Debating (Wartime) Sexual Violence

An INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY ONLINE symposium

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INTRODUCTION

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Significant debates in the literature on (conflict-related) gendered and sexualized violence have not been featured in the pages of *International Studies Quarterly*, which has only published a few pieces that focus explicitly on sexual violence (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009 and Leiby 2009). This forum on Sara Meger's article on "The Fetishization of Sexual Violence in International Security" is thus a welcome occasion to reflect on the state of the literature on sexual violence in international-studies scholarship.

Meger's provocative piece picks up an argument made by other feminist scholars: Namely that the way in which the issue of wartime sexual violence has been taken up both by the international community at large—as represented by both non-governmental organizations and governmental efforts—unduly narrows the focus of our study of sexual violence. Indeed, she claims it has been fetishized through a three-part process of decontextualization, objectification and blowback. To counter this trend, Meger insists on the need to place sexual violence on a continuum with other forms of violence. This continuum spanning peace and war, as many feminists have noted (e.g. Cockburn 2004), also highlights that "all acts of violence exist on a continuum of violence … which is intimately related to society's hierarchy of gender, ethnicity, political and civil rights" (Davies and True, 2015; citing Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009).

To make her argument, Meger covers broad swaths of literature, and this symposium features some of the scholars whose work is either directly invoked in the article itself or is otherwise relevant to showcasing the broader debates about (conflict-related) gendered and sexualized violence and to pushing this conversation further.

The first piece, by Paul Kirby, takes on the question of whether or not securitization of sexual violence, as alleged by Meger, has actually taken place. A co-authored intervention from Harriet Gray and Maria Stern follows, in which the authors discuss the fetishization process as outlined in Meger's article. In a second co-autored piece, Dara Kay Cohen and Elisabeth Jean Wood take on Meger's (and other feminists') claim about the relationship(s) between wartime rape and everyday violence. Last, but not least, Nicola Smith agrees with Megeron the need to look at fetishization and notes that "social scientists produce a great many objects of analysis that are not only fetishized but sexualized too."

The scholars who have contributed to this forum make a series of important interventions, some of which Meger responds to in her reply which focuses on how particular (feminist) epistemological positions shape these debates. Overall, the symposium serves as a reminder that this is a vibrant research area, fraught with tensions (Al-Ali 2016) and significant challenges in terms of gathering and interpreting data due to historical, cultural and other barriers to reporting and analysis (Davies and True 2015). Meanwhile, important site- and context-specific studies (e.g. Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013, Boesten 2014) are helping to further our understanding of (conflict-related) gendered and sexualized violence – hopefully this symposium leads more (feminist) scholars to publish this important work in *International Studies Quarterly*.

THE SECURITY FETISH

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How does sexual violence come to be recognised as an object of security, and with what consequences? Sara Meger's provocative article proposes an answer, and along the way identifies fault-line controversies in the study of gender violence within international politics. More, it raises the stakes of responding to them.

The process of securitization – through which an issue comes to be viewed as belonging to the sphere of 'security' rather than 'politics' – poses ethical dilemmas for activists (Elbe, 2006). Successful securitization brings much-needed attention and resources, but in the same moment empowers certain agencies (often military or police) and enables practices (often coercive or deadly) that pose risks to the political vision that led activists to agitate in the first place.

For Meger, it is evident that sexual violence has been securitized, thus undermining feminist politics proper. To be sure, there is lively debate over the emancipatory possibilities of security (e.g. Booth, 1991; Hansen, 2012; MacKenzie, 2009; Floyd, 2011; Nunes, 2012). At some moments, feminist have challenged the 'exceptionalization' of sexual violence in war. But in others, they have actively contributed to it, and major feminist organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) actively support policy initiatives that Meger critiques. In scholarly spaces, far from contributing to "the elevation of 'conflict-related sexual violence' as a new abject thing", several of us have argued explicitly against exceptionalism (for example in an open letter to the then UK Foreign Secretary William Hague and Angelina Jolie Pitt, Seelinger, 2014).

