Mere Symbols

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Abstract: Symbolism is not absent from modernity. Rather, the absence of an anthropological awareness of its presence favours semiotic manipulations that serve the interests of global domination, often in the name of populist policies. Within a framework broadly circumscribed by "Western" values, local and nationalist politicians exploit models of intimacy, kinship and engagement in ways that often undermine the interests of the marginal populations to which they most effectively appeal, especially when the rhetorics in question are not purely verbal and are thus more resistant to critical analysis. Examples are drawn primarily from Greece, Italy, Thailand, and the United States.

Keywords: scientism; modernity; simulacra; populism; hegemony; mereness

Résumé : Le symbolisme n'est pas absent de la modernité. C'est plutôt l'absence d'une reconnaissance anthropologique de sa présence qui facilite les manipulations sémiotiques servant les intérêts dominants mondiaux, souvent au nom de mesures politiques populistes. Dans un cadre largement circonscrit par des valeurs « occidentales », les politiciens locaux et nationalistes exploitent des modèles d'intimité, de parenté et d'engagement, de façons qui, souvent, sapent les intérêt des populations marginales que ces modèles sont pourtant le plus à même d'attirer, surtout quand la rhétorique ne se limite pas uniquement à des paroles et résiste donc davantage à l'analyse critique. Les exemples proviennent principalement de Grèce, d'Italie, de Thaïlande et des États-Unis.

Mots-clés : scientisme, modernité, simulacres, populisme, hégémonie, la qualité de n'être pas consideré important

Anthropologists are apt to pride themselves on their marginality to the larger world in which they live, whether in terms of the places they have chosen to study or as a mark of their self-positioning (and their positioning by others) in the academic firmament. In the dim twilight of colonialism, they began to move their focus closer to what they thought of as "home" (but there were many already for whom "home" was far from Europe, North America, or the Antipodean cities). Even then, if John Davis (1977:7) had it right, they were still in search of something exotic. They had to justify their work to skeptical colleagues who, having suffered in the bush or the jungle, saw no reason why the less adventurous should suffer any less, and they also found it hard to draw a clear line between their activities and those of sociologists and others already engaged in the social analysis of familiar territories.

In this way, the colonialist prejudices of anthropology's emergence persisted into a time of modernity and even post-modernity, a time of searching self-examination and even of self-disavowal, and of historiographic sensibility and semiotic challenges to the literalism of previous generations. It was perhaps in this painfully introverted anachronism that anthropology itself became post-modern: not, that is, because it castigated itself in undoubtedly quite satisfying rites of penitential self-mortification, but because it did so amidst a growing awareness that even work "at home" would produce a kind of exoticism. What makes garage sales (Herrmann 1997) and beer advertisements (Dávila 1998) interesting is their capacity to recuperate the sense of defamiliarization that the old, exoticizing ethnographies provided, in part by invoking the theoretical positions (such as Mauss's treatment of reciprocity) that such explorations originally made possible through the sense of distance they provided.

Some anthropologists continued to pursue apparently exotic phenomena in places such as Melanesia, but even those who did not tended to seek the exotic within the cul-

tures of Europe and the Mediterranean. Amusing though the armchair ethnologizing of modernity by such critical spirits as Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas might have appeared, that work entailed little or no new field research as such, and was seen more as a side-benefit of having done "real" anthropology than as a new area of investigation. The emergence of a rapidly growing Europeanist group in North America found virtually no place in the writings of anthropologists of other parts of the world. Although a few among them showed some casual interest in the work of colleagues whose major work was conducted in European and European-derived cultures, the dominant sense remained that the anthropology of Western societies would always be a theoretical follower rather than a leader.[1]

My point is not to engage in boosting the new interest in European and North American "mainstream" societies. Rather, I want to draw the reader's attention to the degree to which popular ideas about the West and the Rest have continued to infuse epistemology. The so-called "Western" world was rarely seen—Douglas (1986) and Leach (1976) were again unusual exceptions—as a space for symbolic activity. Horace Miner's (1956) justly famous essay on the "Nacirema" ("American" spelled backwards), in which the everyday activities of the bathroom were presented as arcane mysteries, belongs to a tradition of reflexive satire perhaps initiated by Van Gennep's *The Semi-Scholars* (1967)—that made fun of archaeologists as well as anthropologists—and was echoed by at least one archaeologist: we can still appreciate as hilariously (and disturbingly) familiar Leonard Woolley's (1962:17-18) account of the can-opener that appeared in a Turkish museum as "a votive object, probably Hittite." These accounts, however, are spoofs, effective precisely because they parody common acts of pretentiousness. At least implicitly, however, they also raise a more serious issue: that of the cosmology that underlies everyday habits in the world the anthropologists themselves inhabited. Why is it important to archaeologists to call something a votive object? What boundaries between a superstitious past and a rational present are generated in this way?

For a long time anthropologists remained in thrall to this perspective and refused to pursue the symbolic in the modern or the familiar. If you really wanted to know about symbolism, you went to exotic places—Oceania, for example. That was the beginning of Eric Schwimmer's career as a field anthropologist. Schwimmer was also among those who traced the European sources of much of Maori nationalist symbolism without, however, reducing it to a simple derivative, as so many other analysts of nationalism had done before him; he found such local re-workings to be creative rather than merely imitative (Schwimmer 1990; cf., Gellner 1983). In Papua New Guinea others have subsequently investigated similar intertextualities (e.g., Foster 2002; Gewertz and Errington 1996; Strathern 1996), while the work of Bruce Kapferer literally brought "home" the consequentiality of symbolism in world both exotic and familiar.

Kapferer (1988) emphasized the striking parallels between Theravada Buddhist theology and practice in Sri Lanka on the one hand and egalitarianism in Australia on the other; he showed that ideologies preaching peace and humane co-existence could all too easily transmute into legitimations of violence—on religious pretexts in the one case, out of racist resentment in the other. He thus confronted his readership with two revelations, both born of the comparative imperative that is central to anthropological theory building. On the one hand he pointed out the semantic lability of ideological texts; on the other, making the point that is especially germane here, he placed the culturally exotic and the culturally familiar in a common frame. That awareness has still not had much public impact, and theorists such as those who espouse rational choice models still dominate public debate. This "populist rationalism," as I would like to call it, also has enormous appeal outside the West, and serves to extend Western cultural domination long and far beyond the fading twilight of classic colonialism.

