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Black lives Matter: On Racism and Political Correctness

Azmi Bishara

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I. On the History of Racism

After the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, demonstrations against anti-black racism spread like wildfire across the US. The entire scene of the policeman kneeling on Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes was broadcast across the media. Floyd's last words, "I Can't Breathe," served as a metaphor for the protesters to express a buried cumulative feeling of suffocation and as a slogan to lead the marches around the United States and some Western European countries.

Racism has a long history that has intersected with colonialism and slavery in the past. From the outset, it has interacted with the older tendency to attribute genetic characteristics to the class differences between aristocratic families and the general public in colonial countries. The nineteenth century saw a trend of using pseudo-scientific methods to explain the relationship between the physical structure of human groups and the personal characteristics of their members, intellectual abilities, morals and culture.

The American doctor Samuel George Morton (1799-1851), who specialized in the "scientific" practice of measuring skull size, is considered the founder of the "American School" of ethnography focused on race (descriptive ethnography). He collected human skulls from different regions of the world and categorized them according to the size of the brain. Morton theorized that the white "race" (or Caucasian as he called it) was superior to others in terms of intellectual capacity based on the cranial cavities in the brain, while black Africans were inferior, and Indians and other groups were somewhere in the middle. He decided, based on his analysis of the pharaonic mummy skull, that the Pharaohs belonged to this "white race," unable to conceive that the people who created such magnificent architecture could be black Africans. His work was preceded by the development of this purported science by European scientists and doctors, and these pseudo-scientists were boosted by Darwinism, and later from social Darwinism. It can be said in this context that the emergence of ethnography as a discipline was a direct effect of that pseudo-scientific trend to justify racism and control the other. Ethnography only broke free of this trend after undergoing a critical scientific revolution following its enrichment from history and social sciences.

Although racism is a modern term and stems from the notion of race, it is not the only source of cultural and social racism. Negative attitudes or opinions about entire human groups existed in colonial culture, not only before the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, but even before the European discovery of America. Communities in ancient civilizations held a fear of the other ranging from apprehension and suspicion to demonization. When apprehension of the other is accompanied by organizational and technical military superiority to the point of one group's subjugation of another, the tendency to justify the subjugation process with claims of superiority in contrast to the inferiority of the other arise. Likewise comes the tendency to link this superiority and inferiority to visible differences in the external appearance, or to cultural or religious differences. Slavery itself, especially that associated with wartime defeat, is much older than the modern racism associated with ideas of racial inferiority. There were black and white slaves, and slavery was often a result of defeat. In the past, people and tribes with much more developed civilizations were enslaved by those who defeated them in the war.

Pseudo-scientific justification provided the foundations for racist ideologies in the era of secularism and rationalism in the form of a theoretically adaptable ideology or belief, and this ideology played a dangerous role in modern history. There is no doubt that it affected political and military leaders and settlers in the age of exploration and conquest. However, the attitudes of large sectors of society about the “otherness of the other” (curiosity, willingness to communicate, and coexisting with the other in contrast to apprehension or demonization), whether stemming from skin colour, language, religion or simply strangeness, did not arise as a result of these pseudo-scientific theories. Many people held these attitudes towards the physically, religiously, ethnically, or even tribally different before these theories gained popularity and they maintained them after they fell out of fashion.

The upper classes in the colonizing countries readily accepted the idea of their own superiority over the colonized peoples. The belief in their superiority over the general population in their own country was already widespread in those circles that considered the general population hereditarily incapacitated and ignorant, so that reproduction by marriage among themselves enshrined these traits. The European aristocracy was certain that a different blood was secreted from its veins, and that their aristocratic lineage provided a natural justification for their power and wealth. On the other hand, the common people recruited to fight in the colonies accepted the idea that the colonized were inferior to them because of the same hierarchy, and because the dehumanization of the colonized endowed them with the privilege of superiority and put them in the same position as their own aristocracy. This happened before the rise of nationalism and the idea of all classes belonging to the same nation, and the emphasis on the difference between nations rather than between nobles and commoners.

There are multiple examples of human ability to absorb preconceived notions of the other by making ignorant assumptions. All of them are derived from generalizations that are already based on the assumption that there is an “essence” or “quality” intrinsic to a particular human group, whether this group is composed of black people, or followers of a different religion, or a different ethnicity/nation and so on. These tendencies can generally be grouped under “Essentialism”, which links the endless qualities of individuals in a group back to a presumed essence that unites them, as if their characteristics are derived from it.

John Locke (1632-1704), one of the most important European Enlightenment philosophers and fathers of liberalism, justified slavery by claiming that the enslaved did not know how to appropriately use and cultivate their land and had failed to produce private property, in the same way they had lost in a “just war”. The solution to enslave instead of killing them seemed to him a fair trade-off.⁽¹⁾ Long before that, it was believed in ancient Greece that some people were slaves and some masters by nature, as noted by Aristotle in his book *Politics*. Slavery existed all around the world, in ancient civilizations, as well as in the Middle Ages, including in Arab and Muslim countries. Another aspect of slavery in the Arab and Muslim context was that many slaves were brought in during the Abbasid era for the purpose of military service and managed to reach high ranks and gain political power.

1 John Locke, “The Second Treatise of Government,” in: John Locke, *Two Treatise of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro (ed.) (New Haven, CT/ London: Yale University Press), pp. 110 - 116.



Slaves were also integrated into the highest ranks of the army and administration in the Ottoman Sultanate following the formation of the Janissaries and the Sultan's guards from white slaves made up of children from the Balkans and other countries. What distinguishes modern slavery in America is its relationship to settler colonialism, and its ties to racist ideology and the idea of the inferior race.

