

Theorising power and resistance under contemporary capitalism: An interview with Nancy Fraser

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Abstract

In this interview, Fraser reflects on the meaning of the so-called ‘culture wars’ for theorising power and domination, the nature of contemporary struggles for liberation, the role the concept of labour could play in bringing those movements together in political action, and the wider theoretical and political work needed to achieve it. She also offers her assessment of some of the theoretical literature that has addressed those issues. In doing so, she both situates her own work within the wider tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory and clarifies her views on intersectionality theory.

Keywords

Contemporary, critical theory, power, capitalismresistance

Nancy Fraser (NF) is one of the most influential contemporary Marxist thinkers. As a critical theorist, she has paid particular attention to issues of power and domination throughout her career. But in contrast with many of her fellow Frankfurt School members, her theorisation of those issues has remained firmly grounded in a critique of capitalism. Much of her work has been devoted to elucidating the operations of power and domination under capitalism and, more recently, shedding light on the interconnections between diverse and seemingly discrete struggles for liberation.

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In this interview, which took place online in March 2024, Bice Maiguashca (BM) and Charles Masquelier (CM) are interested in bringing Fraser's theoretical contributions into dialogue with some key social and political developments marking contemporary capitalism. Here Fraser reflects on the meaning of the so-called 'culture wars' for theorising power and domination, the nature of contemporary struggles for liberation, the role the concept of labour could play in bringing those movements together in political action, and the wider theoretical and political work needed to achieve it. Fraser also offers her assessment of some of the theoretical literature that has addressed those issues. In doing so, she both situates her own work within the wider tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory and clarifies her views on intersectionality theory.

CM: In *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (2018), co-written with Rachel Jaeggi, you note and praise the fact that capitalism is now back on critical theory's radar (after being excluded from sustained critique in the later work of Habermas and the recognition work of Honneth). Capitalism, in fact, is very much on *your* own radar. I would argue it is central to it. But it was also central to the work of first-generation critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. I would therefore be interested in finding out where you situate your own work in relation to this generation of critical theory? What do you think your work shares with theirs and how do you think it differs from theirs?

NF: Let me start on the autobiographical plane. I'm basically a child of the New Left and my first introduction to critical theory was Marcuse, whose *One-Dimensional Man* (1991) made a big impression on me. Later in graduate school, I encountered Habermas, but I had very little experience of reading Adorno and Horkheimer and to this day I've always been somewhat wary of both of them. It's largely because of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997), which to me pushed the problem back so deeply into the historical and de-historicised anthropological level, that became an iron cage. The politics of what followed from the book contradicted my whole sense of someone who would come out of an activist experience and was trying to figure out what I could learn from and what I could contribute to critical theory as an intellectual counterpart, as it were, to the activism of the time. I found the book completely un-useful, even though it comprises brilliant interpretations of 'this' or 'that'. Later I discovered more of Adorno, in fact, I'm teaching him now, and he's truly brilliant. But, politically, I'm out of sync with him. In a way, the icon in the first generation remains Marcuse. Not because I myself have developed a sort of Freudo-Marxian strand of thought that I think represents one of his great contributions, but because I think he was really much more keyed into looking for real possibilities of transformation and the social forces driving it at the time. You put the question in terms of capitalism and all of them use terms like 'late capitalism' or the 'exchange society' as Adorno put it. It all comes out of Lukacs really, and I have more recently come to feel that this is all-too totalising. Capitalism is much more internally differentiated and contradictory as a social formation. So while the first generation certainly did put capitalism at the centre, they either de-historicised it or over-totalised it. I think our generation is looking more for the internal tensions and differentiations of the system. Part of that has to do with understanding how much more heterogeneous and varied the forms of social struggle and contestation are within capitalism. For the first generation, it was either the proletarian revolution or nothing, with the exception of Marcuse.

CM: Thank you. Moving forward to critical theory today. Would you say capitalism is also on the radar of Hartmut Rosa's own work and, if so, what would you say is distinctive about Rosa's own contribution to a critique of capitalism?

