

ERTE SANCHIONI

What Is
Anarchism?

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1918—1952

PREFACE

This pamphlet we present to the public is the posthumous work of a young man whose life was cut tragically short in a boating accident off Cape Cod, Massachusetts in 1952. He was just thirty-four years old.

Erte Sanchioni was born July 20, 1918, in East Boston, the son of Adelfo and Vilma Sanchioni, both of whom were militant anarchists and belonged at that time to the group which published CRONACA SOVVERSIVA, (1903-1919), the paper edited by Luigi Galleani.

He was raised during the period of the Palmer Red Raids and the "Deportations Delirium" (1918-1920), the development of the Sacco-Vanzetti tragedy (1920-1927), and the rise of Fascism in Italy (1922) with its attendant intrigues inside the United States. Since he was a child he may not have been fully aware of these events, but they must have influenced him, at the very least, because of their effects upon his parents' lives. As a result of their strongly-held anarchist beliefs, they were continually harassed by both the American and Italian governments; their everyday life was conducted in an atmosphere of fear and apprehension of arrest and deportation. (It should be noted that at that time a professed alien anarchist was subject by law to arrest and deportation — a law still in existence — and that a forced return to Fascist Italy was not a pleasant event for an anti-fascist to consider.)

The year Erte graduated from high school in Boston (1936) the Spanish Civil War began, and, in 1941, the year after his graduation from the University of Kansas, while he was in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, World War II broke out. Erte served in the United States army for the duration of the war, and it was shortly after his discharge, sometime in late 1945 or early 1946, that he wrote this essay on anarchism.

Two copies of this typewritten essay were found among old family papers a short time ago, all but forgotten in the house of the author's paternal uncle. Both copies were without title, unsigned and undated, but were found in a black jolder which contained a signed term paper of Erte Sanchioni, clearly indicating that these were also his work. The original text consists of twenty typewritten pages, and, in it, there are references to events which indicate the approximate time that it was written.

Upon finding it, Vilma Sanchioni and her brother-in-law consulted several comrades, and it was agreed among them that it would be valuable to publish the essay not only as a tribute to the memory of the author, but also because its clarity and its simplicity deserved a public, especially among the younger readers to whom it was expressly addressed.

The adopted title was chosen by the editors, who feel that it reflects the nature of the text. The footnotes and parentheses were also supplied by the editors.

THE EDITORS

JANUARY, 1977

Anarchism is a system of thought and a social movement aiming to attain anarchy.

Anarchy, in its turn, is conceived by its supporters as a stateless society — a society of men and women living in peace, freedom and justice without recognizing or submitting to any authority whatsoever.

We all know what the state is. It is the principle upon which governments are built. It is the principle according to which men and women are by their nature unqualified to live together in peace and freedom and justice unless they all submit to and obey a selected few who are empowered, by the fact of their selection, to dictate and enforce the rules of the community.

There have been many forms of government, which have varied in procedures for establishing itself and recruiting its personnel. A set of rulers — a government — may just impose itself on the people of a whole country by means of armed force and violence, and enforce its own rule by terror. This has happened again and again in the history of mankind.¹ It has happened in several places during our own lifetime. Another set of rulers may, on the contrary, solicit and obtain the consent of the other members of the commonwealth to their rule, by means of elections. And between these extremes a very large variety of combinations of force and consent are possible.

But whatever the selective process may be, the state principle operates in all cases. A small minority of men and women are thereby vested with authority to make laws for the majority, to enforce them by all means including force and violence, if and when they see fit. They are empowered to take from each and every member of the community anything they deem necessary for the security and welfare of the state — not only their money, not only the fruits of their labor and effort, but also their freedom to speak, to travel, to associate with anybody they might wish. In fact they have power to take their lives themselves.

Anarchism claims that such an authority, such an all sweeping power vested in the ruling minority is an intolerable invasion of the natural rights of man, a denial of his personality, of his freedom. Anarchism claims that it destroys the fundamental purpose of society itself.

Now what is the fundamental purpose of society?

Man is a social being because, like all social animals, he needs companionship and help in order to fulfill his elementary needs, his inner aspirations. Man needs love, friendship, assistance, security, exchange of services and thoughts. To most human beings loneliness is torture. This is why man has developed as a social being. This is why he has endured so many adversities caused by the mistakes and crimes of authority along the path of history. This is why he must seek his salvation in the company of his neighbors.

