A not so 'brave new world': fear, risk, and vulnerability in times of COVID-19

Um nada 'admirável mundo novo': medo, risco e vulnerabilidade em tempos de Covid-19

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ABSTRACT A new coronavirus, initially designated as 2019-nCoV and after that as SARS-CoV-2, emerged in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. By January 2020, at least 830 cases had been diagnosed in several countries. SARS-CoV-2 is the third coronavirus to emerge in the human population in the last two decades – an emergency that has set global public health institutions on high alert. A little more than a year later, cases and deaths are counted in millions worldwide, with Brazil holding a prominent position in the number of cases and deaths. The succession of events in this recent period brought up highly relevant issues: civilizational fraying, increased vulnerabilities, and resulting risks. In this essay, we propose some reflections on the social consequences of the pandemic from a socio-anthropological perspective, revisiting classic public health and social sciences themes such as fear, risk, and vulnerability. We observed resurging trends and escalating tensions, which leaves us with a horizon of great concern, especially regarding the expanding biopower devices. Thus, we join the ongoing reflexive effort on the potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on sociality and power relationship forms in today's world.

KEYWORDS Pandemic, COVID-19. Fear. High social risk. Social vulnerability. Biopolitics.

RESUMO Um novo coronavírus, designado inicialmente como 2019-nCoV e pouco depois como Sars-CoV-2, surgiu em Wuhan, China, no final de 2019. Em janeiro de 2020, pelo menos 830 casos haviam sido diagnosticados em diversos países. O Sars-CoV-2 é o terceiro coronavírus a surgir na população humana nas últimas duas décadas – uma emergência que colocou as instituições globais de saúde pública em alerta máximo. Pouco mais de um ano depois, registram-se casos e óbitos na escala dos milhões no mundo, com o Brasil ocupando posição destacada tanto em número de casos quanto de óbitos. A sucessão de eventos desse período recente atualizou questões de grande importância: o esgarçamento civilizacional, a potencialização das vulnerabilidades de toda ordem e os riscos decorrentes. Neste ensaio, propõe-se uma reflexão sobre as consequências sociais da pandemia a partir de uma perspectiva socioantropológica, revisitando temas clássicos da saúde e das ciências sociais, como medo, risco e vulnerabilidade. Observou-se o recrudescimento de tendências e acirramento de tensões que fazem olhar o horizonte com preocupação, especialmente com relação à expansão de dispositivos de biopoder. Assim, o presente artigo associa-se ao esforço reflexivo em curso sobre efeitos potenciais da pandemia da Covid-19 sobre as formas de socialidade e as relações de poder no mundo atual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Pandemia por Covid-19. Medo. Alto risco social. Vulnerabilidade social. Biopoder.

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Introduction

No one survived like the person they had been.

John Gray1

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically enhanced the issue of health inequalities. As widely shown by epidemiological research, differences in health conditions are associated with social factors - nutritional aspects and daily habits; gender and ethnic-racial differences; occupation, work, and income; housing conditions and diverse environmental aspects; access to education and health services; and macrosocial factors such as health and macroeconomic policies, State organization, and the 'socioeconomic and political context' in a broad sense. Health inequalities appear in national societies in different forms, such as, for example, endemic communicable diseases that result in avoidable loss of years of life due to death or disability and proportionally affect the poor more; unequal access to health care and technologies and cultural and educational resources; unhealthy environments and substandard and violent social contexts^{2,3}.

Starting in China, the virus spread through ports and airports, reaching Europe and the Americas in a few weeks. The virus carriers were apparently groups of individuals traveling across different parts of the world as tourists or on business. It is not by chance that the virus entry points in America and Europe, in the large metropolises and the financial, industrial, and commercial centers.

