

# Ideas in Politics in International Context

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## Abstract

This article asks how we might rethink the study of ‘ideas in politics’ in modern Britain. It suggests that historians need to set the problem in its international contexts in a more structured way. Focussing on the nineteenth century, the article reflects on conceptual angles opened up by ‘global intellectual’ and ‘entangled’ approaches to political ideas and behaviour. While stressing that these methods have their pitfalls, the article argues that a reconsideration of the seams where international and intellectual contexts meet can help to reconnect modern British political history with wider historical debates.

**Keywords:** history of political ideas, political thought, international history, imperial history, nineteenth century

## Introduction

MODERN BRITISH political historians have spent many decades puzzling over problems about ‘ideas in politics’. The label once described studies of the structural interrelation between political ideas, policy making and political practice.<sup>1</sup> It has since become a looser shorthand for intellectually oriented work on British political culture, most of which does not aim to make such definite claims about the ways in which patterns of ideas drive, rationalise or provide alibis for political behaviour. The shift has helped spur historians to think in new ways about the global, and especially the imperial, dimensions of British politics.<sup>2</sup>

The difficulty is that this internationalised scholarship is radically fragmented. Relevant work is organised into an array of insular sub-disciplinary subcategories, and carved up

along geographical lines.<sup>3</sup> So the preliminary challenge is to achieve a clearer perspective on existing knowledge. We know from detailed individual studies that the British political classes engaged closely with (among other things) democracy in America, constitutional developments in France and theological innovations in Germany. We know, thanks to ‘new imperial’ histories, that the empire mattered in British politics and thought. We know that ideologies like suffragism and socialism responded to exchanges of ideas across borders. But what happens when we stand back from the specifics, and try to conceptualise the general shape of ‘ideas in politics’ in its international contexts? How do we relate it to wider systemic shifts and interpretive issues?

These are not idle questions. If modern British political history is to recapture relevance, it needs to find ways to speak to a historical discipline now preoccupied with global and transnational forces. This article outlines some possible answers, in relation to nineteenth century Britain. It suggests that historians might shift the emphasis away from how Britain understood other individual polities, and towards larger-scale structural problems. This would involve thinking harder about how Britain formed part of global movements of

<sup>1</sup>D. M. Craig, “‘High politics’ and the “new political history””, *Historical Journal*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2010, pp. 453–75; and A. Middleton, “‘High politics’ and its intellectual contexts”, *Parliamentary History*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2021, pp. 168–91.

<sup>2</sup>This development was neglected in the last state-of-the-field volume, D. Brown, R. Crowcroft and G. Pentland, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018. See also T. Sasson et al., ‘Britain and the world: a new field?’, *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2018, pp. 677–708.

<sup>3</sup>A. Middleton, ‘Victorian politics and politics overseas’, *Historical Journal*, vol. 64, no. 5, 2021, pp. 1449–76.

ideas; how it participated in, learnt from and particularised debates taking place across borders; how the circulation of ideas worked; what barriers might have stood in their way; and when, where, and under what circumstances ‘external’ ideas were most politically potent.

In other words, the article asks how modern British political history might apply some of the cross-cultural frameworks that are reshaping other areas of modern history. It draws, in particular, on new styles of ‘global intellectual history’—which have encouraged us to think differently about how patterns of ideas travel and interact, and promoted fuller-bodied comparative analyses—and on the overlapping paradigms of ‘entangled history’.<sup>4</sup> The article stresses that intellectually oriented political historians need to be alive to the limitations of these approaches. It suggests, nonetheless, that they can help us to imagine British politics differently, as a system operating in structural tension with ideas, theories and patterns of representation generated and circulated in (primarily) European, Atlantic and Mediterranean public spheres. The great advantage of such a model is that it re-focusses attention on the structures of knowledge, power, connection, access and agency that lay behind the substance of political debates. In this way, a more robustly international approach to ‘ideas in politics’ might help it regain its original impetus, as a means of explaining material political change.