At the beginning of the Renaissance, racism secularized the negative religious position towards the other based on differences in religious belief by transforming it into to a position explained by inherent qualities that cannot be changed with beliefs. The motivation for this was to justify the sceptical stance towards Jews and Muslims who converted to Christianity following the expulsion of their communities from the Iberian Peninsula after the Reconquista war, a position that held for several generations out of fear that their descendants would reach high positions in the state or church. It had to therefore be assumed that there are fixed genetic elements in them that do not change by changing the creed. In Spain and Portugal, blood purity certificates were known before the emergence of the racist pseudo-scientific theories that went so far as to require certificates to prove whiteness in America after generations of its occupation.⁽²⁾

The “discovery of America” and the shock of learning of the existence of peoples in this world not mentioned in the Book of Genesis, or the Old Testament in general, led to the adoption of the idea of the existence of sub-human beings that resemble but do not qualify as humans, who can thus be treated like other wild game. Some colonists found their goal in the “theory” of the Calvinist Protestant philosopher, Isaac la Peyrère (1676-1596), on pre-Adamites, according to which the Torah only narrated the story of the Jews and did not tell the story of the humans who lived before Adam and Eve; that is, those who lived in a natural state of bestiality.

In South and Central America, a conflict between the Dominican monks and the racist occupiers who denied the humanity of the indigenous people gained infamy. In 1550, a public debate spread between the Catholic monk Bartolomé de Las Casas (1566-1484), who affirmed the humanity of the indigenous people, and hence the necessity of preaching Christianity (and not respecting their beliefs, for example) like other human beings, and Juan Sepulveda (1489-1573), who edited Aristotle's book *Politics*, based his position on the old Aristotelian view that there are human beings who are naturally slaves because they are only able to use their bodies.⁽³⁾

Two centuries later, a scientist who was considered a European expert and reference on American affairs in the eighteenth century (without even visiting America), Dutch Protestant philosopher Cornelius de Pauw (1799-1739) returned to this position. He criticized the Catholic Church's attempt to preach to the Native Americans as human beings and considered them neither evil nor good because they are not human beings to begin with.⁽⁴⁾ He argued that they were ethnically inferior to

² Richard Popkin, “The Philosophical Basis of Racism,” in: Richard Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, Richard A. Watson & James E. Force (eds.) (IndianaPolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), pp. 79 - 80.

³ Angel Losada, “The Controversy between Sepuvelda and Las Casas in the Junta of Valladolid,” in: *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and his Work*, Juan Friede & Benjamin Keen (eds.) (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp. 279 - 309.

⁴ Henry Steele Commager & Elmo Giordanetti, *Was America a Mistake? An Eighteenth-Century Controversy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 90.

the inhabitants of Europe because of the accumulated influence of climate and geography.⁵ Here enslavement was dressed in a “scientific” costume with what appeared to be a departure from good and evil, supposedly using scientific measurements and avoiding value judgments.

Those who have perpetrated some of the most horrific crimes the world has seen believed that what they were doing could not be classified as good or evil, either because they believed that their work was simply a job and the implementation of orders, and that they do not make decisions concerning the morality of the work or because the actions seemed logical and beyond the realm of morality, or because the victims of their orders were, in their eyes, sub-human, no moral standards or values of good and evil were required of them.

Europeans lived in the colonial climate for centuries without it affecting them physically or mentally and a debate arose that called these theories into question. At the time one of the most famous scholars of the age, a professor of medicine and botany at Uppsala University, Carl Linnaeus (1778-1707), developed a theory on the relationship between skin colour, facial features, hair type and eye colour and the ability to organize society. He divided races according to emotional and intellectual disposition, classifying them as “sanguine”, “phlegmatic” or “choleric”, and classified certain kinds of ape as close to humans before Darwin ever did.

After these pseudo-scientific “theories” harnessed the tools of natural sciences, the philosophy of history came to classify peoples according to how much progress they had or had not made with Hegel coming to argue that there are peoples without history. The spirit of history in his opinion was impeded in Africa and for the Native Americans and Inuits by the extremely hot and cold regions, leaving these groups restrained by the fetters of nature, unable to participate in the march of human progress in history.⁶ The historicism of the philosophy of history leaked into the other social sciences in the nineteenth century, replacing the “spirit of history” with that of the spirit of people, nation, class, elite or race before being liberated by the epistemological revolution from that belief that appeared scientific because it is consistent within a coherent philosophical system.

Scientists who tried to categorize personality, including intelligence, inclination towards violence, and proximity to bestiality or humanity, according to skull size or nose and jawbone width and other measurements, believed that they were making discoveries according to a strict scientific method. In reality, they derived psychological, cultural, and moral qualities from what they considered to be a fixed substance. Some may still believe such myths, thinking that they are scientific, but the wider scientific community has completely denounced their credibility. These “theories” became embarrassing for those who believed them, especially after their catastrophic exploitation by the Nazi racial ideology when the racist theories of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) were taken up by Nazi theorists from the sort of Alfred Rosenberg (1893-1946) in his 1930 book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*.

5 The “rational” judgments about the relationship between physical characteristics and their effect on the mind, soul and natural climate are not new; they can be found in the work of Montesquieu and other Enlightenment thinkers, just as Muslim travelers have linked the characteristics of people with their natural environment.

6 I have previously touched upon the above topic under the secularization of racism, and references to this information are available in: Azmi Bishara, *Ad-Din wa'l-'Ilmaniyya fi Siyaq Tarikhi* [Religion and Secularism in a Historical Context], pt. 2, vol. 1: *al-'Ilmaniyya wa'l-'Almana: as-Sayrura al-Fikriyya* [Secularism and Secularisation: The Intellectual Process]. (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015). pp. 478 - 489.



The leaders of the Nazi Party and Hitler himself were declared advocates of the hierarchical ideology that ranked humans from Aryan at the highest to black Africans at the lowest level, while the Jews are the lowest of the lowest as they are considered to be a mixture of races polluting Europe. The Slavs were considered to be inferior to the Aryan race to justify Nazi expansion policies. Of course, they believed every impressive ancient civilization, whether in ancient Egypt or Persia, to have been founded by communities close to the Aryan race, their collapse the result of Aryans mixing with the local population and thus contaminating their pure lineage. Ensuring the purity of race became a goal of social engineering in the Nazi state. But they showed pragmatic flexibility, so they were ready to adjust the hierarchy for Slavs who allied themselves to the Nazis so they were considered superior to others. All of this collapsed spectacularly at the end of the Second World War and holding such views became no longer acceptable in universities or among the European and American elites. But this did not mean the death of racism.

