

The justicialist rhetoric of Néstor Kirchner

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The main thrust of this essay is to account for the preliminary results of a discourse analysis research on former president Néstor Kirchner's oratory as head of the Partido Justicialista [Justicialist Party; abbreviated PJ]. Within the frame of discourse analysis current tendencies in the French-speaking field,¹ it examines some rhetorical and argumentative features of the speeches belonging to Kirchner's "justicialist" stage, starting from the hypothesis that the speaker's institutional move from the Presidency of the State to that of the PJ implies a mutation on different levels of its political enunciation, mainly on the forms of subjective agency and on those of control of destination. On such horizon, this work takes into account Eliseo Verón's contributions in his classic article "La Palabra Adversativa" and seeks to explore the link that the word of the leader extends on his positive and negative recipients.² We believe that the image of himself a leader offers, the traditions and meanings he brings together in his argumentative weaving, the auditories he seeks to interpellate, the commonplace spaces in which he weaves up his explanations and his passions become ineluctable dimensions of an enquiry concerned with the construction of political hegemony.³

Today, the PJ is the most relevant political party in Argentina, the one that gave continuity to the Peronist Party, founded by General Juan Domingo Perón. In its origins, its main commitment was the aid of workers and it remained since then closely linked to the working classes and labour unions. Together with the Unión Cívica Radical, it became one of the most important political parties in the country up to the end of the 20th century. Currently, it is the main electoral actor and boasts the largest territorial structure in our country. Broadly speaking, the national consolidation of *kirchnerism* coincides with the certainty that the PJ is the only party, the control of which guarantees by itself the political stability of a government. Néstor Kirchner's formal

¹ Among the extensive bibliography, see esp. Dominique Maingueneau, *Cenas de enunciação* (São Paulo: Parábola, 2008), Ruth Amossy, *L'argumentation dans le discours politique. Literature d'idée, fiction* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2000), Ruth Amossy, ed., *Images de soi dans le discours. La construction de l'ethos* (Laussane: Delachaux y Niestlé, 1999) and Patrick Charaudeau, *Discurso político* (São Paulo: Contexto, 2006).

² The arguments in this article recover the analytical perspective in the field of Silvia Sigal and Eliseo Verón's Argentine political discourse. *Perón o muerte. Los fundamentos discursivos del fenómeno peronista* (Buenos Aires: Legasa, 2004) and Eliseo Verón, "La palabra adversativa. Observaciones sobre la enunciación política", in Eliseo Verón et al., *El discurso político. Lenguajes y acontecimientos* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1987): 11-26.

³ The concept of hegemony has been profusely dealt within the field of the social sciences. A genealogy of the term can be found in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy. Towards a radical democratic politics* (London: Verso, 1985). The relation among hegemony, democracy and populism has been more recently dealt with by Ernesto Laclau, *The populist reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

assumption as President of the PJ's National Council took place on 14th May, 2008, at an event in which the guest departed from the scene, giving the floor to the President of State Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. An article in the newspaper *Página/12*, the most relevant among the ones having an affinity with the Government, by the well-known political analyst Mario Wainfeld, was entitled "Silent eloquence". It was during the days of the conflict with the agricultural and farming sectors due to the enforcement of new taxes to withholdings to exportations.⁴ The following day newspaper covers report about Kirchner giving the floor to his wife [President Fernández] in a string of facts involving, for instance, the first of the "*Cartas Abiertas*" (Open Letters) of the group of intellectuals called *Carta Abierta*, under the headline "A climate of political unstableness". The strategy of taking up office as head of the PJ is defined by Kirchner himself as an instance of support to the new administration's good governance.

Kirchner's party leadership can in fact be viewed as the culmination of a plan the party in office had devised three years before, in 2005, to consolidate a framework of governance, which the project of "Plural Agreement" had been basing on quicksand.⁵ From the initial mainstreaming to progressive control of the PJ, the turning in the political strategy of kirchnerism is ostensible: after the first stage dominated by the alliance of the government with the PJ (through the Kirchner-Duhalde deal) -marked by the symbolic distance of the first as compared to the second regarding mainstreaming⁶-, the triumph of the party in office in the mid-term parliamentary

⁴ About kirchnerism and the so called "land conflict" see: Ricardo Aronskind and Gabriel Vommaro, comps., *Campos de batalla. Las rutas, los medios y las plazas en el nuevo conflicto agrario* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2010) and Norma Giarracca and Miguel Teubal, coords., *Del paro agrario a las elecciones de 2009. Tramas, reflexiones y debates* (Buenos Aires: Antropofagia, 2010).

