

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FRENCH CREATIVITY INSTITUTE

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A Brief Note on this Chapter

What you're reading here is both a rigorously researched book chapter on cutting-edge developments in the field of creativity (with a French twist) and an actual proposal for a brand new, bricks-and-mortar creativity institute entitled the French Creativity Institute (FCI). This chapter is itself a form of scholarly justification (more erudite than a "marketing plan") on the vital public need for this new institution. One that will be equal parts think tank, educational and cultural center, and media apparatus. Its initial two sites, based in Paris and NYC, will nurture a rich, exploratory, playful Franco-American dialogue on creativity. As the 'ripple in the pond' effect sends creative reverberations around the world, we'll respond in kind by opening new FCI branches internationally to meet the needs and desires of local populations.

Abstract

This article proposes the creation of the *French Creativity Institute*, a non-profit organization designed to educate the world about the best ideas in creativity studies: with a French twist. Based in Paris, it will have offshoots in major cities around the world, including London and NYC. France was chosen as the h.q. of this unique new institution due to this country's long historical association with humanistic culture, philosophy, literature, and the Enlightenment tradition. The institute's main purpose is to channel creativity toward the civic goal of preserving democracy. In addition to offering courses in creativity, it will feature a robust artistic program of film screenings, literary readings, and theatrical events. It includes a café as a hub of social life, and a media platform to share its creativity insights with the world.

The French Way in Creativity

Welcome Francophiles! And everyone else who wants to expand their creative capacities, with a focus on the "French way." And what exactly is the *French way* in creativity? In our rigorous examination of creativity traditions from around the world, we've discovered a particular French emphasis on joy, leisure, beauty, love, imagination, utopia, and happiness in life. Take romantic love, for example. Did you know that the very concept of romantic love was invented in the South of France, by the famous 12 century troubadour poets?

Fast-forward to the 20th century. Consider the groundbreaking work of artists in several mediums, from Monet and Matisse in painting, to the revolutionary sculptures of Marcel Duchamp and Louise Bourgeois, to the French New Wave filmmakers (Godard, Rohmer, Varda, et al) who critiqued the formulaic fluff of Hollywood with their humanizing and critical experiments in cinema. Anyone with even a passing interest in creativity would have to ask themselves: What are the French eating for breakfast? Is there something in that French toast we should know about? Perhaps creativity is rooted in the French DNA.

Maybe the wine and cheese could offer a clue. Aha, now I think we're onto something! Especially considering that the salon, a convivial space for looking at and discussing art, has long been associated with France. Most famously with Gertrude Stein's early 20th century soirées in Paris. Given that a good salon can be measured by its level of conviviality, it appears that social interaction itself...often cheered on by a little wine and cheese...is part and parcel of the French creative sensibility. Indeed Henri Bergson, an influential French early 20th century philosopher, turned away from the dry, mechanistic views prominent in his day (how French!) by relating creativity to imagination, dreams, and even joy.

Bergson looked at the unconscious and affective aspects of creativity. He also believed that "moral creativity" must be the ultimate goal (2006, p. 105). In a similar vein, the notable French pedagogue Célestin Freinet believed educators need to motivate their students by "arousing the desire to learn." (2006, p. 112). Such ideas are deeply aligned with the work of American educational philosophers like John Dewey (1916), who believed in "student centered learning," and Maxine Greene (1995), the pioneer of aesthetic pedagogy who argued for the centrality of arts and imagination education curriculums. One of Maxine's favorite quotes was "imagination gives us the capacity to think of things as if they could be otherwise" (1995); an idea that connects creativity to both a personal and political sense of agency.

As a member of Maxine's vaunted Sunday Salon in her Manhattan apartment from 2000 to 2010, I consider myself her protégé. I'll be channeling her ideas into the French Creativity Institute. In addition, I'll be building on the work of the modern-day creativity movement, spearheaded in 1950 via an historic speech by Joy Guilford at the American Psychological Association. Guilford was part of the "big 3" of American creativity innovators, along with Alex Osborne (inventor of the technique of "brainstorming"), and E. Paul Torrance: creator of an early test to measure creativity. These innovators all had a practical side. They brought structure, rigor, and a sense of discovery to an unwieldy and slippery topic so that "applied imagination" can harness the magic of creativity - a process that could benefit the domains of culture, education, business, politics, and everyday life.