The American Declaration of Independence, which is by no means an anarchist document, states that the fundamental aims of the human being are — life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It states, furthermore, that all men are created equal, which is tantamount to say that they are created free, since only in freedom can equality be obtained.

Now whether men are created or whether they are developed through the natural process of evolution in the animal kingdom is beyond the scope of our debate at this moment. Here we are concerned at present only with human affairs as they present themselves at this stage of our social life: the purpose of social life and the relationship of man to his neighbor.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness may very well be accepted by anarchism as the fundamental aims of man as an individual and society as an aggregate of human beings. I might go further and say that it is possible to conceive of anarchy as the logical fulfillment of this ideal of Democracy. For if Democracy means rule of the people it must ultimately mean that all the men and women who form a people rule. But where everybody rules there is no

one to obey. All have authority to the same degree; therefore there can be no state, no government since there is no one to obey them. And that would be anarchy.

Of course this is not how democracy is understood by the majority of our contemporaries. This is not the way it was understood by the "founding fathers" when they assumed that it was their duty to translate into practical institutions the general principles of democracy they had propounded in the Declaration of Independence. The late President Roosevelt who was a states-man rather than a democrat used to qualify the democratic institutions of the United States by saying that ours is a democracy, yes, but a representative Democracy. Which means that the rule of the people is expressed through their representatives, their elected representatives.

So did the "founding fathers" understand Democracy. No sooner had they signed the Declaration of Independence than they started to ponder how they could best rebuild the state which had been destroyed by the revolution. Under the loose Articles of Federation, which left the peoples of the colonies practically free to work out their own destiny according to their will, they felt uneasy.² And when they assembled to frame a constitution they all but forgot that men are created equal and their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. What absorbed them was the task of organizing a new government which should have all the traditional powers of the state authority. And this they did so well that they literally forgot the "Bill of Rights," which was added a few years later, under popular pressure, in the form of the first ten Amendments to the Constitution of the United States.

Now the Declaration of Independence has been in existence for almost 170 years.³ Who would dare claim that the aims it gave the American Nation or society have been attained? Whose life is secure, nowadays, not only in this country but anywhere in the world? In our lifetime we have seen two major wars which have caused violent death to

tens of millions of people; utter destruction of whole nations; mutilations that make us shudder; moral and material ruins that the wildest imagination cannot fathom. And then we all know what is in store for all of us, wherever we happen to breathe and live. The atomic bomb is the new weapon of war. Its destructive power is fantastic. It may fall any day anywhere in the world — destroying for miles around all signs of life. Who feels secure, who can feel secure from the ever impending threat of such a dreadful weapon?

Many of us even in this country still have some illusions about being free. When we read or see on the screen about the terrible conditions in which men live in other parts of the world, such illusions of ours appear to justify, in part, at least, our boastings.

But aside from a certain freedom to squawk — which is also limited by censorship of the public presses, of the radio and public spectacles — such freedom as we still have is very limited and powerless.

As in all other countries our steps and movements are counted and measured and registered from the day we are born to the day we descend into our graves. Very little choice is left us as far as the trade or profession we may work in is concerned. We may be a genius, but unless our parents can afford to spend a lot of money for our education our genius will be left untrained. We may instead be morons but if our parents have money to spend and ambition, we are to spend tedious years at school for the sole purpose of obtaining a degree for which we have no use but which will permit us to hold our position in society. On election day when some of us go to the polls, we imagine we are free men voting for the candidate of our choice. Nothing is further from the truth. We vote for men we hardly know, whom we don't even care to know; men who have been chosen by others equally unknown to us; men of whose ability, integrity or purpose we haven't the slightest notion.

