

Taking on the tweed suits: Reflections on the ‘How the other half lives’ and its critique of masculinist geography

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In this commentary I explore the groundbreaking interventions of Jacky Tivers’ (1978) “How the other half lives” (*Area* 10:4, pp. 302–306). I highlight its contribution in focusing attention on two specific issues: the underrepresentation of women as producers of geographical knowledge and the exclusion of women’s issues as a focus of geographical inquiry. I argue that the paper broke new ground in the context of British geography by demonstrating the connections between the domination of the discipline by men and what was considered legitimate geographical knowledge, as well as by demanding that the latter be addressed through the explicit study of the geography of women and gender relations.

KEYWORDS

feminist geography, gender, geography of women, inequality, patriarchy, women

1 | INTRODUCTION

“How the other half lives” was the first published critique in British geography of the male-oriented view of society at the core of a discipline dominated by men and its complete absence of the explicit study of women. It was cited subsequently in most of the highly influential interventions in debates about gender and geography (e.g., McDowell, 1979; Monk & Hanson, 1982; Zelinsky et al., 1982), in early explorations of feminism and geography (e.g., Bowlby et al., 1982; Rose, 1993), and in geographical reconceptualisations of patriarchy (e.g., Foord & Gregson, 1986). “How the other half lives” brought attention to two interrelated issues to which geography had been especially slow to respond: the underrepresentation of women as producers of geographical knowledge and the exclusion of women’s issues as a focus of geographical inquiry. It broke new ground in the context of British geography by demonstrating the connections between the domination of the discipline by men and what was considered legitimate geographical knowledge, as well as by demanding that the latter be addressed through the explicit study of the geography of women and gender relations. A specific target of the paper was the neglect by geographers of the study of women and of gender roles in research that focused on the household as the primary unit of study with an assumed male head.

Criticism of the under-representation of women in geography had begun to be published in journals in the USA in the early 1970s, in part in reaction to liberation movements at the end of the 1960s (Burnett, 1973; Hayford, 1974; Zelinsky, 1973) and in part because the passing of sex-discrimination legislation raised the possibility that geography departments might face legal action (Johnson, 1985; see also Rose, 1993). However, apart from early accounts of time-geography (Palm & Pred, 1974), still hardly anything was being written about the geography of women’s lives. Moreover, British geography was much slower in acknowledging and responding to these issues, reflecting the domination of the discipline by men and its entrenched conservatism. “How the other half lives” was pioneering in British geography in advocating for

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geographies of women and was a significant contribution in a growing critique of patriarchy in Anglophone geography more widely. While the paper did not call specifically for a more explicitly feminist geography, it was explicitly feminist in orientation, in the feminist social science on which it drew, and in its conclusion that by excluding women from geographical research and teaching, the discipline was complicit in accepting and perpetuating the gender inequality entrenched in society. These conclusions undoubtedly helped inspire feminist geographies in the early 1980s.

2 | “MOST GEOGRAPHERS ARE *MEN*”: CHALLENGING THE INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN

I first read “How the other half lives” as an undergraduate in the late 1980s, a decade after its publication. Not unusually at that time in British geography departments, I was taught by only one woman, Morag Bell. Despite the wider developments in the teaching of feminist and radical geographies in the 1980s alluded to by Sylvia Chant (this issue), my only exposure to feminism as a political and theoretical approach and to gender as an analytical lens within geography had been in a single lecture taught by Morag, with “How the other half lives” recommended as a key reading. The unequivocal statement at the beginning of the paper that “Most geographers are *men*” (Tivers, 1978, p. 302) may have been self-evident at the time, but was not considered remarkable; neither had its significance been addressed in terms of its impact on women geographers or on the nature of the discipline. Reading the paper for the first time some 10 years later, I was prompted to reflect on why a discipline that was in my experience relatively gender-balanced at undergraduate level remained so male-dominated as a profession.¹ Linda McDowell (1979) subsequently provided an understanding of the impact of patriarchal societal expectations in stymying the ambition of talented female students (a point also made by Jacky Tivers in her observation that successfully completed PhDs relied on an “army of consumers-housewives” [1978, p. 303]); McDowell also documented the importance of the absence of women as role models, and the possibility of overt or implicit discrimination in selection processes in explaining the absence of women in professional geography. Reading these early feminist critiques of the discipline as an undergraduate piqued my interest in the connection between male domination of the discipline and what counted as valid topics for geographical study. It also inspired me to reflect on the kind of geography I was being taught.

