

# THE VOICES OF CIVIL SOCIETIES

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## I. Contrasting voices

### 1. Civil society, markets and democratic politics

*Civil society sensu lato and sensu stricto*

The concept of civil society in its broad (neo-classical, 18<sup>th</sup> century) sense refers to an institutional matrix of markets, a liberal polity *cum* a public sphere (today's democratic politics), and a plural associational world. It denotes a normative model to which a number of really existing so-called free, liberal, capitalist, bourgeois or Western-type of societies have approximated, in one degree or another, in the last two centuries. In the course of time, there has been some semantic displacement of the term of civil society, for it to refer not to the whole but to a part of the whole, the world of associations. However, civil society in this restricted (and currently prevailing) sense of associations should be seen as connected to the other institutions of the original whole.<sup>1</sup> They all influence each other and make substantial contributions to the stability and the working order of the whole; in particular, associations do that by trying to solve problems that markets and democracy cannot solve, and by playing a crucial role in the public sphere.

These two contributions (of problem solving and of shaping public discourse) of associations are linked to each other. In fact, problems don't exist in and by themselves; they have to be defined and justified. By defining the problems to be solved and by setting a discourse of justification for their relevance and for their possible solutions, associations (as well as individuals) take a stand about the nature of the good to be done and the bad to be avoided. Theirs are voices in a debate of what a good society is about. We may consider, thus, that the statements which the associations make, by means of what they say as well as by what they do and the way they do it, are voices in a debate on what a good society is about; which is in fact the ultimate standard for passing judgement on (and giving meaning to) the economy and politics of the times.

Civil society in its restricted sense, therefore, denotes a world of plural associations which defend the interests of those they identify with, which express and assert their identities,

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<sup>1</sup>Pérez-Díaz (1995, 2006).

which solve problems related to that defense and that self-assertion, and which, while doing so, make a stand in the public view and argue that what they say and do is compatible with, and further, a view of the common good, the good of the community at large.

*Markets and democratic politics promote associations' growth*

Because markets, democratic politics and a plurality of associations are all interconnected, they tend to reinforce each other. In fact, today's development of markets and democratic politics, and a set of social and cultural factors closely linked to them, increasingly provide associations with resources, opportunities and motives to come forwards. Markets and democracies create a demand for organizations engaged in solving problems which result from the very functioning of markets and democracies. For instance, new products, trade and employment opportunities together with new actors (including multinational corporations) that come with them, generate associational responses of various kinds. Local competitors and providers go to business associations, employees look for unions, and consumers, for consumer associations; while local communities try to make deals with them all. People concerned join environmental movements. Parties, media, experts may all be activated by those developments, and prompted to action.

This is usually combined with crucial cultural developments. To begin with, with the diffusion of institutions of political accountability and the rule of law, and with guarantees for human, civil and political rights, which increase people's opportunities and motivations to join associations. These developments include the spread of a culture of bargaining between competing interests, and enhance the perceived legitimacy of different voices to be heard, of procedures to be respected, and of rules of fairness to apply all around. This happens in a world of relatively open communications, in which the break of the rules is supposed to be known soon and by everybody concerned, so that (economic, political as well as reputational) sanctions to breaking these rules may follow, and come from unexpected quarters.

The development of mass media, new technologies of information and communication, and schooling makes organizations easier to manage, increases their visibility in the public eye, and favors their activities of fund raising and lobbying. Besides, economic growth frees

time, and, together with trends to greater longevity, increases the pool of people available to engage in voluntary work.

This affects both elites and ordinary people. Professionals and entrepreneurs may have the know how and the cultural drive to join associations. Professionals may be so inclined on the basis of their traditional professional ethos of public service, to the extent it has not been eroded by commercialism or political partisanship, and entrepreneurs may look forwards to philanthropic work, in a search for a discourse of justification for their new wealth. At the same time, there is always a vast cultural reservoir among middle, working and popular classes that may lead them in a similar direction. Their activities have been traditionally articulated around a morality of helping others, of giving, which, in their eyes, may amount to no more than following a tradition of common sense and simple moral decency, and they may have, also, a religious dimension.