American Education's Wrong Turn

Ironically, despite the presence of such towering figures in the fields of creativity and education, for the past 50 years American education has been moving *away* from creativity, imagination, and the humanities. As host of the nonprofit TV show *Public Voice Salon*, an open dialogue on education, the

arts, and social change, this point was made by several of our notable guests, including education historian Diane Ravitch (2019), literary critic Harold Bloom (2018), education activist Ira Shor (2015), and public intellectual Stanley Aronowitz (2012). It's also a frequent point made by Henry Giroux, most recently in his new book: *Pedagogy of Resistance: Against Manufactured Ignorance* (2022), published by Bloomsbury Academic.

In subservience to a neoliberal ideology that valorizes the free market over and above humane, moral, and civic concerns, American education has been jettisoning creativity and the arts for a narrow, mechanistic, “teach to the test” approach designed solely to prepare workers for the market economy. Not only does this approach fly in the face of the work of Bergson (who championed joy and imagination), it ignores the beliefs of another French thinker, Ribot, who saw a crucial link between cognition, affect, and imagination (2006, p. 101). It also rejects the more utopian (Fourier, 1808, 1996) and morally grounded aspects of creativity in education that have long been a hallmark of the French way.

Voltaire, the French Enlightenment, and the Birth of American Democracy

Considering the shocking rise of ignorance, wild conspiracy theories, and growing authoritarianism in recent years—including in the U.S.—never have the ideals of the French Enlightenment (1685 - 1815) been more in need of a revival. The work of Voltaire, a key figure in this movement, is especially valuable given his crusade against tyranny, bigotry, and superstition; work that got him into “good trouble” (as John Lewis would've put it) with the powers-that-be; most especially with the Catholic Church. Keep in mind also that the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality not only sparked the French Revolution (which overthrew the monarchy), they also helped catalyze the American Revolution in 1776.

It was not for nothing that two of America's most important founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, spent a lot of time in France. Soaking up the radical, liberating, humanistic French spirit. Even the war itself might've been lost if not for the critical, last-minute French intervention under Lafayette. And America's most durable symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty, happened to be a gift from (guess who?) the French. Interestingly, an effort to revive Enlightenment thinking—along with a renewed focus on civic education—is being led by the American actor Richard Dreyfuss. Dreyfuss has spoken about this vital issue on mainstream media (CNN, MSNBC, and Fox), and as a guest on our TV show *Public Voice Salon*. A few years ago, I engaged in several productive brainstorming sessions with Richard to help him grow his project, The Dreyfuss Civics Initiative, and integrate it into the educational establishment.

Creativity and Democracy

In his introduction to *The International Handbook of Creativity* (2006), the eminent psychologist Robert J. Sternberg writes:

Many of the world's governments depend on ignorance for their existence. In autocracies, education and especially creative thinkers pose perhaps the greatest threats to their existence. In democracies, one would hope that creativity would be more valued, and it probably is. Nevertheless, many of the governments that are elected got into place only through the ignorance and narrow-mindedness of the people who selected them. The last thing these governments want is critical and creative thinking that would threaten their existence. Indeed, the level of political discourse in many of the world's so-called democracies is only slightly above the autocracies, if it is above that level at all.

These words of wisdom by Sternberg (who owns 13 honorary doctorates from universities in Europe, Russia, and North and South America), though written in 2006, offer a chilling warning for our time. How much more prescient they are in our age when the chickens of the pervasive dumbing down in American education appear to be coming home to roost in the form of fake news, the proliferation of wild conspiracy theories provoked by groups like QAnon (whose supporters now include two elected U.S. congress members), intensifying racism, and the overall growing threats to democracy.

Indeed, using our imaginations, we might speculate on a juicy missed opportunity. Had Sternberg's brilliant thesis (the posing of an intimate link between creativity, critical thinking, and democracy) been read in the halls of congress at the time it was written (a decade before the election of Donald J. Trump, the first American president to display overt authoritarian tendencies)—and, crucially, *had it been taken seriously by politicians!*—it may have sparked a wake-up call to protect democracy via a radical transformation of its education system.

