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The Limits of Paul Feyerabend's Proliferation: A Dialectical Materialist Outlook

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Abstract: Paul Feyerabend's proliferation is intended to be a tool that allows for the continuous revision and improvement of scientific knowledge using antitheses opposed to currently accepted theses. But does this method have any practical dimension and application? From the point of view of *praxis*, does this method not need certain limitations to be actually used? Is it possible and is it worth using it indefinitely? The aim of the article is to determine the limits of Paul Feyerabend's proliferation from the point of view of dialectical materialism. The article begins with an introduction presenting the topic and briefly introducing the figure of Paul Feyerabend. Then, the concept of proliferation is explained and described in the context of Feyerabend's work. Another element of the article is a reflection on the need for limits in the context of proliferation as a method. Trying to develop a theory of limits in the context of proliferation, the author relied on the theory of dialectical materialism, especially the principle of unity and struggle of opposites, the category of basic contradiction and the category of antagonism. The article ends with a summary and final reflection on the potential advantages of using proliferation with limits.

Keywords:

dialectical materialism;
dialectics;
limits of proliferation;
Marxism;
Marxist philosophy;
methodological anarchism;
proliferation



Introduction

Paul Karl Feyerabend (1924-1994) was an Austrian philosopher and thinker who is considered a representative of methodological anarchism. His scholarly work included philosophy of science, scientific methodology, and the history of science. In his classic 1975 work **Against Method**, Feyerabend proposed using the tool of proliferation as a method of improving scientific theories.¹ Proliferation in Feyerabend's views was a principle that required the creation of alternative theories to the currently accepted ones. This was intended to improve research through perspectives different from the mainstream view of current problems.

Although Feyerabend himself did not recommend using proliferation at all times and always, in order to be able to use this method in practice one should ask oneself the following questions: Should such counter-theories always be created in every situation? Is it always justified? Are there any limits to proliferation as a tool, and if so, what are they? Is it a tool that can actually be used by scientists? Reflecting on these questions should help in determining the limits of proliferation. With the help of dialectical materialism, I will try to answer these and other questions below.

I believe that this methodology—especially dialectics, and in particular the principle of the unity and struggle of opposites, one of the three basic principles of dialectical materialism—allows us to capture the essence of the tool that is proliferation. This may help to improve Feyerabend's theory and bring his proliferation into more practical use by more clearly defining the limits of the latter.

Dialectical materialism also, in my opinion, allows us to set the limits of proliferation by focusing on the existence (or lack thereof) of contradiction, and the category of this contradiction as something that connects thesis and antithesis in a dialectical relationship.

¹ See Paul K. FEYERABEND, **Against Method. Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge**, New Left Books, London 1975, p. 35. See also Paul K. FEYERABEND, **Against Method. Third Edition**, Verso, London 1993, p. 24.

Paul Feyerabend's Proliferation

Proliferation is a tool that, based on its assumption, allows for the improvement and development of knowledge through the confrontation of contradictory hypotheses and views.² Citing Feyerabend himself:

[P]rinciple of proliferation: Invent, and elaborate theories which are inconsistent with the accepted point of view, even if the latter should happen to be highly confirmed and generally accepted.³

In the moderate period of his intellectual activity, Feyerabend believed that proliferation should always be applied, but it should also be pointed out that at other times he did not consider proliferation (or any principle or methodology) as obligatory.⁴ An example of this can be found in following passage:

Many reviewers have regarded me as an idealist in the sense just described with the proviso that I try to replace familiar rules and standards by more “revolutionary” rules such as proliferation and counter-induction and almost everyone has ascribed to me a “methodology” with “anything goes” as its one “basic principle”. But on page 32 of AM [**A**gainst **M**ethod] I say quite explicitly that “my intention is not to replace one set of general rules by another such set: my intention is, rather, to convince the reader that all methodologies, even the most obvious ones, have their limits” or, to express it in terms just explained my intention is to show that idealism, whether of the simple or of the context-dependent kind, is the wrong solution for the problems of scientific rationality. These problems are not solved by a change of standards but by taking a different view of rationality altogether.⁵

In what follows, I will mainly consider the issue of proliferation in the context of Feyerabend's position in the moderate period.