The result of this combination of factors has been a process of reinforced legitimacy and a substantial increase in the available resources, and, in the end, an explosion of associations coming about all over the place, in an uncoordinated manner, like mushrooms that come out wild after the rain in a propitious field.<sup>2</sup>

*The voices of markets and democratic politics as shaped by a modern, individualist social imagery; and the need for the voice of civil society*

The experience (that is, the actual practices and not only the formal institutions) of markets and democratic politics has tended to come together with a certain social imagery. Charles Taylor has called it a modern ('Lockean') social imagery: the view of an individualist society of sociable and reasonable people who engage in interactions for their mutual benefit; people would imagine this is the way the world already works, in part, and the way it should work, and will work in time, mostly; it is the normal, natural way of life.<sup>3</sup>

We may agree or disagree with this description of the modern social imagery for the last two to three centuries. In fact, this individualistic culture only applies in part even to the

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<sup>2</sup>Pérez-Díaz, López Novo (2003).

<sup>3</sup>Taylor calls it a 'Lockean' imagery but not everybody would agree with this interpretation of Locke (see Taylor 2004; also Dunn 1989).

West; it may even be a delusion of academics to think this imagery was already well established in parts of the West by the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, since it was not. Even more delusional may be to think that (as Taylor suggests), after a long march, it has come to define the social imagery of the West today.

But, even if we consider it to be just *one* version in a *set* of modern imageries (and even if we question calling it ‘Lockean’), there’s something in this over interpretation of the success of the individualist view of the world to reckon with. First, this imagery fits with today’s prevailing view of the functioning of the markets; even though there is an alternative view that stresses the social embeddedness of the markets, which is gaining importance.<sup>4</sup> Second, it fits with the gradually prevailing view of democracy as an arena for competing interests; even though there has always been an alternative view centered on civic virtue and on the theme of a common good.<sup>5</sup> Finally, this view is probably even more prevalent among a strategic sector of society. It’s the view of many people among the elites, such as politicians, academics, businessmen, media people and, in general, enlightened professional middle-classes. They play a crucial role in shaping public opinion as gate-keepers in the system of social communication, and a leadership role in the associational world.

The problem is, these voices of markets and democracies as they are shaped by the modern imagery are short on community. A sense of an enduring community does not come easily into the daily texture of most economic and political experiences thus understood. Markets, let to themselves, provide social cohesion and community as an afterthought; to do otherwise they probably need the complement of an explicit discourse. Democratic politics actually works in terms of contentious politics between different segments of the political body; in it, the political community as such is experienced in rare moments, in times of war and mourning, or in passing moments of ritual celebration.

Probably, the most important overall effect of the workings of a civil society (understood in a restricted sense), that is, qua associations, consists in that it has a critical, decisive effect on the contents of the public sphere, concerning what a civil society is about, and, and most importantly, what a good society is about. This debate is always in process, and

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<sup>4</sup>For instance, the view of markets as conversations (Pérez-Díaz 2006; and Levine *et al.* 2000).

<sup>5</sup>This is the classical view (see Pérez-Díaz 2008).

shouldn't be seen as a debate in preparation for a vote, for a collective decision. It's never ending, and mostly inconclusive; even though it may have an influence all along, as it is food for thought and fodder for character formation, which, in turn, may prepare the way for local experiments and solutions, and, thus, have a lasting effect on a better kind of politics.

As for its substance matter, the debate on a good society includes a discussion on the best institutional framework for keeping the very debate going on. As such, it is open to arguments for and against civil society broadly understood, but the debate goes well beyond that, as it is the key to create a moral community (and not one which would be restricted to an ad hoc arrangement of convenience), and it implies a search for direction and for cognitive and moral clarity (even if it is not expected to *end* by arriving to an unanimous comprehensive view of what this direction and this clarity consist in).

This debate requires a world of associations, for the very reason politics and markets can do the job only in part. Because, as already mentioned, first, ideal politics may be about the common good, but real politics mixes this up with a contest for power. The debate cannot go very far with today's 'usual politics'. Leaders and cadres emphasize inter-party and intra-party political rivalries as a matter of course and on an everyday basis; then they switch to the high ground of statecraft on critical occasions. They may pretend to play a role of moral charismatic leaders, eve of prophets; but they do play with an inherent bias to power politics. And, second, real markets, often, don't fare much better, even if the main thrust of markets, in the long run is to increase social interdependence and people's awareness of it. They 'speak by doing',<sup>6</sup> but their message is implicit and needs explaining; so much so as it is often muddled too. Markets are part and parcel of a *civitas cupiditatis* which may develop in many directions, and, as a matter of historical record, it's obvious that, as they accommodate, often, a robust doses of fraud, violence and noise, they are in need for continuous criticism and rectification. So even if democratic politics and markets work well (and they may work badly), it's better to complement and check them by means of the open debate of a good society, in which associations participate in full.