That being said, I find it shocking that a year-and-a-half after a violent coup attempt almost snuffed out America's democracy, there's been no educational response to this event. There needs to be one. Yesterday, if not sooner. In the same way Russia's launch of Sputnik in 1957 invigorated America's math and science curriculum, we believe the current threats to its democracy require just as dramatic a response—but from the Humanities side of the Academy this time. We recommend an immediate infusion of creativity, social imagination, history (and the other liberal arts, like literature: which nurtures empathy for others), critical thinking, and basic civics into the curriculum as part of an emergency, "save democracy" education plan. Note that when I brought up this idea at a meeting of the Village Independent Democrats (a political club based in NYC, of which I served for five years on their Executive Committee), Senator Chuck Schumer agreed with me. Alas, a beginning! Since President Joe Biden's wife, Dr. Jill Biden, happens to have a doctorate in Education, might she become an ally in this noble cause?

Global Creativity Laboratory

Absent America's glaring lack of leadership (up to now) on the educational front, the French Creativity Institute (FCI) will take the lead in making de-

mocracy a priority in education by emphasizing creativity, social imagination, critical thinking, utopia, and civics in educational curriculums. It will also utilize the media as a crucial site of pedagogy. While we'll emphasize the work of French creativity pioneers, in addition, we'll draw on the best creativity research from around the world. From South America we'll import the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and Chili's emphasis on critical and creative thinking in their education system. From Spain, we'll hold up their Education Act of 1970—which highlights the importance of creativity and sociability as vital components of a well-educated person—as a model to be emulated by other countries.

Likewise, from Turkey we'll import their love of fantasy and color. We'll also try to emulate their volunteer-based, grass roots, community-model of civic education; in particular their "I am a Person, an Individual, a Citizen" program. From Russia, we'll make use of their emphasis on dialogue and sociality—in particular the work of Vygotsky (1990) and Bakhtin (1981)—while also making use of Ponomarev's metaphor of a 'dialogic ladder' that helps intuition climb toward logic (1960). From the Scandinavian countries up north, where Ingmar Bergman filmed his cinematic masterpieces, we'll channel their "welcoming warmth and community" (Sahlin, 1997). At FCI, we agree with the Scandinavian view that a positive mood enhances creativity, that intellectual fellowship among researchers matters, and that chance meetings and exchanges are a powerful catalyst in the growth of science.

From Israel and South America, we'll incorporate their respect for psychoanalysis as a creative endeavor (with a nod to Austria and Freud's seminal contribution to psychoanalysis). But France also has its own strong psychoanalytic tradition, one that sees therapy as a creative process in which one's "self-concept is constructed or revised through the therapeutic process." (2006, p. 116). Taking seriously this link between analysis and creativity, every FCI location will have a low cost, sliding scale-based center for psychotherapy to serve the psychological needs of the community. From Africa, we'll honor their belief that a higher value be placed on community welfare (living in harmony with one's neighbors), than the personal creative achievement of a single artist. (I played with this concept in my 2015 book, *A New Theory of Fame*.)

This community-based view of learning is reinforced by an emerging mindset that sees creativity as a "collective" rather than an isolated, singular endeavor. In the world of theater, this dialogic flavor can be seen in the rise of Improv, a movement which began at Chicago's Second City Theater in 1959 and has since swept the world (Wasson, 2017). Eastern cultures, heavily influenced by Confucian and Buddhist philosophies, also emphasize this holistic, "let's all get together," communal view of learning. Note that as the "peace and love" movement of the 1960s was gathering steam, a visit by the Beatles to India helped shepherd these Eastern views of creativity into the American counterculture.

Literature, Cinema, and Theater

FCI will include its own bricks and mortar bookstore, café, art gallery, and theater for staging plays and screening films. In alignment with the French concern for sociality, audience Q & A's (and talk backs with directors, actors, and playwrights) will occur frequently. So will literary open mics, lectures, and comedy shows. Multiple book clubs, to accommodate a variety of literary tastes, will be formed. The best works of literature, theater, and cinema—with a French twist—will hold a place of prominence in our portfolio of works. Using French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" (1998), which posits a vital link between cultural knowledge and success in life, while also considering the link between humanistic education and democracy posited by scholars like Dewey (1916) and Giroux (2022), FCI will provide a vital (patriotic?) public service by repairing deficiencies in cultural knowledge. We seek to do this not in a dry, stuffy, boring "academic" style, but in a fun, playful, joyful, community-based way.

