

# NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THE ONTOLOGY OF PLACES

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## INTRODUCTION

Most geographers, many academics, and quite a few other people have undoubtedly noticed at least one of two recent phenomena, both geographical in nature. The first is the efflorescence of discourse about space and spatiality. For many academics the 1990s has surely been the decade of spatiality, and its cousin, mapping. And the second is the concern about the demise of individual places. Fueled earlier by jeremiads about strip malls and fast-food restaurants, it has reemerged in a new form through the development of computers and the Internet, the there that has no there. In 1976 Ted Relph decried the “placelessness” of contemporary society; today Joshua Meyrowitz argues that we have “no sense of place.”

My concern here is with something that both groups, and many others, seem to be assuming. And that is that in the end we live in a world that is a spatial world, where places are carved out of that space. I want to take issue with that claim, and say that it has untoward effects on our ability to understand what is happening in the world today. I argue instead that we live not in a spatial world, of whatever form, but rather, for the most part, in a world of places. And that is my topic today.

So I will ask, what does it mean to say that we live in a world of places? And what does this tell us about the questions and concerns raised by those who theorize about space today?

## ON ARENDT

A useful place to start is with the work of Hannah Arendt. In The Human Condition (1958), she makes the following argument. If we look back to Aristotle, and especially to his Politics (1941), we find a bifurcated world. On the one hand is the world of the public, of public places or public spaces. There people engage in political discourse where, ideally, the best argument wins. Granted, all kinds of messy and inappropriate arguments occur, but

there are standards by which to deal with them. So in an important sense, public places are those places within which people act as though they are equals.

In contrast, according to Arendt, Aristotle saw the household as the paradigmatic private place, and for him for a place to be private meant for it to be a place of privation. In the household people deal with issues of production and reproduction. We sleep and eat and have sex and so on. And fundamentally, we do this in a situation that is hierarchical, a situation of inequality. There are men and women, children and slaves. If in the public we can appeal to higher aims, to ideas of the human, in the household we are just trying to get by, to fill our bellies and empty our bowels.

Arendt wants to argue that for Aristotle, and in Aristotle's time if we are to take him at his word, there were only two kinds of places, the public and the private. That was it. Everything else was just noise, or irrelevant disorder. But gradually, she argues, a third sort of place developed. The rise of the feudal system, a kind of "household writ large," can be seen as one stage of this process. In the end, the household came to be replicated in the larger world, in the form of the social. So now we have places like markets and production facilities and so on. And the inequality of the household has extended into the larger world, and increasingly displaced the public. The public, which for Arendt and Aristotle alike, is where people can be truly human, has shrunk as people increasingly occupy themselves with the material world.

Now, Arendt's views on Aristotle have been the subject of heated argument. For feminists such as Jean Bethke Elshtain (1982) and Susan Okin (1979) who agree with her interpretation, Aristotle becomes a sort of fountainhead of patriarchy, just because he seems to argue that the only place of women is in the home.

I don't want directly to engage this debate here, but rather to note something about it. If you look at the literature on Arendt's and Aristotle's understanding of women and the household, it ranges widely, through Aristotle's Politics (1941), Nichomachean Ethics (1941), De Anima (1986), and Generation of Animals (1963). It addresses a wide range of questions, from biology to education to the nature of virtue. But what is missing is a discussion of the nature of places. Grounded fundamentally in a concern with the difference between public and private places, the literature never asks, "What is a place?"

## **ARISTOTLE AND BELONGING**

This is all the more striking because Aristotle had a lot to say about the question. His discussion, though, was in the context of questions not about the human world, but about the world more generally. The most straightforward locus of this discussion is in the Physics (1984). This is a big and complicated work. Indeed, it encompasses far more than one would find in a work of contemporary physics, where questions like "Why do horses move?" are seen as more or less out of bounds.

In the Physics Aristotle is asking, what is the world like? What are its constituent elements? What is its structure? His answer is couched in terms of a critique, often explicit, of the works of atomists like Democritus (Kirk, et al., 1983), who had argued that the world is located in space, which is a big void. For Aristotle this view made no sense at all. In part this was because it was unempirical: Where are those atoms that the atomists talk about? Has anyone seen one? And in part it was because the atomist analysis seemed to make it impossible to understand the nature of motion. If it is resistance that prevents motion, shouldn't motion in a vacuum be instantaneous?