² See Krzysztof J. KILIAN, “Proliferacja jako narzędzie podtrzymujące ewolucję człowieka w świetle poglądów Paula K. Feyerabenda z okresu umiarkowanego”, *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 2013, Vol. 10, pp. 179–202, <https://doi.org/10.53763/fag.2013.10.85>.

³ Paul K. FEYERABEND, “Reply to Criticism”, in: Paul K. FEYERABEND, **Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1. Realism, Rationalism & Scientific Method**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 105 [104–131], <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139171526.007>.

⁴ See KILIAN, “Proliferacja jako narzędzie podtrzymujące ewolucję człowieka...”, pp. 181–184.

⁵ Paul K. FEYERABEND, **Science in a Free Society**, Verso, London 1983, p. 32.

A defining feature of proliferation is the opposition of currently established theses to competing ones, which through friction between them allow humans to improve our knowledge.⁶ Proliferation allows theories and ideas to be improved by discovering new knowledge, inaccessible to us from our current, established perspective. Proliferation is also supposed to preserve pluralism in science⁷ and to promote greater democracy within it.

In the 1975 edition of his work **Against Method**, P. Feyerabend identifies an entire subsection in the analytical index as being associated with proliferation. The content of this description is:

The consistency condition which demands that new hypotheses agree with accepted theories is unreasonable because it preserves the older theory, and not the better theory. Hypotheses contradicting well-confirmed theories give us evidence that cannot be obtained in any other way. Proliferation of theories is beneficial for science, while uniformity impairs its critical power. Uniformity also endangers the free development of the individual.⁸

From this description, one can reflect on the nature of Feyerabend's proliferation. Although Feyerabend—anarchist did not recommend the unconditional application of any method or methodological principle (even the very proliferation itself) I will consider below the situation when proliferation serves as the primary tool for scientific development.

First, the author points out that new hypotheses should not necessarily agree with currently accepted theories, as this results in a preference for theories that have already been established, not the better ones. Not being better, but being coherent is currently more important — and according to Feyerabend, this does not have a good effect on the development of science. When considering the issue of theses that contradict the currently established knowledge, the author assumes that usually looking from a different perspective (different to the established one)

⁶ See Michael T. STUART, "Telling Stories in Science: Feyerabend and Thought Experiments", *HOPPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 2021, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 270 [262–281], <https://doi.org/10.1086/712946> [12.11.2025].

⁷ See Jamie SHAW, **A Pluralism Worth Having: Feyerabend's Well-Ordered Science (Doctoral Thesis)**, *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository* 2018, No. 5599, pp. 51–99, https://tiny.pl/Ov27krm_z [12.11.2025].

⁸ FEYERABEND, **Against Method...**, p. 24.

allows one to notice aspects of the problem that are overlooked from the current position.⁹ Secondly, the proliferation of theories should allow for greater criticality in science, which allows for the development of both science and the individual.

It is worth noting at this stage that proliferation is a tool similar to dialectics. Dialectics, however, is a method that is supposed to serve as a way to explain the workings of the world, while proliferation is supposed to be a useful tool that allows for the development of science. The basic principle of dialectics consists in the clash of thesis (*T*) with antithesis (*A*), as a result of which the opposites are eliminated and a qualitatively better new thesis (*NT*) is created.¹⁰ This can be symbolized as follows:

$$T \leftrightarrow A \rightarrow NT$$

Where:

T – Thesis

A – Antithesis

NT – New Thesis.¹¹

This mechanism is similar to the way proliferation functions in practice. In dialectics, for *A* to be truly an antithesis, it must be contrary to *T*, while in proliferation it must be unacceptable/different from the accepted *T*. The contradiction (or opposition) between *T* and *A* causes these theses to clash. The clash of *T* and *A* is supposed to lead to a situation in which a qualitatively new and better new thesis (*NT*) is created.¹² It is also worth pointing out here that both dialectics and proliferation assume the future creation of another, contradictory and opposite, new antithesis (*NA*) (in dialectics, the creation of another antithesis results from the nature of the world, in the context of proliferation it is the creation of another an-

⁹ See FEYERABEND, *Against Method...*, p. 34.

