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Hierarchies of happiness

Railway infrastructure and suburban subject formation in Berlin and Cairo around 1900

Joseph Ben Prestel

This paper analyzes the development of suburbs in Berlin and Cairo at the turn of the 20th century from a comparative perspective. Focusing on the interrelation of a critique of the city, suburban railways and the promotion of specific subjectivities, I argue that railway infrastructure offered new ways of social distinction for the middle classes in Berlin and Cairo. Trains and train stations were not only a means of transportation that linked the cities to their suburbs. They also became incorporated into practices that contemporaries described as producing suburban subjects. Contemporary publications presented train rides as providing room for reading, rationalizing technology or enjoying the historic landscape. These activities were seen as central contributions to the production of happy and healthy middle-class suburbanites, who differed from the lower classes of the city. I argue that this development ultimately sheds light on a shared history of subject formation in Berlin and Cairo. While acknowledging differences in power structures, the paper thus calls for a bridging of historical research on European and non-European cities.

Key words: Cairo, Berlin, suburbs, railway, subject formation

When the German traveler Hermann Steckner (1892, 112) stayed in Cairo during the 1890s, he reported on the habits of tourists visiting a number of sights in and around the Egyptian capital: ‘The visit to Sakkara and Memphis is often combined with a visit to Helwan, a desert town that is beginning to gain about the same importance that Potsdam has acquired for Berlin.’ Steckner explained that Helwan increasingly attracted visitors because it was a healthier place to live than Cairo itself. In Helwan, Steckner noted, the air is cleaner and ‘one can get away from the distractions

of the big city’ (122). Steckner’s likening of Helwan to Potsdam and his reference to health advantages shed light on a parallel phenomenon in the histories of Berlin and Cairo: the emergence of suburbs as new places for healthy and happy living at the turn of the 20th century. In the present paper, I argue that railway infrastructure played a central role in the development of this shared history. Highlighting the enabling function of railway infrastructure, I claim that the development of train transportation connecting Berlin and Cairo to the areas surrounding both cities ultimately contributed

to new forms of social distinction. Contemporary texts in the German and the Egyptian capitals depicted inhabitants of suburbs as healthy and happy subjects. In this context, inhabitants of the suburbs were contrasted to urban dwellers, who were shown as being affected by the detrimental effects of city life. Rather than taking these claims at face value, the present paper seeks to dissect the subject formation that arguments of suburban health and happiness contained.

The histories of Berlin and Cairo are traditionally written in two different regional contexts. Whereas Berlin is usually seen as being an example of ‘the European city’, the history of the Egyptian capital is often described in the context of ‘the Ottoman city’ or ‘the colonial city’ (Lenger 2012; Mitchell 1991). While such regional approaches have produced highly insightful studies, they risk obscuring parallels that cut across preconceived geographical units of analysis. Historians have recently begun to stress the importance of long-distance interactions especially for the time since the mid-19th century, at times referring to this period as ‘a remarkable surge of globalization’ (Osterhammel 2014, 711). Drawing on these insights, the present paper argues that a comparative look at the history of infrastructure and suburban development in Berlin and Cairo can unearth similarities between the historical trajectories of two cities that are usually seen as being fundamentally different. While differences between the power structures in the two cities, notably in the form of colonialism, persist, the similarities between Berlin and Cairo question the supposed incomparability of European and non-European urban history. In the present paper, I will argue that the shared history of social differentiation in the two cities was ultimately tied to parallels in technological development and social formation. Subverting today’s categories of area studies, the relational position of Berlin and Cairo in increasingly global flows of capital and knowledge ties the histories of their suburbs together.

Middle-class critiques of the city

A number of bleak portrayals of urban change circulated in Berlin and Cairo at the end of the 19th century. Since the bankruptcy of the Egyptian state in 1876 and the British occupation in 1882, Arabic-language writings had spread in Cairo that identified the city as a place of corruption (*fasad*). Readers of newspapers and magazines such as *al-Tankit wa al-Tabkit*, *al-Mushir* or *Misbah al-Sharq* could learn that in recent years the Egyptian capital had developed into a hotbed of prostitution, alcohol consumption and gambling. In such portrayals it was stressed that this development affected the minds and bodies of men living in the city. Several authors claimed that by drinking alcohol or indulging in seedy entertainment, men would destroy their health and ruin their ‘rationality’ (*‘aql*) (Gasper 2008; Mitchell 1991; Prestel 2013). Depictions of the destructive effects of Cairo were often combined with a critique of colonial power relations in the city. Authors regularly stressed that practices such as alcohol consumption and prostitution had spread under the impact of the British occupation of Egypt. In a series of fictional accounts portraying city life that was printed in the newspaper *Misbah al-Sharq*, one of the characters asks:

‘What can you say about a government which [...] approves of the spread of these vile practices that result in the squandering of wealth and the destruction of body and soul; a government which has fashioned a necklace out of its capital city with taverns, gaming-rooms and brothels as its centerpiece?!’ (Allen 1992, 331)

During the same period, publications in Berlin highlighted the detrimental consequences of living in the German capital. The main thread of such texts emphasized that phenomena like noise, prostitution or alcohol consumption would ruin people’s nerves and render them ‘nervous’ (Killen 2006; Morat 2013; Radkau 1998). These

accounts often focused on Berlin's central area, especially the neighborhood around Friedrichstraße, which had developed into an entertainment district since the 1870s (Becker 2011). While portrayals of the negative effects of life in Berlin did not directly address power relations, negative depictions of the city's impact on its inhabitants were regularly paired with a critique of recent changes. Around 1900, authors in Berlin claimed that changed social structures, such as an increasingly demanding work life, would contribute to the nerve-racking activities of Berliners. This connection is exemplified in the statement of the director of a therapeutic bathhouse in Berlin, who highlighted a problematic connection between work, spare time and city life:

'The manager or merchant, who is tired and has strained nerves from his professional activity in the evening and who is furthermore grumpy, angry, and full of bad mood, because of numerous unpleasant business affairs, should relax at home in the midst of his family or should go for a walk outside. Instead, he does the exact opposite. He wants to get rid of his bad mood, of his business frustration through entertainment [...] It is obvious that the tired body cannot relax in this pleasure seeking, nerve-racking activity.' (Canitz 1892, 10)

At the turn of the 20th century, contemporaries in Berlin and Cairo thus voiced a critique of the impact of both cities on their inhabitants. While authors in the German capital did not directly discuss questions of power, debates in Cairo were often infused with an opposition against the British occupation. At the same time, however, critiques in both cities were concerned with the effects of recent urban change. Furthermore, these critiques were mostly penned by and aimed at members of the middle classes. Newspapers in Cairo presented men, who destroyed their bodies in the city's bars, dance halls and gambling parlors, as belonging to the middle class. The magazine *al-Hilal* pointed out that the detrimental

behavior of men was connected to the phenomenon of spare time (*sa'at al-faragh*) that spread with the increasing number of people working in desk jobs (Anonymous 1894). An article in the newspaper *al-Mushir* portrayed mid-level government employees as being particularly prone to the indulgence in cognac and women at the infamous bars of the Azbakiyya district (Anonymous 1896). The close relation between a critique of Cairo and the middle class is also apparent in these articles' place of publication: the city's Arabic-language newspapers and magazines catered mainly to middle-class urban dwellers, who were literate and didn't consume the French-language press of the upper class (Kholoussy 2010, 2). In Berlin, negative portrayals of city life also appeared in magazines and newspapers that were popular among middle-class circles. According to a number of these depictions, becoming nervous in the city often meant that bourgeois men failed to control their emotions (Rabinbach 1992, 146–178). As entertainment was a common thread of critical portrayals of Cairo and Berlin, these writings showed the risk of middle-class consumers becoming indistinguishable from other actors in the entertainment industry. As prostitutes, pimps or bartenders were associated with the corrupting influences of the urban environment, they took the role of a dangerous other with which male members of the middle class were not supposed to mingle.