For Aristotle, the alternative, based on empirical observation, was that the world tends toward stasis. Objects move until they stop. And the critical issue, and the absolutely central issue here, is why they stop: They stop because they have reached the place where they belong. They have reached their natural place.

In the Physics this view was laid out in terms of the basic elements, air, earth, fire, and water. Light things made of air and fire rise, while heavy things, of water and earth, fall. Each moves until it reaches its natural place, and once there stays, absent disturbing, unnatural motions.

For Aristotle, then, space was not really an issue. It was an unempirical concept, one made up and supported by people like the atomists, who in the end were simply spinning tall tales. The world is a world of places. Everything has a place where it belongs. And once you have characterized the place where something belongs, you are done. There is no need to—or even possibility of—referring to other, more basic concepts.

## ARISTOTLE REVISITED

Now if we turn back to the question of private places and public places, or the household and the polis, where does this leave us? It seems to me that it suggests that the polis is the place in which political discourse belongs. And the household, by contrast, is the place in which the activities of production and reproduction belong. Put another way, to engage in political discourse outside of the polis, and within a household is thereby to do something that is disruptive of the natural order within a household. Can a household function if the children are allowed to vote on their bedtime? And to engage in buying and selling within the polis is to engage in activities that undercut what is normally done there.

So one can construct a reading of Aristotle—granted, one that he might not have made—within which the construction of a polis or a household occurs just through those activities that are seen as intrinsic to, as belonging to that place. If the circumstances are right, I construct a place by engaging in political discourse, or by cooking or cleaning.

And this is where the issue of technology comes in, and where it is useful to return to Arendt. For one of the striking things about her two-fold characterization of places in classical Greece is that technology is just invisible.

Consider the polis. She represents it as a kind-of stripped down place. Although there can be many kinds of things and activities there, what makes it a political place is the existence of a particular form of dialogue. The situation is very much like the one in a university. If I were to say, “Well, we were going to have a seminar today but it was a nice day so we all went outside and talked about a set of readings instead,” people would think me a bit odd; a seminar, most people would say, is a seminar not because of where it takes place but because of what goes on. The characteristics of the location are in certain ways irrelevant; what matters is what happens.

In contrast, to say that something is a household is typically to say something about a set of activities, but also about a set of objects and putatively about a set of people who do and do not belong in a household. If in principle in a political debate everyone is treated equally, to the extent that we even have a name for the fallacy of not doing so—the ad hominem—in a household it is the norm that people be different.

But note that in both cases it is possible to imagine the places in question wholly apart from all but oral communication. Aristotle was writing at the dawn of literate society, and anyone who looks back at the works of his teacher can see just what a difference literacy makes; Plato writes in the form of dialogues, the form of the polis, and Aristotle writes books, many books—but is nonetheless writing about a bookless society.

A great deal has been written about oral societies, by people like Walter Ong and Eric Havelock (Havelock, 1986, Ong, 1982, Ong, 1956). But little has been said about the way in which orality is associated with particular kinds of places. In these places, as in the polis and the household, people, objects, and the localities themselves are the repositories of knowledge about the nature of the place, and about the sort of activities that belong there. Without writing there are no catalogs, no chronicles; rather, knowledge is stored in the form of stories, far more easily remembered. The stories told--about what the place is like, what can be done there, and what cannot—define the place.

## PLACES AND WRITING

Indeed, if we look over to an early work of medicine, Hippocrates’s Airs, Waters, Places (1950), we can see just what an alternative might be. His work is not a theoretical treatise, but rather a compendium of the characteristics of various places, a description of the ways in which they are healthful, or not. It is, in the end, a work of classification, one suitable for inclusion in an almanac or atlas. And this is just what we do not find in works of someone like Plato.

In fact, as Harold Dorn (1991) has shown, the science that emerged from those societies in which writing developed early, as in the Middle East, tended to involve the creation of just such sets of classifications, and their use for the construction of lists, and thereby for the maintenance of bureaucratic structures of control, over land, people, and things. Hippocrates has a touch of this eastern science in him.

