



MPIfG Discussion Paper 26/3

Moral and Legitimate?

Historical, Legal, and Affective Issues Around Educational
Privatization in Germany

Karen Lillie and Luisa Hideg



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MPIfG Discussion Paper 26/3
Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung, Köln
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne
June 2026
DOI: 10.17617/2.3715792

MPIfG Discussion Paper
ISSN 0944-2073 (Print)
ISSN 1864-4325 (Internet)



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Abstract

Germany's education system is in the midst of privatization. Although this trend, which started in the 1980s, ostensibly parallels neoliberal education reforms across Europe and the Anglophone world, Germany's case is a special one. Privatization in the country is happening within a historical and legal context that favors public schooling; however, families increasingly exercise school choice to select "the best" for their children. The tension between historically and legally informed norms, on the one hand, and affective desires, on the other, is morally problematic for parents navigating between what is generally accepted as good for society and what they believe is good for an individual. At stake in this struggle is whether school choice becomes a "legitimate" part of the German education system, in a Bourdieusian sense. If it does, it risks strengthening social class closure mechanisms and heightening resultant social class anxiety.

Keywords: educational inequality, education privatization, German education system, school choice, social class, sociology of education

Zusammenfassung

Das deutsche Bildungssystem befindet sich in einem tiefgreifenden Privatisierungsprozess. Obwohl dieser Trend bereits in den 1980er-Jahren eingesetzt hat und vordergründig betrachtet den neoliberalen Bildungsreformen in Europa und der englischsprachigen Welt ähnelt, ist der deutsche Fall eine Besonderheit. Privatisierung vollzieht sich hierzulande in einem historischen und rechtlichen Kontext, der das öffentliche Schulwesen begünstigt; dennoch treffen Familien zunehmend bewusst eine Schulwahl, um „das Beste“ für ihre Kinder auszuwählen. Die Spannung zwischen historisch und rechtlich geprägten Normen einerseits und affektiven Wünschen andererseits schafft eine moralische Problematik: Eltern müssen zwischen dem, was allgemein als gut für die Gesellschaft gilt, und dem, was sie individuell für das Beste halten, navigieren. Im Kern dieser Auseinandersetzung steht die Frage, ob Schulwahl im Sinne Bourdieus zu einem „legitimen“ Bestandteil des deutschen Bildungssystems wird. Sollte es dazu kommen, könnte der Übergang in höhere soziale Klassen schwieriger werden und die daraus resultierende soziale Klassenangst steigen.

Schlagwörter: Bildungsungleichheit, deutsches Bildungssystem, Privatisierung der Bildung, Schulwahl, soziale Klasse, Soziologie der Bildung

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Moral and Legitimate? Historical, Legal, and Affective Issues Around Educational Privatization in Germany

1 Introduction

Germany's education sector has been privatizing over the last thirty years. From 1992 to 2018, the number of private general education schools¹ (*allgemeinbildende Schulen*, as opposed to vocational schools) almost doubled, from around two thousand to just under four thousand (Grossarth-Maticzek, Kann, and Koufen 2020). By 2023, around 12 percent of general education schools were private – representing an 8 percent increase over the preceding decade, compared to a 4 percent decrease in public schools in the same time frame (“Allgemeinbildende Schulen” 2024). The percentage of students attending such schools also increased between 1992 and 2022, from just under 5 percent to over 9 percent (Klemm et al. 2018; “Allgemeinbildende Schulen” 2024). For comparison, around 9 percent of students in the US and almost 7 percent in the UK were privately educated in 2021 and 2023,² respectively (National Center for Education Statistics 2024; Department for Education 2024) – the US and UK being two countries often associated with the private schooling sectors. The growth of private schools in Germany has primarily occurred in larger, socioeconomically diverse cities (Zymek 2015).

In Germany, parental wealth is the main predictor of private schooling (Helsper 2009; Jungbauer-Gans, Lohmann, and Spieß 2012). Tax data from 2016 show that around 4 percent of children from households earning less than 50,000 euros per year attended private schools, and 6 percent from those with an annual income of between 50,000 and 250,000 euros; the figure for households earning between 250,000 and one million euros, meanwhile, was 14 percent, and 19 percent for those earning over one million (Grossarth-Maticzek, Kann, and Koufen 2020). It is thus mostly economically well-resourced families that engage with school choice and its production of differentiated educational experiences. Those families frame the private sector as providing the “best” education for their children (Ullrich and Strunck 2009; Klein 2013; Kraul 2015).