Under the impact of the portrayal of harmful practices in the city, various contemporaries in Berlin and Cairo argued for the need of 'reform'. The movement for the reform of life (*Lebensreform*) in the German capital, for instance, propagated a 'healthy' and 'natural' lifestyle through such diverse activities as naturopathy, dietary reform and nudism (Möhring 2004, 13). A number of actors from Cairo's middle class subscribed to comparable ideas about the need for reform (*islah*). In 1902, a civil servant in the Egyptian postal service named Muhammad 'Umar noted in his book *The Present State*

of the Egyptians or the Secret of their Retrogression that young middle-class men would often ruin their health by sitting for long hours due to their work, drinking alcohol or amusing themselves in the city. ‘Umar (1902) continued that these men should rather ‘train their bodies with healthy exercises’ outside of the city, as this was ‘a reason for the rise and success of the European people, especially the English’ (199). Also in 1902, the neurologist Albert Eulenburg urged Berliners to leave the city and move to the suburbs for the sake of their nerves (Eulenburg 1902). Eulenburg and ‘Umar’s statements are indicative of a common trend in Berlin and Cairo at the turn of the 20th century. While middle-class authors in the Egyptian and the German capitals criticized the effects of the city, they shared the notion that living at a distance from its central neighborhoods would bring betterment. As I will argue in the next section, the hope of middle-class authors in the positive effects of living outside of the city contributed to the rise of suburbs in Berlin and Cairo. The railway was the infrastructure enabling this trend.

The railway as an infrastructure of segregation

In 1840, Berlin’s first long-distance railway line was opened connecting the Prussian capital to the city of Köthen in Anhalt. During the following decade, a number of railway lines were added, linking Berlin to cities like Stettin in the northeast (1843) and Hamburg in the north (1846). After the formation of the German Empire in 1871, Berlin increasingly turned into an international transportation hub within Europe (Erbe 1988). In Egypt, the first railway lines were built between 1852 and 1858 connecting Cairo to Alexandria in the north and to Suez in the east (Barak 2013). During these years, one of the main purposes of the new infrastructure was to facilitate the overland route between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea

that was central for the British Empire as it considerably shortened the journey from Great Britain to India (Huber 2013). After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Egyptian State Railways began concentrating more on transportation within the country—a shift that resulted in growing railway connections to and from the Egyptian capital (Barak 2013). During the last quarter of the century, trains also gained importance for transportation within the two cities, contributing to the incorporation of their surrounding areas. In Cairo, the first suburban railway was opened in 1877. This line connected the newly created suburb of Helwan that lay approximately 15 miles south of the city with a station at Muhammad Ali Square in Cairo (Salim 2006). In Berlin, the first suburban railway lines to Steglitz and Lichterfelde were opened during the 1860s (Richter 1988). The introduction of the city railway (*S-Bahn*) in 1882 further increased the usage of trains for transportation within Berlin.

While these dynamics reflect a remarkable expansion of transportation infrastructure, the history of railways in Berlin and Cairo was never simply a story of technological innovation or linear growth. In one of his perceptive essays, the late Tony Judt (2010) noted that 19th-century railways accentuated social differences in many ways, not least by the fact that they compartmentalized passengers into different classes. Power structures were built into the spread of railway infrastructure in Berlin and Cairo from the beginning. Trains in 19th-century Egypt were operated in a way that provided a different service to different social groups. On the Cairo–Alexandria line, which was often used by Europeans and upper class Egyptians, the Egyptian State Railways used its newest and fastest trains. In 1902, these trains covered the distance of 130 miles between the two cities in three hours and 50 minutes. On a line between Luxor and Aswan that was often used by lower class Egyptians, other trains were used. In this case, the distance of 130 miles was covered in nine hours (Barak 2013). Berliners were

also familiar with the different treatment of different social classes on trains. Besides the division according to ticket prices, a special place was reserved for the high nobility. An article in the newspaper *Berliner Gerichtszeitung* from 1873 recalled an incident in which a famous actress had refused to give up her wagon to the King of Prussia, when his personal train from Potsdam to Berlin was not running. According to the newspaper, the woman's behavior resulted in serious consequences: 'The police of Berlin never forgave [the actress] for this escapade and the young lady was soon told to leave the beautiful city on the Spree as soon as possible' (Anonymous 1873).