To sum up my point so far. Today's voices of markets and democratic politics convey, to a considerable extent, an individualistic version of a modern social imagery by which

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<sup>6</sup>Pérez-Díaz (2006).

sensible and sociable individuals engage in interactions for their mutual benefit and in the pursuit of their own interests, under the form of economic exchanges or of a political exchange between citizens and various segments of the political class. Even if markets also convey a message of social interdependence and of conversations taking place within a community of conversationists, and even if democratic politics implies a reference to a political community and to a set of collective goods, still these voices need to be complemented, sometimes checked and sometimes reinforced by the voices of the associations. The question is, what's the contents of the associations' voices.

*Beyond the individualistic voice: the associations' two languages, for self-expression and for bargaining in the real world (of markets and democratic politics)*

Let us start with the assumption that the expression and the defense of the identities (and the corresponding interests) of the communities they stand for is the basic stuff of the associations' voices. Now, the very expression and defense of these identities, and of these interests, requires associations to learn to speak in two languages.

On the one hand, associations express multiple, different identities: of individuals, families, local and ethnic communities, nations, religions.<sup>7</sup> Their motto would be to be faithful to themselves; and to express the difference of every individual and group vis à vis the rest: which may result either in a clash or in an appeal to a modus vivendi among these different units.<sup>8</sup> Hence, each association is to develop its own language, and then, to emphasize its own modalities of the basic experiences of all of them; eventually, the basic experiences of the wheel of life. The same applies to individuals and groups: the functional equivalent to birth, passage to adulthood, marriage and family formation, work, military duties, political participation, retirement, illness, death and mourning.

On the other hand, associations have to use another language which is common with other actors who inhabit the same environment they do: to use it qua an instrument to

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<sup>7</sup>In fact, historically, the definition of the contents of these identities was side-lined by the culture of the enlightenment linked to markets and democratic politics, and taken up by the culture of the counter-enlightenment: Berlin (1999).

<sup>8</sup>This may correspond to Berlin's (1969) and Gray's (2002) views of the predicament of a post-liberal society.

communicate with them and make them understand why and how they are different, and should be respected as such. Besides, the defense of the identity of an association is indissolubly linked with the defense of its perceived interests; and many of these interests have been already redefined in view of the experience the associations have had of markets and democratic politics.

This being so, the associations find themselves in a complicated predicament, since they have to use a local ('private') language of self-expression, while, at the same time, they have to use the ('public') language in which they argue their differences vis a vis the rest, in order to make themselves respected, and for that purpose, to make alliances, bargain, reach compromises, and share in a consensus here and there. Underlying this complex discourse game, there may be an undercurrent of traditional morality that fits the experience of social networks of giving and receiving Alasdair MacIntyre has referred to.<sup>9</sup> This suggests deep, underlying continuities from traditional cultures (back to nomadic herders and sedentary peasants, through the avatars of the Axial Ages to our current times) and the culture of modern associations.

This more complex voice intimates a form of good society in which we find together two worlds: on the one hand, the world of practical independent reasoners who have their own voice, and, on the other, the world in which there is an acknowledgment of vulnerability and dependence of people on others who provide a voice for them.

A number of associations have sprang to life lately which convey this kind of composite morality. They are like autonomous reasoners who put forwards a collective identity while, at the same time, they give a voice to those who have no voice. They are part and parcel (possibly the core) of social networks of givers and receivers in which the facts of autonomous action is recognized but so it is the fact of dependence and vulnerability. Instead of following a logic of mutual benefit, this suggests a logic of 'beyond reciprocity', of giving more than receiving, or of being part in a network of giving and receiving across time, in which you don't give back the same amount of what you receive to those who give you. This asymmetry of receiving more from some and giving more to others would fit a morality of just generosity, liberality and benevolence.

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<sup>9</sup>MacIntyre (1999).

