Does Germany Still Have a European Vocation?

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The view that Germany has a European vocation remains an important constituent in the self image of the German political class though this role conception is no longer very securely anchored in mass public opinion. It will be the argument of this paper that this role conception developed later and in a less seamless fashion than is often argued. The role conception of the European vocation was often accompanied by a much exaggerated rhetoric of sacrifice which obscured the mutuality of the benefits engendered. Whilst the European vocation came to be seen as the defining feature of the Bonn Republic, it has been subject to pressure and erosion in the Berlin Republic and is increasingly contingent, contested and circumscribed.

The Federal Republic that was created in 1949 was much less than a conventional state and is best described as pre sovereign (Paterson, 2005). It remained under an Occupation statute till 1955, its major city was physically separate from the rest of the territory and under a different occupation regime. Beyond these handicaps, it suffered from a number of fundamental deficits of which the most elemental was the security deficit. This was addressed by the presence of the United States and to a lesser extent the UK forces backed by the nuclear armoury of the United States. In a very real sense the Federal Republic initially constituted those Germans who lived under American protection and were governed by the Basic Law. Whilst the transatlantic relationship was “the hard shell” of the Federal Republic, its asymmetric character meant that it was never likely to be available as a focus of identity in the way that a europeanised identity later came to be.
Adenauer’s initial foreign policy moves were designed to indicate that public hostility, notwithstanding, the Federal Republic would in due course be able to move someway from consumer to producer of security and make a military contribution. In terms of statecraft this calculation was a shrewd one and the lifting of the Occupation Statutes in 1955 followed on the Paris Treaties of 1954 and the Federal Government's readiness to join NATO and re-arm. However shrewd Adenauer's statecraft was, it was unlikely to lead to the level of affective intensity, given the absence of mutuality and the way in which security underlined the Federal Republic’s subject status, that came to characterise European policy; a partial exception here was West Berlin which occupied a prominent place in the US public imagination and where the relationship often worked at a symbolic and emotional level as well as that of mutual interest.

The Federal Republic initially laboured under a double deficit economically. Its economic system depended on exports but it lacked access to other markets and was still subject to discrimination and external control as in the International Authority of the Ruhr. Only European integration offered a way out. By participating in European integration as an arena of cooperation, the Federal Republic was able to persuade others to accept it as an economic competitor. ‘Without European integration as a political arena of cooperation West German economic performance would have been perceived as a threat’ (Bulmer and Paterson, 1987:7).

Intertwined with its strikingly weak state character the Federal Republic was very deficient in “actorness” and European policy offered a route to continually expand its role
as an actor. In the security field, the United States role as “benevolent hegemon” and the fact that the Federal Republic had not been in at the creation of NATO allowed only limited room for the Federal Republic to develop as an international actor. In the field of European integration, by contrast the Federal Republic was there from the beginning and was dealing with a range of states. Moreover whereas the Federal Republic was basically a “taker” in security terms, in European integration it had a huge amount to offer. In the founding years the fragile and unfamiliar institutions of the Federal Republic were buttressed by membership of wider European groupings and the Federal Republic developed a culture of “reflexive multilateralism” where its increasing actorness was veiled by multilateral process and discourse. As the Federal Republic consolidated itself it began to feel confident enough to launch initiatives and eventually to export its own institutional models to the European level - a process with mixed outcomes for its role as an actor. Whilst the adoption of German models at the European level could be said to facilitate German actorness, their adoption as in the case of the ECB also greatly constrained it.

When the Federal Republic was created, its Europeanised identity did not emerge immediately. It was only less than half a decade after the end of the Nazi regime which had mounted a frontal attack on the values usually identified as European. It took a conscious decision by Adenauer to set the still unformed polity on the path of European integration though even he gave initial priority to the relationship with the United States. The choice for Europe was not immediately accepted beyond the CDU/CSU. The SPD until the mid 1950s preferred to give priority to German unity rather than European
integration which they saw as being in opposition rather than complementary to each other and under Thomas Dehler the FDP also gave priority to unification rather than European integration as a *Staatsziel*. From the mid 1960s there was an all encompassing consensus on European integration which spanned all the major interest groups and the parliamentary parties. European integration had come to be seen as essential to the economic success that underpinned the growing attachment of the citizens to the Federal Republic and the europeanised identity adopted by the Federal Republic was one that went some way towards neutralising the collective insecurities associated with the German past while seeming to promise an acceptable future, and a robust affiliational dimension, even if, as seemed increasingly likely, Germany remained permanently divided. There was ‘a deep-seated elite consensus (itself relying on a supportive “permissive” public opinion that multilateral co-operation was not just a valuable means to peace, security and prosperity in Germany and Europe, but had also become an end in itself a guiding value of West German politics’ (Jeffery and Paterson 2001:180).

