

The World as Commons: A Cultural-Cognitive Framework For Sustainability

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1. Introduction

In the cultural system sustainability is conventionally associated, within a parallel view, to physical decay and to financial weakness. Although the two areas are not strictly related some reciprocal influence may occur, since on one hand maintenance and restoration can be harmed by tight budgets, and on the other the range of possible investments and expenditures can be prejudiced by the needs of material survival.

Cultural heritage, both material and intangible, faces problems of sustainability within the shared desire to transmit their enjoyment to next generations (more in general, to future demand) with no dimensional reduction. Keeping it safe, whole and financially sound is therefore a necessary, but not sufficient condition for its proper enjoyment, whose root, glossary and value hierarchy is shaped by the amount, variety and consistency of knowledge crafted, elaborated and exchanged about its historical, technical, social, symbolic and economic meaning and content. With no technical and critical elaborations we would end up transmitting mere stones and dumb artifacts to next generations. We need to focus upon cognitive sustainability.

This paper explores the cognitive framework of sustainability, interpreted as a cultural commons. The concept itself of sustainability is, in facts, embedded in and shaped by culture: cultural habits and social norms affect our behaviour and our relationship with other humans and the environment, determining our willingness to contribute collectively to a future in which both quantity and quality of our endowment has not been reduced or drained through time.

Being culture-bound, cognitive sustainability can be interpreted as a cultural commons: a form of cultural capital generated, managed and fed by a community. Being a cultural commons, cognitive sustainability implies collective responsibility and a pluralist approach to sustainability issues. A decision-making gap exists, however, between policymakers and society: in spite of the interest placed in community engagement, most policy solutions are still market-oriented and top-down shaped.

As a consequence, it is necessary to rethink institutional action and community engagement: when understood as cultural commons, cognitive sustainability becomes an appropriate framework for interaction between local communities and institutions,

where decentralization, social interaction and education play a crucial role, and centralized control is mediated by collective action aimed at sustainable development.

The first section introduces a theoretical framework, investigating behavioural and social sciences: the notions of sustainability empathy (Font, Garay, Jones, 2016)¹ and of cognitive sustainability are introduced, as they prove crucial in understanding cultural instances behind the personal and social motivations of people in acting sustainably. Since sustainable development is a collective elaboration, determined by a set of cultural norms shared by a community and strictly related to the management of common-pool resources, it is possible to understand cognitive sustainability as a cultural commons.

The second section illustrates how the features of cognitive sustainability as a cultural commons shed a light on fruitful ways of eliciting sustainable behaviours: cultural commons, as well as physical commons, prove effective when managed by bounded communities with a self-determined set of rules, effective monitoring, gradual sanctions. Not being imposed from external institutions, such rules and sanctions prove site-specific and generate a higher moral affection in individuals, proving environmentally, socially and cognitively sustainable.

This raises crucial consequences for policy design and regulation, which are dealt with in the third section. The two social dilemmas typically associated with cultural commons can be overlooked effectively: the free riding dilemma is faced through spontaneous monitoring and social sanctions on the part of the community, while the uncertainty of transmission is ensured by inter-institutional interaction between communities and international institutions. The adoption of market-based solutions, though necessary in limiting the environmental damages of extractivist economies, do not implement cognitive sustainability in society, which calls instead for negotiation and learning within and among communities: such objectives need to be pursued through education, delegation and decentralization together with new and more sustainable forms of shared management of resources.

In conclusion, understanding cognitive sustainability as a cultural commons helps shape a more efficient institutional action: the way cultural commons are consistently built and maintained by communities prove, in a sustainability context, that informed local regulation and flexible social interactions are more beneficial than hard regulation in fostering sustainability empathy and implementing collective engagement.

2. Defining terms and boundaries: the existing framework for culture and sustainable development

2.1 Laying the foundations for debate: from the Brundtland report to the three pillars of sustainable development

¹ The definition is borrowed from Xavier Font, Lluís Garay, and Steve Jones, "A social cognitive theory of sustainability empathy", *Annals of Tourism Research*, no. 58 (2016): 65-80. Sustainability empathy is here intended, in a broader sense, as sustainability awareness.

