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Discourse and Violence

Abstract: The essay explores the question of whether and to what extent discourse research, in its various versions, inspired by theories and methodologies from the (global) west, has been conducted as »fair-weather research« (»Schön-Wetter-Forschung«). Relations of power and dominance, hegemony, or marginality have always been at the heart of discourse research. But it has paid little attention to current phenomena of »re-ordering discourses« through body-related and speaker-related violent interventions and threats of violent acts. Such acts might unfold top-down, via transformations in performing state power and control of public spheres, or bottom up, as aggressions of political-ideological or fundamentalist religious movements against (for whatever reason) unwanted articulations. How can discourse studies respond to such forms of violent (re)ordering of discourses?

Keywords: discourse, violence, articulation, censorship, colonization

Zusammenfassungen: Der Essay geht der Frage nach, ob und inwieweit die Diskursforschung in ihren verschiedenen Ausprägungen, inspiriert von Theorien und Methodologien des (globalen) Westens, als Schön-Wetter-Forschung betrieben wird. Macht- und Dominanzverhältnisse, Hegemonie oder Marginalität standen schon immer im Zentrum der Diskursforschung. Aktuelle Phänomene der »Neuordnung von Diskursen« durch körper- und sprecherbezogene gewaltsame Interventionen und Androhungen von Gewalttaten wurden jedoch wenig beachtet. Solche Akte können sich von oben nach unten entfalten, über Veränderungen in der Ausübung staatlicher Macht und der Kontrolle öffentlicher Räume, oder von unten nach oben, als Aggressionen politisch-ideologischer oder fundamentalistisch-religiöser Bewegungen gegen (aus welchen Gründen auch immer) unerwünschte Artikulationen. Wie kann die Diskursforschung auf solche Formen der gewaltsamen (Neu-)Ordnung von Diskursen reagieren?

Schlagwörter: Diskurs, Gewalt, Artikulation, Zensur, Kolonialisierung

The following essay explores the question of whether and to what extent discourse research, in its various versions, inspired by theories and methodologies from the (global) west, has been conducted so far as *fair-weather research*[1] (Schön-Wetter-Forschung). It also points to directions discourse research might take to reflect upon the multiple current (re)ordering of discourses.[2] In 2019, I organized a plenary session about »Violence in Orders of Discourse« at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry 2019, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The call for papers stated that the new rise of authoritarian regimes in Europe and around the world, the control of mass media and

1   In German, »fair-weather conditions« originally refers to easy going activities like sailing under very nice (and not heavy) weather conditions. Final English language editing of this article by Bryan Jenner.
2   I relate to Keller (2012, 2019, 2020, 2021).

social media in states like China, verbal or legal attacks by political leaders on the media in the US, restrictions on academic freedom in Turkey, and terrorist excesses of violence against journalists in Western countries grounded in Islamic fundamentalism, as well as countless other current events, confront discourse research with far-ranging challenges.

Violence has always been a subject and vehicle of discourse, although this is perhaps not made explicit very often. In Foucault's work, orders of discourse were conceived of as (more or less explicitly violent) orders of power, of inclusion and exclusion of speakers and contents, as disciplining processes and formations to achieve the subjection of human beings and their practices. Later, studies like Edward Said's *Orientalism* or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of *Can the Subaltern Speak* inspired post-colonialist and de-colonialist perspectives that pursued this idea further, pointing to worldwide orders of discourse between ›the Global North‹ and ›the Global South‹ as orders of epistemic violence (Brunner 2020) and asymmetric relations of knowledge and knowing, and politics of knowledge and knowing (Keller/Hornidge/Schünemann 2018).