Discrimination against the other has taken many forms, and in this sense racism in the broadest sense of the word was not born of a pseudo-scientific race theory; it existed without theories and thus did not end with them. Other non-biological “essences” replaced race in the new stereotyping and discrimination that continued to be called racism, but without the idea of race. While the mention of races became unacceptable, talking about cultures, religions, mindsets and mentalities as fixed essences remains acceptable, and it is still possible to take a position on groups according to their supposed religion, culture or mentality, and anticipate the characteristics of the individual, their morals, temperament and functional competence based on their belonging to a particular group.

It became possible for anti-black racists to claim that the stereotypes they held were not due to skin colour but rather to their violence or laziness and unwillingness to work, and other generalizations assuming some other variable to replace colour. Racists began to rely on statistics to prove they had low motivation, desire to progress, or educational attainment compared to other groups in society. These opinions are usually applied to compare individuals, as if one is less rational in his act than the other because of their belonging to a certain group, without taking into account social factors such as the differences in their social background or their environment.

A racist can claim that they are not a racist by making exceptions for some black people, including some of the ones they work with. The modern racist claims to be against any discrimination including affirmative action. Racists chanted “All Lives Matter” in response to the “Black Lives Matter” slogan of the demonstrations following Floyd’s killing, but what this really means is that black lives do not matter; black lives are not worthy of the spotlight, even if it is black people who are killed by the police because of their skin colour. This is a reminder of when some people (including activists and leftists) equally belittled the struggle for women’s equality with men, refusing to single out women’s rights on the pretext that there is no equality in these societies between men too.



II. Concerning the Struggle against Racism

Just as racism has a history, the movement against it has a history as well, intersecting with the struggle against colonialism all over the world and against other types of identity discrimination. In the United States, the fight against racism has long been detached from the struggle to expand women's suffrage and equality with men, and other struggles within white society before these struggles interacted under the framework of citizenship. The United States is a special case among democratic countries in which the enslavement of Africans and their descendants lasted for a long time and where slave owners resisted change for a long time, fighting to defend what they considered their property and to preserve "their way of life". Racism remained institutionalised and a part of the culture of many people for a long time.

Slavery differs from other forms of racial discrimination because it simply denies that the enslaved is a human being. It deprives a person of their humanity by converting them into a commodity that is sold, bought, and used as either field or houseslaves.

What distinguished white settlement in North and South America is the use of huge numbers of slaves in agricultural work on huge plantations that required extensive hard labour to yield profits from. The industrial bourgeoisie in Western Europe and North America were not guiltless in this system; the textile and other industries benefited from the crops that were produced by enslaved peoples on these farms. But ultimately, the political, economic, and moral contradiction with slavery arose within the democratic system, and the state imposed its authority over the southern states by force after a bloody civil war. But the formal end of slavery was by no means the last of the matter.

Changing the system of slavery began with its criminalization but racism cannot be eliminated by enacting laws, but rather through interaction between the necessities of modern life and the values of equality, education for citizenship and the freedoms upon which liberal democracy is based, and the struggle for equality and political rights.

This continued for a century after formal liberation from slavery. Legal segregation was practiced in the south while black people were often socially segregated elsewhere justified by the principle of "Separate but equal." Black Americans have long suffered the effects of poverty and marginalization and made countless sacrifices in the struggle against racism following the abolition of slavery. There is no doubt that individual perseverance and the struggle of individual citizens to obtain their rights using the tools available to them within the democratic framework, and the civil rights movement led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) as well as more radical movements whose contributions are currently underappreciated combined with the solidarity of associations, institutions and white citizens, have accomplished much in the meantime. Baptist churches also contributed to the struggle for equality, where black people found refuge after being stripped of their culture, indigenous religions and languages. Some had faith that the teachings of Christianity could be a common language with whites well before the American Constitution.



With the advancement of equality before the law, a middle class developed that could benefit from this progression and from the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of race in employment and so forth. Affirmative action in some areas led to hiring in institutions where black representation was low.

Despite formal legal equality, the “equality of opportunities” promised by liberalism (as an alternative to the full social equality proposed by socialism) is yet to be achieved. There is still a huge gap between the socio-economic opportunities (including educational and health conditions) from birth. Legal equality without social policies in favour of historically vulnerable groups perpetuates rather than bridges the social divide. This has become the subject of endless theories about how to achieve justice within a liberal democratic system, mistakenly understood as universal theories of justice.⁽⁷⁾ Large groups of black Americans continue to suffer the socio-economic effects of racial discrimination through low income, widespread poverty and unemployment, poor health, high crime rates, and as the recipients of police brutality. To overcome the centuries old legacy of racial discrimination the state must intervene in creating access to equality in the social base of individuals in order for opportunities to actually be equally available. But the United States is not a welfare state but rather an economically liberal state based on a prevailing culture of work, competition and the glorification of individual success. According to this culture, state welfare has come to be considered a free ride which has trapped black Americans in a lower socio-economic position.

The path of development is long and winding, and what appears to be a step backwards is often in fact a step towards progress. The trajectory is generally moving in the direction of overcoming more areas of discrimination against black people and the principle of equality is gaining traction in other areas where racism is still tolerated. Black Americans have gradually gained access to all institutions and sectors of life, from sports and the arts to university, military, judiciary, politics. In each of these areas there are stories, symbols, and heroes.

There are well-known articulated events that represent milestones in this struggle, such as the protests against police brutality after the killing of Floyd. Before that in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on the bus, then Martin Luther King’s speech in Montgomery, Alabama on 25 March 1965, and the first city to have mixed education in the south, the appointment of a biracial chief of staff in the US Army (Colin Powell, 1989), and the election of the first black (biracial) president. These are all major events that have become symbols of civil rights equality spreading. The representative symbol often overrides the reality that it seeks to represent. The presence of a black man at the head of the US army did not eradicate discrimination against black people, nor did a black president. In fact, the latter avoided appearing overly concerned with black issues fearing that he would not appear to be a president for all Americans. Did the first black president benefit the rights of black Americans as a whole, beyond the extremely important historic achievement of winning elections? Singer Harry Belafonte’s claim that Colin Powell remained a slave, a house slave that serves his white master, still resonate with many.