Of course, researchers must be attentive to the risks of securitization (as they have in large measure been), but wartime sexual violence does not appear to have been securitized with either the comprehensiveness or the consequences that Meger suggests. At the very least, claims for securitization are of sufficient gravity to be demonstrated with care, through a detailed mapping of speech acts, their success and failure, and the multiple resulting shifts in security practice. This is key, because securitization is not about extraordinary*categorizations* so much as extraordinary *responses*. Securitizing moves are attempted on a range of issues, but only in some cases are they accepted by a given constituency and further parlayed into a license for novel forms of violence and control (see Neal, 2009).

How might we discover whether securitization has been successful in a particular case? Certainly, sexual violence appears in the transcripts of United Nations Security Council sessions with greater regularity today than in past decades. The eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, for many years the main focus of international rhetoric on sexual violence, is also the base for the UN's largest peacekeeping mission, where a recent operation – the Force Intervention Brigade – broke from peacekeeping norms in pursuing active combat operations. This could indicate a process of securitization, but it is also frequently argued that peacekeepers are not doing nearly enough to deal with wartime sexual violence.

There are further grounds for seeing securitization as stalled or failed: The UK's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative, having drawn some attention with a major international summit, is fading from prominence, and a House of Lords Select Committee recently

observed (2016) that new political commitment was needed to rejuvenate its diplomatic mission (and it is debatable whether even that would amount to the kind of 'extraordinary' measures a successful securitization move requires) (cf. Kirby, 2015). The preferred tool in dealing with conflict-related sexual violence, namely an increased emphasis on prosecution under international humanitarian law, is strikingly *not* an appeal for new security powers, being more frequently phrased as a plea to better implement the laws that already exist. Indeed, sexual violence, far from being treated as a distinct security issue on its own terms, is increasingly subsumed within other security discourses, such as countering violent extremism (Ni Aolain, 2016).

Diplomats and scholars may indeed talk of wartime sexual violence as uniquely horrifying. To the extent that it displaces attention from a wider continuum of gender violence, such speech requires judicious qualification. Yet, as Cohen and Wood argue, it does not follow that there is nothing about war zone atrocity deserving of special analysis. Moreover, not all action taken by international actors is securitizing (since aid or development programs do not always or only empower security actors), and not all speech that references 'security' leads to securitization (since the speech must be accepted by a certain audience before it can have further effects). Nor does the achievement of securitization at one level translate into a homogenous set of practices everywhere (since different agencies reinterpret discourse in their own pragmatic registers (Bigo, 2014; cf. Salter, 2008).

In each moment of the securitization process, there are tendencies at work that may lead to the retrenchment of patriarchal politics, but also to new forms of feminist infiltration.

Exploring those circuits in great detail is crucial for understanding sexual violence in all its forms, and the violence within attempts to govern it. The diverse activist, practitioner and scholarly responses to sexual violence (within conflict and without) flow from diverse judgments, which necessarily involve considerations of power, money, and influence. They are not, for that reason, reducible to the banal, flattened circulation of a commodity fetish (or a loose metaphor thereof), but are instead rival attempts to re-order the field of security, for good or ill.

THE ADDED VALUE OF 'FETISHIZATION'?: INTRIGUING PROMISES YET UNFULFILLED

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Meger's invitation to scrutinize the processes (and effects) of 'fetishization' could usefully add to the growing body of literature that focuses on the materiality of security, as well as the political economy of (sexual) violence. Her call to unsettle the reductionist and universalizing 'feminist success story' (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013:1-2) about conflict-related sexual violence as a weapon of war is potentially fruitful, especially through her emphasis on the social and economic relations that produce and 'give value' to sexual violence in complex webs of interrelated economies. However, we believe that the innovation of Meger's arguments is undermined both by missed opportunities to flesh out what - in detail - a focus on fetishization allows us to do/see/understand in a novel way, and by the abstraction inherent in Meger's attempt to generalise complex and politically fraught questions.