The illness and death of many people and the pressure on health services alone would significantly affect the entire economy. Fears, anxieties, uncertainties, and instabilities generated by the unfolding pandemic – uncertainty about its duration and impact and the duration of protective measures; ongoing concerns about the possible recurrence of the virus; the possible emergence of new pathogens with similar destructive power and, finally, uncertainty regarding the time for the recovery of the economy itself and regarding the future demand for goods and services – will lastingly influence the global economy^{4,5}. If, on the one hand, the health measures to face the pandemic are in place – social distancing, monitoring the virus spread, and mass vaccination – on the other hand, the several dimensions related to sociability issues are yet to be appropriately nuanced and remain an unresolved issue as a whole^{6,7}.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by a highly transmissible respiratory virus comes with the intense international people transit and with large populations living in high demographic density urban clusters. We have witnessed other recent episodes in which viruses with similar characteristics have erupted: the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (coronavirus belonging to the same family as the current SARS-CoV-2 and appearing in China); and the 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic. Other dangerous viruses have been detected in recent decades, including different types of influenza. However, none of these had an impact like SARS-CoV-2. The most recent comparable event occurred more than a hundred years ago: the influenza virus pandemic that swept the world between 1918 and 1920, also caused by H1N1, which became known as the 'Spanish flu' epidemic. It is estimated to have infected about 500 million people, approximately 25% of the world's population at the time, and caused about 17 million deaths.

Given that it is a new virus, possibly a recent mutation of some subtype of coronavirus endemic in Asian bat species that acquired the capacity for inter-human transmission, the contingent of people susceptible to infection by the pathogen consisted, virtually, of the entire human population on the planet. Therefore, the potential number of patients would exceed the installed capacity of beds, equipment, and professionals even in countries with more organized and powerful health systems.

Fears surrounding the human imagination have been strengthened with this setting. The fear of a disease that can decimate the species. The fear of the plague^{8,9} and the several diseases that afflicted human populations over the centuries10,11, especially the so-called Black Death (1346/1352), which had countless cases in Europe - but not exclusively - and killed, according to estimates, between 75 and 200 million people (30% to 60% of the world population)¹². Related to this, issues regarding our unpreparedness to face health emergencies¹³ and ontological impotence¹⁴, in turn, updated one of the deepest fears, which is that of civilizational failure¹⁵⁻¹⁸. According to Giddens¹⁹, something structurally different is underway. The world would be experiencing a digidemia, in which digitization, robotization, and the current pandemic outbreak are combined, with the potential to reshape the contemporary world politically, economically, and culturally.

Two researchers with several commonalities, including an intellectual concern for the contemporary, drafted this essay. We are parents of three children for whose future we fear. Indeed, the fear we feel for their future and, by extension, that of other children, who, at different stages of their development, experience this long health, political, and economic storm, greatly influenced us in the elaboration and systematization of this reflection that we partially record here. Thus, in this paper, we intend to reflect on fear, risk, and vulnerability, based on the contemporary context of escalated tensions, towards the resurgence of trends that enable us to glance at the horizon with concerns regarding the growing upsurge of biopower and the so-called necropolitics, aligning ourselves with the tremendous reflexive effort underway, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, with countless possibilities and

suggestions for future changes. We should stress that this reflection on fear, risk, and vulnerability in the current pandemic time is necessarily incomplete.

Fear and risk: risk of fear; fear of risk

I saw the father; I saw the mother, I saw the daughter I saw the heifer that is the daughter of the heifer I saw the replica of the bible's replica In the invention of a science singer I saw the lamb of God in an empty egg I got cold. I asked you to warm me.

'Cego com Cego', Tom Zé e José Miguel Wisnik

(Our free translation)

The agenda for reflections on fear and anxiety is old²⁰⁻²³, general, and global²⁴⁻²⁶. Thus, we feel increasingly vulnerable and at constant risk^{13,27,28}. The health crisis, extreme social inequalities, and political crises exposed^{29,30} and emerged³¹⁻³3 undoubtedly place us in front of a complex and sometimes unprecedented agenda of challenges^{34,35}. Who knows what will come³⁶⁻ 39? What will the much-talked-about 'new normal'40,41 look like? How will sociability be affected42? Will the 'new normal' be a dystopia with increased social coercion facilitated by increasing digital biopolitics combined with psychopolitics, both supported by extensive data streaming⁴³? Given the experience of Asia in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, with the use and sharing of people's data, would we be headed for a digital police regime⁴² and the implementation of a social credit system? What about the issue of sovereignty, also in question due to the pandemic43? We would be facing yet another significant change in the definition of sovereignty because, in the face of data sharing and hyperconnectivity, data owners or the State that will decide who lives or dies⁴⁴ is sovereign; and, from this perspective, we can bring up the theme of digital surveillance, which updates Foucauldian formulations: modern sovereign power is biopolitical, a power articulated in the production, management, and administration of life.