As Dorn shows, the ability to keep records fundamentally alters the nature of places, and this is because it alters the ways in which places are constructed. For the possibility of having written records of land parcels, commercial transactions, and births, marriages, and deaths allows for very different means of determining who and what belongs where. The locus of memory and authority changes. When two thousand years later Marc Augé (1995) complains that places that contain text are “nonplaces,” he is adverting to just this change, and bemoaning it.

As an aside, it is important to see that the move from orally-constituted places to places wherein writing is an element is not an encompassing one. When we begin to construct places within which writing is an element we do not simply abandon those orally-constituted places. Rather, all of us inhabit places that are defined in simply oral terms. This is mostly true of our relationships with our children. And Monica Lewinsky thought it was true of her relationship with Linda Tripp.

So if two people meet in a place, talk and get to know one another there, they in that way constitute that place as “theirs,” as a place within which each can do certain things and not others. But the introduction of writing alters the relationship and the place. A diary, a series of letters, a transcript of a conversation, potentially shared with others; all of these transform the place, from one wherein one has a set of experiences, afterwards lodged only in memory, to one in which there can after the fact be multiple versions, multiple interpretations, and the possibility of classification and cataloging.

This may seem a trivial case. But if you think so, read something like Timothy Garton Ash’s account of East Germany under communism (1997); there you will see the ways in which the expansive creation of written records can alter the texture of social relations and the very nature of the place. In a society awash in written accounts of everyone’s actions, the very nature of those actions is altered. We get a version of Foucault’s Panopticon (1977).

## **WRITTEN WORLDS AND THE INVENTION OF SPACE**

And of course, at the same time, the possibility of writing allows for the development of maps and atlases, which are able to give names to places, to classify them, and to suggest that they have “real,” delineable borders. Writing allows the transformation of the region from the sum of a series of stories of a series of trips to a new kind of place, the image of which can be inscribed on a flat surface. And it thereby allows one to imagine the place as a container for its inhabitants.

Indeed, and in this way, writing is the invention that allows for the invention of the idea of space. Without writing there is no space, but only an image of the void. There are of course places, because as we have seen, the construction and maintenance of places can rely upon strictly oral modes of communication, like narrative. But those places do not exist in space; at best, they exist in concert with other places.

To see how this might be true we need only look at early accounts of places. They typically are of the form of, "I traveled in the place where such and such people live, and I saw this and that." They are really in the form of accounts of journeys (For an example, see Strabo, 1917).<sup>1</sup>

From our perspective today we are inclined to read too much into those accounts, to imagine that the people recounting them had what we might call mental maps, that put all of these accounts into a nice clean gridded system. But they did not. Indeed, an oral tradition lacks the means to store such images. But with writing it becomes possible to organize these stories, and to locate the peoples and events on a flat surface that is imagined to be a replica of the world itself. So it becomes possible to imagine places as located within space.

### **PRINT AND THE INVENTION OF THE REGION**

Some time after the waning of feudal society and the middle ages, yet another form of place came into being. This was the "region." Now, to many geographers to say this is heresy; they believe that geography has always been about regions, and that this was true as far back as the chorographic tradition in classical Greece. But as George Kimble showed in a largely forgotten 1951 article, the region as we think of it is rather a new invention.

So in fact, it was only relatively recently that it became possible to see the landscape in the way that Paul Vidal de la Blache described it, in his 1928 The Personality of France:

A geographical individuality does not result simply from geological and climatic conditions. It is not something delivered complete from the hand of Nature. . . . [A] country is a storehouse of dormant energies, laid up in germ by Nature but depending for employment upon man. It is man who reveals a country's individuality by moulding it to his own use. He establishes a connection between unrelated features, substituting for the random effects of local circumstances a systematic co-operation of forces. Only then does a country acquire a specific character differentiating it from others, till at length it becomes, as it were, a medal struck in the likeness of a people (1928, p. 14).

Here we see echoes of the places developed within a strictly oral tradition, and in one sense, of course, this is no surprise, since the peasants of whom Vidal spoke were largely illiterate. And we see one of the fundamental means of the construction of places, the carrying out of habitual activities, or practices. As Vidal put it,

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<sup>1</sup> I rest my argument here on the account of topography in (Lukermann, 1961).