Although relations of power and dominance, hegemony, or marginality have consequently been at the heart of discourse research, the current twofold shift is in need of closer consideration. On the one hand, it seems that there is more and more top-down control and discipline of discursive meaning-making (re-)entering ›democratic regimes‹ beyond the longer known authoritarian and dictatorial states, not only in the public spheres, but in the fields of political and ideological struggles, scientific knowledge production, or religious expression. And on the other hand, we see increasing bottom-up disciplinary interventions (for whatever reason) into sites and events of discourse production. Those range from religious fundamentalist-induced acts of murder (Charlie Hebdo in Paris, the Danish cartoon affair) or threat to life (as in the US anti-abortion movement) via right-wing populist threats towards feminist scholars and gender studies to some campaigning acts and attacks on scholars from radical transgender activism, and so on. In quite different ways, they all show forms of bottom-up violent intervention in public arenas and discourses, which – as practices of attacking ›unwanted‹ articulations – have a long history (to be investigated). Both processes deeply affect the ongoing re-ordering of discourses. Against this background, the session addressed the following questions:

- What effect on discursive processes and formations do the emerging *order through violence* phenomena have? In many countries and contexts this finds expression not only in the form of (excessive) physical threat, but also as secretly uncanny control and discipline?
- How can discourse research, in its theory, methodology and methods, deal with such forms of violent control over, or intervention into, orders of discourse?
- Is there still any room for manoeuvre for discourse research, under such conditions of violent threat?
- What types of logic of understanding and explaining are suitable for phenomena of violence applied to discourse?
- What violence do discursive processes exert on the constitution of the social?

Examples

The present essay cannot respond to such questions in a comprehensive way. It basically aims at stimulating reflections and research about the relation between discourses and violence – including very different forms of violence: epistemic, physical, excluding, and others. Let me illustrate this with some examples.

Example 1: A writer writes a novel, as writers are supposed to. A journalist friend in a faraway country reads the manuscript a few weeks before publication. She writes a review and announces a looming scandal about the book. A publishing executive steps in. He notes that the novel makes fun of a religion that is widespread around the world and demands a ban on publication. A minister adds that the author must be acting with satanic intent and should be convicted of deliberate insult for his text. A famous postcolonial theorist from the other side of the world contributes to the debate. For him, the book is a further piece of evidence of ongoing Western imperialism towards the rest of the world. An association of African writers withdraws its former invitation to the author, who was to take part in a literary festival in South Africa. The reason given is that the author would attack, via his novel, the entire Third World. The book is considered disgusting and insulting to any person who feels a sense of belonging to a particular cultural tradition. Some followers of the religion in question start a campaign, insisting on their right not to have to accept such mockery of their faith. They organize a petition and public burnings of the book. But the book sells well. A newly founded Association of Religious Believers writes to the embassies of those countries where their religion plays a predominant role. Something must be done, they say. A high religious leader orders the believers to kill the author. In fact, there are some killings around the world. But Western intellectuals support the author in the name of enlightenment against the keepers of religious tradition. 17 years after the events mentioned above, a handful of cartoons mocking the same religion take centre stage in a world crisis. A comparable sequence of events can be observed, through and in which public attention is aroused across countries and continental borders. This time, more people are killed. Some interesting discursive shifts can be observed: Many intellectuals in the West are now defending this religion and its right not to be offended by Enlightenment criticism and mockery.[3]

Example 2: In 2017, David Cole discussed »why we still must defend free speech« in an article in the New York Review of Books. His contribution was prompted by calls from the left-wing anti-racist spectrum to ban hurtful words, especially racist speech. He made a committed plea for freedom of speech, even when what is said is barely tolerable to many. Cole pointed to the 1950s and the US practices of ›hunting communists‹ in academia and education, as a bad example of what happens when politics encroaches on free speech.

Example 3: As Traub (2018) discusses in The New York Review of Books, in India, after 2004, textbooks were written by expert commissions to free them from a preced-

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3   For the *Salman Rushdie/The Satanic Verses* and the *Danish cartoon affair* cases & *Charlie Hebdo* see
    Rabinow/Stavrianakis (2014) and Favret-Saada (2007).

ing practice of political manipulation. But more recent textbooks for the classroom have abandoned this. Also, it is stated that they now disseminate the political programme and ideology of the dominant Hindu nationalist party under Narendra Modi. A recent textbook for senior secondary school in the Indian state of Rajasthan, for example, points out the »disadvantages of democracy«: It would teach people to become selfish, cunning, and gullible. One textbook offers an alternative to this:

> »Hitler built a strong Germany with the help of the Nazi Party and was honoured many times for it. By favouring German citizens and opposing the Jews, and by his new economic policy, he made Germany a rich and prosperous country. […] He changed the living conditions of the German people in a very short time by severe measures. He protected the country from hardship and achieved many things.« (Indian textbook quote, according to Traub 2018, p. 42)

Example 4: A report by TV-broadcast *Euronews* on 24/11/2018 stated:

> »Hundreds of people have protested in Hungary against the closure of the […] Central European University. [...] The university is about to move its operations to Austria because of administrative hurdles. For the students, this was a deliberate manoeuvre by the government against its opponents. ›Basically, they want to eradicate any opposition‹, says Gabor, a PhD student. ›They will lower the level of education so that it will be easier to get very simple and simplistic messages through.‹ Orban's government also intervenes in higher education in other ways. The previous month it had forbidden universities to include gender studies in their curricula.«

Example 5: In Turkey, not only civil servants, teachers, and journalists were dismissed after the coup attempt in 2016. In the German weekly periodical DIE ZEIT, Onur Burçak Belli wrote:

> »Thousands of professors and academics were dismissed after the coup attempt in Turkey. Anger and fear reign at the universities […] University professors had already incurred the government's wrath before the coup with the initiative ›Academics for Peace‹. In an open letter, more than a thousand academics demanded an end to the armed action against the Kurdish uprisings in the south-east of the country. Government persecution has been an integral part of university life ever since. […] Between September 2016 and August 2017, there were nine decrees that led to the dismissal of almost 6,000 academics and over 1,000 administrative staff. 15 private universities were closed altogether […] Statements critical of the government in lectures and seminars are sensitive at Turkish universities, not infrequently leading to prosecutions.« Belli (2018, my translation from German)

This list could certainly be extended ad infinitum, including top-down as well as bottom-up interventions in discursive meaning-making – interventions, which *discipline*

and punish concrete human beings – minds and bodies – to control ›what can be said‹. Please read and look around and add your own examples. My question in this regard is: *How does discourse research deal with such events*?

From self-emergent discursive orders to practices of ordering discourse[4]

To be clear: As we know from history – not only from George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, but, just for example, from the sad and cruel period of German Nazi past or from later Cold War related western and eastern state politics of fighting ›internal enemies‹ –, the ›state *will to power*‹ again and again realized itself via censorship and state politics/control of meaning making.[5]

In Foucault's writings, the term »discourse« designates a specific way of structuring the practices and processes of knowledge or meaning making and circulation in human societies. Its specificity consists, among other elements, in linking the materiality, regularity and practice of language use with the level of propositional content. Discourses are socio-historically structured and structuring structures and thereby regulated practices that establish (or attack) assertions of reality. In this sense, it is possible to speak more specifically of processes of discursive constructions of reality. His book about the *Order of Things* (Foucault 2001 [1966]) discusses such processes as some kind of self-unfolding succession of regimes or ways to know, the »episteme« of similarity, representation and finitude (with their reference to the human being). As he himself admits, he only describes historical sequences. It remains unclear how the historical changes occur. Historical struggles for differentiation and rationalisation, such as those that took place between the Catholic Church and Galileo, the killing of heretics and witches, etc., are left out. There are then no actors in these shifts. Thus, at this point, Foucault ultimately writes a discourse history of the victors. Exclusion, marginalisation, other forms of repressions and conflicts, very present in the »academic field« (Pierre Bourdieu) are absent here. In his subsequent book, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 2010 [1969]) introduced, via his discussion of elements and strategies of discursive formations, a more conflictual perspective, at least implicitly. As is well known, this changes even further with his 1970s turn to the concepts of genealogy, power/knowledge, dispositif, and so on. This becomes clear in his important opening lecture at the Collège de France on the »Order of Discourse« (Foucault 2010 [1971]). Foucault famously makes it sound like this:

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4   »Order« refers to an established structuration of discourse, »ordering« to concrete processes, practices of performing and transforming such a structuration.
5   I am not refering here to legal regulations of what can be said and shown in magazines, movies, social media sites etc., like pornographic content, violence or racist and discriminatory speech acts, and such like.