In the German context, the rise of private schooling and its association with wealthy families is a significant phenomenon. It ostensibly parallels neoliberal-driven education reforms that have put public education at the mercy of the market across Europe, in-

Funding support for this paper was provided by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (BE 2053/11-1).

- 1 There are different types of private schools in Germany, which broadly fall into four categories: religious schools, reform schools (e.g., Montessori and Waldorf), boarding schools, and international schools. It is very hard to get exact numbers on these schools – especially since for some labels, such as “international school” or even “Montessori school,” there are no clear standards.
- 2 This does not include state-funded independent schools, such as the academies, which educate over 50 percent of all students (Department for Education 2024).

cluding in the UK (Kulz 2017; Winkler-Reid 2017), the Netherlands (Merry and Boterman 2020), Sweden (Beach and Dovemark 2011; Nylund, Rosvall, and Ledman 2017), and, in modest ways, Denmark (Laursen and Madsen 2025). In each of those cases, specific conditions have led to particular manifestations of change.

Even so, Germany is a special case. Although Germany's secondary schooling system has different "tracks,"³ its college-preparatory secondary schools all teach to the same state-given leaving exam upon which university admission is based. As such, there is no clear set of "elite" schools in the country comparable to the UK or the US (Reeves et al. 2017; Mills 1956). Several studies have analyzed the career tracks of senior executives in Germany but found no particular set of schools that could be said to produce positional elites (Hartmann 2001; 2007; Schneickert 2018). What makes Germany interesting as a case of privatization, then, is the historical and legal context in the country, which has held back the emergence of particular schools for those considered elite.

The current trend of privatization is thus, at its core, a struggle between what is historically and legally framed as good for society as a whole and what is interpreted by some (wealthy) families as best for their own children. At stake in this struggle is whether school choice becomes a "legitimate" part of the German education system, in a Bourdieusian sense. Such a change would be socially significant as it arguably leads to further social class closure. According to Bourdieu (1990), social practices become legitimate not through explicit rules or laws but rather through their embeddedness in the "dox" – the deeply ingrained views of society shared by its members. In other words, practices that appear natural or commonsensical are legitimate ones. Moreover, Bourdieu argues, the process through which a practice becomes legitimate is connected to social power; it is a process tied to the views of those in dominant social positions.

This paper brings the social construction of legitimate schooling together with market logics by focusing on the role of parental choice. It first reviews the historical context of school choice in Germany, which highlights the various struggles over time between private and public schooling as a norm. The paper then turns to the country's primary legal tool shaping school choice – the *Sonderungsverbot*, which prohibits schools in Germany from selecting students based on the financial circumstances of their parents.

3 Public schools track students from around age ten based on the combination of a usually non-binding recommendation from a teacher and parental choice, depending on which of the German states they are in (Wiedenhorn 2011). Wealthy children, however, are more likely to be tracked into *Gymnasien* and therefore to be eligible for university study (Glaesser 2008; Schneider 2008; Dräger 2022). These tracks can be summarized as academic or vocational, although the realities are more complex. *Kulturhoheit* ("cultural sovereignty") in Germany means that each state controls its own education policy. As such, the question of when tracking starts and which types of schools are offered depends on the state in question. School options might include *Hauptschule* (practical focus, though many states are renaming, merging, or phasing out these schools), *Realschule* (intermediate academic focus), *Gymnasium* (university preparatory track), and *Gesamtschule* (comprehensive school that combines these paths). There are also *Förderschulen* (schools for children with special educational needs and disability).

The paper shows that this law's power lies in its bark: Conflicts of interest have weakened its bite. Finally, the paper examines what parents say about opting out of German state education and what that reveals about underlying moral tensions inherent to such a decision. We conclude by discussing what is at stake – namely, the social legitimization of school choice – and possible future options for the state.