¹⁰ See Maurice CORNFORD, *Dialectical Materialism and Science, Marxism Today Series*, Lawrence & Wishart LTD, London 1949, p. 46.

¹¹ The symbols here represent, in the following order: \leftrightarrow – the clash between thesis and antithesis; \rightarrow – the emergence of a new thesis.

¹² See Pillai N. VIJAYAMOHANAN, *You Cannot Swim Twice in the Same River: The Genesis of Dialectical Materialism, MPRA Paper* 2013, No. 45011, p. 76, <https://tiny.pl/ny-r6rn4n> [12.11.2025].

tithesis for the purpose of scientific development). This indicates the dialectical nature of proliferation and can be symbolized as:

$$T \rightarrow A \rightarrow NT \rightarrow NA \rightarrow \dots$$

Where:

T – Thesis

A – Antithesis

NT – New Thesis

NA – New Antithesis.

which is theoretically infinite in the case of subsequent iterations (as in the context of dialectics). In the following considerations, especially in the context of establishing the limits of proliferation, this comparison will allow us to determine the potential limits of the proliferation principle by referring to the characterization of the contradiction between *T* and *A* in dialectical materialism.

Does Proliferation Need Limits?

For proliferation to fulfill its task as a tool, it must be used – without use, a tool is not a tool. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the practical problem of implementing proliferation in the scientific work of researchers and scientists. Although Feyerabend noted that proliferation should have its limits (for example It should not be the only method used), in order to make it practical it would be worthwhile to try to find more specific limits.¹³

If the main element of proliferation is the creation of antitheses that are opposed to currently established theses, then in the presence of a large amount of evidence that the Earth is spherical, should one conclude that it is flat? Should one always create antitheses, even without evidence to confirm them?

It depends. It seems that having *sufficient* (I am not trying to define what this sufficiency is; it depends on the specific field, problem and methodological principles applicable in a given environment) evidence for a given thesis eliminates the

¹³ See FEYERABEND, *Science in...*, p. 32.

total need to create an antithesis. This is particularly indicated by the absurdity resulting from the situation in the second question – if we do not have any evidence confirming the validity of the antithesis and we create it by force, we are wasting time. Researchers operate under significant time constraints, so they cannot always deeply and thoroughly consider potential antitheses when studying any phenomenon. It is simply impractical and impossible to always, constantly propose antitheses in the context of the theses currently being suggested. In an extreme situation, this can turn into criticism, which instead of promoting freedom in science and improving it, will unproductively inhibit it.

Based on the above considerations, we can conclude that in order to be able to practically apply proliferation, we need to consider its practical limitations. In my opinion, we can distinguish three basic, most important premises that define what these limits should look like in individual cases:

1) Consider whether there is a need for an antithesis (if one does not already exist; if so, select an appropriate one based on the criteria listed below). Consider whether there are premises in favor of a specific antithesis or whether there are any shortcomings in the currently accepted thesis. Examine whether perhaps the thesis is sufficiently proven so as not to create a new antithesis.

2) Consider whether there is a practical possibility of implementing the antithesis (conducting a study, test, or train of thought that allows it to be developed in opposition to the thesis).

3) Examine whether there is a contradiction between the thesis and the antithesis and what kind of contradiction it is — a major or an indirect one. Considerations on this point will be presented in the following subsection using the principles of dialectical materialism.

Dialectical Materialism and the Limits of Proliferation

Referring to dialectical materialism, I would like to briefly describe Feyerabend's approach to Marxism. Feyerabend often referred to Marxist considerations in his writings. In the first edition of **Against Method** from 1970, Feyerabend writes in the footnotes that, despite his praise for Marxism, he defends only the anarchist elements of Marxist views. He utilizes those elements of Marxism

that serve to critique epistemological and moral principles, but he opposes the vision of a future, unified communist society.¹⁴ It is worth noting, however, that these visions within Marxism have also undergone a dialectical process and changed over time, adapting to different conditions and realities. Feyerabend himself notes this, quoting Mao Zedong,¹⁵ who wrote about a situation in which, when Marxism became the dominant ideology in the country, Mao believed that other ideas should be allowed to exist so that Marxism could be refined through discussion with them.¹⁶ In this edition of his work, the author repeatedly cites the works and achievements of Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx, and Georg Hegel, drawing on their philosophical and political achievements, often citing their dialectical views. Feyerabend, in fact, points to Marx and Lenin, among others, as authors and revolutionaries whose works are worth familiarizing oneself with. Feyerabend himself admits that