Another set of issues linked to the previous ones is reflecting on fear in contemporary society, especially in the 21st century. How a social group responds to a threat, such as a pandemic, is mediated by the perception of the threat, its sense of existential security, and the ability to make sense of unpredictable experiences. These reactions are strongly influenced by the various forms of social interaction45 underlying a comprehensive cultural roadmap⁴⁶ of risk and uncertainty. These social interactions provide people with ways to gauge how dangerous the threats and the risk of something such as a pandemic are and how to translate all of this vis-à-vis their daily lives. Cultural roadmaps influence people's perceptions of their vulnerability and resilience. They communicate rules about how people should feel in the face of danger. Obviously, individuals interpret these rules according to their biographical repertoires, circumstances, and tempers. We have here a good thread about risk, vulnerability, and resilience. Frank Furedi^{39,46,47} comments that some of the possible main features of the 'cultural roadmap' influencing the unusual reactions to COVID-19 would be: 1) the shift from resilience to vulnerability; 2) daily life psychologization; and 3) a greater sense of existential insecurity.

We live in a world of prevailing uncertainty. Not knowing which issues should be prioritized soon, we live increasingly in fear and anxiety^{48,49}, guided by social media, fake news, perplexed by an agenda that completely slips through our fingers⁵⁰; overwhelmed by an increasing volume of information, but increasingly unable to decide⁵¹. The amount of information paralyzes us. We are cluttered with notifications but with a constant feeling of emptiness, which we try to fill⁵². We live in a Babel of versions, a battle of narratives, potentiated by hyperconnectivity. Digitized life is installed as a transparent layer but actively mediating and inducing individual perception and behavior. It is a layer superimposed on the real as the world of friction43,51 and resistance. Out of the blue, a non-digital virus causes a commotion: the real resumes its place and makes itself noticed again as an enemy virus, triggering unrest by reality. It is the revenge of the real in the words of Gimenez⁵³.

The 'risk' word has a vast and controversial semantic field⁵⁴, with four general meanings: danger, opportunity, chance, and uncertainty. In epidemiology, risk is a measure of association, which expresses the relationship between exposure and outcome, for example, morbidity and mortality. It is, thus, a measurement of the probability of occurrence. In turn, the epidemiological risk is the probability of a health-related event, estimated from what has occurred in the recent past.

An interdisciplinary field called risk analysis was consolidated from the 1950s onwards, encompassing four areas of expertise: risk calculation, risk perception, risk management, and risk communication⁵⁵. More recently, we witnessed the growth of one of the meanings of risk mentioned above, namely, that of danger, evident between risk and adventure that is made explicit in countless games of vertigo, offroad adventures, canoeing in dangerous rivers, ice climbing, rappelling in waterfalls, and mountain trails56,57. This problem leads us to the question: would it be possible to control uncertainty - one of the meanings of risk - and, thus, the future, for example, through risk management instruments? This question gained an interesting answer in some of Giddens' works, in what he calls the future's colonization^{58,59}.

Fear is a primal instinct²¹ with a fundamental role in human adaptability, evolution, survival, and shaping society. However, the nature of fear changes²⁶, as do social relationships. Fear can be understood as a structurally determined and socially transformative event. We can speculate that the core of modern fear is underpinned by ontological insecurity and existential anxiety^{21,27}.

Even if these essential fears are considered, their distribution is undoubtedly inequitable, since the risks of falling ill and dving - an issue directly linked to ontological safety are strongly determined by social factors⁶⁰, and this is especially true at the most basic social levels in which health care and access to these services are, in general, a significant challenge. In our neoliberal world, those very much integrated into this project have more ontological safety. In other words, for most of the population, ontological safety is a luxury. Another viewpoint - that of the anthropology of emotions - discusses fear as an emotion constructed within social relationships. Furthermore, fear is understood as a powerful emotion for understanding and analyzing societal formations. Therefore, the relevant issue is that fear is a socially-inclined emotion and social construction of meanings, hence a feeling fundamental to reflect on sociability and establishing order and disorder instruments in any social situation³².

