

JOBS AND JUSTICE
Fighting Discrimination in Wartime Canada,
1939–1945

Despite acute labour shortages during the Second World War, Canadian employers – with the complicity of state officials – discriminated against workers of African, Asian, and Eastern and Southern European origin, excluding them from both white-collar and skilled jobs. *Jobs and Justice* argues that, while the war intensified hostility and suspicion towards minority workers, the urgent need for their contributions and the egalitarian rhetoric used to mobilize the war effort also created an opportunity for minority activists and their English Canadian allies to challenge discrimination.

Juxtaposing a discussion of state policy with ideas of race and citizenship in Canadian civil society, Carmela K. Patrias demonstrates how these activists brought national attention to racist employment discrimination and eventually garnered its official condemnation. Extensively researched and engagingly written, *Jobs and Justice* offers a new perspective on the Second World War, the racist dimensions of state policy, and the origins of human rights campaigns in Canada.

CARMELA PATRIAS is a professor in the Department of History at Brock University.

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CARMELA PATRIAS

Jobs and Justice
Fighting Discrimination in Wartime
Canada, 1939–1945

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For Wayne

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JOBS AND JUSTICE

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Introduction

Sometime in 1941 a group of 'Slavic' workers travelled from Alberta to Ontario in search of skilled jobs in war industries. All the workers were Canadian-born and all had been trained under the government's War Emergency Training Programme. Yet, despite shortages of skilled labour in Ontario, they were unable to obtain work. Upon learning their names, Ontario employers refused to hire them, and the workers were eventually forced to return to Alberta.¹ The rejection of these workers, despite their Canadian birth and training, baffles the contemporary reader. Were these workers of Polish, Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak, Serbian, or Croatian descent? Did they trace their origins to countries at war with Canada or ones allied with it? Ontario employers apparently considered such information irrelevant. Not the national heritage of these 'Slavic' workers but their 'race' convinced prospective employers that they were unfit to work in war industries.

In 1941 'foreign' names were widely understood as markers of racial difference. The introduction to the *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941*, for example, stated that 'knowledge of one's racial origin,' could be 'perpetuated in a family name.' Census analysts found it necessary to explain the criteria by which 'racial origin' could be known because the basis for racial classification in the census varied for different groups. 'Colour' was the basis for classifying the 'Indian, Eskimo, Negro, Hindu, Chinese and Japanese races,' religion for classifying Jews, and language for classifying Ukrainians. For some groups 'racial origin' implied 'geographical area – the country from which the individual himself came or that which was the home of his forebears.' In the case of groups of European descent, racial origin was traced through the father. This meant that the offspring of mixed marriages would be assimilated into their father's



Wartime Information Board, Propaganda Poster.

Artist: Harry Mayerovitch, 1944.

Library and Archives Canada, C-115712

group. By contrast, children of 'mixed blood' – those born of mixed marriages between whites and 'Negro, Japanese, Chinese, Hindu, Malaysian etc.' – were classified as belonging to those racial groups if either parent belonged to the 'black, yellow or brown races.' The racial designation for people of mixed 'white and Indian blood' was 'Half-breed.'² People of colour were thereby defined as unassimilable.³

That the names of the 'Slavic' workers from Alberta signified 'racial' difference of sufficient magnitude to disqualify them from obtaining work in war industries suggests that, however imprecise its definition, the racial origin designation was economically and socially very sig-

nificant. One goal of this study is to examine the nature and extent of racist employment discrimination during the Second World War. It will show that, in wartime Canada, racializing minority groups – attributing to them substantial, inborn distinguishing characteristics – greatly disadvantaged group members in the labour market and prevented their full incorporation within the body of the nation.⁴ A second and related goal is to demonstrate that although the government officially prohibited employment discrimination based on race, nationality, and religion during the war, state officials colluded with racist employers and workers in such discrimination.