[k]nowledge is part of nature and is subjected to its general laws. The laws of dialectics apply to the motion of objects and concepts, as well as to the motion of higher units comprising objects and concepts.¹⁷

He thus points to the dialectical nature of knowledge and science, and to the fact that both concepts and objects are subject to the laws of dialectics. He also writes about the eternal dialectic of concepts and facts, encouraging researchers to operate in an environment that is perpetually uncertain, unstable, and allows for constant clashes between different ideas.¹⁸ He also characterizes the traditional, stagnant discourse as non-dialectical, pointing out the negativity of its rigidity.¹⁹ According to Feyerabend, extreme views and theses are sometimes

¹⁴ See Paul K. FEYERABEND, "Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge", In: Michael RADNER, Stephen WINOKUR (eds.), *Analyses of Theories and Methods of Physics and Psychology*, *Minnesota Studies in Philosophy of Science* 1970, Vol. 4, pp. 105–106 [17–130].

¹⁵ See FEYERABEND, "Against Method: Outline...", p. 109.

¹⁶ It is worth pointing out that, in practice, Mao Zedong generally did not allow for the existence of ideas other than those consistent with his own. The Hundred Flowers Campaign (carried out in 1956) is an exception, as it encouraged criticism but ended in repression.

¹⁷ FEYERABEND, "Against Method: Outline...", pp. 35–36.

¹⁸ See FEYERABEND, "Against Method: Outline...", p. 36.

¹⁹ See FEYERABEND, "Against Method: Outline...", p. 72.

necessary since they allow ideas to clash and develop together (this is a very dialectical approach) — artificial reconciliation reduces the differences and blurs the real contradiction.²⁰ Moreover, Feyerabend writes:

An author who can write, in the spirit of “dialogue”, that “Christianity and Marxism are not contrary to each other” (Guenther Nenning, quoted from the Newsletter of the American Institute for Marxist Studies, vol. 6, no. 1 (January-February 1969), first page bottom) will hardly be prepared to accept the doctrines of a tough-minded Marxist who is interested in progress, not in peace of mind.²¹

Feyerabend notes that the dialectical clash of ideas and theses leads to development, not to *peace of mind*, which is more associated with stagnation than with change. It seems, therefore, that Feyerabend respected Marxist thought to some extent and considered its dialectical method useful.

In this case it is worth noting that in their article “Feyerabend’s Discourse Against Method: A Marxist Critique” Jean Curthoys and Wal Suchting criticised Feyerabend’s theories from a Marxist standpoint.²² As for proliferation, the authors do not use this word *per se*, but employ the term counterinduction.²³ They point out that Feyerabend does not recommend counterinduction as the only method, but as a tactic against empirical Methodism.²⁴ According to the authors, the principle of counterinduction (i.e. opposing a currently accepted scientific theory with theories that contradict it) is not sufficiently justified as a method. The text indicates that counterinduction (or more precisely, a thesis opposed to the currently accepted one) does not in itself provide any evidence against the thesis currently accepted.²⁵ The thesis opposed to the accepted one is rather in this case simply a theoretical thesis that can raise the linguistic level of research, but does not engage with empirical validation — according to the authors, the thesis op-

²⁰ See FEYERABEND, “Against Method: Outline...”, pp. 111–112.

²¹ FEYERABEND, “Against Method: Outline...”, pp. 111–112.

²² See JEAN CURTHOYS, WAL SUCHTING, “Feyerabend’s Discourse Against Method: A Marxist Critique”, *Inquiry* 1977, Vol. 20, No. 2–3, pp. 245–250 [243–397].

²³ See CURTHOYS, SUCHTING, “Feyerabend’s Discourse...”, p. 256.

²⁴ See CURTHOYS, SUCHTING, “Feyerabend’s Discourse...”, pp. 256–257.