Some of us like even to indulge in the thought that after all we live in a privileged land where opportunity

exists for all, where a boy who saw the light in a humble cabin or cottage may — if he has the ability — rise to be President of the United States, governor or senator of his state, chairman or director of great corporations. During the expanding years of this great and naturally rich country there have been such boys. There may still be. After all Mussolini was born in a very poor cottage, and Hitler himself was the son of a poor man. But those of us who could read the newspapers about fifteen years ago (*about 1930*) are able to remember that during the great depression upward of three or four hundred thousand underaged boys were roaming from one end of the country to the other, living on the land — begging, stealing, doing odd jobs — homeless, ragged, without schooling, penniless. And those who have followed President Roosevelt's speeches can well remember him having stated again and again that one third of the population of the United States is underfed, underclothed, underschooled, living in hovels rather than homes. Who will claim that equality of opportunity is enjoyed by these forty millions of underprivileged?

Not to indulge in more criticism of the existing conditions than is necessary for the purpose of our argument, I think we may state the fact that nowhere in the world, not even in the United States, has the main purpose of society been fulfilled.

Why?

The reason for this failure is to be found in the way human society is organized, that is in the state, which is the main common form of social organization. The writers of the Declaration of Independence had a clear vision of the purpose of men's lives and their association. But when the task was faced to translate into facts those general principles all the founding fathers did was to organize a new state.

Now, if you study the origin of the state you will discover that it has everywhere a common source: a group, a band of armed men, invade a country and take possession of it. The defeated natives are either exterminated or sub-

mited into slavery; their lands, their homes, their stocks are appropriated by the conquerors — sometimes their women also. Then the vanquished are made to work for their conquerors while they, in order to give a permanent status to their victory, proceed to give it a legal form through lawmaking or religious devices which engage the slaves or subjects to respect, serve, and obey forever.

This is what has happened everywhere. This is how the great Roman Empire was built; this is how the British Kingdom and the British Empire were built. This is also how the so-called Western Civilization was brought into the Western Hemisphere. This is also how the United States themselves were founded.

In this primitive form the King and the state are one and the same. The King is absolute ruler by virtue of the victorious strength of his armies. And to give his power a certain appearance of legitimacy he will say that such is the will of God. And, of course, he will find priests and ministers of God willing to support his claim, in exchange for some privileges such as money or land, donations or a participation in the ruling process of the country. The King becomes the state not only by virtue of brute force, but also by Divine Right. If the people who are vanquished come to believe in such a divine right, so much the better; if not, the armed men in the service of the King will take care to enforce it.

As the time goes on and the memories of the past wrongs wane into the dim fog of time, the vanquished come to accept their condition of slaves or serfs through the fear or faith or love of country, or community of language. They come to feel they are part of the community, of the state itself. Besides they may find courage and strength to demand or assert certain needs and rights.

Democracy steps in. The King loses some of his divinity as he is forced to rely more and more on the consent of his subjects. Some of these may even be admitted to the councils of the Kingdom; they may even elect their repre-

sentatives to Parliament for the purpose of making the laws of the land. But no matter how advanced democracy may be, the people are never supposed to trespass on the sovereignty of the state; that is on its authority which must forever assert itself, be respected and obeyed, under penalty of the severest punishment.

The divine right of kings has virtually disappeared in all countries. Modern civilization will not stand for such nonsense. But the majesty, which was the king's, has passed to the state principle, which remains, even in the most progressive democracies, sacred. The armed forces of the government do not obey the orders of the king any longer, but they are still there in all their might, ready to enforce the sovereign principle of the state as interpreted by its government.

The great rebellion of the 13 original colonies against the tyranny of the British king and lords was an attempt by the people to break away from the yoke, not only of the king but of the state itself. Some of the revolutionists of that time knew very well what they wanted. They fought for almost twenty years in order to prevent the reorganization of a centralized and power state. Thomas Paine, for instance, proclaimed at that time that the best government is the government that governs the least. From which statement logically descends the corollary that "the perfect government is that which does not govern at all."

But if the authority of the British king and lords was finally expelled from the colonies, many and well entrenched private individuals and interests remained. It was these private individuals and interests: aristocracy transplanted from England to the new continent, military men, clergymen, landowners, shipbuilders, lawyers, bankers, etc., who were most anxious to preserve their properties and their positions and who therefore needed a new state to protect them from the mob — that is, from the people, who might in the pursuit of happiness lay hands on their riches.