Thus, while the social imagery underlying markets and democracies tends to be the modern, individualist social imagery, associations usually exhibit a voice with a different tonality, with a component of a different logic; and one which is reminiscent of past, traditional or pre-modern times. Or rather, they tend to have, in a sort of Dostoyevskian twist, two voices,<sup>10</sup> or, if you like, the *composite* or the *hybrid* of two voices. One voice is for bargaining with the ('real') world of wealth and power (of markets and democracies) they are in; hence, a voice of autonomous actors which are intent on a defense of their interests. Another voice is for self-expression, and for expressing the identities of the communities they represent or care for, possibly pointing (in an 'idealistic' manner) to a more communitarian world; hence, a voice of actors which express the identities of dependent and vulnerable people who are in need of help, and of somebody to speak for them, and which associations try to include in a larger community.

Now, let me sketch out the very broad outlines of a story concerning how this hybrid language may have developed in the case of a particular kind of associations, and under specific historical conditions.

## **II. The formation process of associations' hybrid languages**

### **1. Classics, Christians and moderns**

Let me summarize the main points I want to make in this section. Focusing on philanthropic associations, history suggests a complex narrative is needed to give an account of the evolution of their character. From classical antiquity to Christianity, the trend seems to be towards a large network of organizations to put a remedy to a variety of social needs, but above all to establish a normative model of social harmony which would be an institutionalization of charity, and the setting of a moral community in the *seculum* and looking beyond, as the true, ultimate reality. However, the structure of plausibility of this social imagery and its corresponding life forms will be subsequently eroded by a series of economic and political, social and cultural process. The end result will be the gradual emergence of a modern society in which the game of competing interests, in the field of

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<sup>10</sup>Bakhtine (1970).

the economy and of politics (economic competition, political checks and balances and party rivalries, for instance) may provide with possibly unintended but in fact quite desired consequences of economic growth and a modicum of social and political cohesion. There is room for a revival and enlargement of that network of remedial organizations, but the general attribution of an aim at an all encompassing, enduring moral community tends to weaken.

### *Classical antiquity and Christianity*

We need a complex narrative to follow the avatars of the world of associations through Classical antiquity, Christendom and modern times. As a partial approach to the task, I outline a narrative of a particular kind of associations which is explicitly, and mainly, concerned with helping others and solving others' problems rather than with defending their own interests: a saga of philanthropic associations. This is a narrative in which voices with 'Lockean' and 'MacIntyrian' overtones clash and mix and give way to some compromises in between; and one which suggests the uncertain outcomes of the drama we are in.

Let us assume that a world wide, global society such as ours today is made out of a number of complex but recognizable cultural traditions; that globalization itself requires us to debate as our starting point the traditions *we* are part of. *We*, in the West, stand on the grounds of a particular, if multiform tradition, with twenty some centuries behind us, all relevant to where we stand now. In this particular tradition, philanthropy has been initially understood as a moral sentiment of reflective, imaginative love to human beings. This implies an intimation and disposition to wish them good that translates into doing good to them, into good works: good will and good practice, benevolence (*bene volere*) and beneficence (*bene facere*).

In classical antiquity, philanthropy is built on the basis of feelings and dispositions of *philia* or friendship first applied to the worlds of *oikos* and *polis*, then extended to the wider sphere of cosmopolis and humankind, as suggested by the evolution of the Platonic tradition all through the Stoics. In turn, in biblical tradition, God call on us to be the warden of our brothers, brothers of blood, so that blood will cry out against us were we to behave otherwise and kill our brother; and this is extended to the chosen people and, reinforced by the prophets' preaching, may be lead to Jesus' admonition to love our

neighbors understood in an universal register; that is, to all and each of the human beings, including our enemies, not to speak those farthest away converted into neighbors, that is, our closest ones.<sup>11</sup> This love to the closest, not to the farthest away as such, is not a matter of statements but of living work, that is, of a way of living, a life form.

Some historians<sup>12</sup> have tried to explain the diffusion of Christianity during the Low Roman Empire by arguing that, in an atomized and anxious age, Christianity offered community and hope. There was, of course, already a social moral philosophy at work in the polytheist world (and in a secular one, insofar most were oriented towards the *seculum*, the here and now), and, correspondingly, there was also a variety of philanthropic institutions of many kinds, that tended to palliate those feelings of loneliness and anxiety historians refer to.