Because anthropology is largely seen as concerned with symbolic matters, the "mereness" associated with these has sapped the discipline's relevance to public debate. Shifts within the discipline have also not served it well in that regard. Leaving aside populist impatience with the discipline's jargon or with the postmodern turn, the relative marginalization of kinship studies within the discipline has deprived it of a critical weapon at precisely the point where it is most needed: in the critique of nationalism in its new and often violent forms (but see Yanagisako and Delaney 1995 for an important exception; see also Mankekar 1999). How many journalists would be willing to try explaining to an allegedly impatient readership that the Bosnian conflict represents the expansion to more inclusive (that is, ethnic) levels of a feuding society in which patrilineal succession defined the identity of newly born children? Yet it seems hard to explain otherwise the media reports that in some instances Serbian soldiers raped Bosniak women, kept them alive until the pregnancies resulting from the rape came to term, then allowed the women to suckle their infants but kept an anxious watch out for infanticide and eventually, it appears, killed the mothers and gave the babies for adoption. Even had these stories turned out to be untrue, their wide cur-

rency is indicative of the ideology of social relations that makes them thinkable, even probable. Despite the rich insights that such linkages promise, anthropology has had to fight for relevance in a world where the neo-liberal control of public media has increasingly reduced the spaces for the kinds of critical purchase that the discipline offers and dismissed its concerns as obscurantist and divorced from material reality. Here, indeed, we see very clearly the political production of significance and of its corollary, the absence of knowledge vital to critical thought.

Such hegemonic work exemplifies what I have elsewhere called "the politics of significance" (Herzfeld 1997). It also suggests the key linkage between politics in the larger world and the political forces that operate within anthropology itself. Who decides what is "mere"? In other words, what are the criteria by which certain facts are deemed ordinary and unworthy of special or "scholarly" attention, while others are announced as "scientific"? To what extent must anthropology accede to such pressures, and to what extent should the discipline develop a critical response? In the public sphere, data that are linked with a demonstration of statistical agility carry far more weight than generic observations or impressions—indeed, "impressionistic" and "anecdotal" are negative terms of evaluation as much in public political discourse as in the scientific areas of university research. The growing unawareness by native speakers of English that *data* is (or was?) a plural noun suggests the reification of empirically complex phenomena as a single and measurable entity. That reification has spread worldwide, drawing on the legitimacy with which "science" invests it. In Thailand, for example, data collection (*kaan kep khaw muun*) using survey techniques based on questionnaires (*baep sop thaam*) has become almost synonymous, in the public view at least, with research (*ngaan wichai*). Translatability, itself a questionable property (Asad 1993) but here forever unquestioned, suggests transparency—a virtue especially valued as a source of truth at a time when its manipulation as a political symbol has been rendered virtually invisible except, again, to the critical ethnographic gaze (on which, see the excellent demonstration by Morris (2004)). And so we are back at symbolism.

Statistics, often viewed as the (real) antithesis of (imaginary) symbolism, are far from irrelevant to cosmology. Neither symbolism nor statistical data stand alone, outside some sort of social context; it is the *use* of both that merits critical attention. Those who master the rhetoric of enumeration are not necessarily the best statisticians, and opposing sides to disputes may produce contrasting conclusions from identical data sets (see Urla 1993). Such practices spill over into political discourse; nationalists, for example, frequently argue that ethnic minorities are unimportant because they are not numerous (see Herzfeld 2005:114-115). Aside from the difficulty of deciding at what percentage of the total population an ethnic group becomes "insignificant"—the ironic converse of the old racist and anti-immigration adage that "none is too many" (e.g., Abella and Troper 1982, for the Jews in Canada)—this kind of argument pre-empts any consideration of non-numerical forms of significance. It is no coincidence that people speak of the "merely symbolic presence" of such ethnic groups, much as they disdainfully remark that an argument is "merely academic"—in other words, lacking in substance. Academics themselves lend weight to such attitudes by expressing wistful longing for relevance in the "real world."

My argument—not, as such, an original one—is that symbols are very much part of the real world, and that they function at least as effectively (that is, materially) in Western societies as they do in exotic settings. It is also to ask why their presence is so strenuously disregarded. Much as gossip is dismissed as unimportant despite its ubiquity, symbols are relegated to the world of the meaningless for two ostensible reasons: either they are supposed to remain invisible (when they are used by the powerful) or they are dismissed as picturesque (when they are used by the politically disenfranchised). Here we begin to arrive at a clearer sense of underlying cause: since there is a tendency to equate symbols with tradition, the areas of life that are admitted to be laden with symbolic content become, almost by definition, the antithesis of modernity—artisanship, rural life, even entire countries viewed as "historic" rather than as "important" (Herzfeld 2004). Those who reproduce tradition—the artisanal class in particular—can in some settings become at once a source of pride in heritage and of embarrassment about backwardness. Some succeed at inserting their trades into the neoliberal economy, perhaps on a principle of equating leisure with the conspicuous consumption of the non-utilitarian.[2] Those whose own roles as producers are forced into marginal status by successful managers and exporters meet a very different fate; they may be actively excluded from unionizing (often on the grounds that they are "by nature" individualists), and subject, when they rebel, to intensive deskilling that robs them of their one source of respect (see Blum 2000; Herzfeld 2004). The politics of significance could not be much clearer.

The commodification of tradition thus has consequences, which are not entirely predictable, for those charged with its maintenance. People as well as things can serve as signs of particular, imagined pasts. Tourism—what Greenwood (1977) calls "culture by the pound" (see

also Yalouri 2001:132)—leads to the proliferation of simulacra, which then spill out of the boundaries of their sites of production. The new global reach of ethnography (Burawoy 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997) no longer affords easy access to intimate spaces as in the past, especially because rights to privacy, once the privilege that protected elites from ethnographic scrutiny, have been democratized. To make matters worse, our world is increasingly constructed from simulacra of everyday-life encounters (see Baudrillard 1994): U.S. presidential "fireside chats" and "town meetings," waiters who talk to us as if they have known us for years, theme parks that evoke bygone domesticities, and notices in public places that speak to us with the wisdom of old friendships. It is easy to lament the passing of reality, and indeed such nostalgia is commonplace. But an ethnography of the modern world must address these insistent re-enactments of the intimate, which play on the metonymic relationship between the genuinely intimate and the collective privacy of nation-states and similar politico-cultural formations (Herzfeld 2005).