»I presuppose that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and channelled – by certain procedures whose task it is to tame the forces and the dangers of discourse, to banish its unpredictable eventfulness, to circumvent its heavy and threatening materiality.« (Foucault 1974, p. 7)[6]

The control or order of discourse is »what one fights for and with; it is the power one seeks to seize« (ibid., p. 8). Foucault specifically asks how such orders function »in a society like ours« and discusses several such procedures, like the »procedures of exclusion« of topics. These include various types of prohibitions, such as taboo topics or regulations on the situational and personal appropriateness of forms and contents of speech. For example, it is not possible to talk about sexual matters everywhere and not with every other person, if continuation of the communication/interaction is desired. He locates a second mechanism of exclusion in the demarcation between madness and reason – whom should we listen to, the mad or the sane? A third practice of exclusion is established by »opposition between the true and the false«, as in modern science. This is a specifically modern pattern of ordering, although it comes in the guise of a universal dividing line of knowledge formation.

Foucault adds other mechanisms, like »internal procedures by which discourses exercise their own control themselves; procedures that act as principles of classification, arrangement, distribution. This time it is a matter of taming another dimension of discourse: that of the event and chance« (ibid., p. 15 f.). He refers to »the commentary«, the »author function« or the »disciplines«: »[…] one is in truth only if one obeys the rules of a ›discursive police‹ that one must reactivate in each of one's discourses« (ibid., p. 25). Finally, Foucault names a third group of control procedures of discourses, which bring about the »scarcity of the speaking subjects«: »It is a matter of determining the conditions of their use, of imposing certain rules on the speaking individuals and thus preventing everyone from having access to the discourses« (ibid., p. 25 f.). One could speak here of *rules of qualification.*

Discourse research in the social sciences, more or less following in Foucault's footsteps, has for almost four decades now analysed discursive formations and discursive struggles in the public sphere and political arenas, around topics such as climate change, queer politics, racism, and many more, as fights about collective definitions of situations and problems. In addition, it paid attention to mechanisms of othering or discrediting discursive adversaries for their arguments in such conflicts. But it has not paid much attention to the phenomena of ordering discourses by »structural colonization« or top-down/bottom-up practices of discipline and punish.

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6   I consider some translations of Foucault's works into English as problematic, and therefore prefer my own translations (here from German editions).

Structural Colonization

I borrow the term »colonization« here from Jürgen Habermas (1987 [1981]), who identified, in the second volume of his *Theory of Communicative Action*, two major processes of systemic intervention into what he called the reproductive sphere or life world of human beings. These two alienating threats and deformations were called »economic colonization« and »political colonization« – either economic rationalities shape and determine all social relations (as the threat in the Western capitalist societies), or political control (as the threat in the former Eastern states socialist societies). By *structural colonization*, I address phenomena of far-reaching transformations in the western ordering of discourses which are an effect of different intertwined structural shifts.

Economic Colonization: Foucault had characterized the modern »political economy of truth« by five features: the prominent position of scientific discourses and institutions for the production of truth, the demands from politics and economics that are permanently made on it, the very broad circulation and consumption of truth, the influential position of a few »apparatuses« in these processes and finally the multitude of socio-political conflicts over truth or knowledge (Foucault 1978, p. 51). French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard diagnosed the »postmodern condition« not only as replacement of historical meta-narratives by located, plural and incommensurable truth games, but as a far reaching shift in the relation between scientific discourses and economic impact: »Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself […]« (Lyotard 1984, p. 4 f.).

Political economy of uncertainty and opaque colonization of legitimization narratives: Beck/Bonß/Lau (2001, p. 54 f.) spoke, long before Covid 19 or buzzwords like »alternate truth«, in relation to their theory of reflexive modernization and risk society, about the upcoming »political economy of uncertainty«. Risk society conflicts and a broad historical tradition of critique of experts and top-down knowledge production lead, according to Beck/Bonß/Lau, to a historical situation in which the public acceptance of scientific truth games erodes and political struggles about the collective definition of situations transform into a new Gestalt:

> »To the extent that this erosion of certainty in the basis of rationality progresses and is recognized, *alternative forms of knowledge* come into play that may have always latently underpinned actions and decisions, but were regarded as illegitimate because they were incompatible with the respective model of rationality.« (Beck/Bonß/Lau 2001, p. 35)

Digital colonization of commentary: Besides economic colonization and the erosion of scientific authority, other occurring changes are significant and should be examined more closely by discourse researchers. I summarize them in reference to Foucault as *transformations of commentary* – a devaluation of the insiders' ›care by commentary‹ of knowledge stocks and discourse production, a shift from disciplined, discourse-bounded *knowledge in traditions of statement practices* to a problem-related ad-hoc like collage of *sampled knowledge in ›unbound‹ situational practices of statement production,* the consti-

tution of which is (apparently) highly random. The dispersion and replacement of commentary can be noted in three moments: (a) Firstly, *numerical-statistical quantities and procedures* (for example counting ›likes‹) replace the informed disciplinary authority of commentary. One could speak of *algorithmicized commentary* (b) Secondly, emerging »viscourses« (Knorr-Cetina 2001) – discourses in which visual elements become more important than texts – indicate a shift from *battles of texts* to *battles of visuals* (images, graphs or whatever) and are in need of a new vocabulary of analysis. (c) Thirdly, there is a *deinstitutionalization, democratization, de-disciplining or unbounding of* commentary, leading to its *multiplication* and *dispersion*. This is directly related to the *self-empowerment of speakers* on digital platforms – from Foucault's discussion of scarcity to endless proliferation. So perhaps it is indeed the »Google society« (Lehmann/Schetsche 2005) that has set in motion the most far-reaching transformation of modern orders of discourse: »Network-mediated constructed individual realities are taking the place of mass-media guaranteed overall social reality« (Schetsche 2006, <35>).

Political colonization

With the term *political colonization*, I refer here to those (violent) practices of intervention into discursive structuration that aim at suppressing articulations which, from a particular political or religious worldview, are considered ›false‹ and ›dangerous‹. Discourse studies interested in autocratic and dictatorial regimes always had to consider the political/ideological colonization and control of what can be said, by whom, and when, with what consequences for the speaker – all remote from the concept of »parrhesia« (Foucault 1983, for example). Journalists, for example, just get killed, if they do not obey. So top-down control of discourses by the threat of violent interventions is not new per se. And practices of bottom-up violent interventions have their longstanding history in political fights too. It might be that in western societies after World War II, they have mostly been informed by the claim to gain recognition and the right to articulation, whilst now we can observe certain shift towards the suppression of others' statement production for diverse reasons. We live in times of conflict over shifting cultural hegemony. I guess that discourse studies, whatever their theoretical perspective might be, will have to address the question of current practices of violence in orders/orderings of discourses. In my earlier discussion of the current *disorders of discourse* (Keller 2012), I stated:

> »The emerging new order of discourse […] remains ›modern‹ because it continues to be bound to argumentative rationalism and […] references to ›factual realness‹. Intuition, feeling, opinion, violence or transcendence probably cannot officially (re)take this place without abandoning the basic premises of modern societies.«

Meanwhile, I have become more sceptical. This is what the title »Discourse and Violence« indicates. So why did I speak at the beginning of discourse research under fair-weather conditions? Within the framework of discourse analysis following Foucault, the idea

of a self-emergent control of discursive processing is promoted through the reversal of the relationship between discourses and speakers. This corresponds to the imaginary of self-containment within the modern scientific landscape, which historically has always been an idealization. And in similar ways, discourse research addressing struggles about public issues in western democracies was informed by the idea of hierarchies and asymmetries in knowledge making and statement production, but nevertheless conceived of these spheres as arenas, in which, despite all distortion, at least in principle the free development of articulations is institutionalized.