NF: He certainly uses the term and thinks it is at the centre of his work. I'm familiar with two phases of his work: 'acceleration' (Rosa, 2013) and 'resonance' (Rosa, 2019). I'm not sure what he's been doing since then. While the focus on acceleration is a contribution he makes to the study of capitalism, I am not so sure this is the central issue to worry about with regard to capitalist society. I think it's an analysis that should be integrated and you could argue David Harvey develops this kind of theme when he discusses the spatio-temporality of capitalism and so on. I am less happy with 'resonance' theory. To me, with this work, we are firmly within the realm of philosophical anthropology and communitarianism. It's an account of what the good political community that doesn't emerge out of a left-Hegelian historicising and understanding and is somewhat anchored and projected at the anthropological level. From my point of view, this is the wrong strategy for a critical theory. I'm very much on the left-Hegelian historicising side of this argument. I also think that the balance between community and individual is a problem and Hartmut is too far onto the communitarian side of it, which is not to say I want to embrace liberal individualism. Hartmut is an original thinker and I very much appreciate that. I also appreciate his attention to the phenomenology of life, particularly the many striking accounts of experience, and its impoverishment through consumerism, comprised in his work on resonance, etc. Maybe he belongs in a tradition like Simmel's. He's really a brilliant guy but this is still not exactly my idea of what critical theory of capitalism should be today.

BM: If the task of critical theory remains 'the self-clarification of the struggles of the age', then which struggles do critical theorists need to focus on today and why?

NF: Well I think that today it is especially important not to reserve the word 'struggle' for the good guys. The truly regressive, authoritarian, reactionary forces have truly come to the fore. I think it is more a question of not so much picking out the struggles that we like, but getting a sense of what the landscape is, what fault lines are, what the balance of forces is. A while back I opposed progressive neoliberalism and reactionary populism and was looking to the idea of how to construct a third force, and by this I do not mean anything Blairite. It seems to me that there are a fair amount of scattered forces that could coalesce into some kind of a third bloc. But the temptations that many of those forces face to ally again with the progressive neoliberals, out of the fear of reactionaries, is very strong. The key problem, I would say, is knowing exactly when this would happen. This is because I believe there will come a point when, if fascists are really at the door, it is necessary to ally with the neoliberals. We know how horribly misunderstood that question was in 1930s Germany. I don't think we're there now, and I think that there is still a space. So I'm interested in thinking of where and how it might be possible for the leftwing, potentially anti-capitalist currents, within feminism, within the abolitionist and anti-racist movement, within the anti-imperialist movement, within the labour movement, within the environmentalist movement, etc. Each of these movements in itself is complex and has a liberal wing, a pro-capitalist wing, an anti-capitalist wing, etc. For me the question is, on the one hand, how to counter that temptation to run back to liberals for protection and, on the other, think about whether it's possible to split off some

people drawn to reactionary populism. Today Donald Trump is supported by the majority of Latinos – more than Biden is – and is gaining support from African Americans, so it's not just support from the white industrial working class anymore. A much more forthright, pro-working class, line that integrates traditional class concerns such as precarity, security, decent standard of living, housing, health care, etc., with feminist, anti-racist, and environmentalist concerns is what the Left should be aiming for. My analysis is very coloured, it is true, by the situation in the US, but I think it is applicable far beyond the US borders. I wouldn't accept the idea that this is a purely US-centric political vision.

BM: Relatedly, we are both interested in understanding the origins and nature of our contemporary 'culture wars' which are raging in the US and gaining pace in the UK: what do you think they say about 'the struggles of the age' and their possible distortion? How do you make sense of these culture wars? How do you explain such distortions?

NF: At one level 'culture wars' could be regarded as a fight between progressive neoliberalism and reactionary populism, but they are more complex than that. They comprise real issues of existential importance to women, to transgender people, to gay, lesbian and queer people, to African Americans, and so on. The problem is how they are somehow lifted out and abstracted from any contestation around the broader societal matrix in which they are embedded. They are treated as self-subsisting, separable problems, that could be attacked as problems of culture. When we start talking about culture we're already creating some kind of abstraction we should be suspicious of. Once you abstract these issues and treat them as cultural, then you have already in a sense constructed them as a fight between progressive neoliberalism and reactionary populism. The 'neoliberalism' part of it is basically obscured, but is of course the ground on which those issues play out.