National and even international levels of political actions still intersect with the business of everyday life. Politicians, like nationalist ideologues, seek to cement loyalty with intimations of kinship that threaten to undermine precisely what makes the nation-state different from kinship-based entities: the rejection of nepotism. Cretan sheep-thieves find immensely amusing the spectacle offered by the very politicians who have virtually bought their votes by getting them out of jail, and who now declare that they will not take a single vote from a sheep-thief. The mordant humour of this situation displays an acute understanding of political process that would be completely invisible in a statistical analysis of election returns or an ideological reading of the politicians' speeches that did not start from these local contexts in which their pragmatic meaning is articulated. The precise policy-making language of the politicians' speeches has no more fixed a set of meanings than do religious ideologies that preach war as a means of achieving "peace."

Such lability also encourages slippage and borrowing between extreme opposites. In what must be accounted the most extraordinary contemporary example, liberalism came to signify the far left in American politics and yet also, at the same time, a key component of the dominant global ideology of "neoliberalism." Sometimes the slippage appears to be a deliberate strategy, as when the very conservative Greek dictatorships of 1967-74 vociferously and frequently decried communism as "red fascism," while the ambiguity of the term *dhimokratia* (meaning both "republic" and "democracy") allowed them to claim championship of the very principle that others instead accused them of having destroyed. Such slippage also generates the sharing of specific symbolic forms by formally similar ideologies, especially nationalisms, of radically different stripe: the twelve-pointed "sun" contested by Greece and Macedonia (Danforth 1995:164-166), the religion, language, and kinship system shared by the phenotypically differentiated Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda (see Blok 2001:129), the mutual accusations of having perpetuated Nazi systems of rule by the two Germanies (Borneman 1992; Boyer 2005). Indeed, for opposition to exist in the first place, it may be that a shared matrix of symbolic morphology is necessary. Blok (2001:115-135) has argued that the most vicious ethnonationalist struggles attest "the narcissism of small differences."

Such continuities also produce diachronic ironies. Thus, Greek refugees from Asia Minor, many of them communists with self-consciously atheist perspectives, built their new homes in Piraeus according to principles deeply entrenched in the teachings of the Greek Orthodox church (Hirschon 1989:233). Perhaps with more strategic goals in mind, the Italian communists adopted a significant proportion of Catholic paraphernalia, ritual gatherings, and even the calendar (Kertzer 1980). To this day, Hong Kong billionaires defy both the logic of capitalism and the deeply rooted suspicion of "superstition" that characterizes their Marxist state in continuing to decide on the location of major construction work according to the principles of *feng shui* (geomancy). A scarcely less dramatic example is the coexistence, in one famous Bangkok mall (Pantip Plaza), of Buddhist amulet stalls and computer hardware and software stores—a juxtaposition that those of us who are electronically challenged might not find particularly odd, but that sits uneasily with the self-proclaimed rationality of the technological community.

Such juxtapositions are in fact not, I suggest, particularly suggestive of any sort of irrationality at all. Irrationality itself is a symbolic marker often claimed for non-Western identity (Tambiah 1990) and a too-easy explanation of what we dislike in exotic others. The term itself is vaguer than its scientific pretensions would suggest; when, for example, psychologists such as Allport (1954) point to the irrationality of prejudice (meaning that from their perspective its claims are inconsistent), their usage implicitly posits a contrast with knowledge that is independent of culture (and, more specifically, of cosmology). Yet this master narrative of modernity is itself a hegemonic discourse. Critical writers from Johannes Fabian (1983) to Charles Stewart (1989) have already pointed out how the idea of the folk or the primitive expresses a dominant way of managing time. Stewart,

too, has suggested that such forms of syncretism are not restricted to religion but find their way into the ideologies of the modern nation-state—a quintessentially modernist project. Stewart's prime example concerns the way in which modern Greek nationalist historiography has both absorbed Byzantine Christianity and subjected it to the needs of the state—an argument that, ironically, harmonizes with the position of the so-called Neo-Orthodox fundamentalists, according to whom the official Greek church is a "protestant" perversion of a pre-Cartesian, spiritual, and antimaterialist religious world (Giannaras 1972; see Herzfeld 2002a). The Pantip Plaza phenomenon in Bangkok, and the many other examples of a Thai modernity suffused with ghostly emanations, are similarly syncretic and suggest an at least formally similar rejection of the separation of the spiritual from the epistemological and ontological (see Morris 2004). Such conflations confound the evolutionist perspective, common to both colonialist and orthodox Marxist positions, whereby modernity represents the triumph of pure reason over culture—where, for example, the alleged philosophical purity of the ancient Hellenes coopts the intellectually more confused and administratively more confusing heritage of Byzantine Orthodoxy and incorporates the latter as a symbolic marker of identity rather than as a source of cosmological understanding.

One aspect of this modernity, one that is belied by experience, is the premise that globalization represents the subordination of the local (for which read "primitive") by the global (for which read "rational"). This is an empirical error; ethnography shows clearly that, contrary to such rationalist assumptions, the local often reclaims the global (Burawoy 2000; Watson 1997)—sometimes for the very good experiential and (dare we say?) rational reason that the abstract formulations of global science and technology are as context-dependent as those that the dominant discourse dismisses as merely local (Gupta 1998: 175) thus no more likely to work under all but the most specific conditions. Development studies are a particularly rich arena for this realization; the very notion of development is grounded in the rhetoric of 19th century evolutionism, the epistemic foundation of the colonial enterprise (see especially Ferguson 1990), and presupposes a generic recipient characterized by ignorance and lack of abstract reason. Such universalism has other consequences as well. In particular, it generalizes the concept of heritage without any regard for its historical emergence from a culturally and historically specific context in Europe. Global bodies that today seek to preserve and uphold national cultures thus run into local resistance and reformulation; the irony of the international management of heritage—indeed, of UNESCO's coinage of the term "world heritage"—is that it inevitably collides with distinctly local understandings (see for example Palumbo 2003), in part because the national state has itself not yet fully succeeded in domesticating and inculcating the rhetoric of "national heritage."