²⁵ See CURTHOYS, SUCHTING, “Feyerabend’s Discourse...”, pp. 263–264.

posed to the currently accepted one may be in a sense as limited as the currently accepted one.²⁶

The above considerations of Jean Curthoys and Wal Suchting can help in further reflection on proliferation. The authors indicate, among other things, that a thesis that is inconsistent with the currently accepted one should be in some way connected with reality and experience. In their text, one can also notice a reluctance to proliferation as simply a theory opposed to the currently accepted one. I will try to focus on these problems, among others, below.

Returning to my considerations from the previous subsection: While the first two sub-points of the above premises may not meet with resistance, the third may seem unclear. The question of the level of contradiction, whether it is a major or an indirect contradiction, affects the possible sharpness of the antithesis — but what is this contradiction and how can we define its nature?

In order to define what a contradiction is, I believe we should refer to the characterization of contradiction in dialectical materialism. Vladimir Lenin in his **Philosophical Notebooks**, defining the nature of dialectics, writes:

Dialectics in the proper sense is the study of contradiction in the very essence of objects: not only are appearances transitory, mobile, fluid, demarcated, only by conventional boundaries, but the essence of things is so as well.²⁷

In this passage Lenin points to contradiction as the essence and most important element of the dialectical relationship. Without contradiction, the thesis and antithesis cannot clash, and thus the quantitative changes cannot change into qualitative ones, along with their growth in the process of friction. The unity and struggle of opposites in dialectical materialism consist in the fact that, despite the opposites and mutual friction, both thesis and antithesis strive to cancel each other out in the dialectical process and transform into the new.²⁸ The most impor-

²⁶ See CURTHOYS, SUCHTING, "Feyerabend's Discourse...", p. 264.

²⁷ Vladimir LENIN, **Philosophical Notebooks**, in: Vladimir LENIN, **Collected Works. Vol. 38**, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1976, pp. 251–252.

²⁸ In order to explain the unity of opposites in dialectical materialism, it is worth referring to the following passage. This is necessary because at first glance it may seem that there is no unity between opposites. However: "every contradiction is relative to a certain identity. Conversely, unity is the unity of a contradiction. Without content, without multiple and contradictory «moments», unity is void. But contradiction as such is intolerable; the dialectical unity is not a confusion of the contra-

tant contradictions are those that occur inside, the deep ones (basic contradictions), not superficial ones.

When considering issues related to proliferation and attempting to determine the limits of this tool, it is worth taking a look at the concept of basic contradiction.

To bring the concept of basic contradiction closer, I would like to cite an example that can illustrate its nature. Here is an example of basic contradiction given by Maurice Cornford:

[...] the contradiction between the socialisation of production, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the private ownership of the means of production and private appropriation of the product.²⁹

The above passage indicates a basic contradiction in capitalist society. However, it is not the only contradiction, nor is it the only contradiction that influences the change of society and economic relations. There are other, smaller contradictions within capitalist society, but they are not as antagonistic and deep, and therefore are not a basic contradiction. It is this concept of antagonism that I will focus on in the following considerations.

Comparing dialectics and proliferation, and noting that a basic contradiction is crucial to a proper understanding of dialectics, it is worth considering what it might mean in the context of proliferation. In trying to establish a basic contradiction between some thesis and antithesis, one can refer to the level and degree of antagonism as a way of defining basic and lesser antagonism. To illustrate this, I will use a few examples.

It should also be noted that the contradictions analyzed here are contradictions in the sense of opposition between given theses or possibilities, not in the sense of logical contradiction. A logical contradiction would occur between statements such as: the Earth is flat — the Earth is *not* flat, or the Earth is round — the Earth is *not* round. However, we are interested in various, inconsistent theses that

dictory terms as such, but a unity which passes through the contradiction and is re-established at a higher level. The contradiction is a tearing asunder, an internal destruction, an uprooting of Being from itself, a fertilization through Becoming, annihilation and death; but the unity expresses and determines the appearance of the new being, the Third Term” (Henri LEFEBVRE, **Dialectical Materialism**, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 2009, pp. 60–61).

²⁹ CORNFORD, **Dialectical Materialism...**, p. 47.

may influence each other, not in the simple relationship of a thesis and its negation.