No short sketch can do justice to the vastly complex interactions between the ideas, debates and strategies that shaped nineteenth century British domestic politics, and those formulated and articulated in other states and empires. So this is not a place to issue prescriptions. What follows aims only to identify some of the challenges and opportunities involved in yoking together the intellectual and international contexts of nineteenth century British

politics. What considerations and dynamics will historians need to embrace? What conceptual complications arise? And what problems could be solved?

## Considerations

It ought to be a commonplace that a defining feature of nineteenth century British politics was the multiplication of international connections. Ever larger numbers of British officials, politicians, agents, writers and analysts came into increasingly close and regular contact with counterparts and texts from overseas. For all the heightened global interactions and mobilities historians have detected in the eighteenth century world, the next century saw a new order of border-crossing opportunities for the classes who made and moulded political decisions.

Technological and administrative developments built new ways of connecting the world. Railways, steamships, telegraph lines, more efficient global mail routes and electrification simultaneously facilitated the imagining of new political possibilities, and cemented closer relations between European and Atlantic public spheres. International travel became easier and cheaper for Britain’s parliamentary, journalistic and intellectual orders, who forged deeper social and political connections overseas. John Stuart Mill, prophet of nineteenth century liberalism, sometimes spent half the year in France. Correspondence over distance also became more regular and reliable, binding international epistolary networks more tightly, and (for instance) facilitating Alexis de Tocqueville’s many detailed exchanges with British intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> Foreign newspapers, periodicals and books began to circulate across Britain in larger quantities, and Britain exported its equivalents more extensively. Press syndication created further possibilities for exchange. Academic links multiplied, with positions at US and ‘British world’ universities opening up to British scholars—Goldwin Smith taught at Cornell in the 1860s—and vice versa. British actors were increasingly able to participate in political causes and networks that were genuinely transnational, the anti-slavery

<sup>4</sup>For example, S. Moyn and A. Sartori, ed., *Global Intellectual History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013; E. Gould, ‘Entangled histories, entangled worlds: the English-speaking Atlantic as a Spanish periphery’, *American Historical Review*, vol. 112, no. 3, 2007, pp. 764–86. For some ways in which Victorian intellectual historians have started to digest these approaches, see A. Middleton, ‘International thought and Victorian liberalism’, *English Historical Review*, vol. 137, no. 584, 2022, pp. 198–215.

<sup>5</sup>J. Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville Beyond America*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2023.

and suffrage movements being cases in point.<sup>6</sup> Britain also played a leading role in generating, while also binding itself within, the imagined structures of 'international law'. The nineteenth century's new opportunities for communication, travel and international imaginative identification profoundly influenced specifically female political participation and proto-feminism as well—from the campaign against sati in India, to enthusiasm for Mazzini and his views on women's rights.

Versions of these developments touched many nineteenth century states. But Britain was the most intensively connected power in the world. Its commerce linked it with more regional and national economies than any other state, and made it sensitive to their fluctuating politics and preferences. Britain also possessed much the largest and farthest-flung seaborne empire on the globe, which continued to grow, and extended tendrils of 'informal empire' even more widely.<sup>7</sup> The result was that Britain became a magnet for global political argument. Demands for political change from inhabitants of British colonies, especially before settler self-government, had to target the political class at the metropolitan centre. British power often made it vital for foreign political actors and interest groups to lobby for British support. This involved both direct bids to responsible ministers, and more roundabout attempts to rally support for causes overseas, often through public meetings and the placement of articles in periodicals. London, as the political centre of Britain's globally consequential empire-state, became a hub for foreign leaders, diplomats and propagandists, especially in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Given Britain's exceptionally liberal laws of asylum, European refugees of all political stripes found themselves congregating in the capital, disseminating their political ideas textually, spatially and socially. At the most elite levels,

Kossuth, Marx, Metternich and Guizot all spent stretches of time in Britain—the last consulted by Peelites about his views on the secret ballot—while Napoleon III bookended his period as Emperor of the French with stints in favoured London boroughs. Communities of other nationalities and ethnicities—Americans, Germans, Russian Jews, Irish Catholics—also grew up over the course of the nineteenth century, in sustained contact with the politics and ideas of their own countries and diasporas.