The term *heritage* betrays a long history that global conservation policies, much like the nationalisms that they are attempting to render obsolete, are designed to flatten and conceal. Words like *patrimonio* in Italy and *patrimoine* in the French-speaking world point even more explicitly to a linkage between a patrilineal conception of inheritance with the emergence, in early modern Europe (but not necessarily throughout the rest of the world), of property ownership as the definiens of personhood—the possessive individualism that, as Handler (1988) has astutely demonstrated, underwrites the emergence of the nation as an ideal-typical entity that "has" a particular culture. Such ideas spread around the world in the wake of colonial conquest and influence. In Thailand, a country never formally under the colonial yoke but always subject to its unneighbourly importunities,[3] heritage (*moradok*, a direct translation from English) displaced neighbourhood as the key to urban reorganization (Askew 1996), obliterating alternative perspectives on how house forms and ideas of space might reflect local understandings of links between past and present. In defense of their community, threatened with demolition, the inhabitants of one poor neighbourhood in central Bangkok where I have conducted fieldwork insisted that the shrines of their ancestors celebrated, not the spirits of particular individuals from whom the present inhabitants are descended, but those of all Thai people—a surrender to nationalistic understandings of territoriality that matches the residents' insistence that "we are Thai people" (and therefore deserve to be left in control of "our" space). Perhaps here there is even an implicit echo of the official rejection of minority groups' claims on Thai nationality. As for the possible relevance of merit-making (which calls for a distinctly "protestant," conspicuously consumerist replacement of the old in religious architecture, for example (Askew 2002:223)), Buddhist rejection of materiality, and ideas about reincarnation for the very notion of conservation, such socially grounded concerns are inexorably elided by the insistent authority of the language of fine arts, conservation and national pride. Here and there we still meet resistance to a Western "high-culture" value system that demands preservation at all costs; perhaps the most famous case is that of the sandpaintings that Navajo elders wanted destroyed in accordance with ritual prescription but that now reside in museums and that some

Navajo have even been persuaded to reproduce for the tourist trade (Parezco 1983). But when the question of heritage is left to national governments, virtually all of which participate in global bodies that perpetuate the colonial worship of pure reason (and economic rationality), the *Zweckrationalität* of tourist earnings—often disguised in more elevated terms—overcomes all such considerations.

Bodies such as UNESCO typically cede nominal authority to, and impose the ultimate caretaking responsibility on, the national governments that together constitute their administrative base. Thus, while global mobilization may in some respects be an attempt to supersede nationalism, it can also foment it. It expands what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have famously called "the invention of tradition" while, as in their argument, elevating elite constructions over the agency (and ratiocination) of ordinary people. The extent to which ordinary people accede to the conversion of local spaces into theme parks, however, is not based on purely economic motives. Indeed, poor inhabitants of such spaces tend to resist the process, both because they are its primary victims through eviction from their familiar haunts and because their marginality to the sources of economic power inclines them to criticism (Fisher 1995; Herzfeld 2003; Scott 1998). In the long haul, however, relocation and deskilling not only take place but seem to have little impact on the standing of the political leadership that has brought them about. If ever there was an argument for Gramsci's view of the operation of hegemony, the success of populism in the world today surely furnishes it.

Populism also succeeds because it revalidates covert attitudes, the substance of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005), that a more austere leadership and the academic world have suppressed. When Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister, makes sexist remarks to the (female) president of Finland, or when his Thai counterpart Thaksin Shinawatr suggested that soldiers who were killed in the troubled south of his country probably got what they deserved because they were caught napping, they provoked storms of protest at home. But their power remained undiminished, and may indeed have been enhanced by a sense that they dared to say what others merely thought. This tactic has, as Edwards observes of Berlusconi and some of his allies further to the right, "the same, essentially undemocratic function, rallying supporters while foreclosing any debate with opponents" (2005:238). In like fashion, George W. Bush has managed to make a virtue of not appearing particularly clever (unlike his French-speaking opponent, John Kerry, in the 2004 election), and his stubborn espousal of conservative positions on civil rights has won wide support. Not one of the three national leaders I have mentioned here has throttled back on his respective forms of insensitivity. What is the secret of their success?

It is easy to say that they appeal to popular values, but this is to lump "the people" together in precisely the essentialist and demeaning fashion that populists themselves employ; it substitutes ethnographic material for the analytical tools of actually knowing the intimate lives of the people themselves, in all their complex diversity. The populists' appeal seems, rather, to lie in their ability to do the work that Lévi-Strauss (1967) has attributed to myth: they provide a means of suppressing the many inconvenient contradictions inherent in the social order, contradictions that have emerged in the flux of history. Indeed, such positions are "machines for the suppression of time" (Lévi-Strauss 1964:24); they disguise the hegemonic structures whereby people are induced to exile themselves, as colonialist anthropology once exiled them (Fabian 1983), to a disrespected past.

This requires further explanation. Most inhabitants of neoliberal states regard themselves as fundamentally modern, but they also have the intelligence to realize that some of their own cultural habits do not fit the rationalist image; they are irreducibly symbolic. Populist politicians assure these voters that such contradictions are entirely in order. Their rhetoric invokes morality as well as science within a shared framework of "values"; regardless of whether these are declared to be Western or Asian, to cite two common examples, they fit a larger hegemonic discourse that I have elsewhere called the global hierarchy of value (Herzfeld 2004) and that has filled the voids created in the backwash from the dissolution of colonial power.

Populist rhetoric thus does more than straddle the syncretic divide that ostensibly separates the traditional from the modern; it dissolves it. Bush, for example, emerged early in his presidency as a thinly disguised medieval crusader (although he quickly learned to avoid being too explicit about that connection) with an explicit public commitment to restoring Christian values to government even while he proclaimed the importance of tolerance and multiculturalism, threatened to unleash scientific terror on the nation's enemies, and preached retribution in the form of capital punishment.[4] The contradictions that this rhetoric conceals works like Poe's purloined letter, left in full view in the front hall of political debate. Its underlying message remains Western and imperial in origin and purpose. Not a few European Union leaders, true to the Catholic doctrines that animated their engagement from the start (Holmes 2000), and despite

their pious commitment to the ideals of tolerance and multiculturalism, have actively and repeatedly rejected the very idea that "Muslim" countries such as Turkey or Bosnia should or could be part of a "Europe" destined—whether by divinity or by logic is hardly material—for global domination.

