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## **Where is Urban Politics?**

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## **Where is urban politics?**

### **Abstract:**

We outline the rationale for reopening the issue of the spatiality of the 'urban' in urban politics. There is a long tradition of arguing about the distinctive political qualities of urban sites, practices and processes. Recent work often relies on spatial concepts or metaphors that anchor various political phenomena to cities while simultaneously putting the specificity of the urban itself in question. This symposium seeks to extend debates about the relationship between the urban and the political. Instead of asking 'what is urban politics', seeking after a definition of the urban as a starting point, we start by asking 'where is urban politics?' This question orients all of the contributions to this Symposium, and it allows each to trace diverse political dimensions of urban life and living beyond the confines of 'the city', classically conceived. The Symposium engages with 'the urban question' through diverse settings and objects, including infrastructures, inbetween spaces, professional cultures, transnational and postcolonial spaces and spaces of sovereignty. Contributions draw on a range of intellectual perspectives, including geography, urban studies, political science and political theory, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, planning, and environmental studies – indicating the range of intellectual traditions that can and do inform the investigation of the urban/political nexus.

**Key words:** urban politics; interdisciplinary dialogue; territory; space; urbanism; relational thinking; assemblage; post-political; policy mobilities

## **Introduction: from ‘what is urban politics?’ to ‘where is urban politics?’**

Contemporary political events have revived interest in the so called ‘urban question’, raising once again questions about the specificities of ‘urban’ politics. The financial crisis is enormous in scale and scope, yet as economic geographers have observed (e.g. French et al., 2009; Martin, 2011), it has been a crisis notable in its localization in and through urban spaces. From a political economy point of view, the apparent centrality of cities in the financial crisis has political as well as economic implications. Cities are being “repositioned within increasingly volatile, financialized circuits of capital accumulation”, yet precisely because of this, they are also “arenas in which the conflicts and contradictions associated with historically and geographically specific accumulation strategies are expressed and fought out” (Brenner et al., 2009: 176). David Harvey’s *Rebel Cities* (Harvey, 2012) pushes to the forefront this twinned urban politics of capital accumulation and class struggle, seen through the financial crisis and its aftermath. Harvey argues that, despite what macroeconomists think, virtually all capitalist crises have distinctly urban roots, the most recent of which was a crisis in the political economy of land markets. These urban roots of capitalist crises correspond in turn to a long history of cities as sites of political struggle, a history to which Harvey adds recent events such as the London Riots and Occupy Wall Street.

The Arab Spring of 2011 and beyond, involving political upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and elsewhere, has also provoked claims about the revival of urban politics. As in the case of responses to the financial crisis, the urban frame given to these events is not directly concerned with the extent to which they

involved political claims confined to urban based actors per se. Rather, more extensive political geographies – for example of the Arab World (Abourahme and Jayyusi, 2011; Soguk, 2011), of Africa (Mamdani, 2011), even of a generalized global politics (Sassen, 2011) – were problematized and performed in and through urban spaces. Although for some urban space primarily constitutes a ‘lens’ or ‘moment’ for the expression of such wider politics, for others such as Sassen (2011), these spaces themselves constitute the conditions of possibility for political action. Sassen sees the streets and squares of recent uprisings as comparatively ‘rawer’ spaces for making new political claims, as opposed to spaces that encourage the performative rehearsal of more established, ritualized public life (emblematically, European city spaces such as the boulevard and piazza). This sort of claim is reiterated by Lopes de Souza and Lipietz (2011: 621), who suggest that in the streets and squares of the Middle East and North Africa “[p]ublic spaces in a weak sense turned into public spaces in a strong sense”. These events have served to remind many that the particularities of urban space can help constitute forms of public action that are not necessarily themselves urban oriented, but often transnational, and complicated as much by the plastic spaces of mediated communication as those of the city (see Barnett, 2011). Indeed, if writing in the academic blogosphere is any indication (e.g. Ghannam, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2011; Thomassen, 2012), we may see further explorations of this emerging sense of urban political space in the near future.

