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History, politics, society
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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Notes on Italy in recent decades and the Handbook

Andrea Mammone, Ercole Giap Parini, and Giuseppe A. Veltri

Writing on Italy

Traditionally, a foreign reader always finds a good number of books dedicated to Italy. A great emphasis is usually given to the artistic heritage of the nation, cuisine, travel guides, and its significant past, from ancient Rome to Mussolini and fascism. For social scientists, the usual attempts to analyze Italian society have instead regularly focused on Italy’s politics and institutions. In other fields, Italian culture, literature, and arts are continuously attracting the attention of scholars. In many ways, Italy matters, and this Handbook wants therefore to reinforce this belief, and it is grounded on the acceptance of the geopolitical, intellectual, social, and economic significance of the Italian peninsula for the Western world. For example, the experience of the “Berlusconi years,” the so-called Second Republic, and the advent of a new wave of political and social actors have been, and are going to be, at the center of attention. In truth, many recent works especially, though not exclusively, in Italy seem to be devoted to the “Italian case,” its somewhat bizarre democracy, and the various examples of corruption, bribes, and waste of public funding. They, at times, provide some generic (if not sensationalist) journalistic accounts of Italian society and politics (whilst the scholarly production tends to be narrower). This has inflated the market for more scientific overviews.

Some of these books, naturally, relate to the analysis of the controversial experience of “Berlusconismo,” the particular political style that has characterized the Italian agenda, system, and external image in recent decades. There are, of course, exceptions to some of the non-academic accounts of this political phenomenon. The controversial figure of Silvio Berlusconi, in fact, attracted writers, readers, and the international media. Yet, besides some space in this introduction and in a limited number of chapters, we have usually resisted the temptation to focus on all this, and, given the wider aims of our book, on the quality of Italy’s democracy. We are well aware how studies have often described the nation as a specific example of Western democracy (and this would, at least partially, explain the rise of Berlusconi’s political agenda and his enduring appeal). Some of the contributors to this Handbook have also participated in this debate by calling Italy a “sick man of Europe,” and wondering how normal the nation has been recently. Others took a diverse approach, though not many works have been able to focus on Italy in a really broad framework as we have done with this edited volume.
Not many books offer, for example, a collection of essays about the social and cultural transformations and continuities of contemporary Italy. In this Handbook, we aim to fill this gap by publishing contributions that analyze contemporary Italy from a sociological and cultural point of view, and they have been organized for this purpose into five parts. This goes along with discussions on memory, reflections on politics, an overview of the economy, and the role played by some institutions. *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Italy* has the goal, and perhaps the ambition, of becoming a fundamental tool of support to scholars and readers interested in understanding Italy in recent decades. It tries to provide a panoramic view of Italian society and its related narratives, policies, and Italian culture that, although not complete (as this would be impossible to achieve), is as wide and diverse as possible.

As we mentioned before, a very large number of books have a very journalistic tone, whereas others suffer from the editorial and thematic constraints which very often limit discussion. Some of them do, nonetheless, offer interesting perspectives (though they are narrow in their aims), and students of Italy might wish to find out more about them. Journalist Bill Emmott, for example, recently published *Good Italy, Bad Italy* (2012). Emmott’s work is based on a number of interviews, and essentially compares some reasons that contributed to Italy’s downward turn with the “positive” sides of the country. Maurizio Viroli published a more intellectually complex book on contemporary Italy. His *The Liberty of Servants* (2011) is based on the assumption that Italy, under Berlusconi, became a land of humble servants and courtiers. Whilst we share some of the frame brightly provided by Viroli, the *Routledge Handbook* aims to add some further dimensions. There is the necessity to broaden the understanding of the implications of Berlusconism (this latter perceived as a sort of culture and worldview) and the functioning of Italian society, politics, and mentalities, which is probably larger than a modern Middle-Ages-like court. Other quite successful books include David Gilmour’s *The Pursuit of Italy* (2011), which provided, on the other hand, another long-term history of Italy. In addition, his book devoted a few pages to the recent era. The beautifully written *The Force of Destiny* (2007) by Christopher Duggan similarly devotes only some sections to the postwar years, and this book mostly deals with the building of modern Italy.