The stringent necessity to push global development towards a sustainable dimension has progressively imposed a shift from theoretical enquiry to the quest for operational solutions. A set of definitions is now broadly recognized, when thinking about sustainable development, mainly afferent to two, tightly interconnected theoretical spheres: the former has contributed to shaping a univocal definition of sustainable development (that of the World Commission on Environment and Development, 1986 - the so called "Brundtland Report") while the latter has defined the fields of action by identifying three pillars, the environmental, the economic and the social, of sustainable development (Barbier, 1987; Purvis, Mao, Robinson, 2018²). Today this consolidated theoretical basis informs decision-making processes and represents the core vocabulary of sustainability programmes and projects at an international level.

The univocal nature of the Brundtland nomenclature, and its declination into three clear and distinct spheres of action, has contributed to the belief that it is exhaustive and complete in tackling the complex issues related to sustainability. And yet, the theoretical debate over a proper definition of sustainable development is not over yet, as cognitive theories on sustainability are paving the way towards new understandings of the term not just on an institutional level, but especially at a social one (Byrch et al., 2014), and as a growing debate is gaining relevance on an international scale concerning the role of culture in sustainable development.

The matter is far from being a mere punctilious controversy, as doubts arise on whether the Brundtland view accounts for all factors contributing to sustainable development for our planet, or if more transversal alternatives are needed. Culture, in particular, has been pointed out as the main candidate for an established role within the sustainability discourse, as research begins to investigate the hypothesis of culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development (Throsby, 1995; Burford et al., 2013; Dessein et al., 2015). Definitional issues have been inspected at different scales, and from a variety of perspectives, which can be summarised in three theoretical streams.

2.2 The shades of discussion on culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development

At a larger scale, a recent study by Dessein et al. (2015) has drafted a matrix hypothesising three different interactions between culture and the other pillars of sustainable development³. The first hypothesis sees culture as a fourth, autonomous pillar of sustainable development, but is soon discarded by the authors because "*it is sometimes too easily limited to a narrow definition of culture as the arts and creative-cultural sector*". The second definition of culture is that of a mediating force between conflicting aspects of (or between different, culture-bound views on) sustainable development. The third intends culture in the broadest possible sense as the very core

² The paper presents quite a complete account of the conceptual origins of sustainability and of the terminology concerning its three pillars. See Ben Purvis, Young Mao, and Darren Robinson, Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins, *Sustainability Science*, 14, no.3 (2018): 681-695.

³ Joost Dessein, Katriina Soini, Graham Fairclough and Lummina Horlings, ed., *Culture in, for and as sustainable development: conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 investigating cultural sustainability*, University of Jyväskylä, 2015.

and foundation of sustainability, “*Culture in this approach refers to a worldview, a cultural system guided by intentions, motivations, ethical and moral choices*”; being thought to encompass all three aspects of cultural sustainability. This approach is finally the preferred one in the study.

Besides this broad, somewhat universal definition of culture, a second scale in the theoretical discourse is found in the research of David Throsby (1995), a pioneer in coining the term of cultural sustainable development, which he defined as both encompassing

*the idea of cultural development in its own right, according art and culture an independent and valued role in their own terms within society, and culture as a set of attitudes and practices that can be instrumental in supporting, constraining and/or contributing to economic and social development in the widest sense.*⁴

The idea of culture embraced by the first theoretic perspective, the broadest one, is here taken into account by Throsby, who nonetheless identified a more “operational” definition of the term, expressed in the attribution to art and culture of an *independent and valued role within society*. To Throsby’s systemic definition is subtended the notion of cultural capital (first identified by Bourdieu, 1986); not differently from other forms of capital accounted for in the sustainability discourse (the natural, the physical, the social), it needs to be produced and maintained so as not to reduce future enjoyment of cultural capital stock, while presently ensuring intra-generational equity.

At the social and organisational level of analysis, almost no research exists inspecting the relationship between culture and sustainability – or, better, it is exclusively related to the culture of sustainability, and not on the sustainability of culture. It is more common, in the business domain, to speak of corporate social responsibility as of the entrepreneurial culture of sustainability⁵, or to refer to it as cognitive sustainability (among others, Kreps, Monin, 2011; Eberhardt-Toth, Wasieleski, 2013; Hockerts, 2014), underlying the motivations and semiotic structures of business decision-making in relations to sustainability issues.