It can be said, then, that contemporary political practices often have a distinctively ‘urban feel’, perhaps even reinforcing the argument developed by Magnusson in this symposium, who suggests we need to view politics in general through the prism of

the urban, rather than that of the state. Yet it remains an open question as to whether contemporary political events should necessarily always be framed as urban just by virtue of their most obvious locations. Could we not, in most cases, substitute other spatial concepts, for example 'situated', 'local' or 'place'? For classic theories of urban politics – for example around community power, urban governance, the urbanization of capital, or urban social movements (see, e.g., Davies and Imbroscio 2009) – the specific urbanity of politics tended to be the central question. This work did not take the urbanness of contemporary political events as axiomatic, but instead placed a strong emphasis on asking how certain forms of politics could be defined as urban. Thus, during the heyday of the 1970s and 1980s, scholars of urban politics sought to anchor their conceptualizations upon the specificity of 'the urban' itself. For both Harvey (1989) and Castells (1977), for example, a specifically urban politics was defined by the spatialities of labour: for the former the emphasis was on the urban-regional coherence of labour markets for capital accumulation; and for the latter the emphasis was the reproduction of labour through collective urban consumption. By contrast, Logan and Molotch (1987) saw the specificity of urban politics consisting in struggles around property, and the contentious processes through which coalitions of locally dependent, pluralistic interests formed to make 'their' urban land available for mobile capital investment.

In this symposium, Young and Keil are most directly concerned with the specificity of the urban, though in their case defining the urban largely helps them identify the 'in-between' city so often marginalised both in academic debate and in the formal processes of urban governance. More generally, recent discussions of urban politics have often been less concerned with such explicit worries about urban specificity. The tendency is to deploy spatial concepts or metaphors that partly anchor various

political and social phenomena to the 'urban', but which simultaneously put the specificity of the urban in question. In her contribution to the symposium, Hoffman for example, focuses on the more amorphous formation of the urban subject in China, rather than on specifically urban spaces or settings. In such work, the 'urban' refers to something closer to a structure of feeling rather than a discrete spatial complex.

The overarching perspective informing recent urban political theory has been variants of 'relational' thinking, although there is considerable variety in its application to urban politics, and in certain respects such thinking is not particularly new. There has long been a relational strain to USUK (and to some degree European) centred debates about urban politics, in particular critiques of the implicit assumptions of the traditional American urban politics literature, where urban politics refers primarily to those activities and interests clustering around either local government or local business interests. Although in this tradition, urban politics is more or less synonymous with local, place based politics in urban areas, such work has also often highlighted how cities are objects of political engagement on the part of, or in relation to, more broadly dispersed state processes and institutions (e.g. Cochrane et al., 1996; Cox, 1998; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999). In these ways, this strand of work has seen urban politics as an object of multifaceted and often strategic institutional relations that are not necessarily reducible to local jurisdictions, or even to the specifically 'urban'.

At some distance from this institutionally focused, 'strategic relational' approach to urban politics (Jessop, 2001), however, we find a more recent relational concept applied to urban political thinking: 'assemblage'. The notion of an urban assemblage brings together at least three abstract claims about cities: first, that cities are not

bound by scale or a naïve sense of place, but are intensive nodes that gather connections from more widely distributed spaces; second, that cities are not outcomes but rather constantly becoming or mutating formations; and finally, that cities consist of a complex interdependence between humans and nonhuman organisms, technologies, infrastructures and objects (cf. Amin and Thrift, 2002; DeLanda, 2006; Farias and Bender, 2010). Arguably, just as it did for cultural studies earlier in the new millennium, 'assemblage' provides urban research with an anti-structural yet structural conceptual noun: a way to identify with heterogeneity, emergence or the ephemeral "while preserving some concept of the structural so embedded in the enterprise of social science research" (Marcus and Saka, 2006: 102).

In a piece that spawned a multi-issue debate in the journal *City*<sup>1</sup>, McFarlane (2011) argues that the concept of assemblage provides a way to reinvigorate critical analyses of contemporary urban life. McFarlane (2011: 215-19) argues that what is politically radical about the concept of assemblage is that it envisions agency as distributed across social and material phenomena, events and actors. However, this notion of distributed political agency is precisely what is problematic about the concept for others. Brenner et al. (2011) prefer a version of assemblage that is primarily an epistemological approach, a new way of seeing urban politics that nevertheless remains contextualized within a wider geopolitical economy of contemporary capitalism. What seems to be at stake in these recent debates is not the specificities of the urban or of urban politics, but rather competing social ontologies for which urban politics operates as a kind of testing ground. In his

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<sup>1</sup> The extensive contributions to this debate can be found within issues 2 to 6 of *City* volume 15.



contribution to the symposium, Barnett suggests that a focus on the relationship between urban processes and processes of political problematization might enable a pluralist rapprochement between these otherwise competing approaches.