While these examples illustrate how existing power structures could be inscribed into the use of trains, the railway infrastructure in both cities also allowed for new practices of social distinction. By offering a new connection to the vicinity of the city, trains allowed people to work in the city and to live at a distance from its center. Real estate companies and state agencies in Berlin and Cairo quickly seized on this opportunity. The first planned housing estates that were explicitly built for Berliners at a distance from the city's existing neighborhoods began to develop during the 1860s (Bernhardt 2008). Neighborhoods, such as Lichterfelde or Westend, first developed slowly as they were lacking a viable traffic connection to the city. Westend, for instance, was connected to Berlin only by a regular horse-drawn omnibus service via Charlottenburg. Towards the end of the 19th century, however, real estate investors cooperated with private railway companies and the state in connecting Berlin's suburbs to the city, after which these suburbs began to grow rapidly. Following the announcement of an improved railway connection through the *Wannseebahn* in 1887, the population of Lichterfelde increased considerably from 5899 inhabitants in 1885 to 34,311 inhabitants in 1905 (Wolfes 1997, 70). At the same time, several new suburbs such as Grunewald (1887), Nikolaissee (1901) and Frohnau

(1907) mushroomed along other railway lines to the north and southwest of the German capital. The social composition of Berlin's burgeoning suburbs was dominated by the middle and upper classes. Historians have noted in this context that the spread of suburbs propelled a process of social segregation (Wolfes 1997; Reif 2008). Whereas especially middle and lower class city dwellers had mixed in the older neighborhoods, several of Berlin's new suburbs did not allow for this kind of social mixing. The Baedeker guidebook hinted at the beginning of this process in 1905:

'All over the town we find on the same plots expensive residences in front and cheaper ones behind, thus causing a great mixture of all classes of the inhabitants [...] It is only in recent years that some of the suburbs have been laid out on the villa system.' (Baedeker 1905, 54)

In Cairo, the development of neighborhoods such as Heliopolis, 'Abbasiyya and Helwan reflects a similar dynamic. Built as a spa town south of the Egyptian capital around 1870, Helwan boasted a spring of sulfurous water, hotels and numerous plots of land for real estate development. For a long time, however, the town failed to attract visitors—even after a railway connected Helwan to Cairo in 1877. In a letter to the ruler of Egypt Khedive Tawfiq, the medical director of Helwan Franz Engel-Bey described the spa town in 1883 as being in a state of demise:

'Despite all of my efforts, I could not attract patients or cure them [...] Things [here] are still the same and life is pretty sad: a work as a doctor that only gives me little earnings, which barely allow me to live here in the desert.' (printed in Salim 2006, 359)

After the private Suarez Company had taken over the railway services between Cairo and Helwan from the state during the late 1880s, more trains were used on this line and ticket prices were reduced. In 1890, the Helwan–

Cairo line also became more attractive for commuters working for the government, since it now departed from the more centrally located train station at Bab al-Luq, where a number of ministries were (Cartwright and Wright 1909; Pflugradt Abd al-Aziz 1994; Salim 2006). The new railway connection contributed to the dynamic growth of Helwan. Whereas there had been about 140 houses in Helwan in 1888, this number had risen to more than 800 in 1903 with a population of around 3000 (Pflugradt Abd al-Aziz 1994, 268; Arnaud 1998, 250). Autobiographies as well as debates in Arabic-language newspapers about the establishment of a secondary school illustrate that middle-class residents, who worked in Cairo, contributed to Helwan's growing population (Prestel 2013; Ryzova 2014). Robert Ilbert's study of Heliopolis shows how a private company developed a similar suburb north of Cairo with the help of a new tramway line. Ilbert (1981, 119) notes that Heliopolis—just like Helwan—attracted a number of Cairo's middle-class residents. As members of the middle class left the central neighborhoods of the Egyptian capital, the spread of suburbs led to an increasing social segregation (Arnaud 1998). The conjuncture of new railway connections and the increased popularity of suburban living among the middle classes of Berlin and Cairo thus shows the role of the railway as an infrastructure of segregation.

Suburban subject formation and the railway

In Berlin and Cairo, suburban living was often presented as a project of reform. In the context of negative portrayals of city life, contemporary authors argued that living at a distance from the city would turn people into healthy and happy subjects. While trains enabled members of the middle class to leave the city and reform their bodies and minds, the railway was more than an 'external' aspect of this subject

formation. Sources from Berlin and Cairo illustrate how this infrastructure became a central component of an imagined new, mostly male, suburban subject.