And just as the French Revolution replaced the *francophonie* of God with that of Reason, thereby maintaining the same structure and embodying pure abstraction in an entirely human nation-state, the frenetic calls to export "American values" and to defend an allegedly ancient heritage of democracy partake of a similarly religious and mystical symbolic idiom that places science, technology, and pure reason at the height of human achievement. Subaltern countries appropriately subordinate their national myths to the larger, hegemonic master narrative: that is how the Delian League, an early example of imperialistic duplicity by an Athens desirous of dominating its Greek neighbours, came to be championed by one learned Greek scholar as the precursor of the European Union and thus as the key evidence of the Greeks' quintessential participation in the European *Geist* (Kozyris 1993; cf. Herzfeld 2005:136-143). It is also the rationale whereby the Thaksin government in Thailand wanted to redesign the central artery of old Bangkok as "the Champs-Elysées of Asia." This is a shopping street intended to showcase the government's economic policy rather than to celebrate military victories, to be sure; this policy includes a reduction of local craft traditions to cogs in a huge Taylorist machine ("one district (*tambon*), one product") in the name of "Thai tradition" but at the service of the neoliberal self-production of the country. The Parisian metaphor shows just how such a device repeatedly reverts to the conceptual hegemony of models made in the old colonial centres.

Some will object that many Thais, Americans, Italians and Greeks do not succumb to the allure of these neoliberal models, and most also do not talk that way either. I do not dispute that claim—indeed, I could hardly do so without contradicting my own call for more recognition of agency—and to say that all economic activity can be reduced to ciphers of government policy is far too glib and usually simply wrong. I do nevertheless wonder how easily such internal differentiation will be allowed to surface, either in foreign media coverage or in the pronouncements of local politicians. It has long been a received tenet of the ideology of European identity, after all, that "they" are all alike, while what gives "us" transcendent unity is the capacity to think independently, individualistically, and, above all, differently (Herzfeld 1987). Neoliberal-populist politicians evidently possess a remarkable ability to suppress key contradictions in societies travelling at high speed from traditions of deep religiosity to claims of scientific knowledge. By marshalling their supporters in concerted attacks on academics and NGOs, as Thaksin has done—note that his principal critic has been an anthropologist, Thirayuth Boonmee—populists craftily disguise their relegation of the populace to a subordinate role within an international economic order as a way of milking the West of all its symbolic benefits. By appealing to the unspoken assumptions of society's intimate spaces, where lying in defense of one's own supporters is not only legitimate but virtuous, they are able, at least for a while, to distract attention from the radical forms of subservience to which they have led their compatriots.

Their local management of truth claims must, moreover, be understood in the context of the dominant rhetorics of absolute value that global managers preach. These include a submerged but deeply influential assumption that political action at the international level has somehow already achieved "transcendence"—that is, that it is no longer culturally specific. The idea of transcendence, whether or not "invented" by the ancient Greeks, is commonly traced to their influence in mainstream European thought (e.g., Humphreys 1978). It appears in claims about regularity, or "laws," whether in science or in nature (the two being frequently equated). Underlying all such images is the most slithery concept of all: the idea of a universal truth. The extraordinary success of politicians who fairly undeniably have lied to their respective peoples in claiming to speak for a higher truth is alchemical in its suppression of contradiction. There is some ethnographic evidence that in societies now seen as dangerously "other"—notably Arab, Islamic ones—ideas of truth are relative to social loyalties (Shryock 1997) and to the contextual nature of ethical choices (Gilsenan 1976). Yet it would be wrong to suppose that such ideas are foreign to Christendom. In Orthodox Greece, for example, "God wants things covered up" (du Boulay 1974); there is some evidence that at the very outset loyalty to kin took precedence over a too-literal insistence on the truth (Papadakis 1994). (Given the schismatic character of Christian history, some neoconservatives, notably Samuel Huntington (1996), would presumably argue that this feature of *Eastern* Christianity is further evidence of the mutual incompatibility of different so-called "civilizations." Theirs, however, is exceptionally—and ironically—poor reasoning, given that the same divine authority is quite successfully invoked in defense of official deceptions emanating from Western Christianity as well.) The idea of a universal moral truth engenders in turn what, for want of a better

term, we might call the doctrine of presidential infallibility. And the transparency that is supposed to reveal local refractions of that universal truth becomes, as Morris (2004) observes for Thailand, a particularly effective form of opacity.[5]

The leaders I have mentioned, and many others besides, today preside over a rapid transformation of their respective societies. Some of those societies are caught in bitter rivalries between secularists and religious believers; Italy's political life, for example, is still vexed by the endless tensions between a once avowedly atheist left and a fiercely loyal and clericalist Catholicism.[6] Even within an already confused political situation, some of the edges appear to be blurring in unexpected ways; for example, the leader of the post-fascist National Alliance, Gianfranco Fini, recently caused a storm in his party by announcing that he was going to vote—against the church's explicit instructions—in a national referendum on assisted reproduction, and that he would support three out of the four provisions. But his actions *did* cause a storm, suggesting that the changes now under way have not necessarily yet achieved the kind of capillary ubiquity that we associate with the old binarism; Berlusconi continues to talk of defeating communism as though the Cold War were still continuing. Kertzer's analyses of Italian political symbolism (Kertzer 1980, 1996) have shown that binary rhetoric and a common set of symbolic morphologies can easily co-exist—that, indeed, the common symbolic ground, which initially seems so paradoxical, is the semiotic that every politician must master in order to achieve real power.[7] Regardless of how egregiously Italian politicians fail to live up to the principles to which they claim to adhere, the rhetoric of left and right, while perhaps approaching depletion, remains effective, if only because a disillusioned electorate may have abandoned hope for better times. In the elegantly lapidary word-play of Gianfranco Pasquino (2005: 189): "If not much is right in Italy today, not much is left either." Vacuity balances vacuity.

But this is only one part of the story. Populism equates democracy with folksiness, so the ability to be "likeable" is certainly important in a world increasingly constructed around Baudrillardian simulacra. Even more than the ability to project a friendly image, however, the ability to appear unaware (even at the risk of seeming stupid) of what to the troubled citizens are deep contradictions between the respective claims of religion and reason allows political leaders an authority that no amount of wealth, learning, or eloquence can replace. Citizens see in their leaders evidence that simplistic formulae will suffice to sail past the most troubling contradictions in their lives. If the president can name-call, lie, and act like an adolescent cowboy even while solemnly invoking both scientific and religious truth, and remain in power, the world may yet turn out to be a more manageable place. Nothing, it seems, succeeds like success.