## Complexities

It might be possible, then, to construct an interpretation of nineteenth century British politics as an essentially global enterprise. We could see decision makers and opinion formers bounced from pillar to post by imperial and foreign interest groups, ultimately making similar decisions to other comparable powers at slightly different times. But that is not how British politics worked. Cross-cultural interactions did not always exercise a decisive influence within Britain's distinctive political culture. To start from the position that international intellectual connections were always vitally important—or even just to pursue areas where they were—can only offer a skewed image of the interlocking forces that drove political change.<sup>8</sup> The challenge is to work out precisely how, and how much, international contexts mattered in the formation of political visions and the making of political decisions. To this end, we should adopt a problem-centred approach. This would look to interrogate the roles that cross-cultural interactions were structurally able to play; to historicise the moments when international connections were more and less significant; to explain the conditions under which interest in certain regions and overseas problems rose and fell; and to explore the external portals and pressure points accessible to different actors, parties, campaign groups and classes. Taking this course means recognising a number of conceptual complexities.

It is important, first, to be precise about when political debates were and were not connected. There is much potential to misjudge

<sup>6</sup>R. Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2012; A. Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins, eds., *The Politics of Women's Suffrage: Local, National and International Dimensions*, London, University of London Press, 2021.

<sup>7</sup>J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>8</sup>See M. Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945–1968*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2020.

and to be misled, because the political classes across nineteenth century Europe and the Atlantic world so often found themselves arguing about the same basic problems. Debates about republicanism, democracy, industrialism, empire, nationality (and so on) often followed strikingly similar courses, even when texts and actors were not in direct contact with one another. This could be true even of obscure subjects. Arguments in Britain about the merits of the Paraguayan dictatorship of the 1820s and 1830s, for instance, ran along very similar lines to Continental and American commentary.<sup>9</sup> Commonalities among educated and politically aware Western elites often predisposed them to similar political positions without cultural exchange. Working out when connections mattered, and when comparative analysis is more appropriate, requires care.

Next, we need to consider the character of nineteenth century Britain's political culture. Britain was extraordinarily well connected internationally, but it was also one of the more politically self-confident polities the world has known, at least until the sky started to darken from the 1870s. Much of nineteenth century British politics turned on the conviction that Britain had things more or less right, by comparison with other states. Parliamentary and political debates in Britain resonated across the globe, and for most of the nineteenth century, other powers—from Europe, to Asia, to Latin America—were more interested in discovering the secrets of Britain's constitutional, industrial and imperial success, than vice versa. In an era when Britain was the authority to which so many other countries appealed, and did not have to conform its politics and arguments to any higher supranational body, it could chart its own course. On the other hand, the assertively un-ideological character of British politics may also have done something to make borrowing from abroad easier, if less explicit.<sup>10</sup>

More specific forces also helped to check the influence of foreign texts, arguments, strategies and actors on British politics. Some were

intellectual: racial attitudes, isolationist sentiment; and some social: aristocratic traditions, or constraints on the circulation of information and argument. Language barriers were naturally important: while a command of French and German remained reasonably widespread among the elite, other modern languages (including Italian and Spanish) were much less common. These factors narrowed and channelled the kinds of international connections that could exert influence over the political classes. Class itself was another major dividing line. Although the Chartists of the 1830s and 1840s argued that they were part of a global democratic movement, inspired above all by the experiences of the United States, they barely read Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, because it was new and expensive. They drew instead on older, revolutionary-era, second-hand or pirated texts.<sup>11</sup> Geography mattered too. For all London's extraordinary cosmopolitanism, or the echoes of it found in Edinburgh or Glasgow, other nineteenth century political powerhouses—like Manchester and Birmingham—were comparatively insular. A 'four nations' approach would surely suggest further intricacies. As historians have come to emphasise, networks and circulations could exclude and marginalise as effectively as they connected.