Man is an animal of habits even more than initiative. . . . [H]e digs in willingly, if he is not shaken by some shock from outside, into the way of life in which he was born (1911, p. 304).

Furthermore,

traditional habits are reinforced by superstitions and rituals which he himself has forged as supports. His way of life thus becomes the almost exclusive milieu in which he exercises what remains to him of the gifts of initiative and invention (1911, p. 304).

But as Vidal suggests, it would be a mistake to see the region as an object that developed as a result of a single cause. Rather, and as Kimble has shown, it developed out of the intersection of a series of events, some political, some economic, some social. But it has been an entity of remarkable resiliency, lasting for hundreds of years. And moreover, it has come for many to be a symbol of what life should be like, a kind of normative model.

## IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in Benedict Anderson's celebrated Imagined Communities (1991). In that work Anderson describes various elements of the rise of the nation state. Here, it seems to me, Anderson is describing the development of yet another form of place. And strikingly, he is suggesting that there is something inauthentic about the nation state, that it is only "imagined," and to be contrasted with those places that are "real." To be contrasted, one supposes, with the region that Kimble described, wherein people have "real" relationships one with another.

For Anderson the rise of the nation state can be seen as associated with the development of printing. Printed language at once creates a unified field for communication and exchange; gives a fixity to language; and creates a language of singular authority (Anderson, 1991, pp. 44-45).

It seems to me, though, that with respect to the possibility of creating a kind of place that can be thought of as having an existence that is sui generis, there is an additional feature of the use of print technology that needs to be considered. And that is the way in which the use of print allows for the possibility of widely disseminating documents containing data about individuals, where those data can be thought of as having some degree of accuracy.

Notoriously, before the development of print every replication of a written work involved the possibility, and indeed the likelihood, of the introduction of errors. And this was especially true in the case of works of mathematics, such as navigation, trigonometric, and logarithmic tables. But with the development of print, it became possible—at least in principle—gradually to create an edition of such a work from which all errors had been excised. (Of course, it also became possible to be much more efficient in propagating errors.)

If the initial result of the move to print was no doubt limited to fewer shipwrecks, events beginning in the seventeenth century expanded its significance. Here I have in mind the increasing interest in the determination of the extent and nature of populations.

There were moves—in France, for example—in the sixteenth century, not long after the development of the printing press, to create registers of populations. But such systems were gradually replaced, beginning in the seventeenth century, when the development of what was termed “political arithmetic” seemed to provide tools useful to the nation state, both for social control and for political and ideological purposes (Hacking, 1975, Rusnock, 1995).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century political arithmetic had been replaced, at least in France and Great Britain, by statistics. Ted Porter suggests,

Implicitly, at least, statistics tended to equalize subjects. It makes no sense to count people if their common personhood is not seen as somehow more significant than their differences (1986, p. 25).

As Horkheimer and Adorno had earlier put the matter, this view derived from a deeper belief, that

Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities. To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion; modern positivism writes it off as literature (1972, p. 7).

And so, as statistics replaced political arithmetic, there developed what Ian Hacking has termed “an avalanche of numbers (1982).” Noting that between 1820 and 1840 “the rate of increase in the printing of numbers appears to be exponential whereas the rate of increase in the printing of words was linear (p. 282),” he argues that in France

After 1820 ministry [annual] reports were still supposed to have limited circulation, but the sheer fact of multiple printings put them in the public domain. They were ready to be reproduced or condensed in the mass circulation police gazettes and the like.... Disease, madness, and the state of the threatening underworld, *les misérables*, created a morbid and fearful fascination for numbers upon which the bureaucracies fed (1982, pp. 286-87).

Growing bureaucracies, then, created the categories by which people were categorized, managed the enumeration and statistical analysis, and maintained themselves even in the absence of evidence that their products were of any real utility.

When I said that this process, of the development of the nation state, was at the same time the invention of a new form of place, I meant just that. For here we have a place that is

not defined in terms of people's everyday interactions and in terms of sets of narratives told about those interactions, as in the case of places developed among people who communicate only orally.