Similarly, sociocultural superstructures of sustainability are inspected in some research (Ballard, 2000; Cochrane, 2006; van Dam, van Trijp, 2011; Boccella, Cassalia, Salerno 2014). And yet, two corollaries emerge from the correlation between culture and sustainability at the social and organisational level: the former is that culture, intended as cultural capital, underlying to most forms of production, and calling for production and maintenance of such capital which are sustainable in time, is hardly ever present in academic research concerning business. The latter is that research on sustainability,

⁴ David Throsby, *Culture, economics and sustainability*, Journal of Cultural Economics, 19, no 3 (1995): 199-206.

⁵ A complete account of the research on Corporate Social Responsibility is provided by Hernandez Aguinis, and Ante Glavas, “What we know and what we don’t know about corporate social responsibility: a review and research agenda”, *Journal of Management*, 38 no. 4 (2012): 932-969.

even when inspecting cultural superstructures at the sociological level, exclusively focuses on culture shaping demand functions and consumption preferences, thus limiting the impact of culture within a market economy perspective.

What emerges from this theoretical map is that the relationship between culture and sustainable development is, at best, expressed in too general terms, which do not provide us with solid ground for policy action featuring cultural characteristics; at the worst, it is in fact a non-interrelation made of two colliding scenarios, one of which (culture) is used in a simplistic, instrumental fashion and merely subtending to the economic exploitative modalities of natural resources.

3. The cognitive-cultural dimension of sustainability: definitional frontiers and operational opportunities

3.1 Overcoming narrowness in cultural categorisation

The spectrum of attributes which research has conferred to culture, then, ranges from the stringently functional attributes of culture and sustainable development at the business level, to the all-encompassing perspective on culture as the superstructure of sustainable action. If the one appears to be limiting the importance of culture by considering it as merely instrumental, almost a contemporary derivation of Benthamism, the other is similarly limiting in equalling culture to, literally, any sphere of human thought and action, providing for a definition whose broadness ends up being too general to be of any use.

It is widely acknowledged how the complexity of our ecosystem calls instead for an holistic approach to sustainability issues – as a consequence, it is all the more important to reach an holistic perspective on what culture is and how it can contribute to sustainable development in its entirety, in order to overcome the reductive dimensionality of the Brundtland view, and to combine qualitative to quantitative measurements of a sustainable growth. A more radical interpretation of culture is needed which embraces the seemingly separate dimensions of culture – an interpretation where radical means etymological, and where methodology follows ontology.

The term “culture”, which Raymond Williams thought of as “*one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language*” (1976), has in reality an origin which is rather plain and explicative in itself: the derivation is from the Latin word “*colere*”, which has very little to do with the way culture is intended today. Romans, whose semantics is amply adherent to the rural origins of their society, used the term to refer primarily to agriculture and cultivation, and it is only later that the term was translated to metaphorically fit the cultivation of the mind. It is, however, its original meaning which better serves the cause of sustainable development, as it subtends to the notion of “taking care of”: it is in this sense that culture links the two apparently contrasting views of culture within sustainability, that of culture as a superstructure and culture as human production of cultural goods and services.

The “taking care” assumed both at the origin of the term and at the core of what it expresses, implies care in management, affection in administration; specifically, it expresses an understanding of a territory and its identity which is internal to and mediated by a community, rather than by single individuals. While it is true that the cultural features of communities are already accounted for in the discourse on sustainability analysed in section 2, two new corollaries emerge from the “etymological perspective” on culture.

3.2 Towards cognitive sustainability: an etymological approach to culture

The former subtends a cultural dimension to the economic discourse in its market exchange dimension: the prevailing market economy approach prevails over considerations upon psychological and moral attachment of people to the ecosystem in which they are embedded: it is for this reason that the discourse on culture and economics in the sustainability domain is dominated by explicit (regulatory) or implicit (i.e. marketing, production and demand-shaping strategies) market incentives and sanctions. Throsby (2001) has pointed out that the main hiatus between these two spheres lies in the fact that economics, at least in its contemporary expression, is an individualistic science, while culture is a collective instance; as a consequence, market economy mechanisms cannot *per se* constitute valuable (or sufficient) incentives for individuals, as they frame the use of limited resources in the rational-individual modality of market economy consumption: culture, on the contrary, etymologically and factually mediates the relationship of humans with the environment at the collective level, and it is only at this level that sustainable behaviours can be achieved.