Fear is part of human experience, a social category that addresses creation, ways of knowing oneself and the relational other, processes and modes that allow social construction as a projection, and an objective construction of possible realities.

In the sense of a more detailed understanding of the perspective adopted here, namely, reflecting on fear and risk articulation, we will discuss some formulations by Simmel⁴⁵ and Elias⁶¹. We will start with the concepts of subjective and objective culture: from the subjective, internal, and infinite worlds of each are countless possible interactions established from the dynamics of an encounter, drawing a common communication field. This common field is a 'We'. This intersection, this 'We', is based on the exchanges and interactions of subjective cultures and gives meaning to "a culturally contextualized sociability"³²⁽⁷⁰⁾, which Simmel will call objective culture. This objective culture "generates new meanings and forms arranged in a network of already existing meanings"³²⁽⁷⁰⁾.

In this sense, objective culture is a relationship. Consequently, it is full of risks, ambiguities, and tensions because, as it is a meeting between human beings, it is an exchange, while also being a vehicle of expectations between those who meet and rarely fills the void of expectations. This 'We' space, created from the encounter of individuals from their subjectivities, is precisely the social fabric that hosts the celebration of agreements, divergences, concessions, frustrations, pain, and pleasure. All this act of submission to the rules of the 'We', an objective reality, does not erase the subjective elements of individualities or subjective cultures in an intense relationship.

The emergence of a 'We' space does not, of course, erase the relational subject with its subjective culture. This relational subject bears the subjective culture and acts/reacts to each new event in the relationship, maintaining/managing this 'We' space, built in the exchange context32,45. The 'We' 'space' is laden with tensions due to the related parties, which, in turn, contribute their respective subjective cultures. This space is constantly redesigned, mediated by negotiation, adjustments, and novelties, due to the continuous motion of related individuals. Its main mark is conflict and tension, in which risk is embedded. This 'We' is established by related parts and is an 'emotional culture', as Koury explains³².

The relationship of individuals – a tenuous encounter of subjective worlds – is always tense, anchored in what Elias⁶¹ called the 'I-We' balance. This relationship is marked by this balance, this other, always a relational other, in which the individual sees himself projected in his expectations which he seeks to fulfill. We shall not further investigate this subject, but please see Goffman⁶² for a more in-depth look at these issues.

A relationship would be, from this viewpoint, the encounter, the intercourse, of two or more subjective cultures. Because we are social animals, we have an impulse towards the other, which is always mediated by the fear of not being understood. The search for this relational other ends up being a search for something that can mirror us in the process of high-risk, fear-mediated communication, as already noted. It gives rise, on the one hand, to social creation and the establishment of emotional culture, in which, on the other hand, in the adjustments of the parties involved, moral codes that objectify and tend to crystallize in a stable and consolidated plan of standard practices are produced, with rights, duties, and sanctions. In contemporary Western societies, where individuals increasingly crave their individuality, the ambiguity and ambivalence of the encounter turn into a tense and anxious form of meeting and being found and of the fear and risks produced in and by the relational act. This issue is food for thought, for example, to reflect on the different responses given by Asian countries, compared, for instance, to those in Europe, to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a topic, by the way, addressed from different viewpoints in several papers33-35,37,39,40 - and the consequences, more than a year into the pandemic^{4,5,63-66}.

The backdrop set up with the pandemic leads us to speculate a dystopian world⁶⁷ in which, even if the actions of individuals are carried out hoping that everything will adjust in the future, abstractly embracing the 'everything will work out', once we follow the preestablished path, with the political, health, and economic disarray, the anxiety of collapse and failure entered the daily agenda came in a new world in which several certainties were put in check, including, and in specific contexts, especially that of the cure itself.

From this perspective, any action that

projects the future, purpose, and meaning attributed to present efforts to control the future would be in question. A setting in which the number of course adjustments, negotiations, renegotiations, and discussions increases, forcing a readjustment that only offers risks and conflicts, sustaining in a prolonged cycle the anxiety and fear of failure since the eternal restart of the social game would be imbued in this scenario, due to its tense, conflictive and increasingly uncertain, and indeterminate nature. The motto of this scenario could be disturbing lines from a children's song: 'I want to (re)start, but I don't know where, where is the (re)start hidden?' ('Quero recomecar', Tiquêque).