It is also important that politicians do nothing to threaten the fragile sense of a deep European heritage. Too much detailed historical knowledge not only complicates the picture but introduces new doubts. Just as the Fourth of July remains the conventionally true date of the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence even though the historical evidence suggests that this was one of the few days in that fateful month on which in fact it could not have been signed (Wills 1978), it is easier to claim a collective identity for Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin-Laden and to ignore the evidence that such connections followed rather than preceded US intervention in Iraq. Here the logic of what Peter Loizos (1975) has called political "syllogism" is forceful, because it permits people to translate, much as nationalism itself does (Gellner 1983; Herzfeld 2005), complex social relations into blocks of people who either share a culture or, in the language of a "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1996), have nothing in common at all. A political leader who emphasizes simplicity provides reassurance that the world can be managed after all.

The concepts of tradition and heritage thus appear in political discourse as fixed entities, linking past and present, as do the images that support them. They are part of a strategy of simplification that also casts academics as trouble-makers: what they trouble is the smooth surface of prefabricated knowledge. Training—inculcation, to use the term favoured by Bourdieu (1977)—to "recognize" the historic components of the national past is directly analogous to the "political philology" (Wace and Thompson 1914) that so often channels the interpretation of national names while countenancing the cartographic excision of those that do not fit this pedigree.[8] Thus, Greeks learn at an early age not only that an Ionic column signifies the carefully edited national past, but also that this national education can be extended, through tourism and through such campaigns as the repeated attempts to have "Greece" replaced by "Hellas" in a number of European languages, to an international scale.

Symbols, like words, have etymologies. The 18th-century Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico understood that etymology, precisely because it can be managed as a form of legitimation, can also be deployed subversively. His own use of it was as a critique of basic civic disabilities such as tyranny and misgovernance (Struever 1983; see also Herzfeld 1987). If etymologies can be manipulated, they can also be challenged, and this is a game that

the disenfranchised sometimes play as easily as the powerful. I would argue that the principle is even more true of non-verbal symbols than it is of words, as non-verbal symbols usually lack the reflexive properties of discourse. The meanings of such symbols are either more generic (loyalty to the nation represented by a flag, for example) or vaguer: what, precisely, does the Ionic column plastered onto a small-town haberdashery shop in Greece have in common, semantically speaking, with the morphologically very similar UNESCO logo? Or, more to the point, with the architecture of Monticello, home of the philhellenic Jefferson, who was a correspondent of the proto-nationalist and linguistic purist, Adamantios Koraes? Ideas of patrimony ("handed down from our fathers") encapsulate verbally more accessible ideologies; it is usually much harder to accuse an architectural form or a textile motif of representing sexism or cultural intolerance—unless it is too crudely referential, as in the case of the "Indian" logo of a football team—than it is to identify the same ideological failings in a speech or caption.

Thus, the etymological implications of physical signifiers deserve critical attention. Not only architecture but even patterns of social relationship can have etymologies. In Rome, an attitude of "accommodation" is, for example, often linked to the oppressive years of the Papal States, but corruption—which is its political embodiment—can sometimes be traced back to ancient times. Locals "remember"—that is, pass on their grandparents' memories of *their* grandparents' recollections—that the Vatican was, as they claim, among the last European states to practice public executions, during the final years (1861-70) of its desperate attempt to prevent Rome from becoming the capital of the new, secular Italian state. The attitude of accommodation that Romans now attribute to themselves also includes a tolerance for moral compromise, doubtless buttressed by years of interacting with a poorly paid and easily bribed local bureaucracy. An enormous local literature on the venality of the Vatican fuels such perceptions and stereotypes.[9]

In the area of Rome where I have been conducting fieldwork, the zone known as Monti expresses a kind of perverse pride in being heir to the red-light district of ancient Rome, the *Suburra*. A monumental plaque erected by the Borgia pope Alexander VI bears the inscription "*Subura*," a spelling that conveys a local dialect pronunciation and suggests that the ancient name remained (or again became) part of a collective consciousness, and residents often point to the disreputable character of the area as a heritage of long standing. No doubt that association was reinforced by the persistence of the area's engagement with prostitution during the long years in which the Italian state officially sanctioned the practice and supported the bordellos. But now the link with prostitution has a more ambivalent sense. When, stung by the racism of a local man who railed against the large number of prostitutes from Eastern Europe now residing in the district, I said that after all this was an ancient tradition, he retorted, "But those [ancient ones] were our stuff!" Another man, annoyed by the invasion of wealthy left-wingers, described one section of the neighbourhood as the home of writers, actors, politicians, and prostitutes—clearly not intending any affection toward any of these groups. And a rather respectable local man in his seventies who was concerned to give a clean public impression of the neighbourhood suggested that it was not a good idea to mention how generously it had serviced the sexual needs of military conscripts at the time of his own youth. Thus, prostitution, which can also suggest the familiar warmth of an intimate place (and many respectable local citizens, including some women, speak warmly of particular local prostitutes), becomes a symbol of something alien, potentially dangerous, and, above all, symbolic of social collapse.

It is worth considering how this use of an alleged history (and visible present) of prostitution functions in another "classical" country, Greece. There, while there has long been a measure of tolerance for the practice, it was never legalized and has a more unambiguously negative character.[10] While the local prostitutes of Rethemnos, a Cretan town where I have conducted fieldwork for several years (see especially Herzfeld 1991, 2004), seem to have had some collective claim on local affection, they also came to stand for everything that the nation-state wished to decry—again, a good example of what I have called "cultural intimacy," in that public and official claims of moral outrage often conceal a sense of collective identity that the state tolerates because it is actually a source of solidarity. When a foreign-educated teacher happened (apparently without realizing what she was doing) to take her young female charges to the red-light area, this created a major scandal; not only did the subsequent, semi-autobiographical account receive mixed reactions from the Greek public, but, significantly, the televised version of the book provoked considerable outrage and even questions in the national parliament.