2 Historical tensions

Gymnasien, which still today refers to the German secondary schools that grant eligibility to attend university, were created in the sixteenth century. Although each *Gymnasium* taught a classical curriculum and was considered equal in quality to any other, these institutions were highly individualized and shaped by their local contexts (Anderson 2004). They were exclusive in that only a small proportion of the population attended them, but they were also socioeconomically diverse (Drewek 1997; Deppe et al. 2015). Such an education promised social mobility by allowing students to access higher education and then high-status and high-paying professions; in reality, however, family – in particular, kinship, money, networks, and patronage – still mattered more than schooling when it came to life chances (Anderson 2004).

In fact, until the nineteenth century, the wealthy did *not* send their children to these schools (Green 1990). Such families instead relied on homeschooling. This was also the case in many other Western countries at the time, including Britain, France, and the US (Gaither 2008; Motley 1990; Simon 1960). Homeschooling gave families complete control over their children's formal and informal curriculum as well as their social environment (Hans 1951). During the nineteenth century, wealthy families transitioned from private to public schooling as entrance to university and the civil service became increasingly regulated by credentialing (Semrad 2015). Still, many continued to use private tutors either alongside or in place of formal schooling (Green 1990).

The Second Industrial Revolution brought about the need for more skilled workers. The growing bourgeoisie criticized *Gymnasien* for their old-money clientele and focus on classical languages, which seemed out of touch with the modern economy (Albisetti 1987). In response, state-led education reforms expanded the sector and reduced the amount of Latin and Greek in the curriculum to make room for science, mathematics, and modern languages (Albisetti 1987). At the same time, the Prussian state started selectively granting education-related funds as a way to wrest power from local authorities (Cinnirella and Schueler 2018). In this way, and in the name of nation building, a conceptual, financial, and legal framework was eventually imposed on the diverse landscape of schools, giving rise to a coherent schooling system (Müller 1987).

Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie increasingly saw modernity as artificial and immoral, and demanded an alternative, “natural” way of living oriented around the outdoors (Gerster 2020). Education being a market, schools responded. Private boarding schools were newly founded in or relocated to the countryside (Gerster 2020). This included some now well-known schools, such as Paul Geheeb’s Odenwaldschule, which started in 1910 as a progressive institution without grades (Shirley 1992). It also included Kurt Hahn’s Schule Schloss Salem, which was founded in 1920 to educate a new ruling elite emancipated from excess, the problem that Hahn attributed to Germany’s loss in World War One (Sandgren 2017). As a result, the education of the wealthy moved largely back into the private sector.

During the Third Reich, the government again moved to take over educational processes. Hitler wanted socialization happening not within the family but in youth groups and formal schooling where it could be controlled (Sandgren 2017; Roche 2016; 2022). He politicized education through textbooks that exposed students to racial “science” and antisemitism (Pine 2010). Hitler also created state-run boarding schools meant to train future leaders and members of the SS (Mueller 2021). Education in this era largely indoctrinated young Germans into a particular worldview that replaced individualism with obedience and democratic tendencies with fascism (Baldi 2012).

After the war, schools in West Germany came under the influence of the British and American military governments, which focused on transforming an “authoritarian” school culture into a “democratic” one (Levsen 2019). An emphasis on critical thinking and autonomy, as well as participation structures like student councils, was introduced into many schools and generally embraced by students (Puaca 2022). Although these foreign governments wanted to change what Hitler’s education system had taught, they also took advantage of his legacy of tight state control over educational institutions.

However, in part because of the enduring and complicated relationship with Hitler’s approach to schooling, these efforts at change became entwined with deep ideological divides over the role of the state and the role of the family in educational matters.⁴ Some saw such efforts as challenging the centrality of the family and undermining parental authority (Levsen 2019). One flashpoint in this tension was a debate in the 1970s over curriculum framework guidelines issued by state education ministries (*Rahmenrichtlinien*).⁵ Ostensibly about guidelines that incorporated ideas of democratization, critical thinking, and equal opportunity, it became a proxy war between those in favor of state control and those in favor of individual (parents and teacher) control over a child’s education (Beattie 1977).