Chronology is vital. There is considerable debate about how we should date the wider processes associated with 'globalisation', though David Todd plausibly suggests that matters were firmly underway by the 1840s, before a rapid intensification from the 1870s.<sup>12</sup> It is possible to see British politics following a roughly similar trajectory in the expansion of its international connections. Technological developments, as we have seen, opened up certain new possibilities and closed down others. For technological, political and social reasons, dominant international reference points changed over time, sometimes

<sup>9</sup>A. Middleton, 'Britain and the Paraguayan dictatorship, c. 1820–1840', *Historical Journal*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2022, pp. 371–92.

<sup>10</sup>A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>11</sup>J. Gibson, 'The Chartists and the constitution: revisiting British popular constitutionalism', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2017, pp. 70–90. Chartists were, however, among the first in Britain to read Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, because an early translation appeared in a Chartist newspaper.

<sup>12</sup>D. Todd, *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2021.

rapidly and sometimes slowly. Germany enjoyed probably the most spectacular rise to prominence. Having mattered mainly for the religious and ecclesiological elements of political argument earlier on, from 1870 it became a leading actor in politically influential debates about idealist philosophy, education systems and the idea of 'efficiency'. Winston Churchill later referred to the New Liberal social reform agenda as 'a big slice of Bismarckism'. Less obviously, we must also consider how the structures of British intellectual life changed, and how the containers for authoritative 'political' argument shifted over the course of the nineteenth century. The rise of the university and the increasingly academic focus of elite studies of politics was a central development here—both shifts that, not coincidentally, owed significant debts to German precedents. Where intellectually-minded early nineteenth century politicians might have taken certain cues from the higher journalism, their *fin-de-siècle* successors were interested in the new discipline of 'political science'—which, in its earlier phases, was assertively historicist and internationally comparative.<sup>13</sup> The international circuits that had helped shape the former had only so much in common with those that lay behind the latter.

If we want to understand how international contexts affected British politics, we also need to ask how contemporaries *thought* these dynamics worked. How did nineteenth century Britons understand the structural connections between their own political life and political processes overseas? Historians are still feeling their way at this level of abstraction, with the history of ideas about how nations, states and empires influenced one another an underdeveloped subject. This reflects wider blind spots, and it is striking that the wider literature on 'ideas in politics' has passed over the question of how contemporary actors understood the connections between political theory and practice. But the theme is obviously important. We know that fears about the corrupting effects of despotic power in the colonial and Indian empires were central to British imperial thought and policy

after the later eighteenth century. We know much less about the impacts of the belief that the ebb and flow of political projects and causes in other places—especially Continental Europe—exercised a 'moral effect' on politics and parties in Britain, even though this was a comparable staple of nineteenth century political rhetoric. Tracing these patterns of thought needs to be part of any wider effort to understand the material impact of international interactions on British politics.

At the level of conceptual problems, finally, we must not forget one of the fundamental points made by historians who wrestled with the structural connections between ideas and 'high' politics in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>14</sup> One of their core claims—though in summary terms it almost appears a self-denying ordinance—was that politics was, much of the time, not an intellectual exercise. Half-remembered shards of more complex schemes, or the visceral convictions that underlay them, typically drove political action, while elaborated 'ideas' were primarily of service in informing the rhetoric in which action was cloaked. So practical politics should not be over-intellectualised. This point remains instructive as we try to think more broadly about the field from which politically influential ideas could arise, and about the kinds of borrowings, exchanges and engagements that mattered most in steering change.

## Possibilities

An internationally aware approach to 'ideas in politics' is needed to do justice to the realities of Britain's position in the nineteenth century world. But it must also be handled carefully and critically. What can it help us to do?