Studying employment discrimination affords a particularly broad view of the treatment of racialized minorities because minority group members of all classes faced such discrimination. Many white-collar jobs were closed to the educated among minority groups, and poorly educated minority women and men were by and large relegated to unskilled, ill-paid, insecure blue-collar and service sector jobs. The focus on the war years offers a unique opportunity for studying racist employment discrimination because evidence of such discrimination on the home front abounds. Unprecedented intervention by the federal government in the labour market generated a good part of this evidence. State officials intent on maximizing labour productivity during the war were forced to pay close attention to employment discrimination because members of racialized minority groups constituted an indispensable source of labour. On the one hand, discrimination threatened productivity both by creating tensions among workers and by excluding some of them from certain occupations. On the other hand, after 1942, when employment was plentiful and menial jobs went unfilled, racialization could be useful in channelling workers into undesirable yet essential jobs. This study draws extensively on the records of federal government agencies.

Studying employment discrimination during the war can do more, however, than illustrate the nature and significance of racism between 1939 and 1945. That the national heritage of the 'Slavic' workers from Alberta made so little difference to Ontario employers suggests that employment discrimination on the home front owed far less to wartime alliances on the international stage than to longstanding association between 'race' and suitability for certain types of employment and for citizenship in Canada. To be sure, state officials anticipated – and some of them shared – security concerns about the participation of 'enemy aliens' in home defence and war production. As we shall see,

however, many employers, workers, and state officials also racialized Canadian-born and naturalized people of Chinese, Japanese, central, eastern, and southern European, and Jewish origin: many Canadians saw these racialized groups as 'foreigners,' suspected them of disloyalty, and therefore believed that they were undeserving of certain economic and political rights. The war also brought sharply into focus and even intensified racist assumptions that African Canadians, eastern and southern Europeans, and Native people were suitable only for menial jobs and that other groups, the 'aggressive' and 'greedy' Jews, Chinese Canadians, and Japanese Canadians, constituted unfair competition for 'true' Canadians because they placed economic gains above patriotic duty. Such racist assumptions served to legitimize the marginalization of minority groups in Canadian society.

The inclusion of minority groups of southern and eastern European parentage – such as the 'Slavic' workers introduced above – as well as of African, Asian, and Native Canadians, is central to the analysis of the meaning and impact of race offered here. Some of the most influential recent studies of racism in Canada make clear that characterizing groups that we would describe today as 'white' as racially distinct and inferior reveals the social construction and hence fluidity of racial classification.⁵ Even in these studies, however, the attention given to 'visible' minorities generally outweighs examinations of the racialization of groups of European origin. Such a focus is understandable because people of colour have been the targets of the most extreme and most overtly state-sanctioned racism in Canada, in the form of immigration restrictions, denial of the franchise, and legal exclusion from certain types of jobs. It is also easier to study such racism than the less formalized racialization of groups of European descent. This study's focus on employment discrimination allows us to explore the meaning and impact of racist ideas and practices for minority groups of 'peripheral' European as well as African, Asian and Native parentage because the mobility of all these groups in the labour force was impeded during the war.⁶

The debate among American historians concerning the racial classification of immigrant workers of southern and eastern European descent offers useful insights for studying similar groups in Canada. According to James Barrett and David Roediger the status of such workers in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America was ambiguous. Before the First World War, when non-white immigrants were barred from entering the United States, the national government classified immigrants from the

'peripheries' of Europe as white, allowing them to immigrate to the United States in large numbers and to become naturalized and thus enfranchised. The imposition of restrictions against them in the 1920s reflected the intensification of racism against such European immigrants. Their ability to become 'white' over time, however, despite the fact that both social science and popular culture regarded them as 'nonwhite,' reflected their 'inbetween' status: above African and Asian Americans, whose purported colour kept them at the bottom of the prevailing system of racial hierarchy, but below native-born whites and immigrants from northwestern Europe, whose purported whiteness placed them at the top of that hierarchy. The changing classification of southern and eastern European immigrants and their children formed part of the process of their Americanization, itself the result both of the willingness of the dominant racializing groups to perceive them as white and of their self-identification as white.⁷ By contrast, Eric Arnesen, among others, questions the utility of 'whiteness' as an analytic concept, arguing that whiteness scholars misrepresent the racialization of European immigrants in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by reducing this 'complex, many faceted' process to 'the matter of "becoming white."' ⁸