But Roman philanthropy had its limits. The overarching institutional frame is supposed to have been alien and external to people's direct, living experience.<sup>13</sup> The clearest illustration for it is the political system. Immersion in the *polis* (having become a series of *polei*, or rather municipal administrations) and in the Roman empire as such allows for a limited involvement in politics, and a narrow understanding of citizenship: more as a guarantee for a set of procedural rights we'd describe today as private rather than as a basis for people's engagement qua participants in public deliberation and decision making in a political community, be it local or imperial. The republican dream, even if reduced to that of the orders of senators and knights à la Cicero, came to nothing in the long protracted crisis from mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century to 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., and not even the political virtue of the Antonin emperors was able to reverse that trend.

Now, under these conditions, we witness, on the one side, professional and religious colleges to develop forms of self-help and mutual assistance, and, on the other side, the elites' sustained attempt to develop a particular form of works for the public good, known as *evergetism*.<sup>14</sup> The way Roman power expanded was to establish alliances with local

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<sup>11</sup>And love not mainly for the good they have, or how good they are, but for the good they may have, or how good may they *become*; see Max Scheler's contrast between Christian love and Platonic love (1970[1912]).

<sup>12</sup>See, for instance, Dodds (1965).

<sup>13</sup>This is the classical Hegel's criticism of Roman 'politics'.

<sup>14</sup>Veyne (1992).

oligarches and engage their military collaboration in the benefit of both Rome and themselves, by sharing in the economic spoils and by allowing these oligarches to enjoy local power. In turn, the legitimacy basis of the local elites' authority was crucially reinforced by their willingness to engage their personal resources in all sorts of works and activities: aqueducts, theaters, circuses, the patronage of public cult, arts and public entertainment, gladiators' displays, and the rest. All these activities reinforced the elites' claims to prominence, but they were also exhibits of their public spirit, and provided opportunities for a display of communal spirit. In time however, during the long economic and political crisis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, and given the fiscal burden these elites had to shoulder, the final outcome became ever more problematical.

Christianity offered, by contrast, the example of communities in which people care for each other, help each other out, love each other. Their identity sign, the sacraments, are commemorations of acts of love, of communal love: love to disciples, to the nearest friends, to the not so nearest. Love which transcends death, and projects itself onto the after life, in the hope of a love encounter. These are not mere beliefs; they are beliefs to be acted out, in acts of faith and hope, impregnated by charity.

Charity does not consist in specific acts of beneficence aimed to remedy singular problems of extreme need. It refers, rather, to a moral sentiment shared by all individual human beings, which is embedded in mores, habitual behavior. This provides the grounds for building up a *communitas*, a social body, a mystical body to which they all are called to belong. Individuals engage in relations of mutuality and reciprocity: men and women, free people and slaves, children and elders, elites and ordinary people, rich and poor. Despite their obvious differences, they are all equal in regard to the most crucial dimensions. They are equal in dignity: children of God and heirs to His glory; and equals in their lack of dignity: fallible and sinful, unable to save themselves by their own efforts.

The experience of Christian Europe, from 400 A.D. (or 800 A.D., depending on the way we read the historical record) to 1800 A.D., is like a complex, arduous and, to many, disappointing attempt to institutionalize charity; and with it, the vision of an idea, *telos* of the social body that gets as close as possible to the *civitas Dei*.

As such, the institutionalization of charity social order is defined by two fundamental traits. First, by a wide network of organizations such as hospitals, brotherhoods,

universities; all supported, to a large extent, by individual and collective gifts of all kinds. Above all, second, by a normative model of social harmony that society should realize: that of a community of brothers in which they are all God's children. Belonging in this loving community gives access to a proper understanding of the ultimate truth of a creation of finite beings; because, in von Balthassar's words, "love alone is credible".<sup>15</sup>

### *Changes in the road to modernity*

This attempt has been fulfilled by less than a half, under the best circumstances. The fact is, it faces increasing, overwhelming obstacles from 1300 onwards. On the one hand, the demographic crisis of the 14<sup>th</sup> century has its effect of uprooting large masses from their rural, local roots, and posing problems that overrun the capacities of that network of benefic institutions. On the other hand, and above all, the social imagery changes in a direction that challenges the very idea of social harmony, towards the 'Lockean' social imagery.

The growth of state capacities (taxes, military and civil, administrative personnel) comes hand in hand with ever more robust and deliberate real politics strategies by monarchies, nobility and towns; they all draw up the contours of a temporal order run by the logic of a contest between several agents all run by a *libido dominandi*. The church itself is drawn into the game, and plays it with notorious gusto. At the same time, the growth of a market economy comes hand in hand with the diffusion of a collective imagery according to which social life is made up of a maze of conflicts, agreements and compromises between individuals (and families) all oriented towards promoting their own particular interests.