Another interesting recent work is Silvana Patriarca’s *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (2013). It analyzes the public rhetoric about the “national character” that became a favorite explanation for a good number of Italy’s problems. Such debate about the remedies for transforming Italians from being undisciplined and inefficient into almost heroic people shaped the country’s political and social discourses. This also permeated culture in the 1950s and 1960s (particularly popular culture), and it was present in the 1990s. Another fine book on the cultural aspects of Italy is Emanuela Scarpellini’s *Material Nation: A Consumer’s History of Modern Italy* (2011). This is an exploration of the evolution of consumer culture in which an underlying contradiction is in the background: Italians’ capacity for aesthetic beauty and commercial success and, at the same time, the presence of difficult living conditions. Scarpellini observes that it was Italian, rather than American or French, craftsmanship that truly democratized luxury. Yet, according to the author, many contemporary Italians, who are now glued to television sets and shopping in supermarkets, have sunk to the culturally and aesthetically lowest common denominator. These books are examples of a social and cultural perspective that would be, at times, useful for understanding Italy. The Handbook also offers some contribution to this.

Interestingly, in the last few years, Italian nonfiction literature has also been revamped by neo-Southerner revisionism, which is an attempt to rewrite the history of the unification process. It believes that, essentially, the Savoia family and patriots like Cavour and Garibaldi (and, generally, Northern Italian ruling groups), (allegedly) subjugated Southern people, during and after the
Risorgimento era, to exploit their resources and start a process of underdevelopment in favor of industrial growth in the regions of the North. The most representative book is *Terroni. Tutto quello che è stato fatto perché gli italiani del Sud diventassero Meridionali*, which was written by journalist Pino Aprile (2010) and which sold hundreds of thousands of copies. This trend, though based on controversial documentation also overestimating Southern regions’ wealth before 1861, feeds an inveterate sense of discontent. For historian Salvatore Lupo, this is “a ‘simplistic revisionism’ which stems from the political attempts to find into the past what does not exist in it, a recriminatory mentality which looks in the history for the responsibilities of contemporary disease” (Petti, 2012). However, as we suggest in Parts I and V of the Handbook, this shows the role played by political movements, media, and other vectors, the legacy of some historical developments, and the relevance of historical interpretations in shaping national society and local cultures in recent years in Italy.

**Static and fluid Italy**

Interest in Italy is generally due to the fact that this country really represents a fascinating case, as this Mediterranean nation might look like a land in a state of long-term emergency, and surely relevant for the developments of modern democracies and societies. However, all this, along with some of the things mentioned above, and including the challenge after more than 150 years to national unification, might give the related impression (and this is often a well-accepted opinion, at least amongst some Italian people) that many things change in Italy, though with no huge transformation in the general set-up of society and the political setting. As we all know, a century ago, Italian writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa stated, in his masterpiece *Il gattopardo*, how “all changes so that nothing changes.” It is therefore believed that this involves other sectors, from the economy to elites, from family models to religious institutions, and from labor relations to the inner features of capitalism. In other words, one may say that many changes take place, but they do not often actually materialize (at least in the long term), and this gives the, at times, false belief in a static Italy. At the same time, and as the Handbook shows, it is evident that there is an increasing recognition that Italy has been transformed from the late 1980s until today. For a while, and as suggested before, this was labeled as a decline of the country not only economically (as we will mention briefly, in respect of globalization, the financial crisis, EU-led austerity, the loss of competitiveness, and the public debt), but also in its political, cultural, and social life.