For example: How does insight gained from attention to the tripartite fetishization process outlined in Meger's article enrich lines of critique that are already familiar to critical feminist (and post-colonial) scholarship on sexual violence? Much of the content of the stages of fetishisation identified in the text have been detailed in other scholarship. Sabine Hirschauer (2014), for example, documents in some detail the processes and the politics through which the absorption of wartime rape into traditional understandings of conflict abstracts (in Meger's terms, "decontextualizes") such rape from the gendered power relations in which it is embedded, and as such "camouflages and re-emphasizes the patriarchal structures it initially was set out to dismantle" (217) (see also Buss 2009; Hansen 2000; Henry 2014; Kirby 2015). Similarly, Eriksson Baaz and Stern challenge the (in Meger's terms) "homogenization" of securitized wartime rape, arguing that such violence can reflect not only strategy but also the "breakdown and fragility of military structures" (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013:64).

Turning to "objectification," several scholars have expressed concern at the spurious use of calls to 'protect women' as justification for military action (e.g. Hunt 2002; Shepherd 2006:30-32; Wright 2015; Young 2003), and critical scholars have problematized both the commodification of disasters and suffering (in the South) and the liberal (security) governance function of humanitarian interventions (e.g. Duffield 2007; Hunt 2008; Kleinman and Kleinman 1996; Repo and Yrjölä 2011). As Meger notes, the processes she refers to as "blowback" have been documented by others (see, for example,Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013:96-102; Douma and Hilhorst 2012).

While Meger claims that her contribution lies in highlighting the *process* by which commodification occurs, we find this promise to be frustratingly unfulfilled, as the text is instead primarily concerned with re-presenting these already established claims and giving examples, albeit collected together under Marxian terminology. While Meger sometimes deftly presents these familiar insights to tell an intriguing story about fetishization, we are left wondering what to take from her account. Meger's main point - that these should be seen as instances of fetishization - requires more in-depth explication both to demonstrate the details of *how* conflict-related rape becomes imbued with exchange value, and to make clear

what it is that labeling this process 'fetishization' really allows us to see which could not be seen through other analytical framings.

Furthermore, Meger's contribution would be significantly more compelling if she were to show how insights developed in the study of political economy can help us to understand the multiple phenomena of conflict-related sexual violence in all their fraught and intensely political complexity. The problematizations of the 'weapon of war' frame that Meger re-presents have been developed through research that engages with particular contexts in in-depth, and carefully reflexive frames, often drawing on empirical research, to highlight multiple and intersectional power relations and the slippages between them within specific warscapes. The nuances and complexities of these critiques are obscured in Meger's move to translate them into a broad universalist narrative. In particular, Meger's analysis loses sight of the work that post-colonial scholars have done to highlight the deep interconnections between racialization and commodification of sexual violence. In addition, in focusing on the 'preexisting' structural inequalities which 'lie beneath' sexual violence (2), Meger's framework obscures the ways in which various forms of sexual and gender-based violence and the dominant narratives which surround them are also *reproductive* and/or *transformative* of multiple and intersecting power relations (e.g. Boesten 2014; Gray 2016; Shepherd 2008). In our view, therefore, the move towards a universalising narrative in Meger's analysis is theoretically impoverishing, in that it obscures the complexities of the intersectional power relations which shape the perpetration, experience, understanding, and response to wartime sexual violence in particular sites.

IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE DURING WAR EXCEPTIONAL —OR A CONTINUATION OF EVERYDAY VIOLENCE?

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Despite growing consensus among scholars about certain features of sexual violence by armed organizations during war, some areas are contested among scholars. Perhaps most notable among these is whether and how the sexual violence that occurs before the onset of war is causally related to sexual violence by combatants during the war—and if and how these wartime patterns shape postwar patterns. Sara Meger observes that scholars have tended to treat sexual violence as an "exceptional—if not aberrant—phenomenon in war."

This critique is certainly fair in some regards. Indeed, there is a growing discomfort with the "hierarchy of harms" that is created by the intensive focus on sexual violence. Numerous scholars have shown that the international attention sexual violence has distorted the incentives of victims (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013); perpetrators (Autesserre 2012), and advocacy groups (Cohen and Hoover Green 2012). As we and others have argued elsewhere, it is now widely understood that sexual violence in many settings —even during periods of war—is much more often perpetrated by intimate partners than by armed fighters (Cohen, Hoover Green and Wood 2013; Peterman, Palermo and Bredenkamp 2011; Wood 2015).