All together, these demographic and economic, political and cultural factors erode the *structure of plausibility*<sup>16</sup> of a normative theory or a social imagery of the social body as if it could ever become close to a visible manifestation of the mystical body. As a result, there's a tendency to take the concepts of charity and beneficence out of the center of the moral landscape, and confine them to the margins. This way, those concepts would play a role of reference for institutions which are specialized in solving very specific needs, and would denote just the intimate beliefs of people involved in that kind of remedial activities.

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<sup>15</sup>Balthasar (2004[1963]).

<sup>16</sup>Berger (1985).

On the basis of these premises, a curious historical experiment takes place: the rise of a society which gradually defines itself as a secular, modern society, along several centuries. This society sets on a mixture of fights, competitions, rivalries, compromises between agents which are holders of different property rights. In it, the consensus of minds regarding what is good loses strength and moral clarity; in this regard it's quite likely that the trend of nominalism and voluntarism which prevailed in the intellectual debates of the late Middle Ages, played here a crucial role keeping pace with the development of state politics and markets.

The view of a social harmony is replaced by that of a *modus vivendi* between different views of the good, which are supposed to be incommensurable. There is no point in trying to aggregate these views in a collective, general utility function; all we can do is to reckon with the differences, and to bear them out and live with them.

Under these conditions, the ideal of moral community which was attempted to (it's true, with modest success) for about a *millenium* is replaced by that of a civilized, civil society broadly speaking. In it, we may find a number of participatory associations which may pursue their (particular) intimations of a good society, according to that (traditional) model of social harmony or at variance with it.<sup>17</sup> These participatory associations are composed by people with affective, cognitive, moral affinities among themselves; as a sort of spiritual family, sharing a vision of the good: churches, parties, social movements, philosophical schools.

But, whatever the final aims, and the corresponding hopes for a future good society, the rules of the game of today's plural society make for the fact that the experience of mutuality regarding today's whole society is fairly limited. In these circumstances, the state apparatus may step in and provide for a sort of beneficence or welfare which is also quite limited; it is aimed to address needs which are generally considered as basic and incontrovertible.

In turn, the loss of the central character of the experience of mutuality and community, and this reduction of the scope of the activities of welfare, had fostered particular associations' tendency to increase the degree of their efficacy and efficiency by narrowing the horizon

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<sup>17</sup>Insole (2004).

of the interests and activities so as to attend very specific needs, and, in the same vein, to accept the state's mediation, or collaboration, for fulfilling their goals.

*The 'gospel' of modernity?*

As a result, the vision of a good society and the debates about it may have tended to be articulated in terms and values which are consonant with a 'gospel' of, or good news about, modernity, around five propositions.

First, the achievement of community tends to be measured in terms of us getting more resources of wealth, power and status in a world competition with others; this is what defines the internal solidarity of a national society versus others, as shown for instance, in times of war.

Second, inside such society, in turn, the heart of social life tends to be viewed as a maze of conflicts between friends and enemies in politics, of competition between economic agents, of rivalries for status in social life, of conflicts of ideas and cultural forms in cultural life. These competition mechanisms are, of course, softened by, and accompanied by, agreements on the rules of the game, compromises and cooperation of different sorts.

Third, these competition mechanisms are expected to have an originally unintended, undesired effect, and one which is crucially good for the whole. Thus, in the economic realm, economic competition is expected to create incentives for individuals' ingenuity and drive to unfold, as well as their sensitivity to others' needs and desires, this leading to discoveries and experiments the end result of which is an increase in the total amount of wealth, power and status for all. And this expectation is bear out, or so it is said, in the short, middle and long run, even if some deny it and the debate about it starts anew with every new generation. And checks and balances between competing power players may play an analogous role in the field of politics, and result in limitations of a central authority to overpower society.

Fourth, part of this debate, however, has to do with the nature of the goods in question: wealth, power and status are usually subject to intense rivalries; with the implication that their supreme value is taken for granted by most. It has to do, then, with the repartition of these goods among the different parts of society (men and women, youngsters and elders,

upper, middle and lower classes, regions, and so on). Here a justification for the unequal repartition of the resources available (which is tied up with the premises of the competition for resources) is that an unequal repartition favors all, at least in the long run, including the less favored ones, whose condition would worsen otherwise because that very inequality would favor a process increasing the total amount of resources, so that even the poor would lose out were (say) capitalism to be replaced by socialism.