Example 1) Thesis: The Earth is spherical. Antithesis: The Earth is flat. Type of antagonism: Assuming that the main feature of the Earth in this case is sphericity, then the content of the antithesis, that it is flat, is directly contradictory to the content of the thesis. Thus, there is basic antagonism, which allows us to notice a direct, sharp contradiction between theses (and therefore they can be successfully used as elements of proliferation).

It would be similar with antitheses such as: The Earth is in the shape of a cube, etc. – these antitheses directly contradict the basic thesis. In this case, to establish a basic contradiction, one must refer to practice and to arguments against the thesis currently accepted. With the help of practice, one can select one basic contradiction because, for example, there are more people who believe that the Earth is flat, there are more arguments and discussions about it than about the Earth being cube-shaped (leaving aside the quality of these discussions and arguments here; we are only establishing a basic contradiction). At this stage, we already have a reference to the practical, social and scientific situation.

Example 2) Thesis: The Earth is in the shape of a sphere. Antithesis: There is no curvature on the Earth resulting from its spherical shape. Type of antagonism: Since the content of the thesis is first to indicate the lack of curvature (resulting from sphericity), and only then to sphericity through this, it can be classified as lesser antagonism. It would be necessary to simplify the antithesis and bring it to the level of basic contradiction (the one from the first example). In the current example, antagonism exists, but it is more obscure and not as clear as in example 1.

Example 3) Thesis: The Earth is in the shape of a sphere. Antithesis: The exact shape of the Earth cannot be determined. Type of antagonism: There is basically no antagonism between these theses, or it is exceptionally weak. The antithesis indicates that the exact shape of the Earth cannot be determined, but it does not specify whether this results from practical and measurement limitations or from the undefined shape of the Earth. In the first case, there is no contradiction (the impossibility of measuring the shape does not exclude any shape, including a spherical one). In the second case, the undefined shape of the Earth theoretically excludes sphericity, but there is a lot of room for interpretation in the context of

this antithesis (it can be assumed that this undefined shape is very close to spherical, etc.).

Of course, antagonism alone in this case does not yet indicate that it is worth considering the antithesis in terms of proliferation. After all, in Example 1 above (the one that is most worth considering, according to the basic contradiction principle), it seems that enough research has been done to be able to reject the antithesis and not waste any more time on it. However, this antagonism and its level can be useful in the context of considering the problem from different perspectives and the dialectical clash of thesis with antithesis, leading to improvement and development. Nonetheless, if these considerations are not combined with practice, then the value of this process is questionable – as I have already written, an unused tool is not a tool, and proliferation is supposed to be a tool improving science, not speculation as such.

Summary

In summary, Paul Feyerabend's method of proliferation, in order to be applicable, should have limitations – Feyerabend himself agreed with this statement. This article sought to identify a practical way of finding those limitations using dialectical materialism. I have tried to prove that with the help of the principle of unity and the struggle of opposites, which belongs to the foundations of dialectical materialism, one can effectively and practically adapt proliferation to current theoretical needs. However, one must always keep in mind the reality and those three premises, which I have written about before. If there is no need for antithesis, do not create it artificially. It should arise naturally, as an element of the thinking and research process (for example when there are proofs and considerations against the currently held up thesis).

The principle of unity and struggle of opposites allows for the discovery of the existence (or lack thereof) of a contradiction between two theses, as well as the level of this contradiction. Capturing this contradiction allows for a partial understanding of the relationship between two theses/positions, and consequently allows for reflection on the level of antagonism between them, translating into the potential relevance of the antithesis to the binding thesis (according to the principle of dialectical materialism: thesis-antithesis-thesis). This curtailment of the

principle of proliferation by means of showing the thesis-antithesis antagonism, as well as by means of turning towards practice and realities is at least necessary if one wants to treat this principle seriously in scientific research.

One cannot ignore practice and its influence on reflections on proliferation. If there are no practical premises (arguments in favour of the antithesis) to support it, then even the existence of a basic contradiction between the thesis and the antithesis does not justify its consideration. In such cases, it merely consumes time that could be devoted to other, potentially more fruitful research.

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