Under Adenauer’s leadership the Federal Republic thus cultivated a European vocation but as a follower of French leadership. Participation in supranational institutions allowed West Germany to incrementally regain power, to resume access to export markets and to strengthen its impaired and weak state identity. It is crucial to recognise the understandable lack of self confidence in Germany about the establishment of a stable form of democratic government capable of peaceful and productive interaction with its neighbours after the traumas of Weimar and the Third Reich. ‘The emerging institutions of European Integration were in these circumstances a displacement of responsibility (we
are happy to have others govern us) and partly an insurance policy (we are not so sure we trust ourselves to govern’) (Jeffery, 2005).

Although a wide consensus had developed around Adenauer’s Rhineland vision for Germany and Europe, it had a stronger defining character for the CDU/CSU than for other groupings and there was a marked change of focus under Willy Brandt. Whilst the key elements of the prevailing European consensus remained intact, Brandt’s primary focus was on the creation of a European Peace Order and reshaping the parameters of the East-West relationship, including recalibrating the relationship between East and West Germany. As a policy issue, Ostpolitik possessed a number of obvious contrasts and parallels with Europapolitik. Both policies are designed to address the weaknesses that flowed from the Federal Republic’s constrained sovereignty and increase its potential as an actor. This is most obvious in the case of the various Eastern Treaties which ensured that the Federal Republic no longer had to rely on interlocutors to deal with the states of Eastern Europe or to mortgage their policy with the rest of the world to the dictates of the Hallstein Doctrine, but it was also at the core of Europapolitik. One major difference was that in Ostpolitik the Federal Republic could take on a leadership role and also be seen manifestly to be making its own decisions.

Helmut Schmidt was uninterested in grand visions in the Brandt manner and it proved predictably difficult to advance quickly in terms of the sort of intensive interaction leading to change in Eastern Europe which had been at the centre of Brandt’s aspirations. An instinctive atlanticist, he was deeply dismayed by the way in which American
monetary policy developed and his failure to connect intellectually with President Carter and he developed a stronger European profile than had been anticipated. He represented a new more self confident German (under Schmidt Germany’s domestic institutions were seen as embedded and effective), the rise of extremism had been seen off and the German economy was now the envy of her neighbours and the talk was now of “Model Germany”. Schmidt was however acutely aware that a unilateral attempt to export German preferences would fail and sought to achieve his ends through a strengthened Franco-German relationship. It was a more pragmatic approach viewing Europe as a tool kit for solving policy problems with little of the symbolic and value elements that had had hitherto characterised the German approach to Europe. It was also distinct in that it displayed little of the reflexive multilateralism that had been at the core of German Europapolitik. Helmut Schmidt had a lower opinion of the policy competence of the European Commission than any other German Chancellor with the possible exception of Gerhard Schroeder and opted for a strongly inter-governmentalist approach led by the Franco-German duo. Schmidt did however reinforce the German vocation for Europe by focusing on the EEC rather a wider Europe a la Brandt. Under Schmidt, Germany progressed from follower to in many ways becoming the co-leader in action if not yet in name with France and the launching of the European Monetary System was the first time that Germany acting admittedly with France launched a central Community initiative.

Helmut Kohl’s accession to the Chancellorship brought into office an enthusiastic adherent of the Rhineland vision. The solution of the UK budgetary issue, the launching of the Single Market and the signing of the Single European Act together with the
supportive stance of Jacques Delors as President of the Commission and Francois Mitterrand as President of France seemed to indicate a much more benevolent environment for the realisation of traditional German European policy and support for this policy remained very high before the fall of the Wall. The collapse of Soviet rule throughout Central and Eastern Europe in 1989/90 however led to the constitution of a quite different kind of Europe with radically altered political opportunity structures. On a realist reading one might have expected Germany to abandon its commitment to further integration and to a reflexive coordination with France. An uncompromised statehood, the end of German division and international acceptance had all been visibly achieved. Since the advent of the European Monetary System (EMS), Germany had been able to exercise influence/control over the macro economic policies of the other member states without having to concede them a “voice” in the formulation of German monetary policy which remained firmly in the hands of the Bundesbank. In the years immediately following German Unity there was no move whatsoever in a realist direction and the thrust was rather towards ever closer union around an even more explicit Franc-German core.