Finally, fifth, a corollary of the situation thus understood would be as follows. If in the course of modern experience understood in those terms ('tough but realistic' as the saying goes), there are *losers* in all those conflicts, or in some of them, the question would be framed in terms of how are we going to deal with the 'losers in the game of life'. And the answer may just be: the way we deal with people at sea.

Let's assume we are on board of a ship. Let's forget this may look like a 'fools' ship' for a medieval observer; that is, one full by people looking after the 'idols' of wealth, power and status, and, in a sense, following Satan's advice, and falling into the temptations Jesus averted in the desert: those of the stones turned into bread, the excitement of flying, the possession of all good things of life; and all in exchange for just a little detail, an act of homage, a rendering of the heart to Satan's kingdom. By contrast, from the moderns' viewpoint, we are on board of a grandiose steamer. And then, *a coup de mer* throws some people off board. The solution, or sort of, is obvious. We throw them a life belt to keep them afloat, and we send small boats to their rescue. Furthermore, in prevision of this to happen, we keep those small boats on the ship, we ask for their building, we give professional training to people to man them, etcetera. We make provisions for a flotilla of small boats; in other words, and in regard to our problem: we set up a net of remedial organizations, which would be the modern counterpart of the set of benefic organizations of the Middle Ages. Possibly more numerous, better equipped, more efficient, but not necessarily better in kind.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, discounting rhetorical overstatements, that may reflect the increase of wealth and power inherent to modernity, deep down, the overall intent of the new welfare system has become, in a sense, more ambitious, aiming at the eradication of poverty, but in another

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<sup>18</sup>Not necessarily worse either. Let's not forget that saving a life in high seas (to keep to my allegory) is not a minor affair; lastly, it's a precondition for the person in question to be part in a any (living...) community.

sense, more modest. Salvation has lost all transcendental connotation (a gain for some, a loss for others), and, in most cases, saving *may* be little more than 'keeping afloat'. In a sense, it is just a secondary matter whether the biggest part of the flotilla in question is manned by officers with one kind of official title, or another, or whether the state plays a more or less central role; the key lies in the fact that, either way, modern welfare *may* tend to be short in *communitas*, and rather oriented towards specific, basic needs.

## **2. Complex modernities: the US as a laboratory of experiments with hybrid languages**

The paths to modernity, however, may be more, and more complicated, than what the previous outline (which may serve as a first approach to the matter) suggests. They allow for a *mixture* of traditional religious motives and modern secular ones (that is, oriented to the *hic et nunc* of the *seculum*), and therefore for a variety of voices including many hybrid ones, as the US experience shows. Here we witness a tradition of modernity in which, from the beginning, religious and secular motives and practices are closely related to each other, in the elites' philanthropy as well as in the associational experiences of society at large. In the long run, and through a series of avatars, this makes for a reinforced legitimacy and for increasing resources available to associational tasks, that result in the persistence and development of the world of associations, and in particular of the world of philanthropy.

### *A complicated 'tradition of modernity'*

In modern times, philanthropy is in fact a complex phenomenon, in which traditional religious motives combine with modern secular ones; as it happens in the more robust form of philanthropy of the times, which is the American one. This is part of the whole American experience, which corresponds to a kind of modernity which has its roots in the Biblical and classical tradition, and keeps these roots in those traditions alive, as intimated, for instance, by the remarkable presence of religion in society and in the public sphere to this very day.

It is heir to the British philanthropy, with an initial preponderance of institutions linked to various denominations of the Protestant faith, but with a tendency to develop a complex motivational basis in which religious beliefs and an array of new moral theories mix. The new moral theories, for instance, that of the Scottish enlightenment, tackles the problem

of the complexity of people's moral experience as they explore the themes of moral sense, sympathy and empathy.

There may be different ways of understanding the way this moral theorizing connects with the traditional one.<sup>19</sup> One way of seeing it is that this is a new approach to the fundamental theorizing of traditional Christian morality. Namely, to a view of human nature the fulfillment of which requires seeing the individuals as creatures who are members of a community, and therefore are able to communicate with each other what is really most worthwhile to communicate, thus tending to reach an evaluative consensus regarding the idea of goodness, to put that idea to work, and to partake in a creative process. This view suggests there is a large degree of compatibility between Christian morality and the new moral theories, which make for altruistic behavior to be grounded on God's created human nature.