⁷ As in the case of John Rawls (1921-2002), Ronald Dworkin (1931-2013) and others who have proposed models for justice in a liberal democratic framework and not theories of universal philosophical justice.

It is clear that the pattern of human rights for black people is an integrative trend in the American nation. They demand full equality on the basis of citizenship, and not on the basis of ethnic, religious, cultural or other characteristics. The conversation here is not about cultural pluralism and collective rights, but rather about their being an integral part of the American nation. Their demands do not include recognition of a language and culture, but recognition of and respect for the history of their suffering and for their memory in the context of the desire for full integration into American life.

Thus, the appointment of the first black chief of staff and the first black female judge were considered achievements. This does not mean that racism was eradicated from the judiciary, the White House, or the other areas that had already been accessed. Many dark corners remained untouched by equality. Black people have long been recruited to the police force with some becoming high-ranking officers, department heads, prosecutors, and sheriffs, but anti-black racism in the police has remained among the most prominent of these dark corners. This racism is especially important because of the perceived high crime rates within the black community for previously explained socio-economic reasons.

But racists interpret high crime rates as an expression of a fixed temperament in black people, even if the source is social, not organic. This means that every black young man can be criminalised. It is common for officers to not only be more suspicious of black people and quicker to arrest them, but to also use a greater degree of violence during the arrest and for tougher penalties to be handed out to black people in court. This racist structure is sufficiently flexible to elicit violent, racist actions by black officers and prosecutors who take out their anger on the black people they perceive as lazy, those who do not work or on those who are violent by nature.

Just as the crime rate is perceived to be higher among black people, racism among the police force is higher than that of other social and professional sectors.⁽⁸⁾ This is not only because of the cultural and educational background of police officers, but also because the police instinctively tend to generalize and categorize people within their means of control, in addition to embodying the legitimate violence of the state. This violence can easily become abuse in the case of an outright racist or a weak personality seeking to prove his manhood, or even a black officer who wants to fit in with their white colleagues. This abuse becomes institutionalized in the absence of oversight over the police use of force, the lack of accountability for law enforcement in general, the lack of legal follow-up, and corporate solidarity preventing colleagues from being held to account when they abuse their power.

⁸ For example, according to a poll carried out a month before George Floyd's killing, polls indicated that the majority of Americans (78%) have confidence in the police, but only 56% of black people expressed confidence, with this percentage even lower among black youth. The ratios are similar when respondents evaluate the ethical standards of law enforcement; the majority of Americans evaluated them highly, in contrast to only about half of black people, with the lowest numbers found in black youth. Various statistics show the differences in the police and judicial system's treatment of black and white Americans. Although the number of white Americans killed by the police from 2015 to June 12, 2020 (2,473 killed) is twice that of black Americans (1,296), the rate of fatalities scaled to population size is wildly disproportionate. White fatalities at the hands of the police represent an average of 13 deaths per million (out of 197 million), compared to 31 per million black Americans (out of 42 million). In addition, black Americans represent a disproportionate number of prisoners in the US. According to the US Department of Justice statistics office in 2018, it was found that 32.9% of the prison population is black while they are just 12.3% of the overall population. On the other hand, the percentage of white prisoners reached 30.4 percent, although their percentage of American society exceeds 60 percent. Furthermore, black men between the ages of 18 and 19 are about 13 times more likely to be imprisoned than their white counterparts, and in total, black men of all ages are nearly 6 times more likely to be imprisoned than their white peers, not to mention the unequal treatment of black Americans in the justice system. Black Americans are more likely to be arrested on much higher drug charges than white Americans, despite drug use rates being very similar. In addition, the likelihood of refusing bail is higher for black people, and they are more likely to face more severe charges and sentences for similar crimes.



Partially documenting the cases of police killings of black people following Barack Obama's election, begins on 30 December 2008, when a white Texan police officer shot a black man named Robbie Tolan, after he mistakenly calculated he was driving a stolen car as a result of the officer incorrectly recording the car number. In May 2010, the court reached a decision to acquit the officer.⁽⁹⁾

That incident was followed by the murder of Oscar Grant, who was just 22 years old, on 1 January 2009. A policeman shot him in the back, despite another policeman having cuffed him and him not carrying any weapons. The police only opened a full investigation into the incident after a video spread weeks later documenting Oscar's death. The policeman was punished with only two years' imprisonment based on his lack of intent to kill. The jury described the accident tragic. In 2019, ten years after the incident, reports issued under the Transparency Act showed that the policeman's statement about the incident was false.⁽¹⁰⁾ In both cases, Obama, who was a newly elected president and had not yet been inaugurated, made no statement.⁽¹¹⁾

The young Trayvon Martin was killed in Florida in February 2012 after an argument with George Zimmerman – a neighbourhood guard of Hispanic ancestry – because he thought Martin looked out of place, despite the fact that he was not carrying a weapon. In July 2013, a jury found Zimmerman not guilty, leading to a massive wave of anti-racist protests and the establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement. Obama held a meeting with Democratic and Republican decision-makers to discuss how best to reform criminal justice. On 14 July – after Zimmerman was declared innocent – he released a written statement saying that “we are a nation of laws, and a jury has spoken”, calling for calm. He asked citizens whether they were “doing all we can to widen the circle of compassion and understanding in our own communities ... doing all we can to stem the tide of gun violence, and proclaimed that all individuals should ask themselves “how we can prevent future tragedies like this”.⁽¹²⁾