But neither is this a place grounded simply in the written word. It is not just defined in terms of lists of characteristics, or chronicles of events, each connected with its author and the circumstances in which it was written. The particularity of the lists of individuals, maintained in a church or government office, has been replaced by the census, where individuals are of interest only insofar as they can be treated as members of a particular class. Indeed, here the individual exists only as a set of characteristics, attached to a neutral self.

According to Hacking, it was this print-based set of schemata to which Marx referred in his conceptualization of the class struggle (1982, pp. 280). Indeed, in retrospect we can see this joint development of print and statistics, as providing an underpinning for that development, of the social, to which Arendt so strongly objected.

Note that here, then, is a place formed in a new way. The modern nation state is a place that—in part I hasten to emphasize—is created through the production and circulation of works whose explicit aim is to characterize that place in a thoroughgoing way. Its inhabitants take on an existence as members of broad and fluid sets of categories, some of which may have no apparent meaning to them. They are, in an important sense, virtual individuals. But they are virtual individuals who exist in a place that is very real, a place that in part obtains its reality through the process of creation of that virtuality.

There are of course antidotes to this abstractness, and indeed, the state relies upon them as means to its maintenance. One longstanding antidote is, of course, to cut through the apparent abstractness of the nation state by appealing to symbols, which become means of uniting diverse individuals. This is precisely what happens in the US, where the flag, the constitution, and a variety of other symbols have this function.

In fact, the characterization of the nation state in terms of abstracted categories and of concrete symbols need not always be at odds. For example, the late nineteenth century debate about the closing of the frontier arose directly from a census analysis of population density.

## **WHY ARE PLACES IMPORTANT?**

I've now briefly characterized a series of places, in terms of the ways in which certain information technologies are associated with their construction and maintenance. And I've described what must look like a messy process. Places have been described as arising, variously, through dialogue, everyday activity, narrative, classification, and symbol. But where does this leave us with respect to my earlier claim, that the concept of place is more fundamental than the concept of space? And what can be said more systematically about the ontology of places?

One tack here, after Henri Lefebvre (1991) and David Harvey (1993), would be to see places as artifacts constructed through material practices, where places at the same time may be represented and imagined in multiple ways. As much sympathy as I have for this view, it seems to me to miss something essential. Why is this? It is because the accounts that we find in Harvey and Lefebvre, as compelling as they are, clearly must themselves have been written by people, in particular places. They must themselves be artifacts of the processes that I have described. But we see none of this in these authors; theirs are very much placeless views, views from above.

And this in turn derives, at least in part, from the inadequate way in which Harvey and Lefebvre think about language. A common view, and the one that they seem to adopt, takes language to be a system of representation. So for example, when I say the words “material practice” I have in mind a concept, of “material practices,” and a set of rules for applying that concept to the world. I look around and see something that is a material practice, and apply the concept to the object or event.

The difficulty with this view is simple and straightforward, and has been long known. Imagine that you are sitting somewhere—in a building, say—and someone asks, how was this made? What would you respond? In fact, and this seems obvious, there is no single right answer. If I am a builder, speaking with a client, I will have one answer; if I am an architectural historian, I will have another; if I am an investment banker I may have yet another. And in fact, the matter is more complex than that suggests. This is because there are times in which an irate “How was this made” is not a question but a sign of discontent, the equivalent of a groan.

In every case, though, my response will be based on my understanding of what the other person means, and hence of the context within which we are speaking. And in fact, this is just where the concept of place enters into the picture. For one way of eliciting information about the context within which a person is speaking is to challenge the statements that a person makes. We ask why she said that. And the same question about the response, and that response, and so on. But as Wittgenstein put it,

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do” (1968, I, §217).

Now, there are many cases in which we would express this by saying, “This is what we do.” This is just how the Irish, or football players, or members of the working class, or kids act. We can see those as cases in which social or cultural groups are the contexts within which people are acting. But in some cases, indeed in many, we would say “This is what we do here.” We justify our actions, or ways of doing things, in terms of local habits and customs. We characterize those actions as belonging in a particular place.