Risk and vulnerability

There are decisive moments in the history of communities and the lives of individuals. These are phases in which things go off the rails when some key events suddenly change a situation⁵⁹.

In his essential book, Beck⁶⁶ argues that scientific and industrial development includes numerous risks not contained on a spatial or temporal scale⁶⁷. Consequently, it would not be possible to attribute to any social group the responsibility "for the damages caused by these risks, and those affected cannot be compensated, due to the difficulty of calculating these damages"⁶⁸⁽²³⁾. The factors that fully expose to risks would be: 1) the set of ecological risks; 2) the growing and massive substandard living conditions; and 3) the individualized social inequality and uncertainty regarding employment conditions.

As a result of this impossibility of containing the risk in space and time, he called its distribution trans-scalar, that is, the distribution of these evils – the risks – crosses social classes. Its production is local, while its attribution is global, classified by Beck as environmental, financial, and terrorism risks. The stance vis-à-vis the trans-scalar risk distribution has been sharply criticized since inequalities in the access to economic resources have great weight and are crucial to minimizing exposure to risks^{68,69}; therefore, the less favored are forced to confront the global risks created by society⁷⁰.

Based on the works cited, we highlight two significant and very current arguments by Beck: 1) the increasingly strong relationship between triggering states of exception as a reaction to risks, as risk management 'techniques'; and 2) issues related to contemporary risk management. Agamben developed the first issue; for example, his reactions to the exceptional measures enacted by the Italian State at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic^{9,42}; and the second informed developments in environmental risk management^{71,72}.

The contributions of Giddens⁵⁸ and Beck⁶⁶ are of particular interest to public health, as they bring an essential reflection on risk as a 'social fact' in contemporary societies and propose new concepts to describe it and explain its main dilemmas. At the heart of the argument is the distributive conflict's loss of centrality in advanced capitalism, displaced by the dispute over the social distribution of risks - health, environmental, labor, and others - inherent to hypercomplex societies. When presenting the notions of 'reflexive modernization', 'artificial uncertainties' and 'expert systems' (and 'trust in expert systems'), Giddens establishes a new lexicon to describe the several phenomena of great relevance to health research, related to how individuals and social groups address risks and uncertainties in current life and the wide circulation of information about these risks and uncertainties, and several other aspects of life in contemporary societies, hence the importance given by Giddens and Beck to 'reflexivity' as a distinguishing characteristic of what, in their conception, would be the second stage of modernity or even a second reflexive modernization⁷³.

Although Giddens and Beck's original formulations predate the expansion of large-scale digitization and the robotization of daily life, they can be considered secondary derivatives of the reflexive revolution and other relevant issues of our time. The immense amount of information from anonymous sources circulating widely through digital networks calls the authority of 'expert systems' into question. It significantly increases uncertainties, reaching hundreds of millions of people worldwide, even affecting the political dispute in all social settings. Recently, Giddens named this dynamics digidemia¹⁹, which reflects, to some extent, the concept of infodemic, coined in 2003, regarding the SARS epidemic⁷⁴, leading the WHO to hold the first conference on infodemology75-77.

Therefore, Giddens/Beck's reflexive modernization theory foreshadows the current situation, but some particularly problematic aspects of the 'second modernity' that emerged in the last decade are about to be put into perspective: global warming combined with climate denialism leads the problem to another level of complexity and becomes a risk. Conservative/ populist ideologies find more convinced coreligionists and new militants78 when uncertainty spreads and new crises line up. As individuals become socially disconnected, they may become increasingly connected to an imagined past and tradition79 and less tolerant of what they interpret as deviations from an alleged tradition, from those values created and valued by conservative discourses⁸⁰. The climate of dissolution of social ties could give rise to reactions, which are manifested in religious fundamentalism and the resurgence of rightwing neo-fascist organizations, which, in turn, ensure a return to supposed traditional values promise social continuity and safety by re-signifying and suggesting a new

purpose and self-esteem to individuals^{78,79}. As a result, would we be much more limited in imagining new social futures?