On 17 July 2014, Eric Garner was killed in a very similar incident during a police arrest. Garner did not resist arrest, but the police officer nonetheless put him in a chokehold, threw him to the ground and crushed his windpipe with his foot. Garner shouted “I can't breathe” eleven times before dying. Garner's death and the dissemination of video footage of the arrest was followed by protests in many US states, with a second wave following a court decision not to charge the police officer in December 2014.⁽¹³⁾ This time Obama said only that “this is an American problem,

9 Ed Lavandera, “Questions Surround Shooting of Baseballer's Son,” *CNN*, 8/1/2009, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://cnn.it/2Y0Eu3v>; Cameron Langford, “Police Shooting Trial Ends with Surprise Settlement,” *Courthouse News Service*, 15/9/2015, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2YBTeV5>; James C. McKinley Jr., “Texas Officer Is Acquitted in Shooting,” *The New York Times*, 11/5/2010, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/3e2M8Qt>

10 Demian Bulwa, “BART's Shooting Probe Missteps,” *San Francisco Gate*, 30/1/2020, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2AsXoHo>; Sam Levin, “Officer Punched Oscar Grant and Lied about Facts in 2009 Killing, Records Show,” *The Guardian*, 2/5/2019, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2UMBmpY>; Dakin Andone & Marlena Baldacci, “Officer Instigated then Lied about Actions that Led to Shooting Death of Oscar Grant, Report Says,” *CNN*, 4/5/2019, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://cnn.it/2MWicJP>

11 Fredrick Harris, *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and Rise and Decline of Black Politics* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 174.

12 Wesley Lowery, “Trayvon Martin was shot and killed three years ago today,” *Washington Post*, 26/2/2015 accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://wapo.st/37tjfkC>; Leo Benedictus, “How Skittles became a symbol of Trayvon Martin's innocence,” *The Guardian*, 15/7/2013, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3hqA4KN>; “Statement by the President,” *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, 14/7/2013, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3fqzdc>

13 Joseph Goldstein and Marc Santora, “Staten Island Man Died From Chokehold During Arrest, Autopsy Finds,” *The New York Times*, 1/8/2014, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/2Y1i4yS>; Vivian Ho, Peter Fimrite and Kale Williams, “Oakland, S.F. protesters denounce police killing of Eric Garner,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3/12/2014, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3e4La62>

and not just a black problem or a brown problem or a Native American problem”.⁽¹⁴⁾ After broad criticism, he said that he was the president of all Americans and not only black Americans. But despite his claim that it was an all-American problem, Obama took no steps to challenge it in this statement. He could have treated it seriously enough to produce positive results for US society as a whole and black Americans in particular. He refrained from granting black Americans the protection of the presidency.

On 9 August 2014, the eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson after a verbal exchange with a police officer. He had his hands up, but the officer nonetheless fired off a total of twelve shots; ten of which were fired when Brown fled after the officer threatened shooting him, and two at the beginning of the confrontation when the police officer was still in his car. Violent protests broke out after Brown’s death, accompanied by the slogan “Hands up, don’t shoot”. Obama called on the protesters to calm down and turn their anger in a constructive direction, telling them that violent protest was not the solution. He also said that all Americans had to accept the court’s decision to find the officer innocent, because “We are a nation based on the rule of law so we need to accept that this was the special jury’s decision to make.”⁽¹⁵⁾

On 22 November 2014, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was shot by a police officer in Ohio while playing with a toy pistol in a public park. When he refused to put down the pistol the police officer opened fire. The incident was caught on video but the officer was still found innocent on the grounds that it was difficult to distinguish a toy pistol from a real one. The jury described the incident as a human mistake and stated that the evidence did not suggest any criminal behaviour on the part of the police.⁽¹⁶⁾

On 5 July 2015, Alton Sterling was killed in Louisiana. A video showing two officers opening fire after one of them had already used a taser on Sterling led once again to massive protests. One of the officers was fired for violating procedure on the use of force. The other was suspended for three days. Yet again, Obama described the incident as an American problem and called the people to work together to solve it. He reaffirmed his faith in the US judicial system.⁽¹⁷⁾ A short time later, on 17

14 Tanya Somanader, “President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Grand Jury Decision in the Death of Eric Garner,” *The White House*, 3/12/2014, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/30GPUej>

15 Elliott C. McLaughlin, “Despite discrepancies, Dorian Johnson consistent in accounts of Brown shooting,” *CNN*, 16/12/2014, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://cnn.it/3hpM7YS>; Rachel Clarke and Mariano Castillo, “Michael Brown shooting: What Darren Wilson told the Ferguson grand jury,” *CNN*, 26/11/2014, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://cnn.it/2UM1kK5>; Jon Swaine, Paul Lewis and Dan Roberts, “Grand jury decline to charge Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown,” *The Guardian*, 25/11/2014, accessed on 14/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3dYDEd3>

16 Elahe Izadi and Peter Holley, “Video shows Cleveland officer shooting 12-year-old Tamir Rice within seconds,” *The Washington Post*, 27/11/2014, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://wapo.st/3d4S22b>; Ashley Fantz, Steve Almasy and Catherine E. Shoichet, “Tamir Rice shooting: No charges for officers,” *CNN*, 29/12/2015, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://cnn.it/2Y6OpEO>

17 Ashley Cusick, Abigail Hauslohner and Sarah Larimer, “‘Murder, plain and simple’: Grief in Baton Rouge days after Alton Sterling shooting,” *The Washington Post*, 8/7/2016, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://wapo.st/2UOBFJF>; Jason Hanna “No charges against officers in Alton Sterling death; other videos are coming,” *CNN*, 27/3/2018 accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://cnn.it/2Ba81ig>; Nora Kelly Lee, “President Obama: ‘This is an American Issue That We Should All Care About,’” *The Atlantic*, 7/7/2016, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3d5noph>



July 2015, a white nationalist opened fire at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine black American members of the congregation. This produced a mass public response.⁽¹⁸⁾

Under Trump, whose presidency began in 2017, more than 700 black Americans have been killed by the police.⁽¹⁹⁾