Some of the arguments of both whiteness scholars and their critics apply to Canada as well. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, here, as in the United States, the status of groups of eastern and southern European descent was above that of groups of African, Asian, and Native descent, and below that of people of northwestern European descent. Moreover, in Canada as in the United States, the status of people from the 'peripheries' of Europe was ambiguous. Encouraged to come by the hundreds of thousands prior to the First World War, such immigrants were classified 'non-preferred' during the interwar years. This classification indicated their inferiority to 'preferred' groups from Great Britain and northwestern Europe. Eastern and southern Europeans were allowed into Canada before the Great Depression only in the numbers thought to be needed to perform work that Canadian residents avoided. Although immigrants were not labelled 'non-preferred' in public documents, both the term and its implications were sufficiently well known to elicit complaints from 'citizens of standing' in 'non-preferred' countries,⁹ and from the 'non-preferred' immigrants themselves.¹⁰

One clear expression both of the perceived inferiority of people of eastern and southern European origin in Canada and of the distinct

conditions that shaped racial classification in the United States and Canada was the exclusion of 'peripheral' Europeans, along with immigrants of Asian and African descent, from 'better neighbourhoods' in Canadian cities by legally accepted covenants. Canadian scholars have yet to analyse these instruments of residential segregation systematically. James Walker's study of a Canada-wide collection of restrictive covenants by legal scholar Walter Tarnopolsky suggests important regional variations, based on the population make-up of different provinces. Walker suggests that in Nova Scotia such covenants were directed mostly against Blacks, while in British Columbia they targeted people of Asian descent first and foremost.¹¹ Whether restrictions in these provinces extended to some groups of European descent is not clear. In central Canada such covenants did target eastern and southern Europeans as well, including Jews. A 1936 study of restrictions against Jewish ownership and tenancy in Hamilton by the Council of Jewish Organizations of Hamilton and the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) reveals the character of restrictions against minorities of European origin. Some of the covenants barred 'any person of objectionable race.' Others named the 'objectionable races': 'Negroes, Asiatics, Italians, Bulgarians, Austrians, Servians, Roumanians, Turks, Armenians, Jews or Greeks.' Very significantly, not one of the nineteen surveys examined – mostly from the interwar period – limited restrictions to people of colour. Covenants concerning modest neighbourhoods tended to specify a narrower range of groups: one excluded 'any person of the Polack, Italian or any Colored Race,' another, 'Italians, Poles, Hungarians or any person of a colored race.' The exclusion only of foreign-born Italians, Greeks, and Jews in some of the Hamilton covenants implied that these groups – presumably because of their capacity to assimilate into Canadian society – were perceived as superior to people of colour, all of whom, even the Canadian-born, were excluded.¹² Yet these Canadian covenants did not reflect the type of collaboration among all groups of European descent to keep people of African descent out of 'white' neighbourhoods in the United States. David Roediger believes that what prompted realtors and developers in American cities to include groups of European origin in 'all inclusive white neighbourhoods' was neither a liberal impulse nor a decline of their suspicion of southern and eastern European groups, but their perception of groups from any part of Europe as superior to African Americans. Minorities of European descent, for whom home ownership was extremely important, learned the advantages of 'whiteness' from such covenants; they be-

came participants in, rather than the victims of, campaigns of residential segregation.¹³ These different responses reflected the differences in the ethnic make-up of the populations north and south of the border, not the absence or weakness of racism in Canada. The number of African Canadians was far too small to elicit the type of fears aroused by the migration of African Americans to the northern United States. The 1941 census classified African Canadians, along with other numerically small groups, under the catch-all category of 'other.' In many Canadian cities, including Hamilton, the number of people of colour was thus quite small. Here, 'peripheral' Europeans represented the main danger of depreciating land values in the neighbourhoods where they settled. Similarly, in most cities they were the ones whose habits and practices were deemed objectionable: their cooking was deemed to create odours and their entertainments on Sundays to generate noises offensive to 'Canadian' residents.¹⁴