The great French psychoanalyst Lacan once famously said that people "don't know what they don't know" (2009). Here at FCI, rather than blame people for not knowing stuff (considering the rampant deficiencies in education systems), and in line with Freinet's notion that "arousing a desire for learning" is the key for educational motivation, we'll create a gentle but stimulating, nonjudgmental (Rogers, 1961), dialogical space for folks to perhaps *learn what they didn't even know they didn't know*.

Considering France's literary achievements, from Rabelais' 16th century bawdy, erudite, and comic masterpiece *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532)—a watershed in world literature—to Flaubert's convention flouting *Madam Bovary* (1856), to the postmodern critics Derrida, Baudrillard, and Barthes, right up to today's Annie Ernaux (the octogenarian winner of this year's Nobel Prize in Literature), one wonders why literature (rather than fashion) isn't the first "cultural export" which comes to mind regarding the French. Do the fashionistas have better marketing? Perhaps. We think this situation must change. Quickly. For obvious reasons, fashion, however beautiful and ornamental its role in society, should come way below literature in any thinking person's list of cultural priorities. Because literature nourishes deep, soulful, humanistic, psychological, critical, and democratic capacities in a way that the more vapid fashion world—with its focus on surfaces—simply cannot.

To emphasize the civic importance of literature over fashion, there is a fascinating, important, and relatively unknown "French Connection" which posits an intimate link between literature and democracy. It involves the work of Louise Rosenblatt, a pioneer of "reader response theory." Rosenblatt's groundbreaking book, *Literature as Exploration* (1938, 1995), shook up the field of English Education. A student of John Dewey, Rosenblatt was a roommate of Margaret Meade's at Barnard in NYC, from whom she absorbed an anthropological respect for cultural variety. She did her graduate work at the Sorbonne in Paris, earning a doctorate in comparative literature. She was also deeply influenced by her time in Paris, where she met Gertrude Stein, and was part of an elite coterie of artists and intellectuals which included Andre Gide and Marcel Duchamp.

Because Rosenblatt emphasized democratic dialogue as the best way to make (hermeneutic) meaning out of literary text, a methodology good for learning *and* democracy, we'll apply her unique pedagogical invention at FCI. Interestingly, Rosenblatt's methodology has been reaffirmed by new research in creativity which envisages two kinds of creative acts:

1. The creation by an artist
2. the creative *encounter* between a viewer or reader and a work of art.

An art encounter may also include the "hermeneutical" act of making meaning from the work. This process can be enriched through dialogue with others. Having studied at NYU's forward-thinking graduate program in English Education in the 1990s (a program that Rosenblatt herself founded in 1947), where I studied with Rosenblatt's protégé Gordon Pradl (*Literature for Democracy*, 1996), I want FCI to be a shining beacon to the world of Rosenblatt's hopeful, humanizing, democratic vision of literary democracy.

The strong literary bent of FCI, to honor France's historic love affair with literature, will be the guiding star that determines what cinema and theater we choose to curate. High on our cinematic priority list is the French New Wave (Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, and Agnes Vardas) because of their deep respect for literature and philosophy. If the humanities are ever to become "cool" again, like they were in the 1960s—when one in five American students was a humanities major, as opposed to one in twenty today—we hope today's filmmakers take their cues from the French New Wave rather than the shallow, commercialized Hollywood blockbuster model: which values profits in the "China market" over humane and civic concerns.

As for theater, we prefer an experimental, Off Broadway approach—the kind first incubated in downtown NYC in the 1960s, at places like La Mama, The Living Theater, and Judson Memorial Church (Moody, 2009)—than the current dumbed down, fluffy, commercial Broadway model. Given our civic bent, the theatrical work we'll champion will emerge from the political theater traditions of Augusto Boal, Bertolt Brecht, Judith Malina, and Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping (Lane, 2002). Given our French focus, we'll keep alive the commedia dell'arte tradition of Moliere, while encouraging the most creative and innovative new playwrights in France (the future Brechts).