So in these cases the context of action is the place. Indeed, we might well see this process of repeated questioning as diagnostic, as a way of determining whether something is

legitimately a place. But at the same time, these sorts of statements can be seen as means of characterizing a place. When we say that in Greece at the time of Aristotle people believed that the elements that make up the world tend to move toward their natural places, so that when asked why something moved to a place a respondent would say, simply, “Because that’s where it belongs,” we have said something about a place, in this case about Greece.

So it seems to me that when we start from the most basic feature of human life, that we communicate one with another, we are forced quickly to see places as important among the contexts of our actions. This, certainly, was Arendt’s view of classical Greece, where the polis and the household were just such things, places within which human activity made sense. It was equally the case in Kimble’s description of the development of the region, and Anderson’s description of the nation state. In each case—and note that the scale extends from the home to the nation state—the fundamentally communicative activities of using, variously, dialogue, ritual, narrative, classification, and symbol were the means by which the places in question were defined.

But the acts of representation and imagination are not here, as they were in Lefebvre and Harvey, separate from the place in question. Rather, they are intrinsic to that development. And because this is true as much of the representations made by academics and scientists as of those made by the rank and file, on this view it becomes impossible to adopt an inherently privileged position.

At the same time, it seems to me that one needs to see the development of the belief that people today have what is termed “fragmentary” identities as arising from the proliferation of types and scales of the places within which their actions and utterances take place. Once upon a time there were close physical and institutional connections among those places, and it was possible to see differences in a person’s identity or in the context of his or her actions as unimportant. The increase in those differences has been reflected in changes in the nature of individual and group identity. If it once made sense to read an individual’s predilection to act here from her predilection to act there, it no longer does. If it once made sense to see individual members of a group as sharing a wide range of characteristics, it no longer does. The nature and extent of this sharing are now matters for empirical research.

## **NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THE ONTOLOGY OF PLACES**

I suggested at the outset that a rethinking of the nature of places will be of some benefit when it comes to understanding the issues raised by new technologies. In one sense I have already been discussing new technologies; after all, writing and print were at one time new. But it is true that new technologies such as the Internet seem to raise difficult questions. If people’s lives have in the modern era been fragmented, they seem now to be fragmented in new ways.

It seems to me, though, that much of the discourse about computer networks is enmired in images of space. On the one hand, it is said, the increase in the speed of computer

networks has caused the world to implode, as links among people become increasingly small.

On the other hand, this has allowed us, finally, to have what Melvin Webber (1964), some thirty-five years ago, termed “community without propinquity.” Here, for example, in commenting on a case brought by the US government against a couple who had distributed what some said was obscene material via a computer bulletin board, Lance Rose declared that

The time may be near for a major revision of the concept of community standards for online activities. Up to now, ‘community’ always meant neighborhoods, counties, or states—geographically defined communities. But the growing online world is already filled with thousands of new virtual, online communities.... The Supreme Court made its Miller test depend in part on local community standards because it recognized that different communities have different moral standards, and it wanted to let like-minded people living together in communities choose rules that suit them best. The same reasoning, if applied to the online world, could easily lead to a new rule: when considering whether adult materials distributed online beyond the bounds of local geographic communities are obscene, we should appeal to standards of the online community. After all, those who live part of their lives in cyberspace ought to be able to live in a community where they feel comfortable (Rose, 1995, pp. 251-52).

It seems to me that Rose is right to say that there are virtual communities; indeed, these communities are created through just the processes that I have described as those used in the creation of places. At the same time, and in part because this view is wedded to spatial imagery, he fails to see what should be obvious, that in the modern world we are all in several places at once. I can be in Los Angeles and in Westwood and in California and in my office. I am in each of those places by virtue of the fact that there are certain things that I do and say that are, in the end, explicable only because I am in one of those places. This is only paradoxical if I think of these places as located in some overarching space.

In fact, that we can be in multiple places at once is very much a commonplace; ask any prosecutor, or any drug dealer who has faced state and then federal charges. And we rely upon that fact when, through our actions, we carve out private places in public ones, when we steal a kiss or scratch an itch.

Yet strikingly, one of the greatest difficulties in rethinking the nature of the place of new information technologies is not people who can’t imagine themselves being in two places at once, but rather those who fail to see that they are anywhere at all, who instead act as though the world is a set of locations in space, and they are standing outside of it.

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