On 29 April 2017, Jordan Edwards was shot in the head in Dallas, Texas. The officer claimed that the car that he was driving was reversing towards the officer in an “aggressive manner”. But video footage showed that the opposite was true and that the officer had fired on a car that was “moving forward as the officers approached”.⁽²⁰⁾

On 18 March 2018, 22 year-old Stephon Clark was killed in California after police fired on him twenty times in his grandmother’s backyard. One of the officers claimed that they had feared for their lives and believed that Clark was armed, but in fact he was only holding a mobile phone. Video footage of Clark shouting “don’t shoot, it’s a cell phone” led to more protests and a new slogan. On 2 March 2019, it was announced that the officers would not face any charges because the facts did not suggest that they had committed a criminal act.⁽²¹⁾

On 28 March 2019 Javier Ambler was killed as police officers chased him down over a minor traffic violation. Ambler had failed to dim his headlights. Video footage from police documents published later showed that Ambler had not resisted and had told them that he had congestive heart failure, but that officers had nonetheless forcibly restrained him. After they tased him a total of four times, he told them that he could not breathe before dying.⁽²²⁾

On 13 March 2020, Kentucky emergency room technician Breonna Taylor was killed when the police raided her house without warning as they had a “no-knock warrant”. Officers were looking for a man wanted in connection with drugs crimes. Taylor was shot no less than eight times, but her case only led to protests much later, when the FBI began looking into it.⁽²³⁾

Later, shortly after the George Floyd incident, the police shot and killed Rayshard Brooks in a fast food outlet car park. The police had a call that a man (Brooks), who was asleep in his car, had blocked the flow of traffic in the restaurant’s drive-thru lane. After failing a sobriety test he attempted to

18 Nick Corasaniti, Richard Pérez-Peña and Lizette Alvarez, “Church Massacre Suspect Held as Charleston Grieves,” *The New York Times*, 18/6/2015, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/3hski2b>; Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “The Charleston Shooting is the Largest Mass Shooting in a House of Worship since 1991,” *The Washington Post*, 18/6/2015, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://wapo.st/3e5AyE5>

19 “Fatal Force 2017,” *The Washington Post*, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://wapo.st/3e7qbjc>; “Fatal Force 2018,” *The Washington Post*, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://wapo.st/3hz6ItZ>; “Fatal Force 2019,” *The Washington Post*, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://wapo.st/37w40Ri>

20 Liam Stack and Christine Hauser, “Police Account Changes in Killing of Texas 15-Year-Old,” *The New York Times*, 1/5/2017, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/3d9WRaq>

21 “Stephon Clark: Protests over police shooting shut NBA arena,” *BBC*, 23/3/2018, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://bbc.in/30MCNsi>; Jose A. Del Real, “No Charges in Sacramento Police Shooting of Stephon Clark,” *The New York Times*, 2/3/2019, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/2YBoFiF>

22 The Associated Press, “Body Camera: Dying Man Pleads ‘Save Me’ During Taser Arrest,” *The New York Times*, 9/6/2020, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/2YD8SJA>

23 Richard A. Oppel Jr. and Derrick Bryson Taylor, “Here’s What You Need to Know About Breonna Taylor’s Death,” *The New York Times*, 5/6/2020, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/30NG9eC>

escape; officers chased him down before tasing and shooting him. A video of the incident led to more major protests in which some protesters set fire to the fast food outlet.⁽²⁴⁾

This battle against racism is real. Floyd provided it with the spark needed to set off a modern uprising. All the ingredients were there in the dramatic and affecting video clip. What distinguishes Floyd from other recent victims of the police is this film clip, which captures all the events leading to his death and up to the moment when he died, that captures the calm of the police officer standing on his throat, who fails to show any expression appropriate to what he is doing. The increasing violence of police against black people, the presence of a president whose open racism is producing more and more opposition (as opposed to the previous president, who told victims to calm down despite his sympathy for their cause on other occasions described by some as opportunistic), and the difficult economic circumstances after COVID-19 also contributed. Trump has praised and defended white-nationalist movements more than once. Their numbers have increased by 55% under the Trump presidency.⁽²⁵⁾ He has shown contempt for black people's lives. And it seems that "long ago", he and his father even refused to rent apartments to black people (this is without going into his other traits which have been much discussed elsewhere).⁽²⁶⁾

This struggle will continue and take on new dimensions. The BLM movement and other civil rights and democratic movements in the US will not miss any opportunity to put police violence against black Americans back on the news agenda. And they are inspiring others to fight against racism in other parts of the world.

III: A note on political correctness

It is worth pointing out that most of the protests outside the US are happening in democratic countries. Despotic countries stained by racism are not seeing similar protests, or are not allowing them to take place – aside from the fact that they do not accept that they have racism to start with. Some despotic regimes that kill without accountability, torture their citizens in prisons without oversight or legal limit, are brazenly using events in the US to expose once more what they call "the false claims of Western democracy".

In the Far East, where race theory found some hosts in the past, national chauvinism is reaching remarkable heights, but it is incontestable in the public sphere. In Myanmar racial and religious "cleansing" and repression has targeted the Rohingya in a country headed by a former opposition figure who has won the Nobel Peace Prize and the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. India has seen a rise in racism against Muslims, while China's actions against Uyghurs are only discussed

24 Artemis Moshtagian, Jay Croft, Paul P. Murphy, Kelly McCleary and Amir Vera, "Atlanta officer who fatally shot Rayshard Brooks has been terminated," *CNN*, 5/6/2020, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://cnn.it/2N0TVCP>

25 Rosie Gray, "Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protesters: 'Some Very Fine People on Both Sides,'" *The Atlantic*, 15/8/2017, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3forLNG>; Jason Wilson, "White nationalist hate groups have grown 55% in Trump era, report finds," *The Guardian*, 18/3/2020, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/37ycc3r>

26 Tony Schwartz, "The Psychopath in Chief," *Medium*, 28/5/2020, accessed on 15/6/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2YG07VW>



outside China. We have seen how Syrian refugees have been “welcomed” in former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and the mutual discrimination between different ethnic groups in these same countries has been the subject of much research. In the Arab Mashreq there is religious or sectarian incitement, and it is not at all surprising when a preacher in a mosque rails against non-Muslims generally. And in some sectors of society it is still common to look down on those with dark skin.

