

THIS IS ALL THE MORE SUR-
prising since Frankfurt gets
right to the nub of the prob-
lem: "The contemporary pro-
liferation of bullshit ... has deeper
sources, in various forms of skepticism
which deny that we can have any reliable
access to an objective reality, and which
therefore reject the possibility of know-
ing how things really are." Actually, skep-
ticism is not the same thing as bullshit.
There are genuine and deep ways of
wondering about the reality and the pos-
sibility of objective truth. Skepticism can
be an honorable calling. But in the con-
temporary world it often degenerates
into a received attitude, a hip pose, a
rhetorical ploy, a kind of academic party
trick. Imagine such a skeptic coming to
the humanities center: what kind of pa-
per is he or she going to give? An earnest
argument that there really is no such
thing as truth? Of course not. Such a
paper would lack "irony," which is these
days the great validator of intellectual
authority. (I put "irony" in scare quotes
because the current version has almost
nothing in common with real irony.) So
the paper will inevitably be an "ironic"
performance that the truth simply does
not matter to the speaker. This is not
skepticism, it is bad theater. And the
point that the "ironists" are making is
that in their bullshit-artistry they can
get away with it. (It is not unusual for
such speakers to draw attention to the
fact that they have actually been paid to
come and spread their bullshit.)

In this way, the bullshit artist raises
a host of ethical problems that do not
arise at the level of ordinary bullshit. For
bullshit artistry demands our complicity.
It is, in its own way, a demonstration of
power. The bullshit artist in effect says,
"This is bullshit, but you will accept it
anyway. You may accept it as bullshit,
but you will honor it anyway." In this
respect, the bullshit artist is a knight of
decadence. Frankfurt ignores this exam-
ple; indeed, his analysis of bullshit rules
it out as impossible. And in this way he
fails to confront the most interesting—
and influential—style of bullshit in our
time.

But the problem is even worse. For
once we recognize that the bullshit artist
flaunts his indifference, we have reason
to go back to the ordinary bullshitter
and ask whether it really is true, as
Frankfurt asserts, that he must hide it.
Think of Gergen's claim that Summers
reminds him of Socrates. I think that any

intelligent reader would see through the
claim at once. This is not artistry, this is
spin. So I think that Frankfurt is wrong
even about ordinary bullshit. It may be
true that the ordinary bullshitter needs
to go through the motions of pretend-
ing that the truth of what he says mat-
ters to him—but this itself is bullshit,
and it may be easily recognizable as such
to us all. In this way we are all drawn
into a complacent and rundown theatri-

cality. We all know that what we are
reading is spin; we all know that the per-
son quoted is not really committed to
the truth of what he is saying; and yet
we are all somehow willing to go along
with what we instantly recognize to be
ersatz news. This is the problem with
bullshit: it is contagious. It invites us all
to grow more detached from the real, to
give up caring about what is true and
what is false. ■

Paula Fredriksen Beautiful People

THE INVENTION OF RACISM
IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY
By Benjamin Isaac
(Princeton University Press,
592 pp., \$45)

FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY, PHIL-
osophy; art, education, law.
Many of the ideas and ideals
that define our culture and
what we most value in it trace
back across millennia to the civilizations
of Greece and Rome. These two ancient
societies constituted a fundamental stage
in the historical development of the West.
Later, refracted through medieval insti-
tutions, reclaimed in the Renaissance,
and re-appropriated in the Enlighten-
ment, this classical patrimony continued
to exercise a decisive influence in shaping
the culture and the politics of Europe.

But a shadow side accompanied this
amazing heritage. Greek and Roman
writers also conceived, developed, and
rationalized systems of thought that de-
nied full humanity to other human be-
ings. Bigotry and social hatred, aimed at
outsiders beyond the borders of empire
and at immigrant communities within,
both marked and marred ancient litera-
ture. This is the dark theme that compels
the rich research of Benjamin Isaac in his
important book.