In such a respect we can highlight the specificity of culture as the source of the sustainability commons: its shared enjoyment multiplies the individual commitment aimed at its preservation, promotion and diffusion since it grants the active perception of value as a result of the width of demand: the more people enjoy culture as a cognitive elaboration the higher the value each of them perceive. Culture is made sustainable by the combination of awareness and responsibility; the paradox is that, adopting the textbook wisdom, both of them are selfish, and do not represent any anomalies. The symmetrical paradox is that the excess of protection (artworks locked in a deposit, for example) ends up weakening sustainability due to the absence or reduction of participation. The chain is quite simple: a) an artwork is held by a museum; b) the challenge is to facilitate the extraction of its value on the part of the demand; c) along with this a wide and deep interpretation (cognitive elaboration) is being developed; d) the object of enjoyment grows with time, and the extracted value is progressively higher; e) the awareness generates responsibility on the part of a wide and heterogeneous group ranging from specialized experts to simple consumers, granting sustainability from the technical and financial perspectives. Cultural sustainability is a self-multiplying commons, when properly managed and extensively enjoyed⁶.

⁶Michele Trimarchi, “Regulation, Integration and Sustainability in the Cultural Sector”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 10 no.5 (2004): 401-15.

At the origin of psychological motivations behind sustainable behaviours at a collective level, then, lies the “taking care of” places, artworks and intangible culture rather than a general and universal moral affection for the general issues of sustainable development. In this respect, Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory of sustainability empathy (1986, 1991, 2000, 2002) pointed out how *individuals are more likely to see moral consequences of actions with familiarity or proximity* (Font, Garay, Jones, 2016). Culture is the collective dimension of this proximity, and has found, throughout the centuries of pre-capitalist economies, an economic expression in the commons (Thompson, 1971, 1991; Ostrom, 1990; Wall, 2015). The commons, defined as collective forms of management of natural resources by a community with self-established rules and sanctions, were characterised by strong, culture-bound identity and regulation; such economic structure allows for the rectification of the idiosyncrasy between the presumably individualistic behaviour subtended to economics, and the collectivistic substratum of culture.

The latter difference with the conventional sustainability framework is still afferent to the economic sphere, but from a resource perspective. It has been previously emphasized how culture is not merely a superstructure affecting sustainability, but also a fundamental expression of intangible and symbolic human needs, manifested in the production of cultural goods and services (from sculptures to the performing arts, and the like), which compose the diversified cultural heritage of mankind. Such manifestations, however, are always thought of as separate from the natural sphere in the sustainability discourse. Dessein et al., as pointed out in 2., discarded the hypothesis that the cultural sector *within* society could be understood as a fourth autonomous pillar standing alongside the other three pillars of sustainable development, as this perspective would obscure “*culture’s relationship with nature*” (Dessein et al., 2015).

The dichotomy between human action and nature however seems inconsistent with the sustainable development framework – something which the UNESCO framework has amply acknowledged by identifying the notion of heritage landscape, where anthropic artefacts and creations are not just embedded in nature, but shape it and define it. Cultural heritage, including buildings and monuments, cannot be separated from its natural environment; it finds there its reason of being, but the reverse is also true: landscape is enriched of new value through the coexistence of anthropic and natural elements. The tight interconnection between human cultural creations, the value they generate for the community and the environment which such a community inhabits has been well underlined by Santagata throughout his research (2006, 2012). The physical preservation of landscape, a complex composition of culture and nature, passes through the community understanding of its proper value: it passes through cognitive sustainability.

3.3 Cognitive sustainability beyond future consumption: a new emphasis on the accumulation of cultural stock for a sustainable future

What is meant here by cognitive sustainability is the preservation of cultural heritage and, above all, the sustainable generation and transmission of heritage’s cultural value

within an ecosystem which is natural and anthropic at a time: conveying meaning and communicating a sense of belonging is preliminary to a more general affection to sustainability issues. This is valid for the management of natural resources of a determined area as well as the human creation within it: as pointed out by Cochrane (2005) *humans act on the basis of a cultural image of nature, rather than the actual structure of nature*. The Assam tea district in India, with its millenary heritage of tea cultivation and production; the Tuscany region, featuring age-old wineries and the Renaissance cultural itineraries; the traditional building techniques in the monumental city of Kathmandu: the cultural and natural dimensions of each cultural cluster are tightly, irreducibly interconnected, where culture is both the production of mores, practices, artefacts and a superstructure subtending to the caretaking of a territory.