The difference between Greek and Italian moral attitudes to prostitution today is probably not very great. What does differ, by contrast, is the degree of willingness to see it as a pervasive aspect of local society, and the contexts in which such willingness is expressed. Clearly we are dealing here with different idioms of cultural intimacy: the Italian response is conditioned by a relatively weak

sense of national embarrassment and perhaps by a history of legalization, coupled with an affectionate but quite earthy vision of the local culture of Rome in contrast to that of the rest of the country, while the Greek public response converts the revelation of flawed sexuality into a threat against the nation itself. While the examples I briefly mentioned above show the lability of prostitution as a symbol of intimate identity, the association with high antiquity appears to be relatively secure. Romans, confident in both the historical importance of their city and the sense of physical attachment to its spaces as well as to their own notoriously salty sense of humour, have no difficulty in taking pride in living in an area that conjoins stories about the ghost of Messalina walking along one two-millennia-old street with a lively set of local memories of local underworld bosses, loan-sharks and rotating credit societies, and, yes, prostitutes. Theirs is a view of antiquity that enjoys its less respectable aspects. It is robust—I know two taxi-drivers who are collectors of old books on the history of Rome, for example—and it resides in a space stratigraphically linking the modern age to classical antiquity and virtually every age in between.

Ironically, the history of local antiquarian knowledge in Rome is inextricably linked to the presence of the Vatican. The church itself was a great collector of antiquities and, despite fears of a pagan resurgence, derived its own authority from the Roman name. That name, in the form *Romii* (Greek) or *Rum* (Arabic and Turkish), survived in Greece, by contrast, in sharp opposition to the pagan (Hellenic) past. As a result, richly textured links with the distant past such as we find among ordinary Romans today are much rarer in Greece. Greece has experienced ruptures with that past that have been physical (the massive destruction of the architectural past) as well as conceptual. Until the dawn of independence, only a minute minority of truly learned Greeks thought of Hellas as a direct precursor and ancestor, yet this connection became the basis of a national identity largely invented abroad or under foreign influence. But if this was cultural engineering, it was remarkably successful; Greek national unity today compares strikingly with the still-fractured cultural cacophony of Italy. While the imperial statue that looms over the council chamber of Rome's town hall (itself built atop the ancient Capitol and housed in a complex partially designed by Michelangelo) is doubtless a revival (rather than a survival) of antiquity, what it represents does not seem to meet with either the ignorance or the indifference that most such symbols evoke in Greece. But such devices also did not become *national* symbols (although the Colosseum does appear on the Italian version of the five-euro coin). The "SPQR" ("the Senate and the People of Rome") that appears on manhole covers is definitely a local device. The monument to the local Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Via Portico d'Ottavia, opposite the main synagogue, does not call them Italians but "Roman citizens." And Romans not infrequently invoke the tag, *Civis romanus sum* ("I am a Roman citizen").

The Greek symbols were not only fewer; they were caught up in a far more generic mode of official historiography. They include, dramatically, the Acropolis of Athens, around which the nation-state seems to have achieved great success in engendering a sense of sacrality (Yalouri 2001). Here, paradoxically (since Greece was never a single country in anitiquity), the local symbols became associated with national rather than with municipal pride. The municipality itself became the "*demos* of the Athenians," but this phrase is reproduced, with appropriate modifications, in every other municipality of the Greek nation-state. What makes this all the more remarkable is the fact that ancient Athens, at the height of its moral authority, exercised its power in a far more locally restricted ambit than Rome in its own heyday. Hellas was an idea, and, as such, capable of transcending local political boundaries and even deep factional divides, but it never served as the basis of political unification until the 19th century and in a very different historical context; ancient Rome was a physical place, and achieved its own, very different kind of expansion through force and ingenuity. The Athenian attempt to achieve imperial power through the Delian League did not go down in history as a democratic experiment; it was simply revived for that ideological purpose in the modern age, as we have seen.

Democracy itself, for that matter, has changed in meaning. It is a commonplace that the Athenian system excluded women and slaves from participation. Even leaving aside the more obvious cooptations of the term in today's international politics, we also find acute analyses of the ways in which the image of participatory democracy serves to entrap citizens in the reproduction of their own subservience to a narrow range of state and elite interests (see, notably, Connors 2003 on Thailand). And the gloss of "participation" (*kaansuanruam* or *paatisipaeshan*) in Thailand, like *partecipazione* in Italy, fades rapidly once it becomes apparent that such spontaneous grassroots activity is often skillfully managed by those same elite interests.

The symbolic and spatial arrangements that accompany such moves—chairs arranged in circles rather than ranked in rows, leaders who adopt a collective title rather than presidential authority, studiously informal clothing and gestures, knowing glances whenever certain members get carried away by the sound of their own oratory—

could easily morph into a very different semiotic: anarchy, the absence of organization, lack of structure—in other words, everything that formal bureaucracy abhors and can therefore use to condemn those whom it has encouraged to adopt such disorderly characteristics. The arrival of presidential candidates at so-called "town meetings" allows them to invoke an earlier age that was far from devoid of bigotry or inequality, but that enhances the simulacrum of community that is so essential to maintaining a sense of solid, unchanging "tradition." Yet the fact that such terms often appear in English abroad—*la privacy* in Italy is another striking example, as are *paatisipaeshan* and *khommiunitii* in Thai—suggests that the models have less to do with what actually happens than with the desire to calibrate local activity to a global scale of political value in which "the West" remains paramount. In this way, local traditions of engagement are restructured to fit a world political system in which, to an increasing degree, grassroots activism is seen by its advocates as the achievement of a long path of development toward democratic self-sufficiency—development itself revealing a disquietingly evolutionist conceptual base (Ferguson 1990)—and by its detractors as a revival of outmoded and potentially anarchistic modes of subversion.

This is not to say that such activities never serve citizens' needs. But they carry a heavy allusive load, and this means that apparently benevolent citizen engagement can be dangerously misconstrued. To the extent that some citizens actively resist the kind of cooptation I am describing here, these same citizens also take the risk of being seen as rebellious and uncouth, or even as agents of foreign interests (of which NGOs are often accused of being the organizational presence). They are belittled as traditionalists—most of all, as it turns out, by those who advocate the conservation of a national heritage, and for whom the construction of simulacra of an earlier age also provides a means of isolating those who obdurately refuse to join their vision of modernity.