⁵ "Plural Agreement" was the name of the elections alliance founded in 2006 to accompany Néstor Kirchner's government and Cristina Fernández presidential candidature. It consists mainly of supporters of the *Frente para la Victoria*, the party founded by the Kirchners, and the *Partido de la Concertación - FORJA*, made up of dissident members of the *Unión Cívica Radical*. About the party in office political strategy, see: Daniel Arzadun, *El peronismo: Kirchner y la conquista del reino* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana-COPPAL, 2008), Nicolás Cherny, Germán Feierherd and Marcos Novaro, "El presidencialismo argentino: de la crisis a la recomposición del poder (2003-2007)", *América Latina Hoy* 54 (2010): 15-41, and Alejandro Bonvecchi and Agustina Giraudy, "Argentina: victoria presidencial oficialista y tensiones en el esquema macroeconómico", *Revista de Ciencia Política* 28, 1 (2008): 35-59.

⁶ Mainstreaming [transversality] indicated in the first kirchnerism the concern for a political sphere in which the party structures did not themselves guarantee the articulation between the political and civic instances. In accordance with this expansion strategy of the support bases, Kirchner's government recovered the original values of the peronist tradition with the suggestive omission of every explicit reference to Juan Perón or Eva Duarte an to peronism in general, and attempted to bring them together in a centre-left movement, the identification of which was the breaking with neoliberalism. It is very important to understand that the necessary alliance with the PJ that peronism maintained kept up since its rise to power was not accompanied by a discourse strategy directed to peronist recipients. On Peronism, PJ and transversality, see Isidoro Cheresky, "Un signo de interrogación sobre la evolución del régimen político", in Isidoro Cheresky, ed., *La política después de los partidos* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2006): 27-73, Juan Carlos Torre, "La operación política de la transversalidad. El presidente Kirchner y el Partido Justicialista", en CEDIT, ed., *Argentina en perspectiva. Reflexiones sobre nuestro país en democracia* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, 2005): 13-28.

elections created the conditions for kirchnerism to put an end to the “double-headed leadership”⁷ that dominated the *justicialist* scene in those years (two confronted heads: Kirchner and Duhalde), to strengthen a new leadership and reassert other regional headships, settling an “organization instability” which acknowledged as a starting point, according to the political analyst D. Arzadun, “the breaking of the principle of authority inside the party starting from the 1999 election setback”.⁸

With the relative autonomy of formal assumption, Kirchner’s series of political speeches as president of the PJ began some weeks before, on 25th April 2008, only a day after his triumph at the party’s in-house elections had been confirmed. The taking over of office coincides with a progressive drop of the positive image of Cristina Fernández government, who had comfortably won in national elections six months before, which now appeared unexpectedly remote. Kirchner’s presidency in the PJ would be marked by successive internal and external crisis –the so called “land conflict” on the one hand; the international crisis on the other– that, after a meager performance as candidate to national deputy for the Province of Buenos Aires in the mid-term elections, ended up in his indeclinable resignation to office on 29th June 2009, less than fifteen months after having expressly assumed the task. During that interval, Kirchner’s activity as an orator fluctuated between two periods of high frequency (*e. g.* the conflict with the agricultural sectors, the election campaign for deputation office) and periods of absolute silence, for instance, the last months of 2008, when he would deliver only three speeches (*e. g.* on 17th October because of the “*Day of Peronist Loyalty*”).