4 Lillie (2022) reviews another type of change over time as an individual school evolved in parallel with global changes in order to continuously serve a shifting elite.

5 Another example was the debate around moving away from a tracking system to a comprehensive school model (*Gesamtschule*), an idea initially pushed for by the Allied military governments and then taken up by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD) (Mitter and Shaw 1991; Beattie 1977; Baldi 2012).

West Germany's educational model was expanded throughout the country after reunification in 1990 – and with it, an emphasis on state-run democratic schooling. This approach to education articulated an important legacy of the National Socialist era: a cultural aversion to the idea of an “elite” which implies that some are better than others (Deppe and Krüger 2016). Even seventy years later, the term “elite” has rarely made its way into the discourses of secondary school students, parents, or school professionals in Germany (H.-H. Krüger et al. 2014; Helsper et al. 2014; Deppe and Krüger 2016). Together, this educational model and cultural emphasis on egalitarianism created a strong historically informed normative understanding of public schooling as the preferred education system in Germany.

3 Legal bark or bite?

That normative understanding has been maintained over time at least partly by a legal tool, the *Sonderungsverbot* – roughly “ban on segregation” – which was written into the German constitution from 1949 (Art. 7 para. 4 sentence 3 of the Basic Law). It prohibits schools from selecting students based on the financial circumstances of their parents. The law was first debated in the “Committee for Fundamental Issues” and then later in the “Main Committee of the Parliamentary Council.” According to those debates, and on the heels of National Socialism, politicians wanted to ensure an education system that was democratic and just, and school choice that was socially responsible (Wagner et al. 1975). Importantly, the *Sonderungsverbot* does not ban private schooling as such; it only dictates how selection processes can work. Still, it has served to curb the development of private schools in comparison to England or Switzerland, which both take different legal approaches (Zymek 2015).

The extent to which the *Sonderungsverbot* is actually enforced has a lot to do with money. Starting in the 1980s, the German federal government's relative spending on education declined. Labor market reforms in 2002 then introduced austerity policies (Chih-Mei 2018), which intensified after the global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent triggering of the “debt brake” (*Schuldenbremse*) in 2009. This was not reformed until March 2025.

Limits on federal and state borrowing led to long-standing underinvestment in the education sector (Streeck and Mertens 2011). In 2024, Germany spent only 4.5 percent of its GDP on education – less than the OECD average and significantly less than neighboring France and the Netherlands (Lauter 2025). In practical terms, this has meant decreased funding per student, teacher shortages, insufficient equipment, and backlogs in school repairs and modernization (Porsch and Reintjes 2023; Krone and Scheller 2020). A 2014 survey of public opinion showed that over 80 percent of respondents

avored more public spending on education and 40 percent prioritized education over other public services such as health care and employment programs (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020).

School privatization thus becomes a way for state governments to relieve costs. Although states financially support the private schools they approve, this often (depending on the state) amounts to around 85 percent of the cost per student, with school fees generating the rest of the budget. In other words, the state “saves” 15 percent through private education (Lauter 2025).

This brings us back to the enforcement of the *Sonderungsverbot*. The German states, which are struggling to fund public education, are also tasked with investigating private schools’ compliance with the *Sonderungsverbot*. “Compliance” means whether those schools are indeed selecting students independently of their parents’ financial circumstances. For example, the Federal Administrative Court ruled in 2011 that sliding-scale fee models comply with the law.⁶ However, because there seems to be no case law addressing school fee limits, it is up to the individual states to decide which specific fee models comply (Haas 2019; Frenzel 2017; Helbig and Wrase 2017). Even if states were to strictly enforce compliance via fee models, there is still the issue of admissions processes focused on “fit” (Mohr 2019; Gibson, Helsper, and Kotzyba 2019; Bloch et al. 2019). At German boarding schools, for instance, this approach often leads to the intake of wealthy, conservative, business-owning families’ children (Gibson 2019; 2017; Deppe 2019). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that none of the German states seems to enforce the constitutional ban as written and none has a formal way to assess private schools’ compliance with the law (Helbig and Wrase 2017).