Paying attention to international connections can help us to understand the deeper intellectual structures that underpinned and informed politics and political argument. Recent studies of historical writing, of law and legal argument, and of statistical theories and methods, have stressed that cross-cultural exchanges were formative for some of the dominant modes of political reasoning in nineteenth

<sup>13</sup>S. Collini, D. Winch and J. Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>14</sup>See Craig, 'High politics'; Middleton, 'High politics'.



century Britain.<sup>15</sup> Work on political philosophy has made similar points, emphasising that detailed exchanges with French and German counterparts in particular helped to shape and sharpen the schemes of the era's leading figures.<sup>16</sup> The same seems to be true of contacts around religion, theology and ecclesiology, all vitally important nineteenth century political subjects, in which connections with Germans similarly played a major role. In this way, international links helped to shape the overarching intellectual and rhetorical frameworks behind political debate, partisan politics and public policy.

Thinking about the structural relations between European and Atlantic public spheres at less rarefied levels also helps us to explain how political argument worked. Nineteenth century British politicians and writers did not just read books, periodicals and letters written in other countries, but also responded to them. London newspapers frequently entered into spats about domestic and imperial policy with their counterparts in other European capitals, in the United States and in parts of the empire. They did so because of the widespread belief that Britain's moral influence in the world depended on its international reputation. Sometimes, also, the privileged access of certain states to certain regions introduced interpretive distortions, which shaped nineteenth century thinking while rarely being explicitly discussed. British attitudes towards Latin American politics, for instance, were deeply indebted to politically interested North American writing on the subject. Thinking more systematically about the international influences on, and audiences for, British political argument must strengthen our understanding of the

architecture of nineteenth century politics. There may be comparable benefits in scaling up further and trying to understand international political debates as precisely that—political debates conducted internationally—rather than habitually prioritising the rhetorical and partisan purposes that political arguments served in the British context.

Loaded arguments about developments in foreign countries were a primary means by which the British political classes articulated their visions of politics, and through which they battled over how Britain ought to reform its policies, laws, attitudes and institutions. The implicit assumption behind most existing historiography here is that British engagement with political change overseas was highly specific, and that a state-by-state approach is therefore intellectually justified, rather than simply being a legacy of insularity or over-specialisation. But we need to ask questions about the circumstances in which this strategy makes sense. It is clear that, in practice, the attention of British politicians, commentators and thinkers flitted between politics, sometimes very rapidly, as their perceived salience rose and fell. It is also clear that, in certain conditions, the values and ideals represented by foreign competitors and British possessions mattered more than their local histories and experiences.<sup>17</sup> Under what pressures, and in which modes of debate, did British political argument engage with foreign politics in integrated, glancing or detailed ways? When was there a larger purpose to the deployment of international examples, and when were they conjunctural or incidental?

Some politics were indeed so important and distinctive that they could shape debate by themselves. Certain places—like the United States, France and India—featured consistently in nineteenth century British political thinking and debate, because of their geopolitical, symbolic and ideological significance.<sup>18</sup> These places were also capable of throwing up episodes that absorbed attention in a more acute way. In other cases, however, the prime mover in a debate was

<sup>15</sup>For example, J. Bennett, *God and Progress: Religion and History in British Intellectual Culture, 1845–1914*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019; L. Benton and L. Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2016; L. Goldman, *Victorians and Numbers: Statistics and Society in Nineteenth Century Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022.

<sup>16</sup>For example, C. Barrell, *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism, 1800–1865*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

<sup>17</sup>J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity, and Europe, 1830–1886*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>18</sup>For the symbolic significance of foreign states, see Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville*, p. 17.

a core idea—autocracy, nationality, self-government—and the locations involved were illustrations or terrains, with a political relevance of a different order. Sometimes these motive forces were more evenly balanced, and sometimes politics and political concepts were inextricably interwoven (such as America and ‘democracy’, or France and ‘revolution’). The availability and depth of specialist knowledge on different regions also helped to shape their treatment. Thinking about how the nature of political problems differed in these (loose) categorical fashions between cases may help historians to pin down how cross-regional thinking worked in relation to broader political debates and alignments.