Under the influence of global transformations, the Italian social fabric has, in fact, greatly changed in recent decades. Italy, for example, used to be characterized by a system of permanent jobs. This fact assured, for a long time, social stability. It represented a genuine support for a society based on stable nuclear families and ties, and, in other words, with a familiar structure consistently linked with the typical values of the Catholic Church. Starting from the 1980s, the diffusion of more “atypical” forms of job contracts, which have decreased job security, together with the scaling down of the welfare system, has strongly influenced people’s perspectives on their lives. Young people delay their decision to marry and have children, and keep living with their parents, in many cases until their forties. The Istat 2013 Report tells us that the average age for getting married in 2012 was almost 31 for women and 34 for men, and this trend seems destined to rise. In 2013, there were fewer than 200,000 marriages, which represents the lowest level in Italian history (Istat, 2014). This led to a significant reduction in the birth rate. Even if this represents a diffused trend in the industrialized Western world, in Italy, it has reached alarming levels: for an Italian woman the average number of children is less than 1.3, and this is hardly balanced by immigrants living in Italy, since their birth rate is similarly decreasing.
(according to the Istat 2014 Report in 2013 it was 2.20). At the same time, and in a way that is variably connected to the trend we have mentioned, the decay of traditional values and calls for new model of life organization (and a positive approach toward diversity) seem to have strongly influenced family models. At least since the 1990s, different family models have been developing, in particular, the so-called *more uxorio* unions, the majority of which are constituted by people coming from a previous marriage. Same-sex couples who decide to live together are also growing and pushing for formal recognition. The strict connection of cultural changes with the economic situation is revealed by the fact that many people who are living *more uxorio* are young couples waiting for better conditions in order to get married and to have children.

In the background of these cultural, economic, and structural transformations, there is the process of the secularization of religion, especially with reference to the Catholic Church, which is traditionally assimilated to Italian culture and history. The weakening of traditional religious authority in people’s daily life, the decrease in the number of people – even amongst those who consider themselves believers – who attend religious services, in short, “privatization” (religion as a more intimate fact), seem to be the most important aspects of secularization in Italy. Besides that, sociologist Vincenzo Bova has identified an inner process regarding the Catholic Church: the pluralization of the ways individuals or even groups interpret and put into practice their religious beliefs (Bova, 2013). Another sociologist, Enzo Pace, rightly mentioned how “though religious practice is decreasing, together with belief in religion [la credenza religiosa] and adherence to Catholic doctrine, Italians, in the majority, continue to think of themselves as not ‘against the Church’” (Giorda).

Significantly, Italy is also becoming a multicultural country, though much more slowly than other European nations, and even if migratory flows toward Italy have been decreasing in recent years (for example 307,000 in 2013, as opposed to 350,000 in 2012: Istat, 2014). Second- and third-generation immigrants living in Italy are making a series of requests in terms of citizenship, and access to and quality of the education system. In particular, it is difficult to satisfy this with an education system characterized by high levels of bureaucratization. In recent years, Italy has also suffered from relatively indiscriminate spending cuts because of the Italian and the international economic crises.

A new wave of immigration from the southern regions to Northern Italy and Europe is, once more, taking place. It involves, especially, people who are highly educated. This is further reducing the number of well-educated workers in some historically disadvantaged geographical areas. It is, in fact, worth remembering that Italy’s overall economy has faced a very difficult period. As we know, it was initially the challenges of globalization that posed a major threat to the national manufacturing sector with increasing competition from developing nations (and their less expensive labor costs). This had specific effects on the economic environment because of the dominant presence of small and medium-sized firms, often family-owned. Once praised as a model of flexibility and, in some cases, of innovation, the nature of Italy’s industrial actors opened up a wider discussion about the status of national capitalism and governance (Minetti, 2010). Indeed, the long-standing issue of political and governmental influence in many sectors persisted, and with additional costs also for the inefficient bureaucracy and the lack of infrastructure. Another unresolved issue, as mentioned before, is the complex and nowadays dualist labor market, with a core of “old” workers who tend to be well protected, whilst “new” (and usually young) workers have experienced extremely volatile and precarious contractual conditions. The macroeconomic picture of the country has been shaky for the past few years with steady negative or low growth and high youth unemployment, which, as we have suggested, has had an influence on people’s lives, family structures, and, therefore, society at large.
This long “winter” of Italy’s economy endured even after the first difficulties of globalization and entry into the Eurozone. It is still debated whether Italian firms were more penalized than helped by the adoption of the Euro. The financial and economic crisis which started in 2007–8 hit Italy hard precisely because it was struggling with some previous and ongoing challenges. At the same time, the Italian banking sector, though not greatly exposed (initially and at least compared with some foreign banks), did reduce what was already difficult access to credit for firms and families. In sum, the Italian economy was not really helped nationally. Indeed, it was also greatly affected by the range of (poor) actions by the governments (when, in truth, they were not characterized by immobility). The political economy of the country, then, has been dictated by national contingencies, the international environment, and European constraints (like the absolute respect of European economic targets for member states’ public finances). All this helped the rhetoric and success of anti-European movements.