My first explorations were in an essay written for an undergraduate course on the Nature and Philosophy of Geography, which required me to “write an appreciation” of the work of one geographer in changing geographical thought. I was curious as to why a course that ranged from Ptolemy to Humboldt to Harvey failed to mention a single woman as a producer of geographical knowledge. Having read “How the other half lives,” I chose to write about Ellen Churchill Semple, a pioneer of human geography in the USA and the first female President of the Association of American Geographers in 1921. Of course, I discovered that Semple was not a straightforward heroine, being a product of her own ideological environment and given the prominence she gave to environmental determinism, which became a tool of imperialist, racist geography (Peet, 1985). Her work was also remarkably insensitive to gender. However, I was still able to argue a not entirely naïve case for considering the role of women in the discipline and of the significance of Semple’s research on the Mediterranean, in particular, as offering outstanding examples of method in historical geography, an appreciation of which was often denied her because of her influence in establishing a deterministic base in the exposition of geography.

The critique in “How the other half lives” of what counted as geographical enquiry also inspired my PhD research in the early 1990s, which explored the gendered construction of “the geographical tradition,” the erasure of women and women’s voices from histories of geography, and the potential for acknowledging the agency of women in these histories. It coincided with an emerging wider interest in Anglophone geography in critical feminist historiographies of the discipline (Blunt, 1994; Domosh, 1991; Rose, 1993, 1995) and in the role of geographical institutions in actively excluding women from the profession (Bell & McEwan, 1996). Writing almost two decades after the publication of “How the other half lives,” Gillian Rose (1995, p. 413) was still able to claim that the rethinking of geographical traditions, and the questioning of what constitutes geographical knowledge in particular historical settings, had yet to provide spaces in which women’s contributions could be accommodated (see also McEwan, 2000). The process of rethinking the discipline to challenge the invisibility of women, both as the producers of geographical knowledge and as a focus of geographical study, was protracted and not without significant challenges, especially for those at the vanguard of the struggle in the 1970s.

3 | CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Reading “How the other half lives” again over 40 years after its original publication, it is perhaps too easy to overlook both its significance and the courage it took to publish it without appreciating the context of political, cultural, and intellectual

struggle in which it was written. While second-wave feminist activism had inspired radical political and social change in western countries, by the end of the 1970s much of UK social sciences, including geography, remained at best resolutely deaf and at worst actively resistant. Jacky Tivers does not shy away from establishing early in the paper why this was: male-domination of the discipline and the “rather patronizing attitude of geographers towards the consideration of women as a valid focus for geographical study” (1978, p. 302). Her paper focuses primarily on establishing an intellectual case for challenging the gender-blind and sexist assumptions to which this attitude gave rise and the consequent lack of research into the problems, needs, and behaviour of women. The paper also refers fleetingly to an illustration on the front cover of *Area* in 1977 as a specific example of this patronising attitude (Figure 1).

The illustration depicts a low pressure chart over the UK with a number of clouds, each bearing a topic: “Geography of women,” “Liberation movement,” “Gay geography,” “Affirmative action,” “Revolutionary theory,” and so on. Its message becomes apparent in the Editorial in the same edition, entitled: “The fault, dear Brutus is ... in ourselves....” In this, the