Such protection they found in the new state organized by the Constitutional Convention sitting in Philadelphia. That Convention gave them the traditional tools of government under protection of which their privileges were made secure. It gave them a law and a Supreme Court which enabled them to appropriate and exploit for their own particular profit the whole expanse of the continent, its manpower, its natural resources. Those of you who are anxious to know, may read with profit the history of the great American fortunes which is almost one with the history of the Supreme Court of the U. S.⁴ They will see how a handful of unscrupulous adventurers could literally pillage the country with absolute impunity — in fact with the helping hand of the supreme court of the land. It gave them a Congress and a political setup by the means of which their rule was assured, to the exclusion of the common people, who were reduced to the humble rank of voters and could only sanction such choices as were made by the ruling class through their appointed agents in the political parties. And it gave them all the armed forces which were needed to enforce laws made by them for their own benefit.

Since then, the state has grown into a vast powerful machine which is by now rapidly crushing the last vestiges of the original federalism. We all know that local and state autonomy has disappeared. Cities, towns, and states depend to a large and growing measure on the federal government for their finances, their rules and regulations.

And all this sums up to one fundamental conclusion which is the following: American society could not fulfill the purpose stated in the Declaration of Independence — life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — because it adopted the state principle of organization. The state being in its origin, in its development throughout history as well as in its present function, an instrument designed to further the interests and aims, not of society as a whole, but only the interests and aims of a minority, a small minority that has succeeded to secure its control. It does not matter whether this minority has obtained control of the state through con-

quest, revolution, fraud or convention. Its only aim is in any case to use the power and resources of the whole society to its particular advantage or to use the state and all its forces to support and defend and promote its status as a ruling class.

The ruling class considers itself as the state, and rightly so, for the state principle is an abstraction and in practice it is just what the rulers want it to be. If there ever was a moment of imminent danger for the whole nation, you will admit it was during the last war, in 1942, when the Pacific coast of the United States was practically open to Japanese attacks from the sea, from the air, when the Atlantic coast was open to attack from the armed might of nazifascism. It was then that President Roosevelt and his lieutenants, realizing the imminence and seriousness of such dangers, preached the necessity and the urgency for all the citizens to submit to the greatest sacrifices. You may remember that in order that there be a certain justice in the distribution of the needed sacrifices, President Roosevelt proposed that, during the emergency, no one be allowed to retain a personal net income above \$25,000 a year.⁵ The rich minority, you will remember, received this proposal as nothing less than a betrayal, a crime against their rights. They, the rich, were willing to give their sons to the war, but not their money. They fought tooth and nail against the presidential proposal, they flailed it as a jump into Communism — and finally they won. While 12 million young men were prepared to give their lives, they refused to give their money — and they, because they are the state, its rulers, its lawmakers, won.

When we say society, nation, country, commonwealth or any other collective noun indicating a community of men and women and children, we mean nothing at all unless we refer to all the human beings that are members of it. Thus when we speak of the welfare of the commonwealth, of the prosperity of the country and so on, we really mean the welfare or the prosperity of all its component parts, each and everyone of its members.

The supporters of the state principle, on the contrary, do not give those collective nouns the same meaning. When they speak of a great country or of a powerful country or a prosperous country they do not mean a country where all men and women are great, powerful or prosperous. They simply mean a country where the ruling class is great, powerful and prosperous. Up to a few years ago, for instance, Germany and Japan were considered great, powerful and prosperous countries although the majority of their inhabitants were literally slaves and helots, likewise, when they speak of the greatness and prosperity of the United States, they certainly do not mean to include the 40 million Americans who have not enough food, shelter, clothing or education.

Organized on the state principle, American society did not attain the fundamental purpose of mankind because it could not do so. The state was the barrier. The state was its main obstacle because the state turned all the resources of the country to the profit of its ruling class to the exclusion of the majority of the population who were and are left to fare as best, or as bad as they can.

Anarchism proposes to return to the fundamental aims of man and to do away with all obstacles to their fulfillment — obstacles of which the state is the greatest and the most entrenched.

Stated this way it is hardly necessary to prove that anarchism is a desirable achievement. If it could — as the state has from time immemorial proved it cannot do — keep faith with those aims, it certainly would offer mankind a chance to work out its destiny in the most satisfactory way.

If our purpose in life, is to attain liberty, the security of life, so that each and every one be enabled to follow the pursuit of happiness according to his or her understanding or ability, then undoubtedly anarchism opens the way to new trails and horizons for mankind, as these are its aims.