The overall picture of the Italian economy is, once more, mixed, with reasons for optimism and other more negative issues. The gap between northern and southern areas, as mentioned before, is very large. The increasing presence of the organized mafia, which has expanded its economic and financial influence to the central and northern regions thanks to the huge amounts of cash it has available, often has effects on (lack of) growth. The north-eastern regions, moreover, which have been for years the strong driving economic force of the country as a whole, suffered terribly from worldwide competition, difficult access to credit, and limited innovation. Yet, unsystematic spots of modernization emerged. A number of companies have found a way to be competitive again in the global market, particularly those that managed to increase their exports. Clusters of innovation have emerged also in the South (for example, in Sicily, and Apulia’s renewable energy and the ICT technology sector). Somehow, the Italian economy has regained a few signs of vitality, but it is too early to say whether these will stabilize and become something more. Because of the political instability but also the lack of comprehensive and long-term goals, this economy is, at times, like a patient trying to recover at home without a doctor. Economic, political, and social reforms are, nonetheless, very difficult in Italy because of the enormous number of vested interests and lobbies that have a rather good record of resistance to change. However, as we suggested earlier, the Italian economic sector is not fully static. It might also be dynamic, especially when supported by politics, innovation, and, of course, meritocracy.

It is evident that some of these transformations do not often find a political manifestation and the space they need in public opinion debates. This does not mean that Italian politics has not evolved in recent decades. It is easy to play with the usual (and real) historical feature of “trasformismo,” from Liberal Italy to today, with politicians, deputies, and their followers changing political sides merely for personal interests. We all know how the nation was affected by the above-mentioned Berlusconismo, the crisis in political representation, the transformation of parties into electoral machines, the mediatization of the political discourse, and, recently, the appearance of novel forms of political mobilization. What we find even here is possibly another mixture of innovations and continuities, adaptation of old features, and other types of political socialization. If one, for example, looks at it from an international media standpoint (which is how a number of foreign students initially approach Italy), there is, then, a never boring Italian political merry-go-round. In their view, Italy’s politics is indeed exciting, innovative, and backward-looking, at times unintelligible, and surely full of surprises. One example is what happened with the latest change in leadership, namely the downfall of Enrico Letta’s government and the rise of the center-left leader Matteo Renzi, the mayor of Florence, and the secretary of the Democratic Party.
Renzi is young, appealing for the media, and very straightforward. His meetings with world leaders were greeted with enthusiasm by some international newspapers. He is also Europe’s youngest prime minister (and this is very surprising in an Italian politician). All this led, nonetheless, people in Italy and abroad to overlook a significant anniversary. In 1994, a successful businessman officially announced the start of a political enterprise which would later generate consternation, admiration, and also hilarity in much of the Western world. This was the day that media tycoon Berlusconi decided to enter the political arena with a newly born movement. Much ink has already been spilled on his political trajectory, one that ended with sexual and financial scandals and an uncomfortable, not to mention unpleasant, ban from public office. Yet, not even this has deterred one of Europe’s longest-serving political leaders. He has been, in fact, discussing the implementation of reforms in Italy with Renzi. The government, moreover, needs votes for key laws, and Berlusconi’s movement plays an important part in this game. The media tycoon wants his voice to be heard. Was his political trajectory an innovation in a somewhat “static” Italian political life?

To answer some of this, one has to start by looking back at Italy’s past and the European sociopolitical environment. Berlusconi, as we are all aware, won because there was a vacuum in the political system. A number of traditional parties collapsed under trials and judicial investigations in the last decade of the last century. Bribe and illegal party funding were the rule rather than the exception, and magistrates became venerated as almost divine beings. The Christian Democrats, the leading political actors in postwar Italy, quickly disappeared. The Socialists were completely pulverized. Suspicion of the traditional ruling elites was very strong. This led, for example, to a series of victories for local mayors with roots outside the political world, though they were often left-leaning.