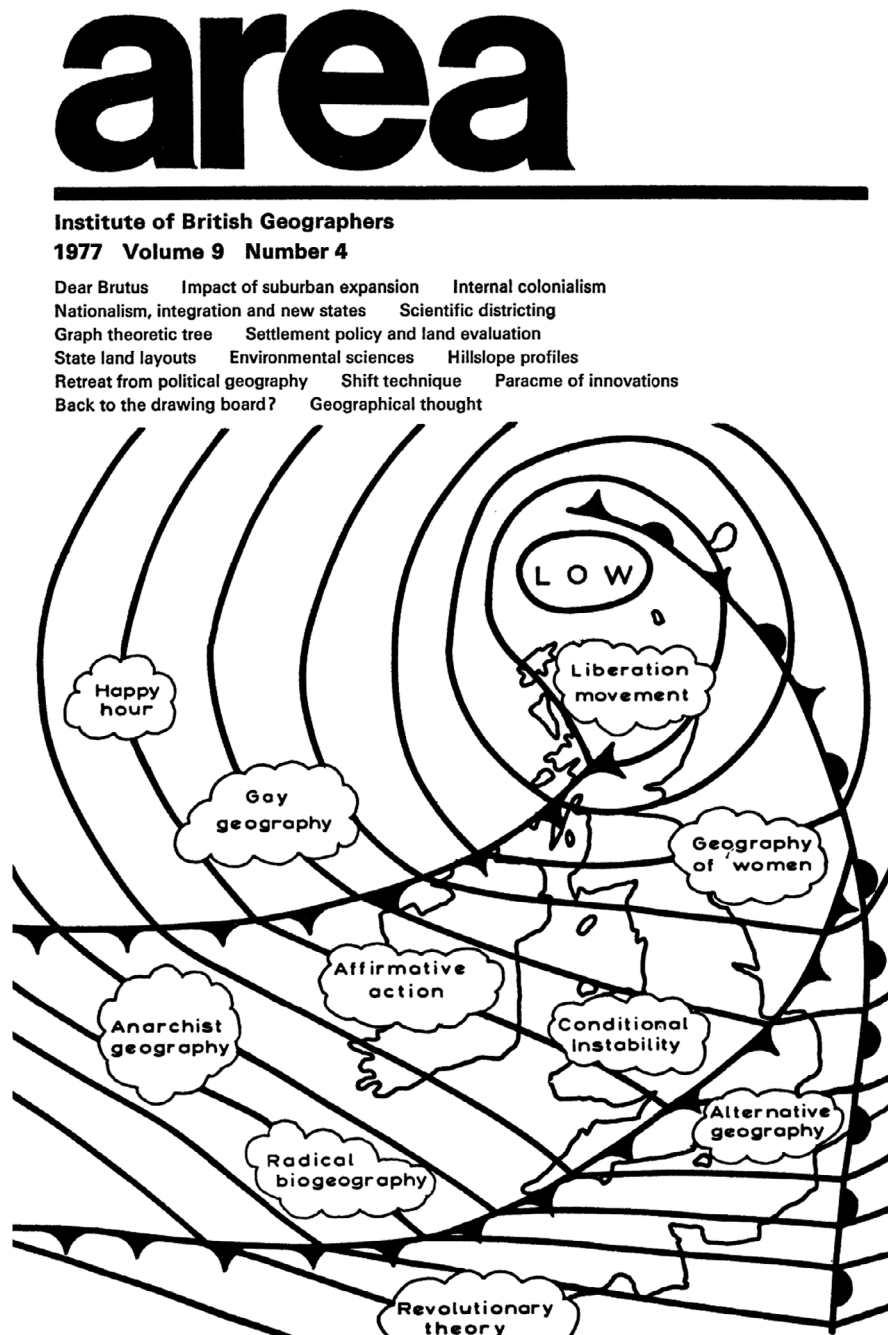


FIGURE 1 Front cover of *Area* vol. 9 no. 4 (1977).

Editor argued – and he may have had a point at the time – that the professional image of the discipline and its interactions with other bodies were a cause for concern, and that the solution lay in raising the status of geography as a profession. However, he went on to claim that there was a danger that this task of raising the professional status of geography would be perceived as:

unattractive in a world in which intellectual fashions seem almost as ephemeral as those in women's clothing (a danger not to be dismissed in a profession susceptible to the temptations of quick returns on first pickings). (Area, 1977, p. 228)

Editorial input in designing the front cover cannot be assumed,² and the Editor deserves credit for playing a significant role in publishing the first feminist intervention in UK geography, which (as was the case with queer geographies some years later) would have likely required by-passing the review system and heavy persuasion of an editorial board and/or officers of the Institute of British Geographers (IBG), which published *Area*. However, the message of the Editorial was clear: the “Geography of women” was one of those “ephemeral intellectual fashions” posing a danger to the professional status of the discipline.