During the 1890s, at least two Arabic-language booklets were printed that listed the advantages of Helwan. In 1894, a teacher of physics, chemistry and natural history at the teachers college (*Dar al-'Ulum*) in Cairo named Ahmad 'Abd al-'Aziz published *The Clarity of Evidence for the Good Qualities and Advantages of Helwan*. On more than 40 pages, 'Abd al-'Aziz (1894) argues in detail that living in Helwan is healthier than living in Cairo, comparing such aspects as the quality of housing, the climate or the possibilities for bodily exercise. A physician called Ahmad Bey Afandi al-Shafi'i published another booklet entitled *The Health of Bodies in the Resort Helwan* in 1897. Similar to the first example, this booklet stresses that living in Helwan brings considerable health benefits compared to living in Cairo (al-Shafi'i 1897). An article in the newspaper *al-Mushir* illustrates that such arguments were prominent within middle-class circles. In the article, the newspaper recommends its readers to buy the 'study' on Helwan by the 'respectable' doctor al-Shafi'i (Anonymous 1897).

In the depictions of Helwan, as well as in other portrayals of Cairo's suburbs, male inhabitants were shown to be healthy and happy subjects. These suburban men were not only presented as rational human beings with a fully functioning body, but living outside of the city was also portrayed as improving their family and community life. In these representations, the railway was more than a material factor that stood outside of male subjectivities. Trains could rather be incorporated into such discourses as a means to produce health, happiness (*sa'ada*) and rationality (*'aql*). Ahmad 'Abd al-'Aziz (1894, 38), for instance, listed the detailed prices and timetable for the trains between Cairo and Helwan in his booklet, claiming that taking the train would cost as much as taking a donkey to work in Cairo.

Furthermore, the train ride from the suburb into the city was shown as a valuable practice in itself, as passengers could gaze at the Nile, the desert and the ruins flying by:

‘The eyes are delighted and the heart is happy. One sees the ancient Egyptians and their high determination, fame, and elevated repute. On the right side of the Nile is the life and soul of Egypt.’ (‘Abd al-‘Aziz 1894, 39)

This representation of the train as improving subjects was not uncommon to Arabic-language publications in late 19th-century Egypt. In his novel *‘Alam al-Din*, the former minister of education and public works Ali Mubarak depicted riding the train as a practice that offered the possibility to educate Egyptians. Mubarak describes in a scene how a religious scholar from Cairo is riding a train to Alexandria together with an orientalist from England. As the train produces various kinds of movements and noises, the religious scholar recalls unsettling things that his fellow-countrymen say about trains, likening them to ghosts and djinns. Trying to stay ‘rational’, he turns to the Englishman who ‘calms his heart’ by providing technical explanations for the things that happen on the train (Mubarak 1882). As On Barak (2013) has shown, such accounts illustrate that notions of rationality and progress within the Egyptian middle class at the end of the 19th century could be intimately tied to trains. Drawing on Barak’s argument, the portrayals of trains as enabling the middle class to keep a healthy distance from the city and produce happiness can be described as a mechanism of social distinction. While the railway infrastructure enabled an increasing social segregation in Cairo, it also provided a means of fostering a distinct middle-class subjectivity. The healthy, happy and rational men living in the suburbs could be portrayed as being distinct from the city’s lower classes and the irrational ‘Oriental’ that British colonial officers depicted in their justifications of colonial rule.

In Berlin, similar publications praised the positive effects of living in the suburbs. In 1908, a brochure with the title *To the Suburbs! Cues and Advices for Everybody, Who Wants to Get Out* stated that living in the suburbs would foster ‘new material and psychological values’ (*In die Vororte!* 1908, 30). This brochure stressed that Berlin’s restlessness and noise would ‘overstrain’ people’s nerves: ‘The incredibly high percentage of big city dwellers among the patients of our insane asylums is the best illustration for this’ (*In die Vororte!* 1908, 5). Living in the suburb, on the other hand, would benefit body and mind, as it provided people with sun, fresh air, calm and a connection to nature. In the booklets, pamphlets and manuals for suburban living, the railway played a prominent role. Future suburban house-owners were advised to pay attention to the ‘means of transportation, especially the railway’ when choosing their new home (*In die Vororte!* 1908, 9). In these publications, the railway was, however, not merely a matter of getting from one point to another, but became incorporated into middle-class practices of social distinction. Addressing readers who would refrain from moving to the suburbs because of ‘the long commute’, *To the Suburbs!* notes:

‘We would like to ask the question: Who lives in Berlin and can completely avoid the use of a means of transportation? The overcrowding of the tramways in the morning gives probably the best answer: only a very small percentage of the population. The rest takes 20, 30, 40 minutes, and even longer to get to work. Sometimes they even have to cover a large distance on foot. The timetables show that the inhabitants of the suburbs do not need to ride for much longer, sometimes even less. Moreover, no one will deny that it is more convenient, for instance during the winter to read the newspaper in the heated railway compartment than to be cold in the tramway or to let three or four wagons pass by because they are full. Furthermore, it is more economical to use thirty minutes for a ride and reading the newspaper than to wait for ten minutes, ride for twenty minutes, and

use thirty minutes for reading the newspaper at home, because reading in the tramway is a questionable pleasure.' (*In die Vororte!* 1908, 7)

This description of the daily commute resonates with various contemporary middle-class values in Germany from economic productivity to newspaper reading. At the same time, suburban train stations could also be seen as the expression of a specific male, middle-class subjectivity. A publication on Lichterfelde, for instance, noted in 1893 the importance that inhabitants of the suburb had accorded to the appearance of train stations in recent years:

'The objective was to let the stranger and everybody else who sets foot in Lichterfelde be greeted with a friendly and pleasant impression; this is even more important as the train stations are and will indeed be the most important parts of the neighborhood.' (Lüders 1893, 70)

The architecture of Lichterfelde's main train station reflected ideas of pleasant living and bourgeois sophistication, as the building was designed in the style of the North-Italian renaissance. This design could conjure images of cities such as Sienna or Florence—two tourist destinations of Germany's middle classes at the time. Lichterfelde's main train station also provided room for practices of political participation of the middle class, since it was the seat of the local municipal council until 1893 (Wolfes 1997). In this way, trains and train stations were not only shown as transporting middle-class Berliners to the suburbs, but also as contributing to their distinct subjectivity.

Conclusion: hierarchies of happiness and their deviations

In practice, the hierarchies of happiness in Berlin and Cairo constantly risked failing. The railway was a center of anti-colonial

workers' protests in Egypt during the first decades of the 20th century (Barak 2013; Beinun and Lockman 1987). Railway workers' strikes and demonstrations show the relation of social groups beyond the middle class with the traffic infrastructure of the Egyptian capital. As the case of strikes illustrates, these relations carried the potential of actively undercutting the railway connections that were seen as fostering middle-class subjectivities. In Berlin, railway infrastructure was also presented as having potentially negative effects for the middle class, such as posing a threat for suburbanites' strong nerves. While the philosopher Georg Simmel stressed the importance of good traffic connections to get into the German capital for work, the railway could come too close for his comfort. He and his family moved out of the neighborhood of Charlottenburg when works for a subway line made his home too noisy. Following their move to Westend, Simmel's wife Gertrud wrote to a friend: 'We live as quiet as you and possibly a bit more rural and we are very happy about the change' (Simmel 1902, 371).

Railway infrastructures enabled the rise of suburbs in a variety of settings at the turn of the 20th century. In Berlin and Cairo, trains allowed city dwellers to work in the city and live at a distance from its central neighborhoods. However, the railway was more than just a link between these two cities and their suburbs. In both settings, trains and train stations provided the means of a specific subject formation. The male inhabitants of suburbs that were presented in Arabic and German texts were healthy, happy and sophisticated subjects with nerves of steel or a strong rationality. Railway infrastructure was shown as contributing to these traits through practices like newspaper reading, gazing out of the window or the use of a specific architecture. These arguments show that it was not only similar technologies that could be found in Berlin and Cairo. The concept of the negative effects of the city on body and mind also reveals a shared

knowledge about the urban realm. Furthermore, the role of suburban housing as a way of differentiating middle-class subjects from lower class city dwellers reflects similar practices of becoming a subject in the German and the Egyptian capitals. Parallel infrastructures in the two cities came with a parallel subject formation. The history of railway infrastructure in Berlin and Cairo thus points to urban networks beyond Europe in which technologies, a similar knowledge about the city and subject formation circulated at the turn of the 20th century. By tracing these networks, historical research can contribute to a more global kind of urban studies, rather than reiterate the regional categories of classic accounts of urban change.

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