This was, however, not enough for the center-left to take control of Italian politics after historically leading some of the best-organized regions (Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, amongst others). The parties generated from the once powerful Italian Communist Party were often not able to elaborate significant and dynamic policies, and, most importantly, a shared agenda. In sum, they suffered, like other fellow European movements, as a result of the decline of international communism. In Italy, since at least the 1980s (if we ignore the tumult of 1968, and the communists’ refusal to understand the demands of Italian youth and intellectual innovations), the leftist world had also abandoned some of its key reference points. In the decades following, the prominent role of high political and scholarly culture in shaping society and generating policies was no longer in place. “Pop” and “low-profile” values, including those backed by Berlusconi’s commercial television stations, became exciting magnets (though leftists showed an evident incapacity to make use of the media as a powerful outlet and spread its political and social vision). Once they got Berlusconi, with his strong media expertise and almost unlimited funding, they encountered an unknown world. Imagine Dante alone, without a guide like Virgil. This left the tycoon with virtually no realistic opponents. There was almost no comparison with other European nations.

The center-left was also unable to maintain power when it did win elections. Romano Prodi, a moderate and internationally respected figure, beat Berlusconi twice but was failed by his coalition, which eventually dispensed with his services. The left was a quarrelling galaxy of disparate voices, whilst Berlusconi was often able to keep control of his allies and govern for longer than any other postwar Italian leader. The left was not even immune from scandals, and this had a negative influence on its usually loyal voters. Berlusconi, for his part, managed to tell people “his” own stories, promising the earth, accusing the now disappeared communists and existing elites and judges for the decline of Italy, and spreading clear, simple, and demagogic
messages through the TV channels he controlled. This mediatization of politics is, however, not peculiar to Italy, and, in some ways, placed the country in a wider Western framework.

As the above-mentioned economic troubles started to hit the nation in the wake of the global financial crisis, and it appeared that traditional politics was ineffective, some citizens understood that not even a miracle-working king like Berlusconi had magic powers. Yet, rather than voting for the left, the solution for many was found in the Five Stars Movement, initially an online network of citizens led by the comedian Beppe Grillo. This represented the complete rejection of most Italian politicians, and a call for innovation and, above all, novelty. They gained, in fact, millions of votes in 2013. They entered parliament and promoted the moralization of politics, society, and the nation (although this theme was not novel in historical terms). This was unique in modern Italian history, and there are, so far, not many similar examples in the West.

It is open to discussion whether this is really helping to improve Italy’s political life. How Grillo managed all this is yet another story. The style of the message rather than its content might have been, nonetheless, once more significant. His movement, however, started to be observed with curiosity abroad, taken as a role model by other European movements, and its EU parliamentary alliance with UKIP ensured more articles in foreign media. Is Italy, then, in this sense, an innovator in some forms of political socialization and citizens’ mobilization?

Renzi is, in some ways, in line with this Western tradition, along with the low quality of the Italian public debate. He is naturally different from many other left-leaning politicians (though some notice in him the style of the socialist leader Bettino Craxi). He likes to foresee a better Italy. He also looks abroad for inspiration (and this is quite common for the Italian moderate left in recent times), and particularly at Tony Blair (bizarrely, given the evolution of Blairism, even if this might show some limited knowledge of international politics).

His enthusiasm, rhetoric, and decisiveness look exciting to many disillusioned voters (as this almost never happened before), even if he has yet to explain fully how he can turn Italy into a wealthy nation, find resources for the reforms, and, above all, decrease pressure from the Euro elites, who show little flexibility. Moreover, the traditional elites of his own movement are opposing him. The vote in May 2014 for the EU parliament showed how appealing this politician may be. However, and most interestingly, this vote put Italy politically in a better place compared with other nations where anti-EU, protest, and anti-establishment forces won the election. What it is evident here is that Italy offers an interesting platform for Western democracies, and some of its historical developments appear old and new at the same time.

Outline

It is true that all these Italian developments may hardly be covered in a single volume (and the Handbook discusses some of them). Instead of giving a whole picture of what Italy is today, the aim of this Handbook is to provide readers with a framework for and an overview of some of the key factors in Italian history, politics, economy, memory, and society in order to understand the main developments. Connections between chapters flow throughout the book, but there is not a common thread: that is not the aim of this work. Instead, each chapter aims to perform the double function of informing the reader about contemporary Italy and, at the same time, being a starting point for further research and investigation. It will be up to the reader to navigate through the sections and explore the common threads and interlinkages that are sometimes highlighted by the authors and in other instances are implicit.