There are a number of fairly obvious reasons why the path of deeper integration and a strengthened core was adopted. There was an almost universal assumption that German Unity would bring with it a significant increase in German power. For France and for Mitterrand the appropriate response after a short hesitation was obvious. Deeper integration around a Franco-German core had been a very successful formula and had allowed France to structure the institutional balance and the key policies of the European
Union. It also continued to offer France and Mitterrand a leadership role. France was expected to bear the cost of the balance of adjustment as a newly enlarged and much more powerful Germany would have a much greater say in delivering the tone and direction but on the vital plane of the economy deeper integration offered the prospect of wresting monetary policy away from the unilateral control of the Bundesbank. For the British government no such option existed since deeper integration was unacceptable and damage limitation suggested self exclusion (the opt out).

In this new situation the choice appeared to lie with Germany, but for Kohl and the German government no choice seriously presented itself. His deepest instincts based on historical memory were to avoid the manifest and singular exercise of German power since this would force others to counterbalance Germany and to seek to contain her in other ways. Pedersen writes of stones being ‘left on the path enabling the Federal Republic to find its way out of the forest’ (Pedersen, 1998:199). The formula of flanking ‘an arena of cooperation’ with ‘an arena of competition’ had worked perfectly for Germany. On a wider canvas Kohl and the German political class in general saw themselves as having a vital interest in the preservation of the stability of the European Union and multilateral governance since the alternative in their minds was nationalism. The stability of the European Union thus precluded a too obvious display of German power in a realist sense. German power resources were to be invested rather in ‘shaping the regional milieu’ and the uploading of German models of governance to the European level (Bulmer, Jeffery and Paterson, 2000).
Kohl had a very strong conception of a German vocation for Europe but it was embedded in a reinvigorated Franco-German core directed by himself and Mitterrand. The preconditions for this leadership were their dominating roles in their own domestic political systems (an obvious contrast here is between Kohl at Maastricht and at Amsterdam by which time his power had visibly declined). Given the depth of integration now envisaged, it was necessary to conduct this leadership in a different manner from Giscard and Schmidt who were problem-led and cultivated a pragmatic style. Inter-governmentalism was strengthened and encompassed many more ministries. There was also a return to the dramatic style centred on a rhetoric of reconciliation that had characterised the Adenauer-De Gaulle era and both Mitterrand and Kohl took care to present a vision of European policy, a practice Helmut Schmidt regarded with anathema (Paterson, 1999).

In the immediate post wall years a German vocation for Europe appeared to have reached its apogee in terms both of a more European Germany, the traditional Ziel of German European policy and increasingly in a second and more novel sense of a German Europe where German preferences were uploaded to a European level. The replacement of the Deutschmark and the Bundesbank by the Euro and the European Central Bank illustrate both processes. For much of the history of the Federal Republic, the Budesbank had been seen as a key German institution and the Deutschmark the outward and visible sign of German economic prowess and the Europeanisation of monetary policy was therefore absolutely central. Conversely the modalities of the European Central Bank owed everything to German preferences. In explanations of the second process a great deal of
weight was placed on the congruence between the German and the European levels. This explanation was unsurprisingly especially influential in the United Kingdom where the lack of fit between the European and domestic levels was associated with a continuing failure of the UK governments to upload British preferences and a contrast was often drawn between a vicious circle in the UK case and a virtuous circle of German-EU dynamics.

“The Germany of the Federal Republic was one which had shaped ‘the regional milieu’. It was both deeply embedded in the EU and also ‘nested’ congenially in a wider European framework. Embeddedness and congeniality both underpinned and expressed the profound role that European integration had played in ensuring the stability of the Federal Republic” (Jeffery and Paterson, 2004:62).