We would like to propose, in view of the above, that the mutation of the identification processes offered by the kirchnerist discourse as sources of political absorption of broad sectors and of actors of national life coincides by and large with Cristina Fernandez’s assumption as President of the Nation and Néstor Kirchner’s assumption as head of the PJ. With the research still in progress, we will now try to expose some rhetorical-argumentative traces of the reconfiguration of the identity of kirchnerism, in view of some signs of Kirchner’s political enunciation in his role of head of the party. As it is known, political discourses imply three types of recipients: a positive one, *i.e.* a supporter, a negative one, that corresponds to the position of the opponent, and an indecisive one, called “*paradestinatarío*” by Eliseo Verón, to whom everything is directed with the purpose of persuading him.⁹ In this article, we will

⁷ Natalio Botana, *Poder y hegemonía. El régimen político después de la crisis* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2006): 74.

⁸ Arzadun, *El peronismo: Kirchner y la conquista del reino*, 81. In 1999, the PJ was defeated in the national elections by an alliance of radicals, dissident peronists and independent forces. It was the second and last time in its history the peronism lost an election; the first was on the return of democracy in 1983.

⁹ To enunciate a political word consists, according to Verón, in situating oneself and situating three different types of recipients, by means of ascertainments, explanations, prescriptions and promises concerning the identities of the imaginary: on the one hand, concerning those entities by means of which the speechmaker seeks to construe a relationship –metacollectives–, and on the other concerning the entity that is foundation of the legitimacy to take the floor, of the [construction] of a collective of identification. See: Verón, “La palabra adversativa. Observaciones sobre la enunciación política”, 23.

concentrate our attention on an essential aspect of this triple destination: the make-up of a Peronist identity. We argue that this search for collective identity is indicated by three rhetoric instances: an identification collective (identity by inclusion), topics (identity by shared knowledge) and anaphor (identity by repetition).

The first thing to be noticed about Néstor Kirchner's "*justicialist*" public speech is the presence of a collective of peronist identification. By this we understand an entity which condenses the characteristic features acquired by the relation between the speechmaker and the positive recipient in political discourse. It is expressed in the inclusive "we".¹⁰ The following is an example:

First of all I want to greet all the people of San Juan, those who think like us and those who don't. Because we, the peronists, want an integrated Argentina, confrontation-free; we want to embrace each Argentinian to fight for happiness and justice. (Event in the Province of San Juan, 23rd May 2008).¹¹

The presence of a peronist collective of identification is no surprise in the speech of who was then president of the PJ. It is evident that the move from the National Executive Power to the presidency of a political party implies by itself a reconfiguration of the enunciation device and a segmentation, no matter how mitigated, of its positive recipients: we switch from the collective "we, the Argentinians" to the collective "we, the peronists"¹². There are no doubts about the peronist pedigree of kirchnerism, be it because of informed consent, of representations about its previous trajectory, or of the symbolical realms displayed by Kirchner himself in his allocutions as President of the Argentine Republic; but nevertheless, the construction of a "peronist" entity constitutes an enunciation novelty compared to those first presidential speeches: the peronist condition of the ex-president is as undeniable as the non-existence of a collective of peronist identification at the beginning of his national administration. The reluctance Kirchner had shown to speak on behalf of party entities, coherent with his strategies of transversal call of allied political forces, stands in contrast to his new institutional position, that of leader of the PJ, which by definition requires certain operations of party agency.

These identification operations, however, call for the necessity of asking oneself certain questions that have no univocal answers: the first of them is who belong to the

¹⁰ Verón, *ibid.*, 17.

¹¹ The format we have chosen for the fragments extracted from Kirchner's public speeches is the following: we have separately placed the paragraphs with special fonts and margins, followed by details of discourse dates. We must make clear that these fragments are significant regarding the corpus, and, if necessary, others could be offered. Finally, we indicate that the speeches have been quoted as they were found in the web site of the Presidency: www.presidencia.gov.ar, at the end of 2008.

¹² The main identification collective used by Kirchner in his speeches as Argentine President was "we, the Argentinians". This collective coexisted with others. The second most relevant generational collective being: "we, the generation of the seventies". As can be seen, both constitute forms of identification transversal to the party entities. In fact, there is no collective of this kind during the first kirchnerist presidency.

peronist collective.¹³ As it is to be expected in a tradition that lacks no everlasting ambiguities, Kirchner's speeches tend to make a mutual approach between the collective of the peronists and that of the Argentinians.

