

## Fifty Years of Research and Reflection *In Memory of Michele Minolli*

Maria Luisa Tricoli\*

ABSTRACT. – The story of SIPRe - *Società Italiana di Psicoanalisi della Relazione* - will be outlined by describing the events that led a group of psychologists and physicians to find it, with the shared objective of reformulating classic psychoanalytic thinking in a way that was congruent with the concept of relationship.

*Key words:* Relationship; subject; unconscious; reflectiveness; intersubjectivity.

In order to speak about the thoughts of Michele Minolli one must speak of the birth and development of SIPRe, the *Società Italiana di Psicoanalisi della Relazione*. Without one, there would be no other. Or rather, without the strength of the Group, which found its expression through SIPRe, an innovative and original way of thinking would not have developed, especially if we consider the times in which it began to be formulated.

It was the '70s. Those were years of turmoil and unrest, of creativity and revolution. In an enthusiastic perspective of omnipotence, a need to dismantle ancient laws and overcome limitations and boundaries was strongly perceived. In the social field, in light of a new, shared equality, the so-called left wing intellectuals were boldly animated by the desire to free the world of malady and distress; and psychoanalysis wanted to free itself from the monopoly of official Freudian thinking.

To tell the truth, during this time (which now seems really quite long ago) the use of the term 'psychoanalysis' was forbidden because it was still exclusive property of those who had undertaken the canonical path of

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\*Psychologist, psychoanalyst SIPRe (Italian Society of Psychoanalysis of Relation) and IFPS (International Federation Psychoanalytic Societies).  
E-mail: tricoli.marialuisa5@gmail.com

studies in the *Società Psicoanalitica Italiana* (Italian Society of Psychoanalysis). We were not allowed to dedicate ourselves to 'psychotherapy', as this was another term that was prohibited at the time because therapy was considered exclusively a medical term. Restricted to anonymity and adorning ourselves with the name '*Psicoanalisi Democratica*' (Democratic Psychoanalysis), which really was in line with the spirit of the times, we wrote in one of our leaflets that we handed out in our neighbourhood (via the voice of Minolli) that our aim was to 'retrieve the socio-political dimension of therapy; promote the global development of a person; and prevent the establishment of pathogenic situations by intervening in our territory'.<sup>1</sup>

We were halfway through the 70s now. Since in 1968 imagination had not taken over power, psychotherapy became a new promised land for many. It was during this time that everything was therapeutic: from birth swimming pools which recalled the warmth of the maternal uterus, to Gestaltic groups that put the body at the centre of attention by simulating games that were more or less aggressive in rooms that were padded with mattresses.

Group tension, or of at least a few people, towards a salvation that came from the outside, particularly from politics, was short lived. We were interested in building a hypothesis about the human beings and their functioning that would go beyond the positivist vision proposed by classical psychoanalysis. Rowing against the current and following the historic-critical method, with help from Rapaport (1944-48), George Klein, Holt, and Gill's first period (1979), we would meet with scrupulous loyalty every Monday evening in the anonymous outskirts of an ancient Roman consular road. We did this in order to examine Freudian writings, some of which were not even published yet in the critical edition by Boringhieri. We did it with much love and respect as we were attracted to the consequentiality of Freudian logic. We identified critical issues and turning points with severe doggedness, discovering barely glimpsed intuitions, which had been immediately abandoned because they did not fit in with the positivistic scientific logic at the time. We investigated the dual nature of the Freudian soul and the epistemic incongruences of the classic theory.

From the beginning, the interest that led our way of thinking was the concept of a 'subject', who was structured and evolving in a relationship. Implicitly we tended to liberate individuals from their limited horizons, which Freudian metapsychology had forced them into, via the intuition that the intrapsychic structure took place in a relational field and thus it

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<sup>1</sup>For the following historical reconstruction cfr. Tricoli, 2007 and Scano, 2008.

could only be decoded in this field. At the time, the relational theme could not find space in a theoretic-conceptual psychoanalytical field,<sup>2</sup> which expressed embarrassment in dealing with this ever since Freud, faithful to the spirit of his times, had proposed to construct a psychology that was a natural science. The Freudian objective involved the removal of subjectivity with the consequence that the subject was simply an epiphenomenalist product of the mind-brain machine. The concept of 'relationship', which later became an integral part of the psychoanalytic perspective, was proposed from the start as of principal competence of psychoanalysis to overcome the reductionism of the closure into the intrapsyche.