A related strain of relational urban thinking – at least in that ‘assemblage’ also makes an occasional appearance – is to be found in recent work on the politics of circulating urban policy knowledge (e.g. Cochrane and Ward 2012; McCann, 2011; McCann and Ward, 2011). This work can be seen as an exploration of the implications of so-called ‘fast policy transfer’ in relation to urban contexts specifically. Writers such as Peck (2011) and Peck and Theodore (2010) argue that cycles of policy development have sped up, largely due to the rapid translation or mutation (i.e. not simple replication) of policy models from one context to another. Circulating policy knowledges illustrate how urban politics and policy cannot, if they ever could, be understood by studying activities conceived as taking place within particular scales or places; fundamentally, it takes place through knowledge of and making reference to ‘elsewhere’ (McCann, 2011). Indeed, as Massey (2007) has argued, the political identity, legitimacy and responsibility of large, globalizing cities in particular is stretched across national and transnational spaces. In their paper below, Cochrane and Allen engage with these issues through a discussion of the experience of the London Olympics, arguing that a topological approach to understanding the localised politics of regeneration might be helpful. They question the value of the distinction between outside and inside, between ‘there’ and ‘here’, as a means of framing the locations of urban politics.

For some recent critical engagements, however, the central question for thinking about urban politics is the extent to which urban concerns are seen as ‘political’ at

all. The answer to such questions seems to suggest that it may be more accurate to think in terms of a 'post-political' or 'post-democratic' city. The idea undergirding the 'post-political' city is that an increasingly wide range of urban concerns are being rendered into merely technocratic problems, and thus placed beyond the scope of politics. Swyngedouw (2009), for example, suggests that current preoccupations with sustainable urban environments are founded on governing technologies such as performance metrics and technocratic management, which assume political consensus and thereby displace a 'proper' politics of debate and disagreement.

From a slightly different perspective, MacLeod (2011) has suggested that theorizations of the post-political and post-democratic might provide a new way to understand so-called 'governance' arrangements which he argues are based on an assumption of urban citizens as consumers, rather than as political subjects. Such critiques of urban politics focus not on the specificity of 'the urban' so much as they circulate around specific, rather prescriptive understandings of what counts as properly political. The pursuit of signs of the vibrancy of 'the political' only further defers consideration of what count as the urban qualities of contemporary political events. In this symposium, these issues are addressed most directly in Barnett's contribution, which outlines an agenda for investigating the plural potentials of urban practices as generative of political action.

Where do these debates leave the urban in urban political thinking? This symposium seeks to explore a tension in both recent as well as more longstanding theorizations of urban politics: on the one hand, there are concerns for a politics that goes on in cities, which is contained at certain scales, or emerges from specific territories and spatial environments; and on the other hand, there are concerns for a looser politics

of cities, which might exceed, extend beyond, filter through or problematize particular scalar configurations or named places.

This symposium, however, puts an additional twist on the question usually posed in relation to urban politics. Instead of 'what is urban politics' we have asked the question 'where is urban politics?' By displacing 'what' for 'where' the papers collected in this symposium seek to provoke somewhat different answers as to what the 'urban' in urban politics refers: not only answers that elucidate the different locations of urban politics, but also a wider than typical variety of theoretical perspectives, spaces, and methods in and through which urban processes can be understood as political in some sense. As a result, the papers in the symposium comprise a plurality of understandings that underwrite a healthy diversity of perspectives on the substance of politics rendered as urban.