Scrutinizing a huge array of classi-
cal sources in an eight-hundred-year
arc from the fifth century B.C.E. to the
fourth century C.E., Isaac lays open
their expressions of ethnic prejudice and

xenophobia. How, he asks, did these
ideas develop as patterns of thinking,
as attitudes of mind? What relation did
these ideas have to Greek and, later, to
Roman ideologies of imperial expan-
sion? And what contributions did these
ideas, passing from antiquity to moder-
nity through the paradoxical conduit of
Enlightenment thinkers—Hume, Vol-
taire, and Kant, among others—bring to
the development of modern racism?

GREEK CULTURE, IN ITS LONG
history, had two formative en-
counters with foreign peoples
before its hegemony finally
ceded to Rome's. The first encounter, in
the early fifth century B.C.E., was with
Persia. The westward thrust of this imper-
ial power out of Asia precipitated the for-
mation of military alliances between the
perennially fractious Greek city-states;
in the end they cooperated and success-
fully resisted conquest. The second en-
counter occurred about a century and a
half later. This time the aggression went
in the opposite direction: under Alexan-
der the Great, a military power identified
with Greek culture confronted the Per-
sian Empire and prevailed.

The Persians had controlled a vast
multi-ethnic empire that included Egypt,
the Near East, and what corresponds
to modern-day Iraq (ancient Babylonia)
and Iran (the Persian heartland). Alex-
ander pushed yet farther east, into the
territory of what is now Afghanistan and
Pakistan. Through military and diplo-
matic prowess, he ruled it all. But the
political unity of this huge area lasted
only as long as its master. When Alexan-

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der died in 323 B.C.E., his empire splintered into smaller kingdoms and city-states. Yet an underlying cultural unity endured.

Wherever Alexander conquered, he established cities and left behind colonizing populations. Forms of urban government, and thus of Greek religion; such organs of post-classical civic culture as the agora, the gymnasium, the library, the theater or amphitheater or hippodrome: these "old country" institutions spread an exported form of Greek civilization, enabling the growth of a new international culture, which scholars call "Hellenism." Hellenism was always a hybrid phenomenon, a creolization of local customs and cultures with the dominant element of Greek. (Artifacts from the Ptolemaic kingdom, for example, though recognizably Hellenistic, are also unmistakably Egyptian.) Greek itself became antiquity's English, the universal linguistic medium that facilitated trade and travel, the exchange of both goods and ideas, the workings of government and of diplomacy, across this vast expanse that stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to the edges of India. In brief, Hellenism was the West's first great experience of globalization.

Culture, art, trade: these descriptive abstractions mask a homelier reality. War and its aftermath, peace, bring different, distant peoples closer. The contact with other cultures achieved initially through military conquest (Alexander's, that of his political heirs, eventually Rome's) brought disempowerment, deportation, and dislocation to the losing side. Defeated peoples might remain where they were, cooperating and accommodating themselves to the new order. Or they might move, becoming refugees, exiles, or slaves. But these empires also established domestic peace, which enabled and encouraged interior travel and less traumatic forms of migration. Merchants, enticed by the wider horizons and the increased opportunities for trade brought by empire, could travel in safety, and so could pilgrims, who celebrated festivals and journeyed to famous temples and holy sites. Populations mixed as soldiers married and they and their families garrisoned military colonies in frontier areas. Ancient empire not only spread the unifying global culture of Hellenism abroad. It also facilitated the migration and mingling of various peoples,

bringing foreigners, as immigrants, "home."

HOW DID GREEKS, IN BOTH these experiences of foreign contact, regard non-Greeks? According to a scholarly tradition that traces back to the Enlightenment, those who fought in the Persian Wars regarded that struggle as a contest between Western democracy and Oriental despotism. For Herodotus and his generation, these modern historians assert, the war against Persia was no mere military encounter, but a *Kulturkampf* of the deepest spiritual and historical significance, recognized as such by the combatants. By repelling Darius and Xerxes, opines one scholar, the Greeks resisted gradual "orientalisation ... coupled with spiritual slavery and the rule of priests." "It was the contact and collision of two different types of civilization," writes another, "of peoples of two different characters ... this contest between the slavery of the barbarian and the liberty of the Greek, between Oriental autocracy and Hellenic constitutionalism." "In depicting the heroic effort of the Greek complex to save itself," declaims Volume Five of the 1927 *Cambridge Ancient History*, Herodotus likewise described the heroic saving of "Europe, as yet unborn for freedom, for science, for civilization."