As far back as 1985, in one of the leaflets that were produced annually, the following was printed:

"Psychoanalysis and relationship refer to reality and conceptual areas that are distant, and in many respects, contradictory: psychoanalytic theory is indeed configured classically, as an intrapsychic science, while the concept of relationship lies in the interpersonal relations field. The key focus of our research is the recognized necessity of inserting the notion of 'subject' in the psychoanalytic model and therefore inserting the relationship between 'subject-object', both from a perspective of theoretical reconstruction of the 'genesis of the subject' and from the perspective of clinical application in the analytic relationship, in a reappraisal of the traditional concept of transference."

In the same period, in one of the annual conferences (Minolli, 1983) in which our Monday discussions were formalized, it was consciously claimed that if Freud had taken into consideration the relationship in his conceptual aspect, he could have, at the most, made it coincide with the vicissitudes of libido, considering it a simple manifestation of psychosexual development via the various stages: oral, anal, phallic and genital. The need would have remained to understand and explain the libido of the Ego and the libido of the object in their succession or exclusion and therefore the question would have been left open as to how an individual could construct his or her internal world in their relationship with reality. If psychoanalytic theory had assumed a framework of Ego (subject)/Object (external world) as preferential axes - of which the axis sexuality/defence could constitute only one particular aspect - the new vision would not have been compatible with the Freudian metapsychology.

In the meantime, the world had changed. Talking about theory was no longer in vogue. Nevertheless, even when at a global level the death of metapsychology was declared and everyone felt free to remark on clinical issues without any theoretical reference, the interest of our group remained

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<sup>2</sup>Cfr. Scano, 2008.

anchored around what a subject was and what constituted it. The preferred route for the answer had already been identified: the tireless study of contradictions and possibilities via an epistemic reformulation of Freudian theory.

In Italy Relational Track theory had become widespread with incredible rapidity. It had its roots in Sullivan and in the English Middle Group; therefore it supported a concept of relationship that, in our opinion, was more phenomenal in order to highlight how the original relationship of dependence subject-object was structuring for subjectivity. This point of view did not give convincing answers to the question of how a subject is formed and how it transforms in the course of its existence. The loyalty to the stringent logic of Rapaport, whose thinking had been disseminated through the work of his collaborators in 1967, kept us from identifying the 'relationship' with 'relationship of the object', which would have re-established the importance of the object, excluded from the Freudian construction, but which would have made the structuring of the subject simply due to an external factor.

We questioned ourselves on clinical concepts (transference, setting), like everyone else was doing at that particular historic moment in time, such as when Gill's (1982) precious work came out. Nevertheless, the interest in a theory that did not reduce the subject to a game of impulses continued to be central in our thoughts, even if it was out of fashion. Today, I can say with certainty that we did not follow trends.

There was however a trend which we had to bend to. In 1989, after years of discussions, the 'Ossicini's Act' that regulated the practice of psychotherapy in Italy, without in reality defining it, stated that only physicians and psychologists could practice psychotherapy, after 'adequate training... in University specialization schools or in accredited institutes'. The consequence of this was that the entire work of our group, that in 1985 had formed the SIPRe association, concentrated on the possibility that training, which had been going on up to that point, could be backed by ministerial recognition. We chose, not without rifts and abandonments by a few members, the longer and more complex road of becoming affiliated with the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies (IFPS), disdaining a search for easy and not always correct short cuts. We interrupted training activities in 1993, which up to then had been aimed at a wide range of operators in the mental healthcare field and not only to psychologists and physicians.