Funding

FCI will be set up as a nonprofit 501C3. We'll seek funding from private citizens, governments, and philanthropic organizations. Given the recent rise of polarization in the U.S. and Europe, and growing threats to democracy worldwide, there's a newfound interest by philanthropists (like Jeff Bezos and George Soros) to fund organizations which promote democracy and civic unity. Given our pedagogical focus on creativity that nurtures civic dialogue, community, and democracy, FCI can make a strong argument to procure such funding.

Café Culture

A central feature of FCI will be a café that's open to the public. The café will symbolize the Parisian Left Bank culture which incubated so much of France's artistic and intellectual development in the 20th century, best exemplified by the café dialogues of Jean Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the rest of their genius cohort (Bakewell, 2016). Likewise, the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas talks of the vital importance of the "democratic public sphere" (1961), the space "in between" the workplace and home, as being crucial to the health of a democratic society.

Café life makes up a critical component of this vital public sphere. The kind of open, spontaneous, improvisational conversations which occur in cafés help nurture what in France is called the "multivariate and differential" approach to creativity (2006, p. 117). This approach sees creativity as being produced by "nonlinear interactions between cognitive, conative, affective, and environmental factors" (Lubart, 1999). In the stimulating, off-the-cuff, improvised dialogues typical of café culture, each of these creative "boxes" might be checked off in just one conversation! Once inside the cozy FCI café, customers can also learn (via posters and flyers) about our greater mission and projects.

Education

Though FCI will nurture the growth of creativity in a variety of ways through our arts programs, we'll also feature an outstanding lineup of university quality courses on creativity and the various arts. In addition to a comprehensive History of Creativity class, we'll feature courses such as Global Creativity, Business Creativity, Creative Activism, and Creativity in Everyday Life. Courses on literature, cinema, theater, improv, humor, storytelling, the visual arts, aesthetic pedagogy (for teachers who want to better integrate arts into their classrooms), will also be offered. Due to our nonprofit funding structure, tuition costs will be kept low.

Media Apparatus

At FCI, we notice a strange paradox between the booming field of creativity research on the one hand, and the abysmal lack of coverage of these potentially transformative ideas (both for people and society) in the mainstream media. We see this as a peculiar silence that needs to be repaired. Barack Obama once said that in modern day society, if it's not on TV, it doesn't exist. We at FCI wholeheartedly agree. Because we'd like to see creativity exist even more in the world, each FCI campus will have its own TV and Podcast studio to keep the public informed about the latest news on Creativity with a French Twist.

Since my wife Claudia and I already have a TV show, *Public Voice Salon*, we'll produce the pilot episodes at our NYC and Paris locations. The "salon structure" of our programming style is perfect for capturing the kind of dialogic, Socratic learning FCI will promote. Nominated for the prestigious Yidan Prize (the equivalent of a Nobel Prize in Education...Carol Dweck and

Linda Darling-Hammond have also won the Yidan), our show has been endorsed by prominent education historian Diane Ravitch; John Johnson: the first African American producer, director, and writer at a TV broadcast network; and Joe Franklin: inventor of the TV talk show. In addition to airing weekly on Spectrum TV in NYC (and a few other media markets), our show has garnered over 100,000 unique views on YouTube.

Cultural Lineage: The Legacy of Sarah Bernhardt and Blanche Walsh

To solidify its artistic integrity, FCI will pay homage to two of the 20th centuries greatest actresses: France's Sarah Bernhardt and America's Blanche Walsh. Our film and theater spaces will feature portraits of these superstar thespians of Herstory. Though Bernhardt remains a household name (at least in well-educated homes), Blanche Walsh—who was known as the “American Bernhardt”—has sadly faded into the memory mist of obscurity. This despite creating the prototype of a movie star in the lost 1912 film, *Resurrection*: based on a Leo Tolstoy novel on love and social justice. Walsh was also the original advocate of an American National Theater, an idea she co-created with her friend Mark Twain. Motivating her national theater plan was a desire to preserve the integrity of theater (by warding off the banal incursion of formula plays), while allowing everyday folks to see quality theater at a low cost.