Moreover, scholarship has generally failed to disaggregate gendered harms. We have advocated in our own work (Cohen 2016; Wood 2012) that scholars must develop separate explanations for violations as diverse in their causal mechanisms as rape, forced pregnancy, forced abortion and forced marriage. Our hope is that scholarship will begin to move in this direction, by developing distinct logics for these violations.

We focus here on Meger's claim that "every day" rape is not a "discrete phenomenon" from sexual violence by armed organizations during war. It is clear that sexual violence by intimate partners continues during war. But evidence shows the vast majority of the sexual violence *by armed combatants* during war is dramatically different from peacetime sexual violence. In short, such sexual violence is truly extraordinary, contrasting sharply with "everyday violence."

Broadly, the relationship between sexual violence before conflict begins and that by armed organizations during conflict varies widely across settings (Cohen 2016; Wood 2015). In some settings, patterns of rape by combatants are indeed similar to those during peace. For example, the limited numbers of rapes by armed organizations that effectively prohibit sexual violence may be similar to so-called "stranger rape" during peacetime. Both types of rape are broadly opportunistic, and perpetrators target victims who are vulnerable because of their circumstances or social status, such as being marginal in their communities. And in wartime, commanders often ignore rape because they simply do not value girls and women, beliefs that may reflect those of the broader society as well.

However, the patterns of rape by those armed organizations that engage in moderate to high levels of rape of civilians are remarkably different from what we know about patterns of peacetime rape. There are at least four significant—and quite consequential—differences:

- **Form**: The fraction of rape that is committed by multiple perpetrators is much higher in war than during peacetime (Cohen 2013; Wood 2013). Data from peacetime settings suggest that gang rape comprises between 2-27% of all cases of rape (Horvath and Woodhams 2013). In contrast, studies of wartime rape have found that 75 percent or more of reported cases of rape among such organizations are gang rape (Cohen 2016).

- **Brutality**: Rape by such organizations is much more brutal than the everyday forms of sexual violence. In addition to multiple perpetrators, objects may be used, it is often public, and it is often accompanied by other forms of torture and mutilation.

- **Relationships**: Many armed combatants do not know their victims. In contrast, most victims of peacetime rape are abused by current or former partners.

- **Goals**: Each of the following goals of sexual violence by armed organizations are documented in the record: humiliation, torture, the regulation of the sexual and reproductive lives of combatants, the creation of terror, the spread of disease. Peacetime rape may occur in pursuit of some of these goals, but not all of them.

Understanding the extraordinary nature of rape by armed combatants is only possible by analyzing its differences from "everyday violence." It is important to recognize that not all violence that looks the same or has the same result is similar. Although all are forms of lethal violence, murder in peacetime is not the same as battle deaths; familial homicide is not the same as genocide. As social scientists, we seek to document and explain particular patterns of sexual violence during war that are perpetrated by political actors.

To be clear, it is undoubtedly the case that sexual violence by armed organizations during war is rooted in pre-war gender relations, and in norms about gender and sexuality. However, armed organizations often radically reshape those norms (Wood 2009; Hoover Green forthcoming). In short, patriarchy is necessary but not sufficient for the occurrence of high levels of sexual violence by armed organizations during war (Cohen, Hoover Green, and Wood 2013).

Recognizing the gendered roots of sexual violence help us to understand why it is used in some contexts but not others. But arguing that the terrible violence of war is merely a continuation of peacetime gendered relations only serves to obscure important differences between rape by armed organizations during war and that by civilians during peace.