This meant undergoing international assessment of our research of a psychoanalysis that was based on the subject, that had assumed the meaning of a faith in a liberatory truth. Our thinking began to be published in the journal *Ricerca Psicoanalitica (Psychoanalytic Research)*, which was founded in 1990. We began to participate in conferences that were no longer

just amongst ourselves and to submit articles based on our theoretical hypotheses to international journals; these were neither always understood nor shared; sometimes they were even the object of hostile evaluations. This went on until 1996, when we were finally associated with the IFPS and our Specialization Post-Graduate School succeeded in achieving the approval by the Ministry of Education. This was a decade of much activity and work, even though it was carried out by only a few members after the interruption of our previous training activities. When compared to societies and groups that were based on Freudian psychoanalysis, which were by then divided into a thousand different streams, often distant from the original model, we were able to enhance our method and theory, and therefore structure a solid group identity. What were once simple intuitions, was becoming a linear vision where theory, method and clinical practice could find more unity and coherence.

Since the 80s and via an examination of Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (Freud, 1895), Minolli had reached the conclusion that whichever structure was acquired, it responded to external stimuli based on a constant way of behaving that was perceived as optimal. A 'structure' therefore was seen as stable in a particular historical moment in time, but susceptible to restructuring when new relational situations were experienced. The Ego, in accordance with Gill (1979), was defined as a hierarchical continuum of forces and structures that were present at every level of the individual hierarchy, but also as a 'subjective element' that resulted from the first relationship and of successive relationships up until the higher hierarchies of consciousness. One could therefore ascertain how in the entire Freudian endeavour, after the introduction of the Ego in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895) and its return in extremis in *Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence* (Freud, 1938) (cfr. Assoun, 1981), psychoanalysis remained prisoner to the 'apparatus' perspective. To establish the Ego as a *subject*, it would have been necessary to change level, moving the partial explanations up to form a totality that included and unified them (Minolli, 1993).

There were two particular Freudian concepts that we could not back (Minolli, 2000a, b): i) The concept of drive: it did not seem epistemologically sustainable for us to explain the complexities of human functioning based exclusively on a biological stimulus, that is to say, based only on an internal stimulus; ii) The concept of apparatus: it did not seem theoretically legitimate to think of a human being only as a machine that was more or less hydraulic. We also did not share in the Freudian theorization of the second topic that divided the entirety of a person into three instances (Ego, Superego and Id), and reduced the Ego to an agency that is provided with specific and divided tasks that are motility, perception, relationship with the external reality, control and last but not least,

consciousness. It was in fact Freud (1921) who stated that the Ego does not have a representation of itself, it is unrepresentable, it is simply a surface that receives representations of an object.

We thought it more convincing to follow a vision of the human being based on a unitary reference represented by the concepts of subject and of identity, obviously trying to avoid the danger of falling into reifications. Nevertheless, the term 'subject' seemed linguistically poorly defined, and it was actually polluted by various philosophical positions, so the term 'Ego' was added on to it. The term 'Ego' did not refer to the instance that mediates between internal and external, like the common meaning shared by Jung or Freud, but was used as a synonym of 'subject as a unitary reference of experience' (Di Francesco, 1998), and therefore as a simple reinforcer of the term subject (as Minolli stated in a paper in 2000). Since no one is the master of language, the use of this expression entailed confusion for the double meaning that the word 'Ego' in Italian ('Io') usually has: either as a psychic instance or as a grammatical subject ('I' in English). To add to this, it is undeniable that the word 'Ego-subject' ('Io-soggetto')<sup>3</sup> had a difficult significance from the start; it was loaded with implicit meanings that should have been clarified. Minolli was referring to, on the one hand, a subject as a concrete structure of human evolutionary and historical baggage; on the other hand, a subject of a personal narration perceived as identity produced by interactions that form it.

The concept of identity, that Minolli formulated at the end of the 90s in an article sent to the *American Academy of Psychoanalysis* journal, which was then rejected, was our most precious success in our way of thinking up until then. Following results obtained from the *Infant Research* and the subsequent elaborations by Daniel Stern, Brazelton, Trevarthen, Lichtenberg and others, Minolli distinguished: i) A form of 'simple' or 'direct' consciousness before 18 months of age, that belongs to each living organism and perceives the world directly for what it appears to be, on the basis of perceptions and affects that are not reflected upon; ii) A form of consciousness that is 'reflective' tied to the birth of reflectiveness, that is a faculty that belongs only to human beings; it entails the recognition of the self in relation to others.