Following Cochrane's (2007) genealogical approach to thinking of the 'urban' content of urban policy, the collection acknowledges the family resemblances between various types of 'political' problematization in which the urban comes into the foreground, without suggesting that there is a single overarching meaning of the 'urban' to which this variety must be made to conform. Instead, the papers in this symposium start from various problems and problematizations through which aspects of urban living show up as objects of political contention, intervention or management. Thus, rather than starting from foundational definitions of what counts as 'urban' (or indeed, 'the political' or 'politics'), the papers collected here show the urban is a quality that shows up in multiple 'locations', both in literal geography and in multiple political processes which constitute urbanism and urbanization as objects of political concern (as well as subjects in and of the urban).

To ensure this coherent focus, the contributors to this symposium have each been asked to explicitly consider: 1) what sorts of politics are explicitly coded as urban or city-based, in variable historical and geographical contexts? and 2) what is at stake in academic re-descriptions of political processes as 'urban'? The papers explore different approaches to conceptualising the 'urban' content of urban politics: approaches in which urban politics revolves around distinctively urban objects of contention, such as housing, transport, and other built infrastructures; approaches in which urban politics is constituted functionally, in relation for example to the spatial configuration of the means of social reproduction or the circulation of capital; approaches in which urban politics is defined by distinctive practices of subject-formation or public sociability; and approaches which emphasise urban politics as the realm of particular agents of political authority, such as local government or coalitions. In each case, the where of urban politics is not straightforwardly contained within urban locations, but rather engages with the tension between a politics in cities and a politics of cities.

The papers that follow present a plurality of theories and methodologies for engaging, understanding and taking forward debates about urban politics. Some papers articulate established strands of urban theory, such as urban political economy; others work with concepts and perspectives which are relatively new to the study of urban politics, such as governmentality theory, theories of social practice, topological theories of space, and normative political theory.

Some of the papers work through new arguments in close relationship to empirical examples, while some are more strongly conceptual in their focus and style (for example, Magnusson's contribution seeks to thoroughly reinterpret canons of

political and urban theory to redefine the objects of both fields). In this respect, the symposium as a whole illustrates some of the methodological diversity that characterises contemporary work on urban politics: sometimes, urban politics is investigated here through the elaboration of case study examples of particular places (for example, in the contributions by Cochrane and Allen, and Young and Keil); sometimes, theoretical arguments are developed with the aim of outlining new agendas for empirical research (in the contribution Barnett, for example); and sometimes, the elaboration of empirical examples has an intuitively comparative effect, juxtaposing theoretical arguments from one place with empirical materials from others (as in the case of Hoffman's elaboration of a notion of urban subjectivity from the Chinese context).

Combining conceptual elaboration and empirical investigation in these varied ways, the contributions to this symposium disrupt the classically conceived, centred notion of the urbanity of 'the city' and engage the urban question through diverse settings and objects, including infrastructures, in-between spaces, professional subjectivities, transnational and postcolonial spaces, and spaces of sovereignty. The contributions also in part continue the recent 'interdisciplinary dialogue' in the pages in the page of this journal (Ward et al., 2011), drawing on a range intellectual perspectives, including geography, urban studies, political science and political theory, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, planning, and environmental studies. In presenting a range of geographical patterns and locales for studying the intersection of the urban and the political, the symposium contributes to the development of more 'ordinary' perspectives in urban theory (Robinson 2006).

By stepping back from debates in which urban politics is defined by reference to a

*priori* understandings of the urban, the symposium offers a broad overview of the diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts in which aspects of urban life are identified as having political salience. And in presenting a range of disciplinary perspectives, the papers underscore that asking where urban politics is draws attention to the diverse academic fields in which urban politics is now a topic of academic investigation.

### **Developing the argument**

The papers brought together here are not framed by any shared assumptions about the nature of urban politics. They do not take for granted that what local governments do, nor the politics clustered around local government, is the natural starting point for theorizing urban politics. None of them simply assumes a territorially bounded, economically determined or institutionally given starting point. None of them is directly concerned with central-local relations or even multilevel governance. That does not mean that territory, political economy or institutions are unimportant, but it does imply that it is necessary to understand how they are assembled, how they are taken to matter in practice, are defined and called on as part of the process of politics. Significant differences in approach and disciplinary understanding run through the papers that follow, and this is evident in different styles of conceptual argument and different ways of combining empirical material with conceptual arguments. They call on empirical evidence from a range of locations, from North America and Europe to China and South Africa; and a range of city types, from global cities to ordinary cities, to in-between cities and suburbs. By interrogating the 'where' of urban politics, each contribution opens up ways of thinking about the wider significance of a politics of urban processes, if not

necessarily of 'cities', whether as potentially transformative space, as battleground of localised globalism, or as site of democratic possibility. All of the papers work across the troubled and troubling borderlines of urban politics in which territorial definitions and practices defined as urban are in tension with each other. Instead of leaving that tension unspoken, here it is the fulcrum around which the arguments are developed.