In calling for geographers to be masters of their fates³ and to replace “the amateur ethos in research and education that is still widespread in university geography departments by professional standards that will enable us to look any other profession straight in the eye” (Area, 1977, p. 228), the Editorial invokes a familiar association between professional geography and masculinity that could be traced back to the origins of modern geography in the 19th century. Indeed, women were excluded from the Royal Geographical Society, an institution seeking to promote modern geography and provide an intellectual environment for professional geography, until 1913 on the grounds that they were ipso facto amateurs (McEwan, 1998), deemed incapable of contributing to and unsuitable to the practice of professional, scientific geography (Bell & McEwan, 1996). The message of the *Area* Editorial was clear: for geography to be a professional discipline, it needed to eschew the “Geography of women” and, by implication, those who advocated and practised it, and to resist the threat of other emasculating and amateurish “intellectual fashions.”

Those “fashions” – which are represented on the weather map as “objects of geographical amusement” (Tivers, 1978, p. 302) – also happened to be some of the most pressing political issues of the time, especially those articulated around gender, sexuality, race, and class. This mattered little to those advocating self-avowed “traditional” (Area, 1977, p. 228) – that is, conservative – disciplinary agendas, whose concerns with identifying and protecting a credible, professional discipline inspired robust policing of its boundaries.⁴ Despite this, many of these “fashions” came to the forefront of human geography in the 1980s and 1990s, reshaping and revitalising the discipline and ensuring its relevance within the social sciences and beyond. The Editorial is a wonderful example of the kind of discourse which, having been laid down when geography was institutionalised in the 19th century, continued to territorialise the discipline until it was reshaped by the concerted critiques of precisely those feminist, queer, and other radical geographies it feared. The only surprise is that at the time Jacky Tivers' appears to have been the lone critical response.

When the *Area* Editorial was published, Jacky was at the beginning of her PhD research investigating the spatial activities of women with young children and struggling to find literature written about women or gender by geographers, and about women with children specifically by any social scientist. The urgency of the need to fill these gaps was clearly a source of inspiration for Jacky's own research, while the dismissal of nascent feminist geographies by those with authority in the discipline was an important motivation for her intervention in *Area*. Reflecting on this context is a reminder of how innovative and courageous this intervention was. Jacky was writing as an early career researcher and she was confronting one of those male professors who at the time were powerful authorities in defining the discipline and gatekeepers to the profession. The paper was written when only 7.3 percent of full-time university teachers of geography in the UK were women (Rose, 1993, p. 1), when very few papers were published by women (e.g., between 1974 and 1978 only 5 percent of papers in *Transactions of the IBG* were by women (McDowell, 1979)), and in the absence of wider solidarity and support networks in the discipline, which in the UK came subsequently with the formation of the Women and Geography Study Group (WGSG). Feminists were perceived as a threat to the established, male-dominated order and claiming a voice in critiquing the discipline of geography was not without risks, on both a personal and professional level.

Although intended to be polemical, the paper was by today's standards relatively measured in its arguments, drawing extensively on evidence accumulated by early feminist academics, such as Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley. It later transpired, however, that the paper was also written from a deeper sense of indignation inspired by sexism that pervaded the discipline. As Jacky Tivers recounts (in WGSG 1997, p. 36), when presenting the initial ideas in the paper at the 1978 Annual Conference of the IBG, she was met with a comment from a male colleague: “I don't know what you mean by

saying that geographers never look at women: we do it all the time.” Of course, the casual sexism endured by many women geographers throughout the 1970s and 1980s is not mentioned in the paper, reflecting the persistent difficulties in articulating this form of marginalisation. Twelve years after the publication of “How the other half lives,” Linda McDowell catalogued the verbal, vocal, and visual power that men in geography continued to wield, including through jokes, patronising attitudes, and sexual harassment, which remained difficult for women geographers to challenge and continued to feed through into structural barriers that shaped appointments and promotions processes (McDowell, 1990; see also Rose, 1993).

