. International relations theory is largely inadequate for this undertaking, although regime theory does provide some capacity for understanding how particular policy areas are governed. The governance framework, on the other hand, does give substantial leverage for understanding how these relatively unstructured relationships at the international level that lack many formal enforcement instruments are capable of steering in the international system.

The logic of governance models therefore can be applied to a range of settings and levels of government. Further, the development of models of multi-level governance is an attempt to link those various levels and to provide ways of understanding intergovernmental politics. The multi-level governance literature does not seem entirely novel to scholars accustomed to the study of federal political systems, but it does help to emphasize the extent to which even formally unitary systems have some of the same patterns of interaction among levels as do formally federal states. Further, the multi-level governance framework provides a different perspective on the policy process in federal systems, and emphasizes

2. Linking a Variety of Fields within Comparative Politics

A second contribution that governance theory can perform in political science is integrating a number of issues and fields within comparative politics to attempt to create a more coherent whole in this sub-discipline. To some extent the variety of dimensions within political science are all concerned with governing, whether they are focusing attention on a single area of the world, a single institution or process, or a particular theoretical approach. Governance can help to bring these together into a more coherent whole.

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One of the most important areas of integration is bringing comparative political economy and comparative public policy more closely in touch with scholars who work in areas such as political institutions (see Pontussen, 1995). Although often interpreted rather differently, these areas are concerned with the activities of the public sector, and the interaction of the political and economic systems. By broadening the range of actors involved in these approaches and by examining a broader range of consequences of public sector action, the governance approach can enrich these sub-disciplines. At the same time, the greater analytic rigour of these approaches can also enrich the study of governance.

American politics perhaps the odd one out so far. The dominance of rational choice, and to a lesser extent now more behavioral approaches, in American political science has tended to leave little room for interest in governance, especially among the very large community of people who work on American politics *per se*. That lack of concern with governance may be contrasted with the “governance turn” in studies of the Europe Union and the desire to understand more fully how the EU is capable of steering this complex political system (Koehler-Koch and Rittberger, 200x; Trondal, 2007).

The potential integrative function of governance can actually extend beyond the field of comparative politics. There has been something of a “governance turn” in some aspects of international relations for example. For example, the increased emphasis on “global governance” in international relations (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1994; Brodansky, 1999) has brought many of the same issues dealt with at the national level into the international arena. Likewise, regime theory in international relations (Wettstad, 2001) tends to be asking governance questions even if they are not phrased explicitly as such.

In addition to the increased involvement of international relations with issues of governance, there has been some increased concern in legal research with governing and governance, rather than just with questions of “black letter law”. This involvement of legal studies with governance is reflected in part in the need to bring

“soft law” (Morth, 2004) into legal studies and also in concerns with reflexive law, or “new law” (Kakkinen, 2004). Perhaps especially in Continental systems with a strong legalistic foundation for government the need to integrate law and governance is crucial for its wider applicability.

The contributions of a range of other disciplines to governance could also be discussed here (see Peters, Pierre, Sorenson and Torfing, 2011, Chapter x) could also be discussed here. Economics has been concerned with some aspects of economic governance, especially corporate governance. Sociology as a discipline has also been concerned with the consequences of governance for society. Development studies has a definite need to consider governance and the means of creating more effective patterns of governance in transitional societies. Thus, the concept of governance has a range of applicability that goes well beyond political science.

3. Integrating Other Approaches

As well as integrating a range of fields within comparative politics, governance has the potential to integrate, or at least to utilize, other approaches to political science and to some extent aspects of the other social sciences (Van Keersbergen, and Van Waarden, 2004). I have made the argument above that governance asks very fundamental questions about what the public sector does, and how it does it. That orientation in turn raises important question about how the process of governance functions, who is involved, and what the consequences of different patterns of action are for society.

Governance is perhaps more useful in identifying problems and issues than it is in supplying definitive explanations for those issues.. Therefore, governance requires the involvement of a range of other explanations for some aspects of decision-making if we are to understand the internal dynamics of the processes. That said, the same is true for almost any approach in political science, especially one that focuses on structural elements. Further, any approach that claims to explain everything may in

fact explain nothing because the purported explanation may not be falsifiable. (See Frohlich and Oppenheimer, 2006)

4. Linking Normative and Empirical Questions

Finally, the governance approach to some extent integrates empirical and normative questions in political science. The notion of governance itself to some extent has a normative content, given that a fundamental assumption is that governance is important for the quality of life of citizens, and also for the success of States in their national and international roles. Achieving the United Nations' Millennium goals, for example, may be dependent in large part on the capacity of governments to govern effectively and to provide the range of public services required to produce these services. The actual provision may be conducted in conjunction with non-state actors such as networks, but States will be crucial in organizing the provision of those services..