The only possible way to preserve cultural heritage is to maintain its value – a shift from the obsession for physical preservation which does not minimise the relevance of the latter, but rather sets the cognitive basis for it and for the transmission of the real value of heritage's material appearance, too often underrated in heritage preservation strategies. Going beyond dimensional views of resource consumption which is intrinsic to the Brundtland discourse is a fundamental step towards achieving sustainability of a new sort: a holistic, comprehensive sustainability, where cultural identities and territorial preservation shape a sustainable ecosystem. Culture as a collective instance provides ground for such sustainable development by empowering mutualism and attachment, fostering creative solutions, building communities: above all, it is the understanding of the cultural value of landscapes, territories, and the resources within it, that communities are able to crucially develop what has been called sustainability empathy through the sense of proximity and belonging.

The preservation of cultural value should be dealt with from a non-prejudicial perspective. It does not require – as is normally believed – the transmission of some frozen object, but the continuous (unavoidably evolutionary and somehow unpredictable) elaboration of critical interpretations, filtered through new information, advanced technologies, emerging social orientations and the related value hierarchies. This implies that an appropriate preservation is granted by an intensive and extended enjoyment of culture, which would imply not only a clear encouragement of consumption crafting a wide range of options such as de-localization, night opening, etc., but also investments in critical elaboration, involving experts and professionals from many disciplines and providing their dialectic interpretation with credible incentives. It would generate a higher and more diffused responsibility, widening the scope of willingness-to-pay to a wide range of products and services, and also raising the willingness-to-donate. Sustainability becomes responsible sustainability.

4. Perspective for a new paradigm of sustainable development: introducing the cultural dimension

The matter of how this cultural sustainability can be achieved remains open to debate. It is nonetheless possible to draw some guidelines by further inspecting the notion of

cognitive sustainability understood as a community resource – that is, by understanding cognitive sustainability as a cultural commons.

The notion of cultural commons derives directly from that of commons, and is somehow subtended to it; differently from the collective management of common pool resources, however, cultural commons are a particular form of management of cultural resources, the latter being non-excludable, virtually inexhaustible, and above all cumulative: they are produced and maintained by the knowledge of a community, regardless of whether this community is geographically bound (which is the case when producing a cultural good within a certain geographic area) or distant in space (not differently from the scientific community of academia, characterised by the massive exchange of knowledge collectively produced within it (Bertacchini et al., 2012).

This proves particularly crucial, as cultural commons can in this respect represent the ideal way of putting the etymological meaning of culture into practice, both representing the flow of knowledge and culture necessary to maintain a cultural/heritage landscape at the local level, and offering the opportunity of knowledge exchange and sharing of best practices at the larger international scale.

As a consequence, the framework of cultural commons better serves the purpose of combining culture and economics in sustainable development, in alternative to the prevailing market economy approach, as it shapes the economy *in itself* by redefining actors and stakeholders within the sustainable development discourse.

Cognitive sustainability, that is the transmission of meaning and the generation of cultural value in natural and human heritage, is not simply limited in scope when sustainable development practices are delegated to market sanctions and top down approaches: it is hindered by a dramatic loss of responsibility on the side of individuals, while institutional attempts are made at automating responses to a cause with little or no cultural proximity to a community.

4.1 Communing responsibilities, sharing cultural heritage: guidelines for responsible sustainable development

The administrative shift implied by the communing of cognitive sustainability is undoubtedly a challenging one. And yet, it is preliminary to the regulation of market mechanisms and to any further policy design concerning local community delegation. the framework of cognitive sustainability intended as a cultural commons could balance local action to international cooperation and monitoring; it presupposes a stronger stress on education, on heritage communication and transmission, and on community cooperation through knowledge sharing and transmission. The actions proposed are a clear and flexible institutional acknowledgement of the role of communities in designing policies; the design of value-based indicators which account for the intangible sustainability values subtending to sustainable development; transversal actions which overcome the separateness of the three pillars and their sterile dimensional features; the substitution of a “preservation” approach to a “transmission” one, which allows for the sustainable generation and maintenance of cultural capital within ecosystems.