As Constance Backhouse has argued, although the racial identity of the dominant white group was splintered in many directions, a 'racial chasm' separated such subgroups from people of African, Asian, and Native descent.¹⁵ Not surprisingly given Canada's imperial connections, the proximity of the United States, and the easy access to both British and American publications, Anglo-Canadians were not oblivious to the privileges of 'whiteness.' Anecdotal sources reveal that eastern and southern Europeans were at times denigrated as being non-white. Yet, with the exception of the 1917 elections, when even naturalized members of European minority groups lost their franchise, European immigrants could secure citizenship rights. Such rights were denied to people of Asian descent, although not to African Canadians. As noted above, moreover, the 1941 census classifications traced the racial designation of most children through the father, but underscored the unassimilability of people of colour by assigning children to the 'black, yellow or brown races,' if either their fathers or their mothers belonged to those 'races,' and describing children of mixed 'white and Indian blood,' regardless of the gender of the Native parent, as 'Half-breeds.'

Yet, although skin colour was so significant to racial assignment in Canada, purported racial inferiority and superiority were most often not expressed in terms of colour. Even more tellingly, colour was not central to the self-definition of 'inbetween' people. Indeed, given the uneven geographical distribution of people of colour in Canada, eastern and southern Europeans were the only significant groups of

racialized 'others' in many communities. The differences between the make-up of the populations of Canada and the United States go a long way towards explaining the differences in racial discourse in the two countries. Most importantly, the weakness of the institution of slavery in Canada's past along with racist immigration policies meant that, in contrast to the United States, the number of people of African descent in Canada remained small until the last decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, the type of black-white polarization that some scholars place at the core of American racial thought did not develop in Canada. To claim that immigrants from the 'peripheries' of Europe were initially perceived as 'non-white,' and that they 'became white' in the course of their integration into Canadian society, would be, to use Arnesen's terms, to oversimplify a complex and multifaceted process of racialization. This study examines the construction of racial classification in wartime by Anglo-Canadian (and to a lesser extent French Canadian) state officials, employers, and workers, and the impact of such classification on minority workers. It also explores minority workers' self-identification in response to such racialization.

Because French Canadians occupied a unique position in the classification of Canada's peoples in wartime, they do not figure prominently in this study. Although some of them complained of discrimination in the labour force and in the armed forces, they did not organize protests against employment discrimination.¹⁶ At the same time, moreover, French Canadians also occupied prominent positions governing state-minority relations. From 1942 to the end of the war, for example, a French Canadian, Major-General L.R. LaFlèche, headed the Department of National War Services, which oversaw relations between the state and minority groups. Other French Canadians held positions in the agencies established by the government to mobilize minorities behind the war effort.¹⁷ Access to such positions, which were closed to members of racialized minorities, offers a clear example of the difference between French Canadians and the minority groups discussed here. French Canadian leaders could advocate more effectively for disadvantaged members of their group. In 1941, when he was still associate deputy minister of the Department of National War Services, for example, Major-General LaFlèche advised officials in the Department of Labour that skilled French Canadians were denied positions in war industries because they did not speak English. Such exclusion, he noted, reflected the dominance of Anglo-Canadians in the ownership and management of armament factories. The Department of Labour

responded by offering French Canadian applicants pre-employment classes in technical English.¹⁸

By illuminating state complicity in the racialization of workers, this study's focus on racist employment discrimination sheds new light on the role of the state in wartime Canada. Up to now, studies of the relationship between the state and minority groups during the Second World War have concentrated largely on the Nationalities Branch of the Department of National War Services and the Committee on Cooperation in Canadian Citizenship. Because these two agencies were created by the federal government specifically to mobilize minority groups behind Canada's war effort and to increase group harmony by familiarizing English and French Canadians with minority groups and their contributions to Canadian society, their records offer rich and readily accessible sources for studying state-minority relations in wartime. Some scholars believe that such endeavours marked the first step in citizenship training or in Canada's progress towards a tolerant and inclusive national policy of multiculturalism.¹⁹ Others characterize these undertakings as Eurocentric and ineffectual.²⁰ The most recent analysis maintains that the government, dissatisfied with the work of the Nationalities Branch, adopted a new and different approach to citizenship education by the end of the war.²¹ Whatever their conclusions, the focus of scholars on the Nationalities Branch and the Committee on Cooperation offers only a partial view of state-minority relations in wartime. The officials of many other government departments and agencies also dealt with racialized minority workers, and as this study will show, their collusion with racist employers and workers helped to block the mobility of minority workers in the labour force throughout the war. The state's complicity both reflected and legitimized racist views widely held in Canadian society both prior to and during the Second World War.