The normative element of governance becomes most apparent when the term “good governance” is used, as it is increasingly in both academic and practitioner discourse. Perhaps most notably the World Bank has placed a great deal of emphasis on “good governance” as part of its program for development in its donee countries. The World Bank has a rather clear conception of what constitutes “good governance”, largely focused on the control of corruption. The assumption is that if government is capable of performing its tasks without significant levels of corruption then it is likely to be able to perform those tasks more efficiently and also it will create trust within the population (see Wagenaar and von Maravich, 2010).

While that is a viable and important conception of good governance, it is not the only one and it may not be far from the most general conception available. One can also conceptualize good governance as the existence of a State, operating alone or along with its partners, that provides a wide range of services to the public (see Bay, 1975). The logic is that the State should use its capacity to tax, spend and regulate in order to

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improve the lives of citizens, a version of governance obviously very descriptive of the welfare states of Europe. This conception may indeed be valuable for understanding governance in the advanced industrial democracies, and to some extent also in other

We must also note that these conceptions of good governance are potentially contradictory so that emphasizing one may make another more difficult to attain. This is most apparent in the contrast between transparency and effective government. Although public decisions should at some time be made public making the process of building the coalitions and reaching agreement may be best done behind closed doors (see Peters, Pierre, Sorenson and Torfing, 2011 Chapter x; Breton, 2007). For example, some of the success of consociational governance in the Netherlands has been a function of making decisions in secret, enabling leaders to take unpopular positions and reach difficult compromises. Even in network governance the representatives of social groups involved in making decisions will find it difficult to accept positions opposite of those favored by most of their members if the process is extremely open to the public.

Like most normative questions in political science, there is no definitive answer to what constitutes good governance. The answer to that question depends substantially upon the perspective of the individual who is answering the question. I am arguing here that although the other perspectives have some validity, for purposes of political science as a discipline, and to a great extent also from the perspective of citizens, a conception of good governance that depends upon the capacity to achieve stated policy goals is the most appropriate. If that definition can be fulfilled then the targets expressed in other approaches, especially those of the active State, can be achieved more readily.

Remaining Questions about Governance

I have been making a positive case about governance as a political theory, but there are still a number of significant questions about the utility of the approach as a general approach to politics. The discipline continues to search, perhaps misguidedly, for as a paradigm and governance can be presented as one alternative.⁶ As already argued, unlike many contemporary approaches to politics governance begins with structures and processes rather than the individuals within them. Further, governance focuses attention on general patterns of attempted steering in societies there may still be more specific question about that steering and the capacity of the processes being studied to shape outcomes in the economy and society.

Links Among Levels of Governance Action

The first question that must be raised about governance is the linkage between the macro-level as contained in most governance studies and micro-level behavior. This question arises within institutional theory (see Peters, 2003) and indeed in almost any approach to social life that concentrates on structural explanations. This question is in many ways just another way of addressing the familiar structure versus agency dichotomy that is central to many discussions of social theory (Hay, 1995). In the case of governance theory the question is more specifically about whether we can explain the behavior of organizations and networks of organizations through individual behavior.

To some extent this question in relation to governance implies identifying the micro-foundations of governance decisions (see Mayntz, 1999). And this question implies also that there are multiple micro-foundations, given the multiple ways in which governance has been defined and used in political science. Given the conventional

⁶ Governance may be a candidate for some parts of the world, but appears not be a viable alternative in the United States because of the dominance of rational choice and a relatively weak tradition of concern with the “State”. Likewise, the reality of governance models involving social actors in a central role seems to be less viable in many other areas of the world (see Kjaer, 2010).

wisdom in contemporary political science the dominant micro-foundation would be rational choice, guided by the assumption that individuals would make governance decisions that would maximize their own self-interest. As in rational choice versions of institutionalism, (see Peters, 2005) the structures associated with governance constitute an ecology within which individuals may pursue their own self-interest,

Again, the variations in governance theory provide both a challenge and an opportunity for understanding the micro-foundations of governance. On the one hand, more state-centric approaches to governance involve power and especially authority as the fundamental resources utilized to gain compliance by the actors involved. On the other hand the more interactive approaches to governance (see Peters, Pierre, Sorenson and Torfing, 2011) imply resource exchange among the actors involved (Rhodes, 1988) and the importance of trust and social capital in governing (Rothstein and Toerell, 2008).