But the Argentinians, having this great movement as a "spinal cord", but Argentinians who perhaps don't think as we do but think of the homeland, together with us, we set ourselves to rebuild this country, we raised it and this is the sixth year of uninterrupted growth. (Inauguration of a party location in Ezeiza on 24th April 2008).

This tendency to bring the identities nearer does not at all mean an homologation between peronists and Argentinians in the style of the first Perón ("for a peronist there's nothing better than another peronist", he used to say), and he is not unaware of the highly valued defense of plurality and freedom of speech in contemporary democracies. He rather makes a consideration of peronism as a "spinal cord" of the national cause, and so, as the basic premise of the Argentinians' national struggles. In other words, the key that mediates between peronists and Argentinians (Kirchner, for example, distinguishes between "the justicialist people" and "the Argentine people") is the articulation among all sectors, whether peronist or not, around a national and popular project, of which peronism would be nothing less than the "spinal cord".

Now I would like us to stop for a while in the vindication Kirchner makes of peronism under the topic¹⁴ of peronism as a "movement". The idea would be that peronism is not as much a political structure or a bureaucratic apparatus as a national and popular movement; i.e., peronism would not represent the expression of a sector or a political party, as for example, the Unión Cívica Radical, the Socialist Party or the Communist Party, but the utmost expression of a national identity, of a national saga, which has its origins in the independence revolutions, its continuity in the pioneer's and immigrant's experiences, who arrived in the country at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century (the complete realization of which would be the culture of work and family in the classical peronism), and its destiny, which had been postponed until the arrival of kirchnerism, in the militant activity of youth in the seventies. Identity, project and destiny, continuity; the relevance of the articulation of party identity and national identity appears frequently achieved by means of the use of

¹³ The issue about a true peronist identity has been one of the great debates in peronism's intellectual history. It constitutes a significant paradox according to which there would be a true peronism the essence of which no one can grasp: "it is an expectation – says Carlos Altamirano – about the virtualities of peronism that constitute its truth. If today that truth does not manifest itself (or only does through testimonies of true peronists), repressed and lost by work of the really existing peronism, it has however shown itself in the past". "True peronism", in this sense, cannot be but a legacy, because "the present is never the time of true peronism": "The present is the time consumed by empirical peronism, the reign of which, however contingent, prevents the truth of peronism to carry itself out". See: Altamirano, *Peronismo y cultura de izquierda* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2011): 132-135.

¹⁴ Here and further on we will use the category of "topic" in the sense of ideologemes that belong to the *doxa* and are considered obvious and beyond all dispute by a certain social group. See: Marc Angenot, *La parole pamphlétaire. Contribution à la typologie des discours modernes* (Paris: Payot, 1982).

anaphors¹⁵, which allows the speechmaker to string together a “national and popular” saga along two centuries of history. Besides, this saga presents the identity of the nation and the people as a transcendental and non-temporal essence, i.e., as the repetition of a spirit identical to itself through time. Let us expose a couple of exemplary fragments:

This is why on this 17th October 2008, we open our arms as always, we want to embrace all Argentiniens, we strongly call together all sectors of the nation to build up the homeland that this country, this Argentina, to build up the homeland that Mariano Moreno, to build up the homeland that General Belgrano, that General San Martín, that Hipólito Yrigoyen, that Juan Perón, that Eva Perón, that our *desaparecidos* [missing] dreamed of, and that we now have to build with all our strength to include everyone. (Event on *Loyalty Day* on 17th October 2008).

That is why, Argentiniens [male and female], (...) I ask you to reflect that nobody is perfect, that we make achievements and make mistakes, but I know we are going the right way, that we have the vocation to bring all groups together, that we have the vocation to open our arms to everybody, that we have the vocation to take up our old banners, of the great men and women of our homeland, that we have a *sanmartinian* vocation, that we have Mariano Moreno’s vocation, that we have General Belgrano’s vocation, that we have Hipólito Yrigoyen’s vocation, that we have vocation for struggling and the conviction of the immortal Evita, and that we have the convictions and principles of those Plaza de Mayo Mothers, who gave an example of dignity, an example of courage to defend the human rights in our homeland. (Event in La Plata, on 17th March, 2009).