Reflective consciousness, a type of awareness that carries within itself the ability to consider and think about ourselves, was therefore defined as a specific function that is acquired evolutionarily and that distinguishes a human from other living organisms. One may refer to this as 'identity' in order to underline the subjectivity of the perception of self that was formed

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<sup>3</sup>The term 'Ego-subject' is a neologism that was created in the 90s by Minolli and remains unchanged in his theory.

in its presence. In retrospect, we must recognize that this last point was not clear, just as there has been confusion between the terms subject and identity. Further considerations would have been necessary in order to focus on the fact that identity was a consequence of reflective consciousness and not a synonym. Reflective consciousness should have therefore been conceptualized as a faculty that the subject could use in various ways, not necessarily in the most functional way for his or her wellbeing. It was only intuitively known that the term identity referred to the *experience* of one's being as an ever-changing presence in a relationship. It was not only about punctual perception of a determined state of mind or of a self-image tied to a particular moment in time. For this reason we did not feel like-minded about the concept of 'self' that had developed in North-American psychoanalysis. Even though it was no longer tied to the representative content produced by the structural Ego, in our opinion, it was still anchored to a momentary perception of an objectified interior datum, so that the sense of wholeness could easily fragment into multiplicitous selves. We were interested in that wholeness of the subject, perceived as 'me' that, expresses itself through values and actions, and is constantly put into play in relationships with the possibility of reformulating itself or calcifying.

With this conceptualization, based on empirical research on child development, SIPRE intended to launch the idea of: i) a unified subject; ii) in development; iii) in a relationship with an object; iv) in a conflicting dimension based on an unconscious basis.

The conceptualization of the conflict in terms that are no longer tied to drives but rather to identity was a basic tenet, as they concern the never automatic and linear passage from a perception of self to another. After abandoning the drive point of view, one could perceive a difficulty in psychoanalytic literature in formulating a concept of unconscious that did not coincide with what was repressed. In what way can a perception perceived as potentially painful or subversive to one's own internal coherence be distanced from consciousness? In the absence of a unified subject who was the agent of this operation? By staying connected to the Freudian topic vision, one could run the risk of reducing the unconscious to the unknown and of making the understanding a developmental event tied to a natural passage of time. Contrarily, the unconscious kept configuring itself not as a mental place or a jumble of repressed content, but as a quality, a function of thought that had priority compared with the consciousness that emerges from it.

Expanding on the suggestions put forward by Daniel Stern (1985) in his research, it seemed convincing to us to think that everything that constituted a pre-reflective level of organization would organize itself as a whole unit of identity meanings, once a reflective function appeared. The individual tended to automatically maintain those identity meanings because they

constitute everything that he or she perceives to be. The root of these meanings, that structure the primary attachment styles, is unconscious because their formation comes before the birth of reflective consciousness. When reflectiveness appears, these meanings acquire an identitary value because they are perceived as something that is fundamental without which the individual would cease to exist. With a very valid intuition, in 2000 Minolli claimed that with the appearance of reflective consciousness the relationship between individuals and their environment transformed, becoming a relationship between personal evaluation/acceptance criteria of the self and the criteria that the external world (family, society, *etc.*) sent back. The comparison between personal evaluations and external ones opens a space for freedom for human beings, who are stimulated to choose whether to accept and evaluate the external input and, in some way, remodulate their self-image or on the other hand, close themselves in the self-image they already have. From this stimulation, which is usually completely unnoticed, conflicts originate. In a relationship with someone else the structured meanings can remodel themselves or they can reaffirm themselves rigidly in their contents, keeping themselves intact, even when reality makes their non-functionality emerge due to the distress or unhappiness that they arouse. In this second case, individuals anchor themselves defensively to themselves, giving rise to those disfunctions that we call pathologies. This last perspective makes it possible to think that human beings structure themselves dialectically in a relationship in a conflicting dimension whose roots are unconscious (Minolli, 2004). From reflectiveness the self-reflective dimension develops, which manifests itself in the personal awareness of our own mental experience and our own past, with the possibility of creating narration for oneself and others. Thus, the subject opens themselves up to the world, conquering ever-widening horizons.