But as Isaac's scrupulous interrogation of the evidence makes clear, Herodotus and his compatriots experienced contemporary events with no such stirring and morally polarizing clarity. True, they saw in Persia a powerful monarchy and the threat of foreign domination. But they nowhere state that the Persians as a people, because ruled by a monarch, were therefore culturally or morally inferior to the Greeks; nor do they describe these wars as a struggle of freedom-loving Westerners against decadent, barbarian Asiatics. These opinions are indeed to be found in the literature of Western antiquity (as well as in the publications of the modern academy), but not until the fourth century, once Greeks looked at Persians from a more belligerent, expansionist perspective.

The more aggressive Greek military ambitions became, the more disparaging grew their views of targeted Eastern neighbors. Thus, writing circa 380 B.C.E., Isocrates urged that "it is impossible for people raised and governed as they [the Persians] are to have

any virtue. ... How could there exist a competent commander or a courageous soldier with the habits of these people? ... They indulge their bodies in the luxury of their riches. They have souls humiliated and terrified by the monarchy." Greeks, he recounted, are hard, disciplined, masculine, strong, free. Easterners *par contre* are soft, corrupt, effeminate, weak, and servile. What produced such inferior people? Persian government, Isocrates explained, and Persian social relations. (Greek government and society, accordingly, produced intrinsically superior people.) Various vase paintings visually broadcast the same message. In one particularly striking example, a heroically nude Greek prepares to sexually assault a terrified Persian. The Greek runs at the Persian, grasping his own erect penis in his right hand like a sword. The Persian presents his buttocks, while the caption reads, "I stand bent over." The painting refers to an Athenian victory in 465 B.C.E.; the imagery portrays the enemy as effete, impotent, feminized. Translated more colloquially, the message is: "We've really buggered the Persians." Given Persian culture, Greek victory was "natural," as natural as the dominance of male over female.

In their Hellenistic phase, Greeks encountered myriad other ethnicities as they took over the old Persian Empire. Syrians and Phoenicians, Egyptians and Jews, among others, became the subject of Hellenistic ethnographies. Such writings often ascribed demeaning characteristics and customs to these people. Traders such as the Phoenicians are invariably described as deeply dishonest; Easterners such as the Syrians, spoiled by luxury, are "natural" slaves. The zoology of the Egyptians unnerved the Greeks, as did the greater antiquity of their culture. Egyptians, in the Greek view, are typically wanton, dishonest, and rebellious; their religion is a depraved dementia. Jewish customs and religion also occasioned negative comment. The Jewish god, disliking the company of other gods, was accused, like his people, of "unsociability." Jewish food laws were obtuse; circumcision was at once repulsive, alarming, and vaguely comical. Greek writers presented such negative stereotypes and demeaning descriptions as flat fact. Various foreigners, they claimed, were simply dangerous: they sacrificed humans or ate them; they were sexually profligate; in war they

were sickeningly savage; in peace, intrinsically untrustworthy.

THE GREEKS ASKED, "WHAT are these foreign peoples like?" and let prejudice shape the answer. But they also asked the more fundamental question: "Why are foreign peoples the way they are?" and grounded their hostile stereotyping in "scientific" explanations that accounted for the character of entire peoples. The physical and mental traits of ethnic groups, these Greeks held, were fixed in populations by environment. "Environment," as we have already seen in the case of Isocrates, was imagined in different ways: as society, as government, as climate, as geography (which connected "race" with "soil"), and (a particularly inflexible form of environmental determinism) as astrology.

Isaac observes that the concept of the environment as causing national characteristics rode together with a bipolar worldview wherein Europe, where the climate was harsh and the people were sturdy, contrasted with Asia, where the climate was good and the people were wealthy and, in consequence, "soft." Aristotle refined the idea further: the Greeks, he said, occupied the ideal environment between Europe and Asia. Greeks were therefore most suited to ruling others. Further, Aristotle explained, the inhabitants of Asia, servile by nature, were likewise well suited—again, by nature—to being ruled by Greeks. Alexander's victories, of course, "proved" the correctness of Aristotle's theorizing.