Mariano Moreno, Manuel Belgrano, José de San Martín, Hipólito Yrigoyen, Juan Perón, Eva Perón, the activists of the seventies, the Plaza de Mayo Grandmothers and Mothers, and the current project of the Argentine government constitute, in the perspective of the orator, testimonies in different periods of a single homeland dream, of a single vocation and a single conviction. As we see, the essence of this “national and popular” identity, woven by the resort to anaphors, appears marked by dreams of a common nation that transcends time (revolutionaries, popular leaders, political activists and kirchnerists share, according to this prose, similar dreams) and emphasizes the proposed identity. Also, the resort to conversational implicatures¹⁶ allows for the recalling of dreams, frustrations and struggles which rest upon a memory shared by the orator and the auditory, so as to favour an enunciation complicity, *ergo* a nearness, a proximity between the leader and the recipients.

¹⁵ According to Heinrich Lausberg, “The intermittent repetition of the beginning of a member or a phrase is called anaphor”. See: Lausberg, *Manual de retórica literaria. Fundamentos de una ciencia de la literatura* 2 (Madrid: Gredos, 1967): 108. The Spanish Royal Academy makes the anaphor and the repetition equivalent in general terms, and defines it as: “Figure which consists in the purposeful repetition of words and concepts”.

¹⁶ Herbert Paul Grice advocates the existence of a series of conversational norms or maxims, known by the speaker as well as by the listener, that guide the conversation and enable that the inferences deduced by the listener be the ones the speaker has wished to communicate. This type of inferences the listener deduces and that does not depend on words but on the conversational maxims is called conversational implicatures. See: Grice, “Lógica y conversación”, in Luis Valdés Villanueva, ed., *La búsqueda del significado* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1991): 511-530.

The link between peronist identity and national identity can be read simultaneously from two points of view. On one hand, a vindication of the last Perón, that of pacification and national unity, who no longer said “for a peronist there’s nothing better than another peronist”, but “for an Argentinian there’s nothing better than another Argentinian”. This vindication finds its sense in a national context of increasing antagonism, encouraged by the disputes between the national government and the agricultural sector and the main media groups, both sectors with a huge symbolic and economic weight in the country’s sociopolitical structure:

We assume it [the responsibility] as Argentinians, not starting from party sectarianism, [but] as Argentinians thinking of this last message of our leader, that for an Argentinian there is nothing better than another Argentinian. And we continue think the same. (Event in the locality of Chivilcoy, 5th March, 2009)

In an instance of political polarization, the mission of peronism thus appears as a mission for national unity, and that national unity would be favoured, according to Kirchner’s view of peronism, by the privileged condition of peronism as a shared social representation about the national and popular issue: the culture of work, political sovereignty, economic independence and social justice. It would not be abusive to point out that peronism provides kirchnerism with a kind of theory of the “national and popular” values that today still retain an efficient symbolic power.

On the other hand, this “national and popular” rather than party-related conception of peronism is argumentatively articulated in the frame of Kirchner’s ubiquitous criticism of political elites and political parties in general, which does none but alter a set of representations very much expanded in the post-crisis¹⁷ Argentine society.

At first, there is a persistence in the presidential speech of a very extended topic in the first years of the new century, that Kirchner had adopted as its own in the construction of his legitimacy as president and as mainstream [transversality] strategy: the topic of political parties as arbitrary areas of confrontation. In this respect, we should be reminded that the kirchnerist projects of “transversality” and “plural agreement” went for a design of politics on behalf of values and at the expense of party structures and concepts, which according to Kirchner himself, “had become obsolete to

¹⁷ The 2001 crisis in Argentina consisted, according to Pablo Gerchunoff and Lucas Llach in *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto*, in “the deepest and most prolonged productive retraction ever since there have been registers”. The confluence of all kinds and sectors of unsatisfied demands accounts for its deep scopes: “cacerolazos” in different cities, “piqueteros” manifestations, massive protest marches and students assemblies, rural protests, gatherings in the country’s main routes, massive looting in the major urban centres. The high degree of mobilization and social dissatisfaction foretold a break of the political forms of representation and of the concept of democracy as a delegation government. On the economical perspective, see: Gerchunoff and Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto. Un siglo de políticas económicas argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2003): 449, and, in the political perspective: Isidoro Cheresky, ed., *La política después de los partidos* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2006).