Still, the *Sonderungsverbot* has had a strong effect on public discourse. The question of private schools’ relationship to social class segregation has had a central place in both political debate and mainstream media (Haas 2019; Huemer and Swierczyna 2024; Grossarth-Maticek, Kann, and Koufen 2020). Most Germans (75 percent) do not want private schools to play a greater role in the education system, while the same percentage also believe that all families, independent of income, should be able to choose between public and private schooling (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020). What the law has perhaps most effectively achieved, then, is to signal the kind of education system that the German state *idealizes* – a public one.

6 Bundesverwaltungsgericht (BVerwG), ruling of December 14, 2011, case number 6 C 18.10.

4 Exercising choice

The signaling effect of the *Sonderungsverbot*, however, has recently come up against wealthy families' increased engagement with school choice. Such engagement seems to have been ignited in the early 2000s, when a few pivotal moments stoked fears that the German public education sector was not serving its children well (Koinzer and Gruehn 2013; Klein 2013; Ptak and Aghamiri 2013).

In 2001, the results of the first-ever OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study were published. Germany's below-average performance and strong correlation between socioeconomic background and academic outcomes led to what was referred to as the "PISA shock" and nationwide debate over the education system (Kusch 2011; Kerstan 2011; Böttcher 2014). Then, in 2002, austerity policies officially took hold, following decades of reduced relative spending on education starting in the 1980s – as previously discussed (Wahl 2013). Four years later, in 2006, teachers at the state-run *Rütli* school in Berlin wrote a public letter (known as the *Rütli-Brief*) describing conditions of violence, chaos, and disciplinary issues at their racially and economically diverse institution (Eggebrecht 2006). This again set off a debate about schooling, but one that intersected with other debates around immigration and social class (see, for example, *taz.de* 2007).⁷

These debates tapped into wealthy families' fears about not being able to control their children's education. Their fears were not about academic outcomes. In Germany, public schools outperform private schools academically when controlling for the socioeconomic composition of the student body (OECD 2023). Parents seemed to respond to this perceived lack of control by turning to school choice – which places a child's education within the realm of parental responsibility (Ball 2003a; Vincent 2017). Parents who have moved their children into the private education sector in Germany also themselves use the rhetoric of parental responsibility, framing their decision as a case of doing "the best" for their children (Ullrich and Strunck 2009; Klein 2013; M. Kraul 2015).

Yet, choosing the private sector is not without tensions. In one study, parents in Germany who enrolled their children in private schools claimed to have a responsibility to select the "best" school – but also to be committed to equality of opportunity (Breidenstein, Krüger, and Roch 2014; see also Ullrich and Strunck 2009). When it comes to a child's educational experience, then, parental duty seems to override ideological commitment. As Ball notes, parents are not required to show the same concern for others as they do for their own children – and so must "make decisions in a mass of contradictions which set pragmatism and love against principles" (Ball 2003a, 145).

7 A collection of statements, comments, interviews, and media reports can be found on the Deutscher Bildungsserver webpage (Deutscher Bildungsserver 2025).

Internal conflicts around the morality of activating school choice are not unique to Germany. Some middle-class families in France and the UK send their children to socioeconomically mixed local schools out of principle but still worry about whether their children are getting a good enough education (Raveaud and van Zanten 2007; Crozier et al. 2008). Some wealthy New Yorkers, on the other hand, might be ideologically committed to an economically mixed educational environment but still send their own children to an expensive private school (Sherman 2017). In Germany, wealthy young people sometimes start at public schools only to leave those schools for “bubbles of privilege” at private schools when their level of wealth makes social integration difficult (Gibson 2017; see also Maxwell and Aggleton 2010).

In other words, in taking control of their child’s education by claiming responsibility for it – and claiming it as their duty to choose the “best” educational institution – economically well-resourced families in Germany are tapping into moral tensions between what is best for an individual and what is best for society (Moor and Friedman 2021; Raveaud and van Zanten 2007; Crozier et al. 2008). When it comes to private education, those two things are at odds. In the UK, individual families shopping around for the “best” has created a private market that in turn sustains the advantages of the middle class as a whole (Ball 2003b; Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995; Ball and Vincent 1998). In other words, activating the private market on the individual level has detrimental effects on equality on the societal level.