The first section contains sociological contributions that analyze a number of aspects of contemporary Italian society. Chambers discusses one of the most resilient and pervasive of social issues, which is the Southern Question (and how it may be perceived today). Veltri explores
the validity of another very vigorous trope about the cultural differences between Italian geographical areas, and in particular, between the macro-regions of the North, Centre, and South. Tintori and Colucci analyze an old plague of Italian society, notably emigration and its recent developments. Levy examines xenophobia in a nation which has never before experienced a large presence of immigrants. Ruspini considers the role of women in society after many years of lagging behind other European countries. Argentin, for his part, focuses on another relevant story in contemporary Italy, namely the social and economic conditions of young Italians. Parini’s contribution concludes Part I, analyzing the mafia, and removing some conceptual and geographical misconceptions.

Part II focuses on democratic life and political institutions. Bull gives an account of the functioning of Italian democracy and the many attempts at institutional reform that often resulted in unsuccessful outcomes. Verzichelli discusses the nature and quality of the political class and its strong resistance to renewal. Padovani tackles another peculiar feature of national democracy, which is the relationship between the mass media, politics, and society. Conti adds the European variable in our understanding of contemporary Italy, as this has become an increasingly important dimension of domestic life. Loprieno looks at another feature of Italian society, in particular the relationship between the state, religion, and the Vatican.

Part III aims at providing an overview of the most recent political actors and developments. Agnew starts with an analysis of a political geography of the country, and discusses regional differences in terms of political traditions and voting behavior. Raniolo and Tarchi discuss the right-wing end of the Italian spectrum, an environment usually mostly known for Berlusconi’s leadership. Lazar and Giugni examine the often quarreling left-wing parties, which have intermittently led the nation in recent decades. Donovan then scrutinizes what is left of the once dominant Italian Christian Democrats, the leading force for a very long period of time. Cento Bull presents a detailed account of the Northern League’s political trajectory, and, therefore, how it may be better understood. Newell considers the relationship between magistrates and politics, discussing the example of Antonio Di Pietro and his (almost disappeared) political party. Diani and Fabbri shed light on the nature of the above-mentioned very recent political development represented by Grillo’s Five Stars Movement.

Part IV contains contributions on the sociopolitical environment. Lynch and Ceretti analyze the trajectory of (often not fully implemented) welfare reforms in Italy, and also the lack of long-term planning. Briquet discusses the costs and consequences of corruption and clientelism, two key pervasive problems in Italy. Leonida, Maimone, and Navarra examine the relationship between economic growth and political competition. Giovannini and Minetti offer an analysis of the nature of Italian firms, from their governance structures to their capacity for innovation and exports. Iona, Leonida, and Silipo examine the Italian banking sector, often considered a critical aspect of capitalism.

Part V contains essays on some cultural themes that have a relevance, which should not be left out, also for their significance in public discourses, politics, and society. Jedlowski discusses the role of the Italian filmmaking industry in shaping the cultural identity and memory of the country. Gori examines the Risorgimento in the political and cultural debate, including its uses. Cooke analyzes anti-fascism, once very powerful, and its place in recent history. Pergher, for her part, examines Italy’s overlooked colonial past and its influence on national identity.

In sum, this might therefore be considered as a kind of open handbook, at times more oriented toward posing questions than giving full answers, whilst covering many aspects of Italy. This means also being attentive to the historical, political, and social processes taking place. We are convinced that, in order to understand this nation, it is necessary to construct a new way of looking at it, possibly an interdisciplinary one.
Introduction

Note

1 Two books are very different in tone, though they were probably not successful like some of the anti-unification literature. One is L’unificazione italiana (2011), also by Lupo, in which the entry of Southern Italy into the Italian nation is mainly a social and political fight and at the same time a clash between different patriotisms. The other is Borbonia felix. Il regno delle due Sicilie alla vigilia del crollo (2013) by Renata De Lorenzo, which tries to get over the anti-Risorgimento rhetoric through an insightful analysis of the social, economic, and political conditions of Southern Italy before 1861.

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