Because Blanche Walsh was also my relative, I see FCI as shepherding forward my beloved ancestor's dream of a humanizing, unifying, innovative creative learning space—similar to her National Theater idea but on an even grander, international scale. Because Blanche insisted that once a week there should be a lecture at her imagined (but never yet realized) National Theater, FCI shall name its lecture series (our version of a TED Talk) after her. I would be happy to give the inaugural lecture.

Role of Drexel University

As a doctoral student at Drexel University's School of Education, where my focus is on leadership and creativity, FCI will collaborate with Drexel's Freddie Reisman Center for Translational Research in Creativity and Motivation (FRC) (a pioneering international creativity lab) to ensure that our protocols adhere to the latest, cutting-edge theories in creativity research. FRC is helmed by Dr. Fredricka Reisman, a colleague of E. Paul Torrance, known to many as the “Father of Creativity.” She also is the creator of the Reisman Diagnostic Creativity Assessment: a free, online creativity test. Collaboration with the FRC will bring a valuable component of intellectual rigor, scholarly integrity, and creativity history to FCI and its mission.

Other Potential Partners

To strengthen the crucial French-American locus of FCI, we're exploring possible collaborations with the following institutions: The French Alliance; NYU's Dept. of French Literature, Thought, and Culture; the Albertine

Bookstore; the Pompidou Centre (in the process of opening its newest outpost: in my hometown of Jersey City, NJ: what magical serendipity!); the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in NYC; the Sorbonne in Paris; and France's National Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image, an agency of the French Ministry of Culture: once helmed by Frederique Bredin—who I share a last name with. More serendipity! Given my past work and friendship with the actor and civics advocate Richard Dreyfuss, we shall also try to forge a connection with his Dreyfuss Civics Initiative.

Conclusion

My dear friend Sandra Laredo, a choreographer based in Paris, is one of the few people who asks me, "Are you happy?" when we meet. How very French! Sandra, who's on FCI's emerging advisory board, has significant contacts within the cultural, academic, political, and business communities in Paris and NYC. But her wonderful, "Frenchified" interest in happiness offers a clue as to what makes FCI so unique and valuable in this dark and troubling political age. Of course happiness really ought to be an American political concern as well, given the word's prominent placement in the Declaration of Independence. And did you know that the tiny South Asian nation of Bhutan, nestled in the Himalayan mountains between India and Tibet, measures the success of its country not in monetary terms (like the U.S. does with GNP: Gross National Product...how gross) but by a unique, humanistic scale known as Net National Happiness.

Inspired by Bhutan, FCI's philosophy of creativity will draw on Henri Bergson's interest in joy and happiness, Ribot's link between feeling and thinking (or affect and cognition), and the use of psychoanalysis to improve our relationships and outlook in life. We'll cultivate a light, playful, humorous touch, building on the work of Israeli creativity scholar Ziv—whose work looks at the psychology of humor (2006, p. 308). Our focus on dialogue will draw on the ideas of Martin Buber (*I and Thou*, 1923), Vygotsky's connection of intellectual growth with social life (1986), and Jerome Bruner's belief in stories as a "way of knowing" (1986). Stories are best told in a community. Often, they are the key to *building* community. Bruner also made a key link between agency and collaboration (1996, p. 93). At FCI, we'll encourage the growth not only of personal agency, but also of the moral and political agency needed to nurture a more just, loving, and peaceful world.

There is a Korean view that equates creativity with interdependence, believing that "human relations are the ultimate principle in everyday life" (2006, p. 409). This perspective even correlates interpersonal relationships, which it cherishes, with good luck; like when we find ourselves in the "right place at the right time." At FCI, we hope to be that right place at the right time to make creativity—a subject that, given its vital importance, has yet to inspire the depth and breadth of research it deserves—a subject less strange and mysterious to the general population.

Given the immense potential of creativity to both enhance our personal lives *and* solve pressing civic problems (like the loss of democracy and

environmental crisis) we cannot wait for our current media and education systems to take creativity seriously. We must create a brand new system. Now. Welcome to FCI! To learn more about the FCI community and how you can get involved, please email me at johnbredintv@gmail.com. Thank you for your time and interest.

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