Sex Without Sexuality

Nicola Smith
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Sara Meger's article serves as a powerful reminder that social scientists produce a great many objects of analysis that are not only fetishized but sexualized too. In my own field, International Political Economy, it is easy to lament the routine erasure of sexuality in top journals, textbooks, conferences, etc., and yet academic, policy and media discourse could scarcely be more fixated on that most fetishized of objects, sex trafficking. To borrow from Meger's incisive argument, sex trafficking is "decontextualized from local/global power relations;" it is "objectified as a ,'thing' in media, advocacy, policy and scholarly discourses;" and it is a "key commodity in the competition among perpetrators, as well as victims, communities, states, non-governmental organizations, and academics for status recognition of resources" (Meger 2016, 4). For sex trafficking as for conflict-related sexual violence, the 'endlessly proliferating economy' of discourses (Foucault 1978, 35) shows that – even as it is dismissed as marginal, irrelevant or frivolous – sex is clearly the stuff of social science.

How odd, then, that social scientists should produce sex without gender. As Meger explores, sexual violence is fetishized by separating it from feminist modes of inquiry, which allows it to be "excised from the continuum of violence and the underlying social, political, and economic determinants of gendered violence" (Meger 2016, 5). Sex trafficking, too, is often removed from gender analysis by depicting it as the product of individual pathology and/or criminality (Suchland 2015). Yet this is not the only paradox at play in debates about sexual violence, for it is not only gender but sexuality itself that often becomes obscured. Meger does not discuss queer theory in her piece, but queer scholars have long argued that sexuality is not a 'thing' that lies beneath social relations, quietly doing its work and untroubled by power. Instead, sexuality is *produced* – it is the product of power and therefore has a 'history' (Foucault 1978, 5).

Queer scholars are particularly interested in how heterosexuality is not only privileged but also depicted as natural and normal – indeed, it is constructed as *so* natural and normal that it no longer has to declare itself. Heterosexuality hides, but it is also treated as the ultimate in causal variables – it is used to explain (e.g. sexual violence) but rarely has to explain itself, and so critiques often focus on what heterosexuality *does* without asking what it actually *is*. One of queer theory's major projects is therefore to challenge the "presumption of heterosexuality" (Chambers and Carver 2008, 155) by opening up sexuality as a category of analysis (Danby 2007). Put another way, queer scholars insist that we cannot interrogate sex, including sexual violence, without critiquing sexuality – that is, we refuse to let heterosexuality sneak around.

To return to Meger's article, it is clear that mainstream accounts need to do considerably more justice to the long traditions of feminist scholarship that take as their point of departure the "underlying social, political, and economic determinants of gendered violence" (Meger 2016, 5). But queer theory also reminds us of the dangers of slippage from 'sexual' to 'gendered' if the critique of sexuality – and especially of presumed

heterosexuality – is not integrated into this. This is not only a question of confronting acts of violence against queer and trans* people, nor of reframing debates about structural violence to include sexuality as an axis of oppression, although these are critically important agendas. It is also a matter of interrogating how – if gender is not a natural 'fact' but has to be violently reproduced (Shepherd 2008) – then so too heterosexuality is produced through violence as much as through unspoken norms (Puar 2008; Weber 2016). In the case of sex trafficking, dominant discourses could not be more heterosexist and cisnormative if they tried – and this is helping to fuel international, national and local policy approaches that represent modes of institutional violence by criminalizing and stigmatizing sex workers (Smith 2015). I want to end, then, in full support of Sara Meger's article but also by highlighting the existence, and relevance, of queer and queer-feminist scholarship in debates about sexual violence, for there is no sex, or sexual relations, or sexual violence without sexuality.

NUANCE AND ABSTRACTION (OR HOW TO DO FEMINIST IR)

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In my article, I contend that the securitization of conflict-related sexual violence through the international regime aimed at ending this violence has led to its fetishization. The thoughtful responses here by Nicola Smith, Dara Kay Cohen and Elisabeth Jean Wood, Paul Kirby, and Harriet Gray and Maria Stern, invite us to think further about both the utilization of the concept of fetishization in this way and about abstraction as an epistemological tool in (feminist) international relations.

These pieces represent a longstanding debate within feminist theory regarding epistemology and how we may come to know something about gender and the world. There are two positions represented in here.