BM: So the nomenclature itself is problematic, that is, the 'culture wars' as a descriptor?

NF: Yes, but it is not just a descriptor. It constitutes the whole way the issues are framed and thought of. It marks a sort of social practice or socio-political practice. Let me go back to your previous question about how I see today's struggles. I listened to Biden's State of the Union address last night, along with the Republican response, which informed the above response. But I also want to add a more objective system focus to the answer. The struggles we should care about today are those where the system in its predatory and self-contradictory crisis-generating dynamics is creating real existential objective-system disasters, such as climate change, the crisis of social reproduction, of democracy, work, livelihood, etc. This is what lies behind these value questions, which are glossed over and rendered invisible when we speak of culture wars.

CM: So the culture wars end up being a distraction?

NF: Yes but I would not want to draw the conclusion that there are only a distraction. I want to emphasise that there are real issues in these battles. I wouldn't say it's just all false consciousness but it's a distortion.

BM: So we wanted to shift gear now and talk a bit about your thoughts on feminism. In the 'Cunning of History' you argued that second-wave feminism in the US during the 1980s/1990s morphed into a form of 'identity politics' that, unwittingly, became a 'hand-maiden of capitalism'. Two questions: 1) Do you think this characterisation of feminism

still pertains to the US movement? 2) And where do you situate black feminist movements/thinkers in this framing?

NF: I have never thought of feminism in itself as identity politics. I'm very suspicious of that whole label. But the sort of common-sense understanding of identity politics is a way of draining the systemic critique out of feminism. There is a grammar of politics that at a certain point in history becomes hegemonic and everything is read through them. Take, for example, nineteenth-century nationalism. At that time everybody had to have a nation. In our time, suddenly everyone has to have an identity they have to defend and the force of gravity of that framing became very powerful and feminism got wrapped up in that. I would say that a better description would be to regard feminism in the US as an interest group within the Democratic Party. It wasn't really a social movement. So the hegemonic current was a kind of meritocratic, liberal, anti-discrimination feminism that thought you could remove discriminatory barriers and the talented women would rise to the top, crack the glass ceiling, etc. That's so American. Every social movement in the US has a version of that. What's different now, though, is that there has been more pushback among feminists against all of that. Feminism, like every social movement, is largely responsive to the political landscape. It's not a *sui generis* phenomenon that secretes its worldview out of its own brain. It responds to events like Occupy Wall Street, which contributed to an outpouring of a different kind of critique that was no longer so focused on identity. That really empowered voices within feminism, including black feminism, which had always had a more materialist centre than some more middle-managerial strata within feminism. Those voices became amplified, not least because of the increasing presence of newly radicalised women. So things shifted. I'm not sure what to say about the immediate present. I would have said that earlier one could witness a struggle for the soul of feminism, such as the fight between liberals and radicals. But after the *Me Too* movement and the overturning of Rowe versus Wade, which touch on issues like workplace sexual harassment and the struggle over reproduction respectively, clear anti-capitalist issues are surfacing. But there is always the danger that they come to be constructed within the framework of individual liberal rights in a way that is system-conforming, as opposed to system-challenging. So I would say that at this moment, it is still unclear which feminism is about to become hegemonic, although in the US you can always bet on the system-conforming version.

CM: Relatedly, we also note that in your first of the three Benjamin lectures (2022b), you chose the following subtitle: 'a post-intersectional analysis of capitalist society'. We are intrigued to find out more about your views on intersectionality theory, particularly in light of Patricia Hill Collins's attempt to establish it as a critical theory and many intersectionality theorists' (Ashley Bohrer, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Patricia Hill Collins, Maria Lugones, among others) see intersectionality as an *antidote* to narrow forms of identity politics.