I suppose that at this point I am expected to lay down something like a blue print of anarchist society. Many have

done so, among them some who were not even anarchist. Edward Bellamy, for instance, in his novel "Looking Backward," William Morris in his book "News From Nowhere," and many, many more including H. G. Wells in several of his books.

To what avail? My blueprint would be but another work of the imagination more or less entertaining according to my descriptive ability, another vision of Utopia which might make Utopia desirable but would not be of much help in reaching it.

I shall abstain from such an effect for another reason which I think is even more important.

The whole concept of anarchism is opposed to blueprint or central planning in the social field. Moreover, the concept of freedom itself is opposed to it.

Social and political systems deal with human beings, not with dumb animals or inanimate things. It is well for a builder to plan, to trace a blueprint for his buildings, to calculate down to the smallest detail the number and size of the rooms he wants, the kind and amount of materials he is to employ. Or for a farmer to plan the amount of stock he wants to raise, the extent of the land he wants to plant with grains, hay, vegetables and so on.

Their plans and blueprints have a fair chance to prove adequate and feasible in practice, in so far at least as they do not come in contact with the human factor in the execution of such plans.

Politicians and sociologists, on the contrary, have to deal almost exclusively with human beings. This means that their plans have to be executed by men and women who may not approve of them, who are perfectly entitled to refuse to conform to them.

Of course I am aware of the fact that planning, in the social and political field, is very much in vogue nowadays; especially among rulers, dictators, reformers, politicians of

all kinds. It has always been. It would be impossible to rule and govern millions and millions of people without a plan.

The so-called art or science of government consists in fact in drawing plans and executing them by persuading the people or by compelling them if they cannot be persuaded — to submit to them and let themselves be pushed around as if they were bricks or stones or rails.

Social or political planning has one last resort: force and violence which are the normal recourse of the state, a recourse which anarchism of course repudiates.

Here again history places itself on the side of anarchism.

As far back as the memory of man can go, all kinds of political and social programs have been devised and tried: the tribal patriarchy and the city state, military and civilian government; aristocratic and democratic rule; monarchy and republic; religious and agnostic; unitarian and federal; and so on. History teaches that none of all the political systems that have been tried has ever succeeded to establish itself in a permanent way. About three thousand years of recorded history bring testimony — and the present state of human affairs bears it out — that they all have utterly failed to satisfy the needs, the longings of the people. One after another they all have been overthrown, generally violently by the rebellious people they were supposed to subdue and rule and lead to greatness and prosperity. Even though all the political, military, economic and intellectual resources of the community were lined for the defense of each one of these systems, none ever succeeded in resisting the onrush of the dissatisfied, angry and embattled people. No one has ever succeeded to prove that it could satisfy the aspirations of the human being or of society in its ensemble.

If history teaches anything that men are willing to learn from, it is that after all human beings are ungovernable. Man has will power, he has intelligence, he has a sense of justice, daring, strength; he never resigns to be pushed around by other men, he never accepts or enjoys exploita-

tion; he never gives up his emancipation from political oppression and from economic servitude.

Anarchism, therefore, refuses to follow the pattern of those who would rule over the people. It means to attain freedom not by crushing freedom but by following the ways of freedom.

Consequently, anarchists have some very definite ideas which they have expounded during most of a century in a vast mass of pamphlets, books, magazines and papers.

Yet anarchism is not a rigid set of theories. Fundamentally it is the antithesis of the state. Thus all anarchists are for a stateless society. Beyond this common trait they may differ considerably as to the detailed forms of the stateless society. As the state society may have and has had so many different forms of organizations, so the stateless society may have and will have many different forms.

Basically, theoretical anarchists thought and doctrine have developed in two principal schools: the individualist and the communist. From the political point of view they do not differ insofar as they both repudiate the state, that is man's authority over man. Their difference is exclusively in economic viewpoint. The individualist school of anarchism claims that man cannot realize his freedom unless he is entitled to own the tools of his trade and the product of his labor. The communist school of anarchism claims, on the contrary, that man can attain his maximum freedom if all the means of production and all accumulated wealth is made common and indivisible property of the whole community, and he himself contributes to the common stock by his effort according to his ability, and from the common pile takes all he needs to satisfy his needs.