These convictions allowed us to place ourselves next to the nonlinear Complex Systems Theories, that created a bridge between biology and psyche, favouring a global and unified vision of a human being. Furthermore, they offered an outlet to the problem of conciliating the continuity of a human being with his or her discontinuity and allowed us to see the disorganization as a possibility for a new and more functional organization. In 2005 Minolli wrote: 'After years and years of confused oscillation between a closed intrapsyche and an interpsyche that was polluted by an easy environmentalism, it is finally possible, to have a unified perspective of a human being and a processual interpretation of its evolution in a psychoanalytic field' (Minolli, 2005).

What could attract us toward nonlinear Complex Systems Theories? A complex system is defined as a physical and functional entity, made up of many parts that are related in how they respond to each other and to other systems working towards a common goal. A similar perspective is well suited



to defining the subject (Ego-subject in Minolli's definition) as a dynamic system 'characterized by sensitivity to initial conditions, uncertainty on possible deviations and open to go in any direction' (Sander, 2002). Furthermore, in order to preserve itself as existent, the system tends to maintain a functional equilibrium within its parts, that is to say, it is coherent. In citing Sander (1995 & 2002), Minolli (2005) states that the system maintains coherence in its organization thanks to an endogenous activity (*agency*) whose motivation and end goal is to self-organize, self-regulate, self-correct and is continuously interacting with the environment of which it is a part of in a continuous activity of auto- and hetero-regulation. This implies a continuous evolution of the 'subject' system and a constant tension towards a balance that is always renewed when in contact with the others. A balance that guarantees wellbeing. Other living species, that are not equipped with self-reflectiveness, adapt to reality on an instinctual level of organization that belongs to their particular species; the human species does this but is guided by a specific system of subjective meanings in a process that is nonlinear and unforeseeable, and requires a search for balance that is continuously being reformulated. Human beings, that interact with reality, choose their own sense in their relationship with the world that constitutes the purpose for living (Minolli, 2005, 2006, 2011; Tricoli, 1999, 2005, 2018).

Up to this point I have presented a type of thinking that is firm and innovative, constantly searching for more coherence in defining the unitary subject who develops towards a more complete and coherent realization of it being a 'human'.<sup>4</sup> This is a field of research that is very expansive and must remain open and debated. If a type of thinking closes in on itself, it becomes rigid and eventually dies. We always run the unavoidable risk of stopping at acquired truths, especially if, having pursued them with tension and effort, they become an object of faith. In order to continue to exist fully, SIPRe today must continue to clarify, as it has always done, what a subject is and how it develops in the interaction with others, also because of the evident repercussions this theorization may have on clinical practice. In this direction of reflection and study our current neuroscience research comes in handy. On the one hand it confirms many psychoanalytic intuitions anchoring them to experimental results, on the other hand it opens stimulating new directions of investigation.

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<sup>4</sup>In Minolli's production, the reflection on the couple, which would require a specific treatment, is particularly important. In his vision, the couple does not present traits that can be traced back either to the individual or to the group; instead, it must be placed within the sphere of dual inter-subjective relationships with a specific paradigm that is more pertinent and adequate. The couple is characterized by the real motivations of genitivity and self-actualization. In the couple are identified the ways in which the subject realizes his ultimate motivation: to affirm himself and to go beyond self-affirmation.

A fundamental concept tied to the common idea of a subject, already cleared up by scientific research, is that of 'consciousness', which is presently unanimously considered as a continuous processing of information that comes from inside and outside our organism. It is 'an instinct' embedded in the brain - Gazzaniga (2018) claims - a species specific quality that has developed evolutionarily in all human beings, from the simplest to the more complex, up to its manifestation of reflectiveness in human beings, continuing to potentially develop into a self-reflectiveness that is always more complex. Consciousness is present even in patients who are in a vegetative state and even in those rare cases in which the frontal cortex is absent. In this evolutionary time of humanity, consciousness manifests as personal awareness of our own lived mental experience and self-experience (Damasio, 2020; Northoff, 2016). The ability to have awareness of one's own thoughts, be able to self-refer experiences, and continue to amplify what each one of us senses as the presence of oneself is a solely human capacity. The subject is based on this ability, finalizing it according to what it is, and thus, according to its desires, to its planning ability, and its values, which manifest continuously in relations with the others and the world. In the psychoanalytic field it is therefore the subject in its entirety, which we must now investigate. It is not sufficient, in fact it is misleading, to linger on only the function of self-reflectiveness (which can substitute, with few misinterpretations, the term 'self-consciousness'), that if considered in itself, inevitably leads to reifications, functioning as a *deus ex machina* that is able to bring about mental transformations. Self-reflectiveness, as a function of our thoughts, develops not only in solitary meditation, but in relationships with others and this allows us to reveal ourselves to ourselves. Thus, the field of investigation that is still open is that of intersubjectivity.