NF: When I use that term 'post-intersectional' I didn't mean to reject it and replace it with something else, but maybe more something like a Hegelian sublation: cancel, preserve and extend it. The latter would be a more accurate description of what I sought to achieve. You're absolutely right that Patricia Hill Collins really does offer an account of it that is critical theoretical in many respects. Also, Ashley Bohrer's (2019)

book is a really interesting account to sort out the relationship between intersectionality and Marxism, which shows that both are not necessarily antithetical and can be made mutually supportive and integrated, although I don't think she successfully does so. I've learned a lot from those works. But intersectionality, apart from the theory, is a buzzword that is now used everywhere. For example, a New York senator, Kirsten Gillibrand, who is the least person in the world who would know about critical theory but was talking about intersectionality on the senate floor in a clumsy way. It's become a bit like deconstruction, which was also a buzzword used everywhere. But why is that? Because it does express the hunger that people have to get beyond siloed, single-movement politics. There is hunger for integration, for deeper cooperation, for some powerful way of coalescing the various potentially anti-capitalist and emancipatory forces in a way that can potentially have a better shot at changing society. That is fantastic. I fully endorse what is the political impulse of intersectionality theory, practice and discourse. But I'm a Marxist of some kind – an unorthodox but genuinely Marxist. So I want to know where the fault lines that are said to intersect in intersectionality come from, to know how they are anchored in the matrix of capitalist society. Some intersectionality theorists, not all, adopt a dual- or triple-system theory framework, according to which, for example, capitalism and patriarchy are treated as separate but intersecting systems. I gave that up many decades ago in favour of what is now called unitary theory, which by the way is a terrible name. As I was saying before, critical theory takes capitalism as a social totality in which it is trying to understand things. That doesn't mean class essentialism or class reductionism, once you understand capitalism fully and in a broad way. So what I've been trying to do is figure out why capitalist societies entrench a serious fault line around gender, race, as well as class, and to think about why these three fault lines are entrenched within a single society and explain how they co-constitute one another, as Collins herself sets out to do. I think this is very important. Existing intersectionality theory, for the most part, does not go deeply enough to explain the genesis of these fault lines and of their intersections. The same system generating the faulty lines, generates the intersections of the faulty lines.

BM: I think this is like saying intersectionality is not a theory yet. I agree with you. It's an important heuristic device and important political impulse, as you say. It forces you to pay attention to and look for certain relations, but it doesn't theorise their origins and it doesn't theorise their dynamics.

CM: ... although that is the self-proclaimed goal of Patricia Hill Collins (2019), who claims to be laying the groundwork for intersectionality as a (critical) theory. She's not achieved it fully yet, and doesn't claim to have done so, but is certainly working out some foundations. Let's move on to another question now. In your recent work, labour seems to be construed as the core lens through which power and domination are conceptualised. For example, social reproduction and racialised expropriation are presented as 'faces' of labour. All roads (of oppression/domination) therefore seem to lead to the economy/labour. But critical disability scholars like Mike Oliver (1990) and Paul Abberley (1996) warn us against construing the plight of disabled people as one of exclusion from production/the economy/labour. They insist on moving away from analysing their oppression under capitalism through the narrow lens of labour. Oliver (1990, p. 91), for example, insists our attention should be devoted to whether disabled people

have ‘ability to be in control and make decisions about [their] life’, irrespective of whether this is achieved through labour. So by reading power and domination through labour, are you not running the risk of overlooking demands for emancipation that effectively lie beyond it?