This essay has been a necessarily brief and deliberately provocative exploration of ideas that I hope will spur further debate and analysis. It seems clear that the concepts of tradition and heritage have often served much less glorious purposes than those claimed for them, and that the symbols invoked in their names provide dense support for the widespread acceptance of the dynamics that they represent. It is the apparent "mereness" of the symbols themselves, moreover, that makes them so effective in the hands of the powerful—that, indeed, constitute their power. But clever subalterns can also turn them around, although the risk then is that of becoming coopted in the discourses of the dominant. They are the very material of which common sense is constructed and, occasionally, negotiated. They are organized in categorical systems that, as Douglas (1966) has shown long ago, offer a coherence that seems to harmonize with social realities and that reproduces some of the key rules of social interaction. Given the amplification offered by today's mass media, they have a virtually incalculable reach. The less school children around the world learn about the language, culture, and daily lives of ancient Athens, the easier it becomes to furnish instead a set of assumptions about the "Greek" origins—and content—of democracy. Contrary to the received expectations that are themselves part and parcel of the ideology of "being Western," this situation is arguably much more conducive to homogeneity and complaisance than the relational realities of small-scale societies.

Such are the paradoxes of contemporary political discourse. When a politician claims not to be talking politics, we know that the discourse is purely political. When symbols are dismissed as mere icing on the cake of reality, it is time to ask who is defining reality, and what are the structures of social, cultural, and political activity through which apparently eternal verities are contested. In this sense, anthropology must always be a political enterprise. Its insights are always in some sense symbolic. By that token, they are never mere.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for the extremely helpful observations they offered on a disgracefully preliminary draft of what is itself an intentionally programmatic essay, and Winnie Lem for her exemplary editorial patience. I am delighted to participate in a special issue offered to Eric Schwimmer and so to signal—indeed, to symbolize—my appreciation of his generous interest in my work since my very early years of living in North America.

Notes

1 The term "Western" is highly problematic. I retain it here for two reasons: first, because it serves as an ironic index of a shifting identity that is almost always presented in absolute terms; and second, because that representation constitutes the major identity claimed by many of those who wish to demonstrate a deep historical association with the emergence of universal reason.

2 The allusion is to Thompson's (1979) coinage of "rubbish theory." On the at least partially successful deployment of

tradition, see Terrio 2000 and Ulin 1996 for two splendid examples from France, a country that reserves for peasants the double-edged role (as glorious exemplars and premodern holdovers) that I have noted for artisans in Greece (see Rogers 1987). For an Italian tradition associated with high-class skills, see Yanagisako 2002. Krause's (2005) account of textile makers offers a less exalted picture and probably represents the norm for those artisans whose products do not in some sense make it into the realm of "art" or *haute cuisine* (as opposed to "craft" and "ethnic/peasant food"). The exaltation of Italian peasant food (*cucina povera*) (Krause 2005: 150), for example, does little to lift most of its producers—as opposed to the food itself, suitably transmogrified—to a higher social status.

3 The status of Thailand as a non-colonial state has been widely criticized in recent years. See, for example, Herzfeld 2002b; Jackson 2004; Loos 1998; Lysa 2003; Chaiyan 1994; Thongchai 2000.

4 I am thinking particularly of his support for "victims' rights," a concept that suggests those laws of vengeance that supposedly—or so the academic myth of a "kinder, gentler" West tells us (Elias 1994)—had disappeared from "our" culture, remaining only in such "savage" places as those Arab countries in which a victim's patrikin may be offered the option of exercising clemency in accordance with Islamic ideas of compassion. The horror expressed in many American media at this practice and the complete absence of any comparison with "victims' rights" attests the success of the political Right in suppressing this particular contradiction. Bush is clearly riding the crest of a mythological wave.

5 It is hardly coincidental that *trasparenza* has emerged as a key concept in Italian political discourse, more or less in parallel with the Thai *khwaam prong sai*. Gilsenan's (1976) clever analysis of how a Lebanese might use a lie to reveal the deeper lies of a dishonest cleric offers a useful way of approaching this type of subterfuge on the national and even on the international stage.

6 This is necessarily a gross over-simplification. Since the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, communism itself has been in retreat in much of Italy; the mainstream remnants of the old Pci (Italian Communist Party) not only undid as many of the symbols of their communist past as possible but, while in government, embraced policies that seemed more neo-liberal than left-wing (e.g., shoring up home owners' rights with regard to squatters and defaulting tenants). The political spectrum on left and right splintered into numerous small parties, which today comprise somewhat unstable factions that in turn attempt to reproduce, in each election, the sense of a fundamental choice between left and right. Prime Minister Berlusconi, for example, continued to rail at "communism," even though the main opposition party had abandoned this term. It is an extraordinary mark of the confusion that has replaced what once seemed a clear choice (see Kertzer 1980) that the present (and, since World War II, longest-serving) national government is comprised of three parties that in most respects detest each other's policies: Forza Italia (Berlusconi's party) and the "soft" neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale are both stridently nationalist, although in very different ways, while the Lega Nord (Northern League) remains, declarations of fealty notwithstanding, a secessionist group and frequently embarrasses its coalition partners through the public outbursts of its representatives. A further confusion is created by the claims of both major factions that they are "centrist," while many predict the imminent re-emergence of the Christian Democrats as the centrist party *par excellence*—an ironic twist, this, in the history of a party once regarded as the bastion of the pro-American Right.

7 Indeed, this would seem compatible with a traditional anthropological interest in binary sets, or what structuralists explicitly call "*complementary* opposition." Complementarity presupposes some degree of common ground.

8 For more recent studies, see, for example, Danforth 1995: 174-184; see also Wilkinson 1951.

9 See, for example, Guarino 1998; Ledl 1997, and, in a contrasting mode, Savagnone 1995.

10 Given Italian and Greek attitudes to their respective state bureaucracies, we should perhaps not over-emphasize the significance of legality here. In Greece there was a high degree of tolerance for prostitution, seen as a sexual safety valve for young conscripts and male bureaucrats, until relatively late in the 20th century. There is today a new debate about the possible legalization of prostitution in Italy. But its significance is best seen in the context of the former seclusion of women in, especially, the more rural areas of both countries. Greek prostitutes were often "dishonoured" women who had fled from their native communities in order to escape death, social or physical; while this is apparently also true for much of Italy, at least some of the Monti prostitutes claimed to be Roman.

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