Feminist geographers would have a protracted struggle against patronising, sexist, and even misogynist attitudes in staking a claim in the discipline. The issues first highlighted by Jacky Tivers concerning the relationship between a male-dominated discipline, what counted as geographical knowledge, and the policing of the boundaries of the discipline were still being debated in the 1990s.⁵ Who are considered to be the practitioners of a discipline is clearly not coincidental to the dominant forms of knowledge that are produced in that discipline. As Katherine McKittrick and Linda Peake argue:

The problem was (and is) not only that middle-class white men were numerically dominant in departments of Geography in Britain and North America in the twentieth century but also that they held sway over the status quo. (2005, p. 42)

It is perhaps unsurprising that this meant that the interests of middle-class white men were served by studying people like themselves and excluding others. By the time “How the other half lives” was published, the bourgeois status quo within geography was already being challenged by class-based studies. For the traditionalists in geography the real threat was arguably not to the professionalism of the discipline, but to their own dominance of it. “How the other half lives” was an important opening salvo in what would become feminist geography in the UK and heralded the concerted challenge of the exclusion of the study of women, women’s lives, and the significance of gender and sexuality within the discipline. Sessions on feminist geography at the Annual Conference of the IBG led subsequently to the founding of the WGSG in 1982, which became an important source of support and solidarity for women geographers who remained considerably outnumbered and marginalised within discipline. Feminist challenges to the status quo eventually helped paved the way for further challenges from more of those “ephemeral intellectual fashions” on the *Area* weather map: heteronormativity and the neglect of sexualities began to be contested in the late 1980s; whiteness and the neglect of the construction of racial difference and of non-humans began to be critiqued in the late 1990s.

One aspect of “How the other half lives” that was perhaps less appreciated at the time of publication was its insistence on a need to focus on specificities rather than to essentialise and homogenise women’s experience. Criticisms from black feminists and women of colour, and the advent of third-wave feminism with its focus on difference in the 1990s, eventually led to intersectional approaches interrogating the relationship between gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality coming to the fore in feminist geography. However, this was not apparent in 1978. Jacky Tivers was writing against the primacy of household class differences in studies of social interaction patterns, which assigned women as housewives the socio-economic status of their husbands. The paper thus has a tendency, as with much early feminist geography, to refer to women in generalised terms. However, its call to focus on women as distinct geographical actors and on the specificities of different groups of women – in the case of Jacky’s own research those with young children – hinted at the need for the intersectional approaches that would follow. In acknowledging that there are “other forms of inequality” (Tivers, 1978, p. 305) in society that needed to be challenged, the paper also demonstrated sensitivity to difference, yet it was only from the mid-1980s that the tendency to assume a commonality in the forms of women’s oppression and activism worldwide, and that the political project of white, middle-class feminism was universal, began to be challenged (McEwan, 2002).

4 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The discipline has changed beyond recognition from when I attended my first IBG Annual Conference in Sheffield as a postgraduate in 1991. I remember attending the opening address and standing at the back of the lecture hall, looking out over a sea of balding and greying heads and wondering if a tweed jacket with elbow patches was compulsory dress for a geography academic. I did not enjoy being told by one delegate, who was old enough to be my grandfather, that I was not doing “proper geography.” However, it was at this conference that I attended my first inspirational sessions on feminist geography and on sexuality and space. Although my first two academic appointments were in departments that employed hardly any women, and no senior women in human geography, I was fortunate to meet role models through the WGSG – including Jacky Tivers herself – who took a genuine interest in my research and were supportive of my early career.⁶ I now work in a department that is gender balanced in human geography. It is still skewed in physical geography, but

improving, and women on both sides of the discipline are now being promoted. However, only in 2020 will my department appoint its first female Head of Department⁷ and, as with all UK geography departments, chronic lack of ethnic diversity remains a serious issue.⁸

Jacky Tivers' call to challenge persistent and pervasive forms of gendered inequality remains as relevant today as it was in 1978. Within the discipline, while gender is now to a large degree part of the mainstream, there are still deep-rooted cultural issues that perpetuate inequalities. Despite the expansion in numbers of women appointed to geography departments in the UK, the steady promotion of women to senior positions, and external drivers of progressive change such as the Athena Swan Awards, many women still experience the academic career as a continuous process of struggle – for work–life balance, workload parity, equal pay, recognition, and promotion – and these struggles are more acute for black and minority ethnic women, who encounter institutionalised racism as well as sexism, and other minority groups. This has an impact on who does what work within the discipline. The experiences of minorities – women, BME, LGBTQ+, disabled, working-class colleagues – are shaped by being required to do the work of progressive change within the discipline and in institutions, very often in the face of lack of comprehension or even hostility from those who occupy positions of power. Keeping one's head down and progressing by seeking the approval of those in power is often not an option and the work of struggle is wearing and sometimes costly.⁹ There is still much more to be done in understanding and tackling these inequalities within the discipline.