NF: I should say that what I’m doing in these lectures, which are neither finished nor published yet, as they are work in progress, is experimental. I’m trying to find out how far we could get in taking this labour lens. How much of it can be somehow captured within it in an effort to make new connections? I certainly don’t start out assuming a priori that everything can be read through that lens. It’s about pushing it as far as you can go. So this is one possible hypothesis or proposal for taking that step towards greater integration of potentially emancipatory social forces that could constitute that third route beyond progressive neoliberalism and reactionary populism. This choice to focus on labour is partly explained by some interesting revivals within the labour movement, including efforts to organise unorganised workers. For example, my own graduate assistants are on strike right now and are represented by the UAW, a powerful union in the US. So both in the traditional labour movement, such as the manufacturing sector which recently won a big strike in the US, and within the low-wage service sector, such as workers in Amazon distribution centres and Starbucks baristas, one finds a lot of unionising going on led by young workers, some of whom have had college degrees and have learned a lot and created new paradigms for labour organising. This is interesting in my view. Then you also find *Me Too*, which as I said above, has a lot to do with labour issues. I also think the abortion and reproductive freedom struggle has to do with labour, for reproduction is an essential and socially necessary form of labour. This all leads me to think that much of what we have been talking and fighting for could be thought of as labour if we lived in a political culture that did not immediately stigmatise any reference to labour as Stalinist and instead lived in one that had a pro-labour feel to it. That is the spirit in which I started this reasoning on labour as a lens. My analysis of capitalism, as it is presented in the article on Marx’s hidden abode and consequent pieces that are found in *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022a), or the discussions with Rahel Jaeggi (2018), already comprised the idea that part of capitalism’s deep structure was precisely a gendered separation between what I now call two faces of capitalist labour – between an exploited wage labour, which is acknowledged or remunerated labour, and social reproductive labour which is treated as non-work, as something else. I also already had the idea that there was another fundamental entrenched division, intrinsic to capitalism, which was a racialised division between free waged labour that is contractual and officially recognised, and all unfree or semi-free and dependent work that involves various forms of overt coercion beyond that of hunger. Then I started thinking about focusing on how these three faces of labour – reproduction, exploitation and expropriation – are generated within the system, non-accidentally, and part of its deep structures. What Marxists and socialists have traditionally called class is not the only deep structural fault line in capitalist society. These others are equally structural and deep in the social system. So what if we started to think about how they were generated deep-structurally and how their intersections were generated deep-structurally, then we’d have at least one way, one grammar, of political claims-making and contestation that was pointed in a more materialist way and a less purely rhetorical way, that can point to what exactly we are in together here, and need

to fight against together. That was the impulse and it was always meant experimentally to see how far we can get. I think we can get a lot further with that lens than you might initially imagine. But can you get absolutely everything? Probably not. I'm not committed to that idea.

Regarding disability, I'm not as deeply schooled in this literature as I should be but I think that everybody in our society has something to contribute in one way or another to what is socially useful. So I would think that in a society that equated work – if we are still going to use that word at all – with socially useful activity, disabled people might want to be part of redefining what counts as socially useful. It would be a mistake to accept existing definitions of work and say that's not our problem and we have something else to focus on. I should get better informed about this literature, but I agree that disabled people should be able to be in control and make decisions about their life irrespective of whether this is achieved through labour. That's true for everybody and doesn't exclude labour. I would argue that insofar as food isn't going to drop into our laps from the trees above us, human societies will always involve labour. Maybe we could spend a lot less of our time doing it if we were more rationally and fairly organised. But we're always going to have that portion of our lives, and this other portion of so-called free time. Everybody has a stake in freedom in both spheres. Marx would have said freedom within the sphere of necessity *and* beyond the sphere of necessity. Labour is a word that, if we expand our understanding of it, can capture a lot of what anti-racists care about, of what feminists care about, of what environmentalists care about, because one doesn't have labour without nature, without our 'inorganic body' as Marx called it. Labour and nature go as a pair. So this labour lens also brings in the ecological dimension.

BM: In your Benjamin lectures (2022b, 2022c, 2022d), you talk of building a counter-hegemonic project which draws together three social forces defined by their experience of exploitation, expropriation and domestication. Given that, at present at least, these three groupings do not see themselves as natural allies, and the fact that the main intellectual/cultural institutions within civil society are thoroughly 'neoliberalised', do you think consciousness raising on this scale is even possible? If so, who do you think would be able to undertake this ideational work? Where are the organic intellectuals necessary to do this kind of ideological heavy lifting?

NF: Maybe I should preface my answer by saying that my *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022) approach to this question did not go through labour. It went through crisis and I make the argument that it is a multi-dimensional crisis through which different groups pick up strands of the crisis that affect most directly or experience as most pressing, and that no Left should say you're wrong because something else is more important. It's a bit like the Rashomon idea whereby you get a picture of a crisis in which a generating matrix has different dimensions that exacerbate one another, which acts as the lens through which you could say 'look this is all the same crisis, for you can't solve your part of it unless the other part gets solved'. That's the kind of intellectual appeal of this matrix.