Underneath this apparently tranquil surface however a process of erosion had already begun. At the level of mass opinion cracks had begun to appear in “the permissive consensus” and European Monetary Union was consistently opposed by significant majorities in public opinion. With developing integration the Laender became increasingly alarmed at the threat to their competences and demanded a greater co-decision on European policy. More fundamentally Germany’s European vocation had been facilitated by the prosperity and size of the German economy. As the 1990s progressed it became increasingly clear that contrary to expectations, German unity had weakened rather than strengthened the German economy and that Germany’s role as banker to the European project was imperilled.
The Berlin Republic

The question mark in the title of this paper points to a move away from the reflexive Europeanism of which Helmut Kohl was the last exemplar towards what Jeffery and Paterson have labelled a ‘yes, but’ European policy (Jeffery and Paterson, 2001); Sebastian Harnisch (Harnisch and Schieder, 2006) prefers the term ‘contingent’ which we have used interchangeably. Although there are slight differences of emphasis, the explanations offered by us and Harnisch/Schieder are largely convergent.

It’s the Economy Stupid

The continuing weakness of the German economy has had a pervasive effect on Germany’s European avocation. The impact of German unity on public finances has produced ‘a resource crunch’ which makes it much more difficult for Germany to underwrite European integration than it did in the past. This constraint is especially damaging during a continuing process of enlargement which necessarily leads to heightened distributional struggles. Moreover whilst the uploading of German models to the European level was associated with a perception of Germany as a success story, the current view of Germany as vying with Italy for ‘the sick man of Europe’ title has rendered them much less attractive as export models.

Within Germany the link between European integration and the success of the German economy is now more contested than in the past when it was automatic to link the success of Germany’s export led economy with EU membership. The tight fiscal policy of the
ECB - reflecting pan-European conditions - has created tensions at a time when persistent high German unemployment would seem to favour a looser fiscal policy. The ECB’s ‘one size fits all policy’ is uncongenial to Germany in contrast to the former situation where others had to adjust to German needs as judged by the Bundesbank (Marsh, 1993). Ironically there has been continuing tension about the failure of Germany to meet the terms of the Stability and Growth Pact which had been introduced at German insistence.

A further tension has been added by the fact that the long term EU liberalisation project has begun to penetrate deeply at a time when unemployment is high and the German economy faltering. The German economy had benefited greatly from the Single Market Programme as it was implemented first in the manufacturing sector where Germany was both strong and had profited from a major influence on standard setting but it was now being pursued in the area of services and other sectors where Germany was relatively weak. While the EU was seen in overwhelmingly positive terms in Germany when it opened up other states’ markets, it generates tension when it acts to open up protected German markets or lays down strict conditions for public subsidies. The response has been to propel Laender chiefs into a defence of their right to give state aids and at the Federal level Chancellor Schroeder was notable for his readiness to personally back sectoral German interests even when his stance as on the recycling of cars conflicted with the policy that the government had recently backed (see note 1).

Enlargement

In the last decade of the 20th century German governments consistently pushed
Economic and Monetary Union and Enlargement. The difficulties associated with EMU have already been mentioned and while the grounds for German support for enlargement were compelling (Harnisch and Schieder, 2006:102-3) it has greatly complicated German European policy. It has placed huge strains on the financing of the CAP and Cohesion Funds where Germany has traditionally been the paymaster. The obvious route of dealing with these pressures by policy reform would risk alienating Germany’s allies in the EU. For example, France has exercised a consistent veto on CAP reform and the result has been an ungenerous treatment of new member states and considerable damage to Germany’s reputation of being their advocate in the EU.

In a bigger picture analysis enlargement has transformed the geopolitics of the European Union and the emergent picture is one of a shrinking core and an expanding periphery. In this new situation the Franco-German core, the preferred instrument of German EU policy loses traction. This had already been anticipated in the Kohl period and helps explain the discourse of irreversibility associated especially with the EMU where it was hoped that the centralising logic at the heart of the EMU project could be hard wired into the EU system before enlargement took place. In the second Red-Green government post Iraq isolation led to a heavy dependence on the Franco-German relationship and the declining ability of that relationship to shape the EU in a positive sense became very manifest though of course it still acted as a powerful defence mechanism on issues like their failure to meet the terms of the Stability and Growth Pact and reform of the CAP.