First, Cohen and Wood, empiricists[1], claim to show that conflict-related sexual violence is definitively distinct from 'peacetime' rape. By suggesting that conflict makes men more likely to rape, and to use especially brutal forms of 'stranger' rape and gang rape, Cohen and Wood fail to reflect on the underlying conditions for such "truly extraordinary" violence. How can we meaningfully contrast conflict-related sexual violence with the gang rape of a girl in Brazil by 30 men, or reports of gang rape in Delhi, or of the frequent perpetration of sexual violence by sports teams in the US and Australia? I'm not suggesting that there aren't empirically measurable differences; rather, this violence needs to be seen not in isolation from other forms of violence women experience every day in every country, but as "a kind of terrorism which severely limits the freedom of women and makes women dependent on men" (Griffin 1971: 34). This violence needs to be contextualized and situated on the 'continuum of violence' that maintains hierarchical (gendered) relations (Kelly 1987; Reardon 1993; Cockburn 2010).

Second, many of the contributors reflect the poststructuralist turn in feminism/international relations, which tends to focus on the politics of identity to the neglect of interrogating the geographies and materialities of power (eg. Hartmann 1981). Within all the pieces here, there is a rejection of structuralist feminist theorizing of patriarchy as the basis of sexual violence, and of a critical political economy abstraction of the place and means of power.

This leads into the second issue raised by the contributors: the utility of the concept of fetishization in international security scholarship. Kirby most clearly asks this in relation to the extent to which conflict-related sexual violence has actually *been securitized*, given the existence of various frames and "diverse activist, practitioner and scholarly responses."

[1] It should be noted that Cohen and Wood do not represent *feminist* empiricism, but rather malestream empiricist epistemology.

Though true, we cannot take all actions by all actors as equivalent. International politics are structured in such a way that some actions and actors matter more so than others. This is the basis of my critique – that when moved from feminist frames to security ones, the interests necessarily shift. Kirby acknowledges "considerations of power, money, and influence," but doesn't engage with how these material resources might actually be playing out in the field of combatting CRSV (particularly when we consider which actors and frames are highlighted and which are marginalized).

This question of the utility of critical political economy within international security reflects the epistemological encampments that have made theorizing outside the prevailing paradigms of feminism and IR nearly impossible. Rather than convincingly arguing that a critical feminist theorization on sexual violence as a cultural and social effect of capitalism is *unhelpful*, the poststructuralist encampment reflected in these pieces has sought to police such materialist abstraction as insufficiently 'nuanced.' Smith's response, which calls for the added dimension of sexuality, and Gray and Stern's response, which calls for attentiveness to a nebulous and undefined view of "intersectional power relations", are not testing the analytical utility by pushing the line of abstraction or argumentation, and as such are not adding value to theorizing on the effects of securitization on CRSV.

Rather, these critiques reflect what Kieran Healy calls 'Actually-Existing Nuance,' which is a "free-floating demand that something be added" (2016: 2). The effect of this mode of critique is that there is no room for multiple plausible stories about the 'causes' or effects of things in international security (Ward 2016). Gray and Stern's response falls into two of Healy's "nuance traps": first, the "rejection of theory masquerading as increased accuracy" and, second, which form Healy names 'the nuance of the connoisseur,' is "the insinuation that a sensitivity to nuance is a manifestation of one's distinctive… ability to grasp and express the richness, texture, and flow of social reality itself" (Healy 2016: 4-5). In light of Healy's critique, one might see the demand that Gray and Stern make for recognition of the 'nuances and complexities' of 'the intersectional power relations,' and that Kirby makes for recognizing diverse actors and responses, as actively and purposefully hampering the abstraction required for producing *good* theory.

Thus, while the contributors to this symposium have raised good and challenging questions regarding the conclusions in my article, the failure of these reactions to reflect on the analytical utility of the concept of fetishization itself seems more to do with a desire to reject materialist theorizing than a failure of the concept.

What leverage I believe is gained from this concept is that the foundation is now laid for a critical feminist political economy analysis of social and political relations beyond the spheres of (market) production, to ask: How might we discuss the marketization of the social and the political? What role does gender play in shaping not only capital itself, but also capital's social and political effects?

More specifically, its translation into international security asks us to consider further implications – notably, does securitization correlate to capitalism? If so, why and how? And how do we think and talk about value in a social and political sense, within the framework of securitization, lacking a theory of value?

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