In her reflections on »Structurally Necessary Critique«, Gesa Lindemann (2018) understands state orders as orders of violence. Discourses provide the corresponding legitimations for its institutions and law regulations. The distributions, dispositions, forms, and means of violence are also fixed. The state's monopoly on the use of force by the police, for example, is grounded in various discursive fixations. In western societies it is based on the historical constitution of the embodied individual and its dignity and integrity against which state force can and must only be used in justified special cases, and which is otherwise protected from the influence of non-legitimate force.[7] Non-authorized actors who use violence do so illegally and must expect persecution. Gesa Lindemann then understands violence as a »component of the communicative mediation of order« (Lindemann 2018, p. 24). The naming of violence is based on an order of interpretation. So it seems that in general, discursive structuration is based on some kind of (state-related) institutional order, which monopolizes the use of violence by legal procedures. For discourse studies, however, this does not imply that violence can only be named where it is constituted as such in relation to the immanent standards of a symbolic order. That which is not described as violence by the interns can be given the form of a violence narrative from an external perspective. Foucault defines power as a relational concept, referring to a network of practices which »guide the possibilities of conduct« (Foucault 1983, p. 221). Violence and consent are instruments or consequences of power. According to Foucault, a

> »relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities. Its opposite pole can only be passivity, and if it comes up against any resistance it has no other option but to try to minimize it.« (ibid, p. 220)

The reference to the relationality of power does not exclude the use of violence, nor does it exclude the generation of consent or assent.

This implies complex relationships between discourses and violence. If we consider infrastructures and sites of discourse production as dispositives, we can distinguish the following relations:

- Discursive fields which operate – to a certain degree – in a mode of autonomy, which is guaranteed by state institutions and their monopoly of violence [Gewaltmonopol]. Here violence is in a state of enabling *background presence*.

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7   As occuring police violence shows, reality can be different.

- Ideological discourses which openly call for violent action (war, revolution, terrorist attacks, executing unwanted articulators and articulations) and incite corresponding affects and emotions. Here the call for violent action is a *topic of discourse.*
- ›Non-political‹ discourses that commit violent acts in order to realize their ›good‹ purposes (like the sad history of medical experimentation). We can speak here of some *absent presence* of violence (it is there, but not called by its name).
- Discourses which legitimize and use violent action as means of disciplining ›unwanted‹ articulations. These include all forms of state prosecution of ›internal enemies‹, by censorship, threat, or legal prosecution, in order to ›stabilize‹ and ›protect‹ some political regime. And they include violent practices of stopping articulations ›from below‹ (like death threats in anti-abortion campaigns, the Rushdie case, hate speech and physical threats towards gender study academics or against those who do not agree with some transgender activism, like the British Kathleen Stock case, and so on.). Here violent action intervenes in *visible presence*, as threat, hate speech and concrete action in fights about cultural hegemony.

The manifestations of discourse control through violence and coercion establish themselves in turn through legitimizing discourses: discourses establish the containment and control of discourses via violent means. This is not historically new, but surprising in the vehemence of its recurrence. It replaces the criteria of free speech and space for articulation of the criterion of the political-ideological desirable. A benefit or harm, however determined, of what is articulated in relation to one's own cause becomes the criterion for allowing or banning statements. They thus constitute discourse orders that structure their production of statements according to loyalty and disloyalty, tolerated, desired conformity, and threatening deviation.

Conclusion

My conclusion will be very short. Being aware of the fact, that the argument I have presented needs much more nuanced elaboration, I just refer back to Foucault's reflection about the order/ing of discourse. On the one hand, it still provides a cornucopia of ideas about the constraining practices of discourse structuration which remains stimulating and is far from being explored. On the other hand, it is in urgent need of an update, responding to the »demands of the day« (Rabinow/Stavrianakis 2013, in reference to Max Weber). What value can be ascribed to a statement analysis that operates on the positive surface of documents and data, but ignores the fact that there are re-emerging violent practices which aim at controlling or re-designing the boundaries of what can be said, by political or religious powers from above or below, and their policies of identity, mobilization, and interest? Should we distinguish between ›good‹ and ›bad‹ violence at this point? The ›good‹ violence as that which is directed against positions that are perceived, by some protagonists, as hurtful, discriminatory, oppressive, offensive? And the ›bad‹ violence that attacks what – from whatever our own value standpoint might be – seems to

us not legitimate? To what extent is the defence of free speech a necessary condition for discourse research itself? All this could certainly be argued about at great length.

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