Both communist and individualist anarchists agree on another point, that is, that no one should live or profit from the work of another.

Individualist anarchism descends from economic schools of classical liberalism, free interchange of goods and services

without special privileges for anyone. Communist anarchism instead stems from the socialist doctrine according to which all that exists, beyond the resources of nature, is the accumulated product of the toil of all the generations of men that have succeeded one another on the earth since man emerged from its purely animal life, and therefore rightfully belongs to all his descendants without distinction or preference.

Personally I think that communist anarchism would best respond to the fundamental aims of mankind. Before the human being is capable of contributing to the welfare of society or even to provide for his individual needs, many years have to pass; and during these years society has an obligation towards him, whether his parents are or are not in a position to satisfy that obligation in society's stead. Furthermore, the first aim of society is to provide the means of life for all its members. Given the present development of industry and science in all fields, that is even now amply possible. Given an abundant supply of the elementary means to support life physically, there is no reason why private property of subsistence goods, or the means to produce them, should persist. No one would think of establishing the private ownership of air, or water, or sunlight or any other item of which an ample supply exists.

But whether communists or individualists, all anarchists agree that freedom, personal freedom is the only means which will guarantee the fulfillment of the fundamental aims of mankind.

They all want to arrive to a free society by the way of freedom.

That such an aim is desirable, we find not only in the most significant documents of the past, we find in our own hearts if only we take the time and trouble to look into them.

That it is possible to attain it, is proved by the fact that men have never given up trying.

Barely ten years ago, (1936) when the Spanish people overthrew their inept government in order to take up arms and fight the fascist conspiracy, they organized in many places, especially in the country, free communities which were in fact anarchist. And you may be sure that whenever they get a chance, people everywhere will vindicate their right to work out their own destiny by themselves, that is free from the authority of any state.

Anarchism is here to stay. Aiming at freedom for all by the way of freedom has one advantage that no other social ideal or school can claim. It permits you to say the truth as you see it without fear. Not seeking for yourself any special advancement or profit or position, you are completely free to say what you think without fear that what you say may damage your personal interest or political aspirations.

The way of truth is a self-satisfying way. You don't fool yourself and you don't impose on anybody else.

How then, you may ask, shall we go about it? How can we arrive at an anarchist society?

By fighting the principle of the state. By resisting all invasion of authority upon our rights, upon the rights of anyone else. By refusing to climb to a position of privilege for ourselves, and by contesting persistently, unwavering, at all times the legitimacy of any one else's privileges. Above all, by convincing our fellow men and women that no one, but themselves, by the good use of their mind and strength and effort can work out their own, our common salvation.

If life will ever be free, secure, and dedicated to the pursuit of happiness, it will be when the state principle, governmental authority, upper class privileges, armies and prisons have been discarded by a really civilized society of men and buried into oblivion together with all other instruments of torture.

You have all your lives in front of you. It is your future that is at stake, the future of your children. You can do your share, you can do a lot to make that future safer than was my past, happier, more peaceful, more prosperous, not only for you but for all your fellow men, whose welfare is indissolubly bound to yours.

Anarchism, if you care to get acquainted with it, offers you an ideal worth living and fighting for.

* * *

FOOTNOTES

- 1 In our time this is happening on a large scale in Asia and in Africa where old European colonies are asserting their own independence from foreign rule and through violent internal strife are asserting the rule of the strongest, openly supported by the rival foreign powers.
- 2 The Articles of Confederation were ratified by the thirteen original colonies on March 1, 1781, and lasted until March 4, 1789, when the Constitution of the United States went into effect.
- 3 This places the date in which this essay was written between the end of World War II and the first half of 1946.
- 4 *History of the Great American Fortunes* by Gustavus Myers, Chicago, Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1910.
History of the Supreme Court of the United States by Gustavus Myers, Chicago, Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1918.
- 5 On April 27, 1942, when the fall of Russia and the invasion of Western Asia by Hitler's victorious armies seemed imminent, President Roosevelt sent Congress a message, proposing that for the duration of the war no one in the United States should have a net annual income over \$25,000.

*The printing of this pamphlet has been financed by
Vilma Sanchioni, the mother of the author, in his memory.*

*The cost of printing and mailing one copy of this pam-
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