Perhaps most fundamentally versions of governance theory tend to raise questions about structure and agency in governing. The state-centric approach tends to rely heavily on structural explanations with the institutions of the State being responsible for governing and their characteristics being crucial for defining outcomes (see Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Duit and Galaz, 2008). To some extent even the network models tend to rely heavily on structural explanations, assuming that the nature of the networks also can determine the patterns of interactions (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2004).

These largely structural definitions do tend to provide relatively little place for agency in processes of governance. Although the structures are important for shaping decisions and for channeling the activity of individuals and political groups, it is important to remember that the actual decisions made are made by individuals, whether as single actors or through interactions. The integration of various other approaches to political science mentioned above is a means of bringing agency into governance. While that contributes to the explanatory process it does to some extent require moving outside the approach *per se* in order to have a complete explanation of the phenomenon being investigated. The virtue of involving these multiple

approaches may be, however, the capacity to bring together several otherwise competitive approaches to provide a more integrated conception of behavior in governing.

Developing governance theory therefore requires developing means of bringing together individual level behavior with structures and institutions. This problem is also relevant for institutionalism and to some extent any structural approach to politics and government. Unlike many approaches to institutionalism, however, governance approaches do not have any explicit mechanisms of integrating individuals and structures (see Peters, 2005). That said, some approaches to political science closely allied with governance, notably public administration, do have strong elements of individual behavioral explanations that can to some extent be carried over into governance.

Measuring Governance

A second important question about the utility of governance as a general approach to political science is the ability to provide adequate measures of the phenomenon. Contemporary social science is based on adequate measurement as well as adequate conceptualization and therefore to advance the case of governance as a general approach to political science requires developing some valid and reliable measures of the concept. Further, these measures need to “travel” (Sartori, 1971) well and be viable in a range of circumstances if this concept is to be usable in comparative research.

In political science it appears that the phenomena that are most important for the actual performance of political systems are the most difficult to measure, and vice versa. While voting behavior is interesting and can entertain citizens on election night television its connection to the actual choices made by governments is increasingly remote (see Rose, 1974;). There are a large number of steps occurring between elections and policy decisions that elections can hardly be said to shape those policies.

That said, however, voting data is readily available and exists at the interval level of measurement so that it can be used readily in all the standard statistical methods. Governance, on the other hand, has few obvious measures, and even fewer if any that are at the interval level (see Besancon, 2006).

Measuring governance will require investing a great deal of effort and also will require consideration of just what level of measurement may be required to advance the study of this crucial phenomenon. The danger is that many people in the discipline will assume that only if governance can be measured in the same ways as some other familiar political phenomena, and only if the same statistical modeling can be applied to these data then the approach can not be considered adequate. This assumption of the dominance of quantitative methodologies (see Seawright, 2010) may well be misplaced, and methods such as process-tracing (Bennett and George, 2005) may tell us as much or more about how government decisions are made.

Creating Good Governance

Finally, the normative question of how to ensure good governance remains a central concern in considering governance. As noted this term is subject to multiple definitions The minimalist definition already mentioned is that good governance is the capacity to get things done and to have services delivered. In addition, we would want to add that good governance is democratic, or at least open, remains important for understanding the impact of governance on society. As already noted governance has a pronounced normative element, as well as the empirical element, that must be considered when analyzing governance decisions. Several of the strands of thinking in governance that have attempted to augment, or supplant traditional representative democracy have used enhanced democratization as one of the justifications for that change,

In whatever version good governance may be considered, the normative dimension must still be a part of the consideration. This is true for any important issue in

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political theory and is certainly true for governance. A fundamental issue for any society is how it can govern itself effectively, and in an open manner. It is perhaps especially important to examine carefully assumptions that the quality and democracy of governance can be enhanced by reducing the role of the State in governing. Such an approach may have a rather narrow conception of the public at its heart and therefore in the name of democracy democratic governance may be sacrificed.

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