The complexity and size of the enlarged EU mean that the chances of realising the core
model as motor of the EU are very slight. Enlargement to 25 members with the almost
certain prospect of a number of others entails institutionalizing a logic of diversity and
there is also a clear aggregation of preferences problem. Simon Hix (2005) identifies a
number of coalitions in the Council of Ministers. These include the Franco-German
coalition, the Benelux coalition, the Cohesion Bloc, a Nordic Bloc and an Eastern
Alliance. Even at present the Franco-German coalition is seen as pivotal in only 25 per
cent of cases. Moreover Germany, given it public finance deficits is unwilling and unable
to make side payments on the scale that lubricated the acceptance of the Kohl/Mitterrand
agenda. In the new more complex EU the strident assertion of core interests offends not
only Italy but Spain and Poland which see themselves and are seen by others as rising
powers. It also offends the wider expanding periphery of small member states, worried by
the whole thrust of institutional discussion in recent years.

There can be little doubt then that the mutually supportive character of the European and
German institutional systems has now become more contested as the EU both deepens
and widens and as the semi-sovereign character of the Federal Republic itself has
undergone important changes (Green and Paterson, 2005). The resource crunch
engendered by the continuing costs of German unity means that Germany has few
financial resources available to facilitate the uploading of German preferences. At the
same time, the European Union on which these preferences are projected is becoming
increasingly complex with, as enlargement progresses, a shrinking core and an
expanding periphery. Meanwhile downloading will continue and in a political system still
characterised by semi-sovereignty, this will continue to cause tensions with some
prominent actors at both Federal and Laender levels. Uploading of German preferences except in areas like ESDP will also be continue to be complicated by institutional pluralism and semi-sovereignty; the issue of whose preferences are being uploaded will remain problematic in some areas.

Contingency Versus De-europeanisation

The narrative of Germany’s European vocation falls into three stages (see note 2). In the first stage - constituting Germany in Europe, European integration was a vital secondary arena for ensuring that the Federal Republic was able to develop economically and to become a stable democracy. The second stage-ever closer union-accompanied by institutional export was already evident under Schmidt but becomes really manifest in the Kohl Chancellorship reaching a high point in the early nineties. However these advances which had been conceived in the eighties reflect a quite different context and the material demands of unification and the implications of enlargement were to put the ever closer union vision under considerable pressure. The result has been a partial re-calibration of German European policy and a much more manifest resistance to the downloading of EU policy. Whilst there was little disagreement among analysts about the direction of Kohl’s European policy, there is a divergence on how to categorise the post Kohl era. Harnisch and Schieder (2006) and Jeffery and Paterson (2004) stress the contingent element in contemporary policy in contrast to the traditional reflexive multilateralism whilst Gunther Hellmann (2006) uses the term de-europeanisation. What I will label for the sake of convenience the BT(Birmingham-Trier) view centres on the imperative for Germany to re-establish goodness of fit between the German and European levels, ‘a rolled back
In her Governmental declaration on European policy, Chancellor Merkel (2006) speaks of a refounding (Neubegruendung) of the EU though it is clear that she does not yet have a ‘vision’ to characterise this new stage in the manner that Adenauer and Kohl did (Paterson, 1999). It is however fair to point out that it took sometime in office for them to develop a fully blown narrative. The mutually supportive character of the domestic and European levels is no longer a ‘given’. More Europe is no longer automatically desirable. Transfer of competence to the European level is no longer justified on the grounds that the European level is better, but on whether the transfer is necessary because the member states are unable to perform the action separately. The contingent ‘take’ on German policy assumes however that Germany still has a European vocation, that Germany has a vital interest in European integration (indifference in the English manner is not an option), but that the European Endziel has been transformed and involves restoring the goodness of fit between the two levels, at both the German domestic level (Federalism Reform) and the European/member state interface there is a new emphasis on making the division of competences clearer and part of this change clearly reflects financial exigencies; pooling and sharing sovereignty always seemed to involve the Federal Government bearing a large part of the burden. The new agenda is ‘leaner and meaner’ (Harnisch and Schneider, 2006) and places much less trust in multilateral institutions like the European Court of Justice (Kohl actually began the trend here) or the European Commission, but it expects Germany to continue to support more Europe in key areas like foreign policy and constitutionalisation. It is noticeable here that the new government
still expects to make progress on the European Constitution issue during the upcoming Presidency though, given the difficulties, they have been understandably tight lipped as to what that might be.