5 Discussion

The German education sector has been shifting. Although this shift is another case of educational privatization since the 1980s, seemingly in parallel with neoliberal reforms elsewhere, it is importantly happening within a particular intersection of historically and legally informed educational norms of public schooling, on the one hand, and wealthy families’ engagement with school choice, on the other. That engagement is reshaping the normative framework through which particular schooling choices are seen as legitimate – a process that seems to represent a return to the past.

“Legitimacy” here refers to the taken-for-granted practices and beliefs of a society (Bourdieu 1990). Critically, though, Bourdieu argues that it is the practices and views of those in *dominant* positions that become the norm and therefore “legitimate.” He thus points to the social power structures not only implicated in but also maintained through norms. Bringing that lens to the German education context allows us to see private schooling as a practice both normalized by the wealthy and in their service.

And, in fact, privatization is part of the story of social class closure. This story has been theorized as a “wormhole” (Nespor 2014). The wormhole starts with the family, which

has a number of functions. Wealthy families socialize children into wealth, normalize aspirations to higher education as well as high-status and high-paying professions, and cultivate characteristics in their children such as ease, confidence, and entitlement to spaces of privilege that are seen as reflecting their socioeconomic position.

The next step is education. Wealthy families have high purchasing power in the education market as well as knowledge about that market through their social networks. They thus often opt for forms of schooling that they see as conferring qualifications, values, and knowledge that have high worth in society, and as building networks among children of similar economic backgrounds. Increasingly, this form of schooling is private schooling.

The last step of this pathway is a professional career. The “right” education presumably leads to a high-status and high-paying career.⁸ When the young people who followed this path then become parents themselves, they restart the cycle with the next generation. In this way, the wormhole is a mechanism for social class reproduction – and social class closure.

The social class closure that results from privatization, however, can also have the unintended effect of increasing social class anxiety by raising the education stakes (Ball 2003a). In other words, if privatization facilitates social class *reproduction* while also impeding social class *production* (because of the financial barriers to entry), choosing the “wrong” school puts reproduction at risk, in a moment when downward mobility is increasingly hard to recover from.

6 Conclusion

What are Germany’s options at this juncture? The future of the country’s schooling system may depend most heavily on future state actions. The state, for example, could flex its constitutional muscle and enforce compliance with the spirit of the *Sonderungsverbot*. This would probably slow – but not stop – the growth of private schools and, perhaps more importantly, send a strong signal about the kind of educational landscape that Germany aspires to. Or the state could choose to ignore developments and allow the private sector to evolve, perhaps with the justification that doing so reduces pressure on already stretched funding for the public sector.

Either way, it is important to acknowledge that some families already do and will presumably continue to circumvent the German state altogether. There is, for example, a trend among wealthy families of sending children to private schools abroad (Zymek

8 Importantly, this can be very gendered – see Lillie, de Alwis, and Tisch’s (2025) analysis in the US context.

2014). This is an attractive option in part because of opportunities to build international networks, cosmopolitan cultural capital, and foreign language skills (Ullrich 2014; J. Krüger, Roch, and Dean 2016; Keßler et al. 2015; see also Lillie 2021; Lillie and Maxwell 2024; Lillie 2024). Additionally, some schools abroad, particularly in the US or UK, offer a globally recognized educational “brand” that German schools lack (Zymek 2014). The option of going abroad, however, may not only confer status but also allow parents to sidestep the potential discomfort of having to make choices within the German education system.

Still, the question of state response to privatization is particularly relevant now. Germany’s center-right party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), won the national elections in February 2025. However, governments in Germany are coalitions, and the CDU reached an agreement to govern with the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD). When it comes to education, however, voter preferences between the two parties are rather different: CDU voters want more market-based educational governance, while SPD voters prefer a stronger role of the state (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020). Which educational direction this coalition will go in, then, remains unclear, but state governments may anyway prove more decisive than the federal one when it comes to education policy. What is clear, however, is that the recent rise of private schooling in Germany is not linked to reform – as in the UK, for instance (Reeves and Friedman 2024) – but instead has been facilitated by the non-intervention of state governments.

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