It is easily understood, and yet not obvious to admit, that a proper community delegation passes through a formal institutional recognition: without the proper acknowledgement of communities' responsibility, policy actions will hardly ever shift from top-down approaches to actual delegation. A balance is to be found between the bureaucratised institutionalisation of community involvement and a mere declaration of intents – as well as between overspecialised or oversimplified categories of intervention. International organisations and communities should, in this respect, engage in a cooperation which allows for recognising different communal forms of participation in different regional contexts.

A second necessary operation would be, then, that of better designing institutional matrixes and sustainability indicators which allow for communication flows at a local, regional, national and international level. Awareness about, care for and responsibility on localised items is a fundamental dimension of whole-of-society engagement in sustainable development at a local level, and would allow for the design of value-based indicators of sustainability (Burford et al., 2013). The quality of life, the diversity of cultural expressions, the impact of participative approaches to heritage transmission need to find proper representation in the measurement of sustainable modes of inhabiting ecosystems. The value-based approach to sustainable development passes through cultural mediation and the accumulation of a shared cultural stock on a territorial level, and yet provides an understandable toolkit for communication on a larger scale.

Transversal actions are required which overcome the simplifying separation between economic, social and environmental goals, to which cultural goals are obviously added. Cognitive sustainability implies the shaping of creative and resilient solutions for complex territorial spaces, tailor-made by the most diverse range of stakeholders, from cultural actors to engineers. The implementation of cross-sectoral networks and the creation of public spaces for encounters of different perspectives would allow for the potentially infinite number of information grafts and exchanges, enchainning a natural process of knowledge creation.

Preservation strategies should be replaced by a transmission approach: the maintenance of physical heritage stock from the past, or of natural resources, are but the emanations of a transmission process. At the core of cognitive sustainability lies the ability of communities to transmit and perpetuate the meaning of lifestyles, practices, artefacts and buildings – in other words, to attribute content and meaning to sustainability. The emphasis of the transmission approach should be then placed on sound educational practices which embrace the notion of natural and human heritage, on projects which link theory to practice, and on regional policy toolkits which materially enable communities to take part to the sustainable development of their region by interpreting local cultural instances, favouring mutuality, fostering practical applications of collective knowledge.

5. Conclusions

The conventional framework of sustainable development, flawed by the absence of a cultural dimension, has been questioned from different perspectives; the approaches to cultural sustainability, however, have either tended to an overgeneralised approach to the notion of culture, or to an uselessly instrumental view of it within market transactions, which does not acknowledge for the intangible values expressed by art and culture in people's life.

Cultural sustainability should be then intended as both a superstructure of sustainable behaviour, and a symbolic human instance manifested in the production of cultural goods and services; a second fracture is healed in understanding culture as the mediator between anthropic settlements and the natural environment, culture having shaped humans' relationship to nature. Such holistic perspective is reached through the idea of cognitive sustainability, that is through the transmission of meaning about human lifestyles, practices and artefacts in relations to the environment; cognitive sustainability is then intended as a preliminary step towards achieving sustainable development, in that it provides the content and context for sustainable behaviour.

Cognitive sustainability can only be pursued at a collective level, since the creation and maintenance of the cultural value of an eco-system is a cultural commons owned, enjoyed and reproduced by local communities. In order for cognitive sustainability to be achieved, then, it is necessary to redesign institutional action which clearly and flexibly acknowledges different forms of communities within the framework of policy design for sustainable development; the delegation to local communities could allow for the creation of a value-based sets of sustainability indicators which account for the cultural and intangible dimensions of sustainability, propaedeutic to the numeric ones emphasised by the Brundtland perspective; transversal and negotiated actions are needed in order for a more holistic approach to sustainability to emerge and tackle complex issues. Eventually, the preservation approach should be replaced by a transmission one, which ensures that value and knowledge about ecosystem and lifestyles within it are transmitted to future generations, in order to fill sustainable development with meaning that goes beyond mere immanence.

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