A further conviction strengthened this view. Not only were a people's characteristic (and characterological) traits acquired by environmental influence, but these characteristics, once acquired, were heritable, virtually intrinsic to their designated "race." Hence Phoenicians were typically Phoenician wherever they were, even when outside their native environment, whether natural or social. Jews were always and everywhere Jews; Egyptians, unalterably Egyptian. Their acquired characteristics ran in the blood, passing invariably from one generation to the next.

This idea had a convenient corollary. It justified imperial rule. Conquered peoples, as evinced by their defeat, were inferior to the victors by nature. And once enslaved, they acquired further servile characteristics from their servile

condition and also passed these on to their descendants. Slaves, in this view, were born slaves and born to be slaves. But the obverse did not apply: freedom could not alter the nature of a slave. Once deteriorated, ethnic character stayed deteriorated, or could only further decline.

But contact with outsiders—an inevitable consequence of empire—brought with it also anxiety over contamination: the low qualities of outsiders, in the view of the Greeks, were contagious, communicable through contact. In an age of globalization and immigration, then, when people of various ethnic groups resettled in significant numbers, the vanquished posed real dangers in the imagination of the victors. Their low characteristics might pass via resident aliens into the "host" culture, and thereby corrupt it. (Again, the obverse never applied: aliens could not, by contact with Greeks, substantially improve.) So one source of the hostile stereotyping so visible in these ancient sources seems to be fear—a fear that, according to the canons of their own explanatory theories of Greek moral and cultural superi-

ority and of corresponding foreign decrepitude, was not rational.

ROME INHERITED THIS GREEK worldview, with some necessary modifications. Rome's Western geographical location and its military success enabled (and perhaps required) thoughtful Romans to hoist the conquered Greeks by their own theorizing petard. The Greeks, many now slaves, became the soft, luxury-spoiled Easterners; the Romans became the "hard," virile, virtuous Westerners. And whereas Greeks had thought primarily in binary oppositions of East and West—Europe as opposed to Asia, Greece as opposed to Persia—the realities of Roman conquest turned the comparative axis ninety degrees. Romans thought in terms of North and South, and tinkered with theories of racial environmentalism accordingly. The too-cold North produced fierce fighters defective in government and culture (that is, the Germans); the too-warm South produced effeminate, servile, overly cultivated weaklings (the Egyptians, for example). Italy, needless to say, occupied the

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perfect middle. It produced the world's natural rulers. "The true perfect territory," writes Vitruvius, a first-century B.C.E. author, "is that which is occupied by the Roman people. In fact, the races of Italy are the most perfectly constituted in both respects, in bodily form and in mental activity, to correspond to their valor.... Hence it was the Divine Intelligence that set the city of Rome in a peerless and temperate country, in order that it might... command the whole world."

Roman imperialism was both like and unlike Hellenistic imperialism. Roman intellectuals adopted and adapted much of Greek ethnographic "science," expanding the theory to account for and describe the exotic others whom they now encountered on their northern and western frontiers: Celts, Gauls, Britons, various Germanic tribes. Insecure about their own culture (they were indebted, and they knew it, to the richer culture of the Greeks), they insisted on their own excellence in the virtues that they valued: virility, moral and physical discipline, patriotism.

Yet Romans also inherited the Greeks' fear of influence. Their anxieties were fanned by their own greater success. The Pax Romana, together with the superlative engineering of an empire-wide system of highways, required and enabled the army's greater mobility and encouraged increased interior migration. Romans worried about their armies' weakening through contact with the very outsiders whom they had defeated. And they worried particularly about the "purity" of Rome, with so many foreign residents polluting the capital and its citizens, alienating presiding Roman deities by dragging along their suspect customs and strange gods. From time to time, the Senate acted on these anxieties and issued directives temporarily driving such suspect foreigners (Egyptians, astrologers, Jews) out of Rome. This fear of alienating heaven ultimately led to the significant anomaly of persecution, the attempt to coerce other Romans to worship only the gods that were native to them.