By adopting a top-down approach to state-minority relations in wartime, existing studies also obscure the role played by minority group members – educated elites and ordinary workers – in challenging employment discrimination. Educated elites among minority group members were able to respond to discrimination in a highly articulate way. Newspaper owners, journalists, lawyers, clergy, teachers, and some labour organizers had the education, confidence, and means to protest against discrimination and articulate views on integration into Canadian society. They knew English, were familiar with Canadian laws and institutions, and were the most likely to have connections to main-

stream society. Their views offer an important insight into how these relatively privileged segments of minority groups envisioned integration into the labour force, and into Canadian society more broadly.

An important component of the protest against employment discrimination consisted of documenting its nature and extent. Minority activists believed that the blatant contradiction between Canada's declared war aim of fighting the racism of the Nazis and racist discrimination at home, combined with the high demand for labour and state control over the labour force, created propitious circumstances for challenging employment discrimination. The records of voluntary organizations established by racialized minority groups, especially by Jews and African Canadians, compose the second important body of evidence on which this study relies. These sources, some of them located in smaller archives, and many written in languages other than English or French, are less well known than the records generated by state agencies. Yet they are essential for understanding employment discrimination and ideas of identity and the rights of citizenship from the perspective of minority group members. Unlike most studies on state-minority relations in wartime Canada, this book juxtaposes state policy and ideas of race and citizenship in civil society. It adopts the methods of social historians – often neglected in recent times in favour of linguistic or discourse analysis focused on leaders, policy makers, and educated elites – to study this relationship from the vantage point of targeted minorities, thereby offering a new perspective of state policy. Through the examination of the role of various segments of civil society – such as middle-class, educated, and politically conservative or liberal minority group members; radical racialized workers and activists; and English Canadian critics of various ideological leanings – this study also reveals the limitations and contradictions of the different sources on this topic.

Perhaps no feature reveals the value of sources generated by minority group members themselves than the light they shed on the wartime experience of minority women in the workplace. These sources reveal that women, as well as men, suffered from and challenged racist employment discrimination. Yet, because studies of gender discrimination during the Second World War (such as Ruth Roach Pierson's *'They're Still Women After All': The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* and Jennifer Stephen's *Pick One Intelligent Girl: Employability, Domesticity, and the Gendering of Canada's Welfare State, 1939–1947*) focus largely on the role of the state and the attitudes of policy makers and of the professionals in their employ, these studies say little about the addition-

al racist barriers that minority women faced.²² State officials in charge of women's employment during the war appear to have been unconcerned about the race or ethnicity of women workers, probably because they assumed that women would withdraw from paid employment at war's end. Perhaps because they saw only 'foreign' men as potential threats, officials in charge of protecting national security were equally unconcerned about minority women. Conversely, sources generated by minority groups that shed light on racist employment discrimination and the protest against it say nothing about the gender-based discrimination that minority women faced. The silence of the sources on this subject reveals that, as Ruth Frager and Alice Kessler-Harris argue, both in Canada and in the United States the focus on racism most often overshadowed discrimination against women in the workforce even among minority group activists, male or female.²³ Consequently, gender-equity and anti-racist campaigns seldom intersected.

To draw attention in the mainstream press to racist employment discrimination and to their campaigns against it, minority activists succeeded in harnessing both wartime egalitarian rhetoric and demand for labour. This study thus also relies on wartime newspapers and magazines. Large numbers of relevant newspaper clippings can be found in the repositories of government departments and voluntary associations. A systematic examination of a series of newspapers for the war years supplements these more specialized collections: *Le Devoir*, *Globe and Mail*, *Hamilton Spectator*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Niagara Falls Review*, *St. Catharines Standard*, *Toronto Star*, *Welland Tribune*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Canadian Forum*, and *Saturday Night*.²⁴