solve the individuality crisis”.¹⁸ Let us insist on this point: the public speeches of the PJ’s president recover and activate three of the central topics that operated as commonplace manifestations of that “anti-political discourse”, typical of the popular disenchantment with the political elite during neoliberalism: politics as a show, politics as a field of secret operations and politics as exercise of bureaucracy. Here are some relevant extracts:

Since Cristina became President, from the first day, they were a “hampering machine”. When they are asked what ideas they have, they suggest none: ‘no, we must come to agreements’. Agreements about what? The resetting of the 90’s model in Argentina? No, we come earnestly, not to play phony politics or political bureaucracy, we came to dare risks and to change Argentina. (Event in Ensenada, 7th May, 2009).

[Dear] officers, we are to come out to talk about security, not only when there is a camera; not only when there is a microphone to speak about security. Dear officers: with no cameras as it corresponds to the responsibility the people have given us, get organized, work with the mayors [...]. (Event in the Tres de Febrero district, 9th March, 2009).

We must go and speak as militants, as real political cadres, house by house, district by district, again, because it is the way to find the solution, it is the way to find an answer to the media lock up they want to cause us. (Event in the Avellaneda district, 17th February, 2009).

Against these three topics, Kirchner proposed presence, permanent action, militant activity, a model of politics claiming to be public and every day, with no mediations, no intermediaries, no protocols. Action, direct contact, movement, immediacy form part of a lexicon that associates politics with militant activism and the politician’s image with that of the activist. The preceding paragraphs make evident a connection which must be stated explicitly: the topics of “anti-politics” do not only define, issuing it down in black and white, a form of making true politics, but do define as well the domains of the opponent: the opposition as “hampering machine”, the opposition as bureaucracy, the opposition as a constellation of media figures, the opposition as mere saying. On the same lines, involved in each of these practices, which, from the orator’s perspective delegitimize politics, appear the communication media, cameras, microphones and media lock-ups.

Before we finish this work, let us sketch out some features of the *adversative function* of Kirchner’s PJ speeches, which for reasons of space will be convenient to develop and exemplify in future works. We may, however, advance three characteristics that contrast with Kirchner’s allocutions as President: the first, the emergence of an adversative instance, under the nominal form “the opposition”; the second, the fragmentation of the entity “the Argentinians” and even of entities that do not usually allow for fragmentation like the collective “the Argentine people”; the third, the subordination of political opponents to an adversative instance that transcends them and encloses them: the big communication media business-owner conglomerations. In this sense, opponents in the political field become a “façade” of the

¹⁸ The quotes correspond to Néstor Kirchner’s speech as President of the Nation delivered on occasion of the 97th anniversary of the Argentine Chamber of Commerce on 11th December 2003.

real opponents; and as counterpart, the media groups operations become the real reason for the positive image increase of the opposing leaders, or, as was the case in 2009, the true executors of the party in office election defeats. We must say, regarding this issue, that the construction of the media instance as an adversative instance, even as the main and determining one, is a novelty of kirchnerist discourse of this stage that has not yet been properly dealt with.

Kirchner's assumption of the PJ's presidency was the corollary to an adventure that had in fact began with the triumph of the party in office in the 2005 parliamentary elections. The combination of the national Executive in the hands of Cristina Fernández and the PJ's leadership under Kirchner himself exhibited the peak of an accumulation which very few people predicted at the beginning of the Kirchner administration. Beyond the vicissitudes of political daily exercising, the consolidation of kirchnerism as a force enables to catch a glimpse of a political practice that kept varying with the passing of time and the occurrence of events. This mutation in the drawing power is in line with an insistent adscription of kirchnerism to the "national and popular" tradition in our country. The consideration of the peronist identity acquires, in this context, a relevant weight. Our aim has been to broadly outline a sketch of the main identity unit in Néstor Kirchner's speeches during his PJ stage. We have sought to comprehend the way in which peronism has been discursively considered in the framework of a reformulation strategy of the kirchnerist identity.

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