Labour has a more identitarian quality because it has been so important in the history of workers' movement and part of what I've been toying with is the idea that we might need an identitarian, a more affective – not just calculative or strategic – approach. Is

there some way in which we could say ‘we’re all doing socially necessary work of one form or another’? This is potentially more integrative but it’s a much harder sell. It would require a lot of heavy lifting and may not be possible. Maybe we’ll have to go back to some more intellectual ideas. I can tell you something else that worked in a few places that has not been about labour per se but has been about debt and austerity. In Argentina, before the recent election, you could find Argentine feminists that became the whole face of anti-austerity politics and was able to unite with trade unions and show how violence against women was connected to other forms of violence, such as that exerted by the banks. Violence or debt could therefore provide other lenses. I’m very agnostic about how far the labour idea could go but it has historic resonance in the history of socialism, which I care about. So the organic intellectuals, such as those in Argentina, would have to be young and committed to making connections, broadening the struggle, and integrating different forces.

BM: I think they need to be feminist. So I guess what I’d say is I put my hopes on a range of left feminist movement in the global south because I think they are making the kind of connections you’re calling for. I don’t see them so much in the global north. When I went to interview activists in India and Brazil, the kinds of connections you’re making were quite obvious to them, even if they used different languages and focused more on certain issues. I think that could be an exciting place to think about it.

NF: I think that you’re right that feminism in the global south is much more materialist and class sensitive than overall is true in the global north. But I guess, and this is an American intuition, anti-racism is a very generative field. Black Lives Matter, for example, which has been led by women and has feminist insights within it, is actually focused on violence against black people, especially black men in virtue of its focus on the prison system and so on. What I’m thinking is that out of that movement, out of that ferment, which radicalised a whole generation of young activists, all sorts of people have rediscovered Black Marxism, racial capitalism theory, etc. There is a tremendous amount of organic intellectual self-education and development of the capital-race question, just as within some corners of the feminist movement. Another symptom of all of this is the whole new interest in social reproduction theory or social reproduction feminism, which for me is a code word for Marxist feminism. I’m part of it. Along with the talk on intersectionality, these are all signs of the fields in which organic intellectuals are emerging, that could play a role in political developments. There is a lot going on. There is also eco-Marxism, which is the most exciting field and comprises so many brilliant and interesting people, including the work on eco-imperialism, unequal ecological exchange, environmental load displacement, etc. There is so much going on both at the level of theory and in real dialogue with social movements. So if I could just think about those intellectual developments, I would be optimistic. But, going back to what I said at the beginning, all of this is overshadowed by this huge surge of the most reactionary, militaristic, and authoritarian impulses. So we have to have both of these aspects in mind.

BM: But it’s also overshadowed by a recalcitrant left that doesn’t always commit to feminism or explicit forms of anti-racism. So even if the Left agrees to mobilise around a more expansive conception of labour which includes both ‘expropriated’ and ‘domesticated’ forms, how do we then make sure that its thinking, discourse and practices

remain feminist and anti-racist in orientation? In other words, where does the impetus for critiquing gender and race, as *sui generis* forms of oppression (whether they emanate from capitalism or not) come from? How do we keep *whiteness*, *heterosexism* and *patriarchy* central to the discourse and the normative agenda of the Left once it has reoriented its focus to anti-capitalism and to a new expansive form of labour politics? Or is the idea that we won't need to?

NF: I think part of the problem is that we can't speak of 'the' Left. First of all, in the socialist sense, there is no Left in the United States, and that has been the case for a very long time. Whenever there has been a movement that has a Left dimension, it has been in feminism, anti-racism and so on, even though it's been a minority dimension in those movements. Now we have the resurgence of the labour movement which is quite different from the old American labour movement and which is interested in non-standard workers and which comprises a lot of women and people of colour. But to answer your question more directly, that is, how do we keep whiteness, heterosexism and patriarchy central to the discourse, I would say that feminists, people of colour, queer, transgender and gay and lesbian people on the Left all have to do that. This is not one homogenous movement. Everyone comes to it with their own experience and their own biographical trajectory of how they came to it. It's an ongoing struggle within any Left. Feminists in the new left had to insist on gender, with greater or less success. That is going to be an ongoing part of any struggle. In fact, here the labour lens actually helps.

BM: I guess that's what I was getting at. I was trying to think about whether this lens will help that struggle or make it harder to put it back on the table. But maybe it will...

NF: I think if old-school leftists are attached to the idea that labour is the central lens you could say 'yes but you understand labour in the wrong way and here is another way of understanding it'.


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