The first paper directly confronts the view that urban politics should be explored through a spatial or territorial lens. For Warren Magnusson, the urban is not a site for a particular order of politics, but rather is the 'very form of the political'. His argument envisions urban politics as a way of thinking about politics beyond the confines of sovereignty and the state. In this view of 'urban' politics, issues of scale, space, place and territory are at best secondary, if not irrelevant. Magnusson argues that much geographical and social scientific thinking makes the mistake of buying into 'the dominant ontology of the political' which positions urban politics at a lower level in a political hierarchy. Proper or 'high' politics remains the prerogative of other levels of governance, further up the scalar hierarchy of the state. If, instead of approaching politics through the state (an approach which is said to deliver a hierarchical model obsessed with issues of sovereignty), politics is approached through the experience of the urban (characterised by what Magnusson identifies as 'proximate diversity: the co-presence of different activities and ways of life') then a very different understanding becomes possible, one in which politics is constructed through a multiplicity of overlapping authorities. Of all the papers, Magnusson most strongly asserts that there no separate domain of 'urban politics' because 'the urban' itself is a whole way of life, the way we live now.

Lisa Hoffman also comes at the question of the 'where' of urban politics with a

productive look through a less familiar lens: considering how subject formation becomes a political problem in modern China. From this perspective, a key political question is how subjects are formed, rather than how particular kinds of pre-existing 'agency' engage politically across the terrain of the urban. There are echoes of the arguments developed by Magnusson, in so far as Hoffman also considers how urbanism as a way of life may provide the basis for a distinctive form of politics expressed in how people behave and organise. In this case, however, the focus is on the making of new subjects, or subject positions, through urban spaces. The urban is therefore interpreted as a set of processes and power relations stretched across space. Hoffman sees the formation of the subject as being 'of' the urban (as well as located in the urban) and, in the Chinese case under consideration, the urban provides the basis for an imagined cosmopolitanism within processes of political and social change. So for Hoffman, new horizons are opened up in the shaping of subjectivities, in which the engagement of the global also re-territorialises existing geographies. From Hoffman's broadly anthropological perspective, in other words, urban politics can only be understood in the context of complex and often contradictory subject formation processes.

If, in the first two papers, the urban is understood in terms of the lived experience of urbanism in ways that do not rely on analyzing actual existing urban places, Douglas Young and Roger Keil do carefully consider how the reshaping of the contemporary city spaces has new implications for thinking about urban politics. Although they share the concern for the often mundane experience of the urban, Young and Keil emphasize how mundane urbanity is increasingly materializing in unfamiliar urban territories. Examining what they call the 'urban in between', they question both an



urban politics focused on the central city (and the areas it draws under its influence), and more recent approaches which invert this focus to suggest that it is now the periphery (the suburbs and beyond) that matter in polycentric urban regions. They point to the failure of conventional approaches to urban politics – and the empirical places and processes they tend to study – to capture those political spaces at the interstices of central city and periphery within dispersed urban regions. With the help of a detailed case study of the politics of infrastructure provision in Toronto, they push to the forefront the need to study and theorize marginal, fragmented, seemingly shapeless and often unloved areas of cities. From this starting point, the authors open up a very different way of thinking about a non-territorial territorial politics, as a politics of place organized around those spaces generally understood to be non-places.