More broadly, while feminism appears to have become “popular” in western contexts (Banet-Weisner, 2018), the period from the end of “second-wave” feminism at the end of the 1980s has seen a worsening in the lives of the majority of women globally and, more recently, a resurgence of patriarchy (Gilligan & Richards, 2018). Austerity politics in the global North has seen women disproportionately affected by the privatisation and dismantling of public services, such as the provision of social care, and subjected to ever more vile and insidious forms of misogyny and racism. In addition to persistent economic and social inequalities, women (and their children) in many global South countries are bearing the brunt of the effects of climate change, ecological disaster, and conflict. “How the other half lives” was prescient in highlighting that the specificities of women's lives matter. Contemporary feminism is beginning to challenge the idea within hegemonic feminism that greater representation of women at the top can bring about social change and is advocating instead approaches that aim to empower women in their diversity (see, for example, Arruzza et al., 2019). Within this there is a renewal of debates about the relationship between capitalism, patriarchy, and racialised inequalities. However contemporary feminist geographies are engaging in these debates, they can still learn from their groundbreaking antecedents in the 1970s in advocating for more than a minority of women and for sensitivity towards the spatially specific, diverse, and changing manifestations of women's subordination to men.

The significance of “How the other half lives” lies in its timeliness. Beyond being inspirational, its personal significance for me is the fact that I have been, in many ways, a direct beneficiary of its interventions. The battles fought and won by the pioneers of feminist geography in the 1970s often came at a cost to those women, but they made academic life much easier for subsequent generations of feminist geographers. Jacky Tivers was one of those pioneers whom I admire for being brave enough to take on the gender-blindness and misogyny in British geography.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Critiques of the “whiteness” of the discipline and the occlusion of “race” and racism in geographical research took much longer to be recognised (see Bonnett 1997; Kobayashi & Peake 2000; McGuinness 2000).

- ² The front cover was drawn by Jean Dowling and Patricia Short, who worked as cartographers in the Geography Department at Birmingham University, where the Editor was also based.
- ³ The title of the Editorial is an abbreviated quotation from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in which Cassius exhorts Brutus to conspire in Caesar's murder by telling him that he needs to take control of his own destiny: "Men at some time are masters of their fates. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves, that we are underlings."
- ⁴ The effects of this in the Editor's own department – in which I also worked between 1997 and 2003 – was a notable failure to engage with critical race and class studies emerging simultaneously next door in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Thanks to James Sidaway for reminding me of this.
- ⁵ The exchanges between David Stoddart and Mona Domosh in *Transactions of the IBG* in 1991, and between Peter Gould and Linda Peake and Janet Momsen in *The Canadian Geographer* in 1994, are particularly insightful.
- ⁶ I also met some of the new generation of male geographers who were engaging in critical theory and keen to challenge the status quo. In my experience, it was when these colleagues began to serve on selection panels that women began to be appointed to geography departments in greater numbers.
- ⁷ There are several reasons for this, which are too complex to detail here. However, I have had two Heads tell me that taking on the role had necessitated negotiations with their wives about who would be doing the cooking to accommodate the inevitable late hours. Not many senior women in my department have had wives willing and able to support their careers in this way! In this sense, little has changed since Jacky Tivers wrote about gendered household labour supporting men in advancing academic careers.
- ⁸ Desai (2017) charts the chronic under-representation of black and minority ethnic students and staff at all levels of Higher Education geography. Geography fails to attract a diverse BME student population or to support a pipeline of BME staff and only 1.4% of professors of Geography in the UK are BME (2017, p. 322).
- ⁹ I am grateful to Rachel Pain for sharing insights with me on this matter.

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