Educated elites, however, were not the only members of minority groups who protested against employment discrimination. Working-class women and men, who faced the consequences of employment discrimination on a daily basis, also fought against it. Admittedly, they were generally poorly educated peasants or workers whose brawn had opened Canada's doors to them. Long hours of hard labour and frequent searches for jobs allowed them little opportunity to learn English or familiarize themselves with Canadian ways outside the workplace. The spread of industrial unions in wartime Canada, however, offered an avenue of protest even to those whose command of English and understanding of Canadian laws and institutions were limited. Organized labour courted minority group support, and minority protest was an important force in the great expansion of organized labour – industrial unions in particular – during the war years. The impact of minority

protest within the labour movement not only influenced the orientation of union leadership, but also played a part in state building in the late 1940s by laying the foundations for anti-discrimination legislation and human rights commissions. In a recent re-evaluation of his path-breaking book, *Labor's War at Home*, Nelson Lichtenstein questions the book's characterization of the consequences of the wartime bargain between labour and the state as detrimental for ordinary workers. He now believes that the harnessing of wartime patriotic egalitarianism by increasingly organized workers, especially African Americans and Mexicans, and the opening of avenues for the expression and redress of grievances by minority workers (through such state institutions as the National Labor Relations Board, the National War Labor Board, and especially the Fair Employment Practices Committee) combined to constrain management's freedom. Through grievance and arbitration procedures, 'workplace contractualism' offered advantages to most workers in most places. Although it did not eliminate seniority systems designed to protect the advantages of white workers, the new system created a significant breakthrough in rights consciousness among African American workers in particular, and hence in their struggle for citizenship rights.²⁵ This book suggests a similar need to focus on the negotiation between minority workers and the state to understand industrial relations in Canada.

The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), both of whom saw their main constituency as the working class, joined the anti-discrimination campaigns of labour unions. They too sought and gained support among minority group members by targeting employment discrimination specifically. Consequently, in addition to the press and archives of labour organizations, the records of these left-wing parties constitute important sources for this study.

Civic-minded intellectuals of more conservative and liberal leanings also recognized the injustice of racist discrimination. Some of them noted that such discrimination expressed itself in denying work to racialized minorities altogether or in restricting the types of jobs that were open to them. Many of these intellectuals were concerned primarily about minority groups of European origin, sometimes because they had little contact with any other racialized groups, and sometimes because they too subscribed to the racist notion that certain groups, especially people of colour, were incapable of performing any but menial jobs. Since these men and women belonged to privileged middle-class circles, they were

not familiar with the circumstances of racialized workers. That is why many of them thought of ending employment discrimination as a gradual process rather than a matter of great urgency. They could thus hold on to their notion that equal opportunity for all could be attained in Canadian society through familiarizing English and French Canadians with the 'special gifts' of minority groups and the contributions they made to Canadian society, and through citizenship education for minority group members. Some of these advocates of greater tolerance, moreover, were themselves suspicious of the political left, of organized labour, and of state regulation of economic and social life. Such suspicions pitted them against the aspirations and strategies of minority group members and their labour and left-wing allies.

This study begins by exploring the nature and extent of racist employment discrimination in Canada during the Second World War. Part I also analyses the extent of and reasons for state collusion with such discriminatory practices. Part II focuses on minority group resistance to employment discrimination. Chapter 2 considers resistance and protest by Jews, whose anti-discrimination campaigns were the most highly organized and hence the best documented among the campaigns mounted by the victims of employment discrimination. The next two chapters look at resistance by other 'racialized' groups: Chapter 3 considers African Canadians, eastern and southern Europeans, and Chapter 4 looks at the disenfranchised Chinese, Japanese, and Native Canadians. Part III focuses on the support anti-discrimination campaigns received from members of Canada's dominant ethnic groups, especially English Canadians. The views and actions of conservative and liberal critics of racism form the subject of Chapter 5, while Chapter 6 analyses the participation of the CCF, the CPC, and organized labour in the fight against discrimination. The final section (and chapter) returns to a consideration of relations between the state and minority groups. It attempts to explain why the Nationalities Branch and the Committee on Cooperation in Canadian Citizenship, state agencies designed to integrate minority groups into Canadian society, had apparently little knowledge of, and hence contact with, campaigns by minority group members to achieve the same ends.

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