Yet Rome's political culture was much more open than that of the Greeks. Manumission was a normal and widespread practice, and the large freedman class of former slaves contributed vigorously to Roman society. Citizenship in Greek city-states had been closed, commonly restricted to offspring whose parents were both citizens. Rome granted citizenship generously: by 212 C.E., it had universally enfranchised the free population of the empire. Coping with their own success, imperial Romans fretted about the dangers of foreign influence; the moral hazards of immigration; the communicable corruptions of intrinsically inferior outsiders passing, whether through the army or through pliant civilians, into their own culture, compromising their much-loved *Romanitas*. They articulated these fears and prejudices by drawing deeply on the xenophobic legacy of Greek proto-racist theorizing. And yet they produced one of the most open and international societies that the West has known.

CLASSICISTS AND ANCIENT historians have long debated among themselves whether Greek and Roman societies were "racist." They have concluded that these societies were unquestionably given to xenophobia. Ethnic and cultural prejudice doubtless existed. But Greeks and Romans, in academic estimation, were innocent of a concept that could reasonably be identified as "racism."

Benjamin Isaac now seems to have settled this question against the previous consensus. He has done so by scrupulously canvassing some eight centuries' worth of ancient evidence, and by analyzing a huge swath of academic opinion in at least a half-dozen modern languages. But in his quest to define his historical question with precision, Isaac has also surveyed and evaluated the various definitions of racism proffered by the modern fields of sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, Darwin studies, law, and biological science. With compelling intellectual and moral lucidity, he considers the phenomenon of racism itself: the ways that it rests on "science," the ways that it posits the heritability of acquired characteristics, the ways that it reduces the individual to the definitions of an imagined collective.

These are the points of principle common to both ancient and modern racist theory. True, modern racism relies upon

applications (and distortions) of Darwin in ways that ancient racism could not, but this distinction should not obscure their more fundamental similarities. Biological determinism characterizes modern racism and grounds it in "science" in precisely the same way that environmental determinism characterizes and grounds the racist theories of antiquity. In subordinating the individual to the collective ("race"), ancient racism and modern racism both ignore the ways in which individuality, personal characteristics, and free will shape human experience and, thus, humanity.

Herein lies the telling distinction between ethnic prejudice and racism. Contemporary anti-immigration movements, for example, often demand that immigrant minorities conform to the cultural and social values of the host country. Ethnic prejudice thus does not deny the possibility of change, whether at the individual or the collective level. Racism does. But "race" in the sense that racists employ the concept—a population invariably displaying intrinsic and unchanging social, cultural, psychological, and physical characteristics—does not exist. As Isaac urges, quoting the Belgian social scientist Jean Hieaux, "Race is not a fact, but a concept."

This concept of race from the classical past was preserved in literature widely read by European intellectuals ever since the Renaissance. "If it is accepted that the Athenians inspired Western civilization with their democracy," Isaac asks, "can it be denied that they were instrumental in conveying the idea of racism?" Enlightenment figures thought deeply with antiquity's racist theories, to which they added their own preoccupation with skin color. Thus Buffon theorized that black men (that is, Africans) were a degenerate form of white men, grown progressively darker through prolonged exposure to extremes of heat and sun. He further opined that countries lying in a temperate zone—in Europe, say—produced the most beautiful people. Hume asserted that "Negroes, and in general all other species of men... are naturally inferior to whites." Voltaire repudiated the idea that climate caused skin color as unscientific: "Negro men and Negro women, transported to the coldest countries," he observed, "still produce there animals [*sic*] of their own species." He concluded that blacks must have sprung from different original ancestors.

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The great Kant coordinated all these different observations by combining the theory of climate-caused skin color with the idea of inherited characteristics: once heat had caused skin to blacken and the condition was communicated across generations, it was irreversible, fixed "by nature." Climate also affected temperament and intelligence, Kant held, which is why blacks were by nature also intellectually deficient. ("So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, that it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.") And unlike the more generous Buffon, who was willing to regard all natives of temperate climes as most beautiful, Kant's aesthetics demanded more precision: "The tallest and most beautiful people on dry land are on the parallel and the degrees which run through Germany."