The battle against racism outside the US is centred on the countries of Western Europe not only because of their colonial history but also because of the entirely different expectations that people have of democratic regimes. The child of an immigrant in a Western European country expects to enjoy their rights in full. They expect to receive an apology for the state’s treatment of their parents and its policies in their once-colonised homeland. This is because they have grown up under a legal system and prevailing political and civil culture that encourage them to expect equality from state and society and to hold them to account when reality falls short of expectations.

Over the last three decades there have been major advances in individual rights in the West, with the rights of women and racism against black people in the US front and centre. Liberal sections of society were quick to make this issue part of their struggle against conservative forces. And a new generation of conservatives did not take long to accommodate to the achievements of civil rights and move on to new issues: most conservative politicians now contend that everyone should have the same civil and political rights. Recognition of the rights of women and black people soon became, in their eyes, part of Western liberal culture (irrespective of the fact that it was never part of this culture historically), and they remained keen on preserving the power of the US and its “historical message” in the world (in this sense Trump is not a neoconservative nor a simple conservative but rather a right-populist of a different kind).

Modern conservatives are different from older conservatives in that they are more accepting of the idea of individual rights and more opposed to discrimination on the basis of sex, race etc. But they only accept equality on the basis of integration – i.e. without any idea of cultural pluralism or the recognition of communal rights that many liberals have come to accept after previously rejecting them outright. While conservatives have moved towards an acceptance of liberal ideas of equality on the basis of integration into “the existing identity and culture of the state” and respect for its “national history”, some liberals have come to accept the idea of cultural specificity too, including accepting the cultures of different religious communities in the US, or immigrants in Western European countries in particular on the basis of equal citizenship.

At the same time, liberal intellectuals, feminist movements and civil rights movements have adopted the discourse of political correctness, which seeks to purify the language of the terms and expressions that they believe to be racial slurs that have become embedded in usage, and contend that their use should be socially unacceptable. Prejudices have certainly left their mark on language, but the circulation of many of these negative terms results from long usage, and some of those who use them are not alluding to their original meanings. And although political correctness has

been an important part of the battle against racism and an important tool for checking racists and encouraging individuals and communities to think about certain common expressions and their racist origins, it has gradually become an issue in its own right almost completely separate from the original purpose for which it emerged. The culture of political correctness, once it becomes an aim in itself, becomes a kind of suspicion of normal people, who become the object of a patronising liberalism that comes close to chastising them for the language they speak.

Over the last decade a sort of resentment has built up in Western countries towards political correctness discourse and its zealous guardians, who seem to be holding people to account for what they say and restricting their “freedom of speech”. The extreme right have thus transformed freedom of speech from an enemy into a tool to be used against its liberal “originators”. The populist right has exploited political correctness and turned it into one of the most important elements of its mobilising strategy against foreigners and minorities in the West, “exposing” liberals who are throwing away their countries’ culture while giving recognition to other cultures that threaten the prevailing local culture and the identity of the motherland that working class people – who do not travel much and do not encounter other cultures – grew up with.

One of the reasons for Trump’s election and the rise of the populist right in Europe in alliance with Putin against liberalism is this same resentment, that populist call for white men to take back their countries (imagined as if it has been stolen from them and given to minorities, black people and migrants). It is important that any organised battle against racism – I’m talking here about organised movements, not random mobilisations – make sure not to invite this kind of response. This is to say that the current movement for black rights against police violence and for equality before the courts must not reach the point of considering itself a purification movement that will probe the depths of the “average citizen” looking for his innermost thoughts or his unawareness in linguistic or cultural expressions and then ask him to confess that he is a racist. Nor can it force him to review the whole history of his country; such things take time and do not just happen in response to protests. Interest in political correctness must not become an issue in itself as if political correctness is itself the important thing and not how much it helps in the fight against racism.

The histories of the rich capitalist countries which were once colonial states encompass much evil and, of course, many shameful episodes. All of them recognise this. They also encompass persecution of workers and women and child labour, and even, at some points, slavery. But it is also here that the liberal-democratic system developed, that citizens’ rights and liberties emerged, and that a continuous process of critical revision of these histories has gone in academia and even in popular culture. The stories of their “great men” are not simple or one-dimensional; all the elements of the historical period in which they lived overlap in them. The founding fathers of the US owned slaves when slavery was not limited to the southern states and were without a doubt male-chauvinists.

Culture and ideology have historical context. Projecting the standards of the modern age on them as part of a political struggle for demands is not a true critique. A true critique requires review of the



objects of criticism in historical context. Are Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and James Madison so important to US political culture because they produced the first liberal-democratic constitution in human history (a constitution that today seems to have many shortcomings), or because they owned slaves just like others did? What precisely distinguished them from others in their own time? Asking the average American citizen to think about this question will meet with rejection – it will make them more open to being influenced by extreme right propaganda. As important as it is to deromanticise and demythologise historical figures and assess their role and achievements in their historical context without rose-tinted spectacles, it is important that we do not become convinced that current issues will be solved by summoning them up to judge their deeds and intentions. This itself takes attention away from dealing with the heart of the issue that reproduces itself year after year.

The struggle advances by achieving particular demands at every stage; the challenge is applying the ethical value that drove this struggle to other issues of oppressed people. Changing culture, on the other hand, is a long process that does not begin or end with toppling a statue – although it cannot hurt to topple a few statues of people whose only achievement was to make their fortune by trading in slaves or to show their “bravery” by hunting escaped slaves in the South, or even of more important people like Cecil Rhodes distinguished by their racist colonial inclinations. Refusing to glorify or immortalise such people as national symbols is entirely understandable. But there are cases which are more complicated because of average citizens’ view of their countries’ history and their national symbols. The biggest mistake these movements can possibly make is to drive the average citizen into the arms of the populist demographic right.