According to Furedi46, the most critical change in how individuals are seen in the 21st century is the shift from a presumed resilience to a definition of individuals by their vulnerability. The author believes that vulnerability is currently one of the defining characteristics of personality. At the same time, a semantic field is consolidated to circumscribe and, perhaps, evoke fears and risks. Fear is being cultivated regardless of risk effectiveness. We have a culture of feeling fear and feeling at risk. Fear is a way of governing. More than that: it is a way of driving populations. This semantic field includes words such as extinction, pandemic, epidemic, climate change, extreme events, and extreme weather. A sense of anxiety about the future is reflected by popularizing this new language of fear. A fundamental expression in evoking this collective mesmerization is the 'tipping point', as it produces the dreaded backdrop of the point of no return. As a result, another passage is operated, namely, from fear to extreme fear or dread.

The emergence of vulnerability as a defining characteristic of the human condition has fueled a new tendency to psychologize the problems of daily life and existence. In this sense, health issues are on the rise these days, and an increasing number of previously normal conditions are now diagnosed. Thus, shyness, stress, low self-esteem, fear, anguish, and sadness were renamed as medical pathologies. As a result, the so-called contemporary 'cultural roadmap' tends to relativize people's ability to address adverse experiences. The current exaltation of vulnerability can inflate the sense of helplessness many feel when faced with emergencies.

As we have already pointed out, risk and vulnerability are concepts that can only be discussed if associated with different historical-social contexts and with varying paradigm disputes in the scientific areas that developed them. Therefore, depending on the viewpoint, most populations and communities living in situations of vulnerability, especially in large urban centers in countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, can be 'at risk'.

The strong dependence of the socio-anthropological context in outlining groups exposed to risks or vulnerable cannot be stressed enough – for a development of this argument, please see Douglas⁸¹. We are currently experiencing a situation in which the following is noticeably clear: we are all at risk before the threat of a virus such as SARS-CoV-2. However, vulnerability partially depends on socio-spatial, cultural, and economic qualifications and the so-called concomitant comorbidities; and, in part, also the resilience mechanisms.

Conclusion: updating our fragilities, fears, and uncertainties

There is no pattern of things to come.

H. G. Wells82

We bring here the question asked by Agamben⁹ to all of us: how did we get here? What is a society that has no other value than survival? In the case of Brazil and all Latin America, we are used to living decades in a row in conditions of constant crisis and emergency that, as Agamben⁹ points out, reduces life to a merely biological condition, consequently losing its social, political, human, and affective dimensions. A society that lives in a constant state of urgency cannot be free. It is doomed 'to live in a perennial state of fear and insecurity'. Are the current health, political, and economic crises a quasi-experiment for a new political and social architecture for humanity's near future?

Uncertainty increases just over a year into the pandemic. We all look forward to an after, but, somehow, we can assume that the after will not be. We can speculate on an extended present that lasts and changes, producing, in this change, another reality. In the movie Matrix Reloaded, Neo is in a coma and wakes up in the train station, whose name is Mobil Ave. Mobil is an anagram for Limbo, and that is what the station really is: nowhere. Neo is trapped in a place between this world and the world of machines⁸³. We have not yet emerged from this global event. We are trapped in one, simultaneously, the same and different place, in a kind of limbo.

We find a diversity of contradictory fears and motivations in the disorderly reactions to the pandemic. We recall here the idea of moral panic⁸⁴ that would mark the turn of the 21st century. Insecurity, uncertainty, and fear are solidly aligned. A circular relationship between the three terms allows us to understand the resurgence of the politics of fear and predictions of global catastrophes⁸⁵ and eschatological accounts of all kinds in this century, insofar as social, political, and ecological uncertainties increase, giving rise to new fears⁸⁶. The COVID-19 pandemic may have further expanded this unsafe environment and the resulting imagination, making it, as Furedi³⁹ affirms, an unprecedented disaster.

Collaborators

Najar A (0000-0002-9529-4034)* contributed to the manuscript's design, planning, conceptual analysis, writing, and critical review. Castro L (0000-0002-9376-5103)* contributed to the manuscript's conceptual analysis, writing, and critical review.

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