To confront this aspect, it is useful to ask ourselves in advance how we can define the subject and the relation between subjects based on neurophysiological acquisitions. Today, the eternal dualism between mind and body is considered outdated and has been overtaken by a unitary vision in which the modifications of mind and body have the world as a reference: the others and the environment in their entirety (Northoff, 2016). The brain, as a bodily organ, is no longer considered as a simple passive receiver of external impulses, able only of a reflexive function that brings about predefined and automatic reactions to the external world. We no longer think that neural activity is passively determined by a cognitive stimulus and by external environmental requests. The brain is active even when we are resting (on its own it consumes 20% of the total bodily oxygen consumption at rest) and even in a deep coma there is still reticular activity (Northoff, 2016). One can therefore think that external stimuli do not cause cerebral activity, but that they modulate ongoing intrinsic activity, a cyclic activity that functions as recurring waves. This same stimulus is processed

many times in various cerebral areas up until it is expressed in perceptions, emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are ever more complex and always individualized. Contrarily, if re-entry cycles are not possible, like in the case of those who find themselves in a vegetative state, elaboration is much reduced because the minimal integration of information does not reach the cortex, not allowing for conscious reflectiveness. Subjectivity - and its development- can be seen as a demonstrable value at an experimental level that is not caused by the immediacy of the external contributions. From birth an individual has an individual heritage, that is both somatic and mental, and that develops in contact with the environment.

Regarding this last perspective it is useful to refer to Northoff's (2016) thinking. He studied the reactions of the cortex in a resting state, for example in vegetative states and deep comas. In following the vicissitudes of the stimulus from specific sensory regions up until the cortex, Northoff reported that the stimulus penetrates the pre-frontal cortex, acquiring reflectiveness thanks to the activity and variability of the cortex itself. In this way it opens or closes the doors to external influence. Therefore, whether the stimulus and its contents reach a reflective consciousness or not depends on the state of activity and variability that exists before the arrival of the stimulus itself; that is to say from the situation in which the brain finds itself before an external perturbation. The state preceding the brain determines the response to the stimulus and allows this to be associated to conscious reflectiveness. My personal interpretation is that the capacity to use the reflective function of the presence of oneself is tied to the subject and its genetic inheritance (nature) and what it becomes over time in relation to the environment in which it is included (culture). However, the natural dimension is also cultural because it includes not only the specifically familial transgenerational heritage, but also all of the heritage that was conquered by humanity in its evolutionary development. We cannot say, therefore, that the subject does not exist prior to birth, unless we do not mean that a subject coincides with his/her own individual reflective consciousness.

We can agree that the area of individual reflective consciousness is a limited horizon that does not account for the concrete realization of human beings. It is in the tension in a relationship that one acquires awareness of what one is and what one can be, overcoming the instinct to be dependent that since birth characterizes us all. Speaking of dependence I mean the need to maintain a perceived self-image of oneself, both in the desire to feel approved and loved by another: both reify us making us objects that are moulded by the external environment. To become subjects, we must experience ourselves as separate in a significant relationship with another, who is a subject in turn both because of their similarities and their differences too. We do not become subjects with the solipsistic power of the mind, but with concrete actions of

transformation, experienced in real interactions with the world in which we live and that lives within us. A route that entails an obligatory passage - that is necessarily intersubjective - from the dependence from others to one's self-affirmation for what each one is in that historical moment in time and in that particular relationship (Tricoli, 2018).

To continue to develop an innovative thought, SIPRe today has the task of dealing with what a subject is and clarifying how the subject develops ways of interacting, transforming itself and enriching itself in intersubjective relationship with others.

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