The more zealous form of political correctness commits two errors. **Firstly**, it conflates representation with truth, giving changes in terminology a greater importance than changing reality even as racism continues in practice.⁽²⁷⁾ This tendency to exchange reality for representation extends beyond language to their understanding of developments in reality itself. A woman or a black American being promoted to a senior management position is, from a “representational” perspective, sufficient evidence that great achievements have been made in the struggle against racism or discrimination against women. Any arriviste can present their promotion as an achievement for black people or women more broadly. What do we say about a black American who demands the right to lead the same police that discriminate against black Americans in their exercise of violence? Has it been shown that he will do more than his white predecessor or successor to fight discrimination? There is no evidence to suggest so. Past experiences are not encouraging. Even Obama, as president of the US, did no more to fight racism against black people. The battle for equality is not a matter of representation, even if representation in itself may be an important breakthrough into a field previously denied to black people or women. **Secondly**, extreme political correctness patronisingly polices how people in general speak, chastising them and showing surprise at how “backward” they are. These practices produce regrettable reactions.

²⁷ This tendency has been encouraged by the emergence of philosophical currents who believe representation to itself be reality, and that it creates reality (which is true in particulars), justifying a general conflation of symbolic representation and the reality it represents.

Perhaps the most absurd of these practices is imposing political correctness onto history itself. If the exclusion of racism in the cultural sphere or cinema extends to scenes showing women or black Americans as inferior, this does not mean that equality should be projected onto racist history itself in such a way that black people and women become heroes in cowboy films, joining white male settlers in fighting the indigenous “Indians”. Not only is this excluding indigenous people, it is also a distortion of history. Here “political correctness” does the opposite of what it aims to do, cleansing history of its actual racism.

IV: Palestinian Caveat

George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020. Five days later, Eyad Hallaq was killed in Jerusalem just for being Palestinian. There was no reason for Hallaq to be detained – there were no complaints against him. According to the Israeli soldiers responsible, they suspected he had a gun. He did not, and the soldiers seem to have shot him while he was lying on the ground. The Israeli authorities have admitted that the incident was a “tragic mistake”, not a single policeman or soldier has been arrested and nobody has been held accountable. The Israeli security forces behaviour towards Palestinians – which is more violent than the US police’s behaviour towards black American citizens – is to be expected, because they are under occupation and not in fact citizens. Historically the Israeli occupation has never punished a soldier for killing a Palestinian, even in cases that are clearly in breach of its own laws. It does not want to make them think twice about killing in the future, in cases that are “necessary” or “legitimate”. What is “legitimate”, in the customary thinking of the occupation, justifies what is “illegitimate” – stripping words like “legitimacy” and “law” of any meaning to start with.

We might ask when the authorities carrying out killings like this spark protests against it. When Muhammad Durra, a child, was killed on 30 September 2000, it triggered a full-scale uprising (the second Intifada). One might conclude from this case that it was the presence of cameras documenting the whole incident that made Durra’s death into a spark, just as it was with Floyd; Eyad Hallaq’s death was not recorded. But the conditions for the Second Intifada were all present from the failure of the Camp David negotiations onwards, followed by Sharon’s decision to deliberately provoke Palestinian feeling by forcing his way into the Al Aqsa Mosque – similar to the febrile atmosphere in the US after three years of Trump and three months of Corona. Other black Americans have been killed by the police and their deaths filmed and made public without this beginning a popular uprising. Equally, the unfilmed killing of six Palestinian workers triggered the First Intifada because all of the preconditions existed.

The Intifada targeted the occupation as a whole and not simply the violence of the Israeli security apparatus. It was not a struggle built around a concrete set of demands. This is the difference between the killing of Eyad Hallaq and the killing of George Floyd. Eyad Hallaq’s people do not want to integrate into Israel. They do not expect to be treated as full citizens by a “democratic Israel” and



are thus not surprised when they are not. They want the Israeli security forces to leave, not to simply moderate their violent behaviour (which is structurally rooted in the occupation itself). The struggle of the Palestinian people against Israeli police violence is not a demand that forms part of a struggle for equality in a democratic state. It considers the violence of the police and of the Israeli judiciary part and parcel of the occupation system it can trigger an uprising against occupation not against police violence.

Even Palestinian Arabs inside Israel, those who demand full citizenship rights as part of a struggle built around specific demands, do not want national citizenship as part of an umbrella Israeli culture which doesn't exist. There is no demand that an Arab should be able to serve as commander in chief or fly planes for the IDF (even if some individuals may have such ambitions). The struggle is directed in its entirety towards achieving citizenship within the framework of the cultural and national distinctiveness of the indigenous population of the country, not integration into a state that sees itself not as a state of all its citizens or a sovereign embodiment of a citizen nation but as giving expression to the Jewish people, a state that defines itself not only as a "Jewish state" but as "the state of the Jews" (many of whom are not citizens).

Nonetheless, Arabs in the interior do expect less violence from the Israeli security forces as part of their demands for equality and demand that their excesses should be investigated. They compare themselves to Jewish citizens, and expect equality before the courts to form part of citizenship. This is the difference between their political behaviour and that of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, where the longing for statehood still exists, while the hope for its realization is waning. The political behaviour of these latter continues to be defined by a project of statehood and independence from Israel – and not a citizenship state and equality therein. Israel, meanwhile, wants their land but not its inhabitants. It undermines the constituent parts of the independent Palestinian state and creates a system of racist segregation in such a way that Palestinians enjoy neither the benefits of an independent state nor the benefits of equal citizenship.

Nonetheless, the killing of Eyad Hallaq in cold blood should have produced protests that could have become a part of the ongoing global democratic struggle against racism. That there is a racist element to his killing is indisputable. He was killed because he was Palestinian. If he had been Jewish and had been actually carrying a gun (and not simply wrongly suspected of being armed), he would not have been killed. His pointless death should have provoked protests, even if only against the occupation and not in favour of equality before the Israeli security forces and courts. But it seems to me that the Palestinian national movement has become directionless. And Israeli society lacks any real popular civil rights movement against racism.

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