Just as these debates and discussions matter for conceptually locating politics in and through urban life, they also imply more normative concerns about the degree to which urban politics should be thought of as a special field of emancipatory collective action. The final two papers engage with these latter concerns directly. John Allen and Allan Cochrane remain committed to an approach that starts from an understanding of the urban as place based. Yet this image of place sees the urban as a node, around which sets of social and political relations are organized, drawing together activities, people, policies and ideas. The urban politics which they imagine is one based on an ‘unbound’ conception of the urban: both placed and not placed, localized and globalized. Drawing on a topological reading of political space, and in contrast to the arguments of Magnusson, Cochrane and Allen retain a commitment to the value of a place based reading of politics. Yet they do so by moving beyond any notion of state based hierarchy, instead pointing out that it is necessary to think

through the ways in which the apparently distant (and even the apparently higher scale) is directly present in emergent forms of urban politics. Not only is state hierarchy no longer helpful as a way of framing urban politics, even multiscale approaches are ultimately unhelpful, since particular urban political spaces are effectively constituted by actors formally located at different levels (and associated with different places), as well as those who are identified (or self-identified) as local. With the help of a case study of the London Olympics, they show what it means to think of urban politics as a politics that is stretched across space, but also one that defines itself in places, drawing in actors from elsewhere so that they are part of local sets of political relations. Allen and Cochrane explore the emergence of an active politics in which the urban is defined through a wider web of connections that find an expression in the detailed experiences of urban places as well as through extensive linkages beyond the city.

Clive Barnett also sets out to consider the possibility of the urban as a site for political action which is not necessarily contained by the city, noting that political action taking place in cities is not necessarily limited to demands around specifically urban issues. Drawing on empirical studies of urban environmental politics in Durban, Barnett focuses on the ways in which urbanization processes provide occasions for claims about shared interests to be generated and communicate. The key question here is not the existence of politics in cities, but the extent to which urbanized processes make it possible to generate, recognise and act upon issues of shared concern. From this perspective, it remains possible to imagine the emergence of specifically urban issues, associated with the way people live together. In Barnett's terms, the urban might be seen as a communicative milieu that generates and articulates varied experiences of injustice, and place making might be

an important condition of possibility for spatially extensive practices of democratic contention in which issues of shared public concern emerge as topics of public debate, deliberation and dispute. But the city may also offer more than this, because it has the potential to operate as a site for more spectacular protests or actions less likely to be apparent in other sorts of place. However, Barnett argues that although the urban may offer these possibilities, whether they are realized or not is an empirical question, the answers to which are contingent on the outcome of particular sets of negotiations and power relations.

In some respects, the five papers have apparently incommensurable starting points for their engagement with the urban of urban politics. Magnusson sets out from the concerns of classical political theory, excavating the notion of polis to undermine state oriented approaches with their stress on sovereignty and hierarchy, instead highlighting the messy spaces within which the urban governs itself. Drawing on Foucault and others, Hoffman defines the urban through the ways in which subjects who are governed and govern themselves in particular ways may be constituted as entrepreneurial and responsible subjects. Young and Keil return to the apparently more familiar terrain of urban politics, associated with the material spaces of the city, but suggests we need to shift some of our attention from more familiar locales and examine the emergence of the unfamiliar, 'in-between' spaces of urban living. Allen and Cochrane also focus on the political spaces of the city, but do so by identifying them as part of a wider politics of connection, which draws on notions of topology – familiar but also defined in unfamiliar ways. And Barnett sees cities as contingent sites for, and sometimes objects of, democratic deliberation and claim-making.

Yet the papers in this symposium are intentionally pluralist. One result is that they

may in some cases bring incompatible philosophical, theoretical or disciplinary perspectives to understanding urban politics. Indeed, although some of the papers connect with recent urban political thinking, such urban assemblages, policy mobilities or the post-political, they are just as often explicitly unhinged from these new, as well as more established, approaches to urban politics. What they share as a whole, however, is an attempt to bring fresh perspective to how the urban might become political – by approaching urban politics at some unusual angles, they all throw new light on how urban processes and political processes can articulate one another. In so doing, the papers in this symposium provide a sense of the continuing excitement about the potential of urban politics, and the variety of disciplinary traditions and intellectual perspectives through which urban processes are understood to matter politically. Whether defined through its sites and spaces, through the particular sensibilities of the urban as a way of life, through the political problematization of phenomena as urban, or indeed through the activities of local authorities and democratic assemblies, what this collection of papers draws out is the enduring and maybe even expanding relevance of urban processes in learning to challenge, think about and develop new and better ways of living together.

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