With dry humor and a keen eye, Isaac traces this march of folly through the racist theorists of the nineteenth century to the fantasies of eugenics, through modern anti-discrimination laws that seek to protect groups of people from race crimes by defining them as racial groups to the highways and byways of UNESCO documents, through the Library of Congress's horribly muddled

cataloguing protocols to the 1996 Michelin Guides to Venice ("The Venetian is born with a positive attitude toward life that is maintained by an imperturbable nature") and to Scandinavia (where it seems that native Scandinavians are born with national pride). The patterns of racist thought pop up everywhere, even when the enterprise at hand is self-consciously anti-racist. Isaac's wit lightens a very oppressive realization: our culture seems powerfully drawn to thinking in these racist terms.

That this is so, as Isaac has powerfully argued, is testimony to the foundational importance and powerful intellectual legacy of Greece and Rome. Ancient Greeks and Romans have bequeathed us not only their ideas of freedom, art, philosophy, and much else that we value, but also, he concludes, "some of the elementary concepts of discrimination and inequality that are still with us." To be able to identify these sinister concepts clearly is to give us some critical purchase on them, and thus some crucial distance from them. In this hope, and for this reason, anyone concerned with racism, and more generally with the moral complexity of our civilization, will be profoundly educated by Isaac's masterful and ethically lucid study. ■

David Thomson The Observer as Hero

ISHERWOOD: A LIFE REVEALED
By Peter Parker
(Random House, 815 pp., \$39.95)

'FIX" IS A WORD FOR OUR time, blunt and secretive, yet promising transformation. If the "fix" is in, don't we all suffer because of it?

When the World Series of 1919 was "fixed," the game needed Babe Ruth in order to recover. But if we have a bad knee or a car that won't start, it is a mercy if someone says they can "fix" it for us. That treatment—we hope—doesn't involve a cheating fix. It must be a true case

of repair or restoration. But there is another way of "fixing" things, and it goes like this:

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.

Those first four words are as famous as they are tendentious (a camera doesn't know a kimono from a kiss). They are Christopher Isherwood in Berlin in the years from 1929 to 1933, between demoralization and Nazification, boys for sale and the Hitler Youth. That moment is still so modern, so dangerous,

and so demanding of individual decision that it makes Hemingway in Paris only a few years earlier seem like the last season of the Grand Tour where Europe sat still to have its picture taken.

"Fixed" was, for Isherwood, a new usage: it is the photo-chemical process used to stabilize an image in the darkroom. That could make you think that "fixing" is somehow geared to correctness, or finding the one and only right print—as in, "Well, I've fixed your papers, Mr. Lime." But, as any photographer knows, the fix is optional, and creative in its degree and its timing. The fix locks a picture in, but only at the photo-emotional level that the photographer wants. The fix is atmosphere: the day can be bright or noir. It is your choice.

Here is an example of how Isherwood's fix could be ambiguous. When he came back from Berlin in 1933, he had the notion of turning his diaries and his memories into a "huge tightly constructed melodramatic novel in the manner of Balzac." He wanted to find room for all the wayward, doomed, stray, and shadowy people he met in Berlin, and he thought of calling the novel *Die Verlorenen*, or *The Lost*. But he changed his mind (and the title remained available for the somber little-known movie that Peter Lorre directed in the 1950s). Yet Isherwood's people—Sally Bowles, Mr. Norris, the boys, and even Herr Issyvoo—why, they are not lost, they are indelibly inscribed (I nearly said fixed) in our view of Berlin on the brink of Hitler. It's a lurch or two, I admit, from Jean Ross (the original and unsuccessful Sally) to Julie Harris in *I Am a Camera* (1955) or Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* (1972). Christopher Isherwood is now forever linked to the insouciance of "Life is a cabaret, old chum." But if Sally Bowles had been that good, he once remarked, she would have been a star.

IF SALLY BOWLES'S BERLIN IS THE modern, swift-bite take on Isherwood, then the fixing day has come with Peter Parker's immense and magnificent biography. Some of Isherwood's admirers will be put off by its title. After all, Isherwood has hardly suffered from neglect, and a great part of his often tricky mix of art and self-promotion was to make his life the essential material for his casually narcissistic project. Well in advance of Norman Mailer and *Advertisements for Myself*, he was in the habit of keeping

David Thomson's new book, *THE WHOLE EQUATION: A HISTORY OF HOLLYWOOD*, has just been published by Knopf.

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