Adopting a cross-regional approach might also help to dissolve the long-standing separation of ‘imperial’ and ‘foreign’ ideas and policies into separate silos. This historiographical habit has always stood in the way of understanding, given that most of the major nineteenth century states with which Britain had business were in some sense empires (self-consciously or otherwise), or appendages of empires, and much of British foreign policy was based on defending the nation’s imperial interests.<sup>19</sup> What intellectual historians have come to call ‘imperial political thought’ was, moreover, located in a variety of different settings and quasi-disciplines—political philosophy, history, international relations theory, jurisprudence, anthropology, polemical journalism—and mixed in with discussion of other issues. We should approach it in that light. The very recent rise of trans-imperial histories, which tend to work at a subnational level and to focus on non-state actors and movements of ideas, also creates new opportunities. Most obviously, we can start investigating British arguments about the character and policy of other contemporary empires—an obviously significant, but curiously overlooked, element of political culture—and asking how they affected domestic political strategies and Britain’s imperial governance. As in the case of the United States, did understandings of British

‘liberal imperialism’ rest on what ‘liberal’ empires did elsewhere?<sup>20</sup>

This more expansive approach to international context would also help to solve intellectual-political problems about party identity and ideology. Historians have tried many different methods to pin down what precisely made a liberal, a conservative or a radical in nineteenth century Britain. But there has been no systematic study of how the British identified authentic counterparts or competing versions of these creeds overseas. To take liberalism as the most complex and contested example—who did the British think qualified as a ‘liberal’ in France, in Germany, in Spanish America or in the Ottoman empire? And what were the tests they applied? At the least, discursive battles over what counted as ‘liberal’ on foreign fields must have constituted an important part of domestic struggles over the definition of liberal politics, and presumably—from the 1880s—over the identity of the true inheritors of the traditions of the British Liberal Party. There are connected questions to ask, also virtually untouched, about the impact of foreign representations and critiques of British parties. What effects, if any, did visions of British politics developed overseas have when consumed back in Britain?

## Conclusion

Modern British political history has no choice but to become more systematically aware of its international contexts. Powerful currents are dragging us in this direction. But if we want to resist the submersion of Britain’s experiences within wider European, Atlantic or global schemes of analysis, we need to explore ways of explaining political change in Britain which address structural tensions with developments overseas, and the impact of cross-hatching patterns of external influence. Political ideas must be central to this shift. Working out what people thought and how that related to political change—whether we treat ideas as motive forces, as instruments

<sup>19</sup>For the complexities of nineteenth century ‘imperial’ identities, see C. Carroll, *The Politics of Imperial Memory in France, 1850–1900*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2022.

<sup>20</sup>See also M. Gobat, “‘Our Indian empire’: the trans-imperial origins of U.S. liberal imperialism”, in K. L. Hoganson and J. Sexton, *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 69–92.

for getting things done, or as smokescreens for the technical exercise of power—remains one of the thorniest, but most beguiling, problems in political history.

Identifying larger-scale structural problems about how international connections shaped the intellectual contexts of British politics, and about how political ideas moved, changed and became effective, can help us to think in new ways about the environments in which political actors developed their visions, conceived governing strategies and formulated policy. Pursuing this broad agenda must also help to bring the historiography of British politics into contact with a range of potentially revitalising literatures on other states and empires, perhaps even scholarship which bears that intimidating label, ‘comparative politics’. And asserting the

distinctive significance of the transnational and trans-imperial dimensions of nineteenth century British history may yet help to arrest the stubborn drift towards the prioritisation of the twentieth century among historians of ‘modern Britain’. Whether used as a foundation for research or as a situationally specific tool, cross-cultural intellectual-political approaches promise real interpretive gains. Not the least valuable thing they might do, given their many possible configurations and applications, is to encourage us back towards the conceptual eclecticism that the most attractive works of political history have always projected.

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