The Birmingham-Trier version is one which depicts Germany’s European vocation as ‘leaner and meaner’ but European integration remains crucial for Germany and we do not posit in a simple minded manner that the virtuous circle of an ever stronger Germany together with a more empowered EU which characterised German European policy for so long has been replaced by a ‘vicious circle’ where an ever weaker Germany interacts with a fragmenting Europe. Charlie Jeffery and I employed the metaphor of the clashing of tectonic plates to capture the new tensions between the German and the European levels but as the continued survival of the western edge of California indicates there can also be very long periods of equilibrium.

Whilst the Birmingham-Trier model takes a binary view with Germany supporting both ‘more’ and ‘less’ Europe, Gunther Hellmann (2006) in a recent publication argues that ‘there are certainly powerful (and mounting) indicators that we are observing a mounting process of de-Europeanism’ (Hellmann, 2006:170). For Hellmann these indicators include changes in public opinion, a new elite discourse and changes in the coalition structure of the EU which make it more difficult for Germany or any other country or group of states to realise their goals (Hellmann, 2006:178-9). The changes in public opinion have been observed for some time but the relationship between this change and policy outcomes remains under explored in the literature. Hellmann’s presentation of
changes in elite discourse is too truncated to be totally convincing and would benefit from a more comparative treatment since German discourse remains more European than that of the other large member states. The counterview that ‘the most prominent feature of German foreign policy has been the continuity in the rhetoric of continuity’ (Hellmann, 1999:837) also carries a degree of plausibility and resolution of the diverging claims would require a more extended treatment. The final point about the difficulties Germany will encounter in pursuing her European policy goals is a restatement of the shrinking core and expanding periphery thesis and is one with which I am in agreement (Paterson, 2007). It is one of the merits of the Hellmann approach that he adopts an interactionist approach which attempts to link changes in German policy with the changing opportunity structures at a European level.

Conclusion

This paper is a preliminary attempt to look at the trajectory of Germany’s European vocation. Given the broad sweep and the number of variables involved, it has been necessarily discursive. The narrative has employed a three stage periodization. These stages are not wholly watertight and earlier periods contain elements which appear more fully formed in the later periods. Most of the open questions relate to the third stage. Analysts are agreed that we have left stage two but there is nuanced divergence as to the characterisation of the current situation. Are we in a new stage or still at a ‘critical juncture’ where it is clear that the preconditions of the previous policy have changed but the contours of the new stage remain too fluid to give us sufficient confidence to define the future direction? Gunther Hellmann emphasizes quite strongly the process of de-
Europeanization and there is much that is compelling in his analysis, especially in his use of interactionism and the more negative political opportunity structures at the European level (Hayward, 2007). His analysis may be too deterministic, however and it can be argued that he pays insufficient attention to continued Europeanisation (Dyson and Goetz, 2003; Miskimmon and Paterson, 2006) and his analysis of discourse is too selective. The Birmingham-Trier model shares much of the analysis but would argue that, despite changes, a Europeanised identity still persists to a greater degree than Hellmann allows which will continue to shape important elements of German policy. We would also argue that internal semi-sovereignty/institutional pluralism continues to constrain the view that Germany can be a coherent state pursuing a clearly defined national interest like the UK or France. Finally, the impact of public opinion remains the joker in the pack.

‘Elite and mass views continue to diverge but the prevailing elite consensus and the relatively low salience of European issues has allowed continued elite autonomy. The question is for how long?’ (Paterson, 2005:282).

The upcoming Presidency will provide more clarity than is at present possible as to what the character of the new stage is. Caution will however continue to be required in coming to conclusions. It is sometimes overlooked that despite the increased strains that have become apparent and the parlous state of the German public finances, the wider economic climate has been benevolent. Were there to be a recession however we might be entering an era where Gunther Hellman’s pessimism about Germany’s European avocation looked like an underestimate. Internally Germany has long since transcended the fair weather
democracy stage but I would be less confident about Germany’s or anyone else’s Europeanism in foul weather conditions.

Note.

(1) For a detailed treatment of this theme see Jeffery and Paterson (2004, 66-69)

(2) Project draft by Charlie Jeffery

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