Another way of seeing it leaves God's revelation, and even God-given human nature as apprehended by natural reason in the background, out of the picture. He is, at best, *deus absconditus*, a hidden, and silent, God. Altruistic behavior is grounded, then, on human nature understood as a set of basic instinctual drives, of which we know by direct experience; somehow influenced by means of imagination and reflection. But then, the game opens in many directions. The new moral theories are useful for just managing a peaceful coexistence between people with different moral views in a political community, and, eventually, for easing the task of mutual persuasion. This last attitude suggests a view of society as a minimal moral community in which, for all practical purposes, religious moral theories and pragmatic, experimental ones may be hold as overlapping in part, and, 'with luck', as de facto compatible with each other. In any event, the grounds is laid for a pattern of coexistence, dialogue, mutual respect and mutual influence between people holding these different views.

Common to all these views is a view of society as an ongoing, unfolding, creative process in which every new generation may have a participatory role. Not really a Promethean view of today's society as a creation *ex nihilo* of the current generation; what might have led in the direction of an exclusionary secularism (as it has done in Europe). This would be incompatible with both the Biblical and the classical traditions, as well as with a style

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<sup>19</sup>Milbank (2005), and, particularly, Herdt (2004).

of thought and life that emphasize traditions: traditions of inquiry, legal precedents, or meta-narratives which stress fidelity to origins, and presents even the birth of a new nation as linked to an act of defiance of American colonists having been faithful to the old English tradition of liberty versus the British themselves having been unfaithful to that very tradition.

Historical and geographical conditions in the new world make for increasing assertiveness of civil society. To begin with, no established church and not overpowering state is there to lead society, and therefore, to inhibit society's spontaneous activism. There are no established churches to look after society from a position of authority, and the state loses a fair deal of its prominence. Following British tradition the state will not even call itself 'state', a name with an aura of sacredness and impersonality; but 'government', an office for keeping the ship on course, to be fulfilled by individual people, responsible as individuals to the law, checked by their fellow countrymen, subject to being brought with charges before a court, and to whom no particular deference is due other than the normal respect to the office they hold and the moral consideration which is equally due to anybody else.

At the same time, there is a view of the world which combines secular and religious motivations with an activist streak. Secularism implies a surge of energy to be invested in trying to take hold of more resources to be used, here and now, to increase wealth, power and status. To build up a *civitas cupiditatis*, in which everybody tries to succeed and make good, in those terms, and to outdo the others. The new world is viewed as wilderness,<sup>20</sup> undomesticated nature; it offers new opportunities for that display of energy. At the same time, the intensification and channeling of this energy is favored by a number of factors. The very experience of uprooting, emigration, surviving and new settlement encourages people's continuous learning on the spot (on every new spot people may come into), and requires people's energy be put under some form of self-control and direction; the risks are just too high to do otherwise. On top of that, rules and social disciplines, to begin with in the form of common, public opinion shape the use people make of that energy: the rules of markets, the rule of law, religious, educational and political institutions shape the character of the participants.

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<sup>20</sup>Marx (2008).

At the same time, the Christian imagery points to *eschaton*: to a society that tries to anticipate the kingdom of God on earth, to build a *city on the hill* that illuminates the world. The point is to establish a community of good people, decent individuals, and, as such, responsible for each other, guardians of their brothers, who care for each other, as neighbors, members of towns and churches and associations. In such community, politics is a public service to be considered a trust given to the office holder by the rest of the community. The underlying message is captured by the mood and the gestures of the public rituals. The gestures and the words of swearing in public office on the Bible, as well as the expressions of ‘in God we trust’ or ‘God bless America’ are not empty gestures and empty words; they resonate in the hearts and the minds of a large majority of those who attend to them and listen to them, and which, by means of these gestures and words, they feel they belong in the same community ‘under God’.

These are the symbolic grounds which make plausible a view of wealth itself as only really justified in terms of stewardship of material resources on behalf of the community, and for the benefit of the community; and a view of status, of high position, not as something which has been ‘conquered’, not even ‘inherited’, but as a gift to which a gift must be offered in return. The key here lies in some variant of the old motto of noblesse oblige: a sense of moral obligation is, thus, attached to any high position, most often in terms of owing to society a contribution to solving the problems of people in need, in particular, in need of instruction.

*The avatars of US philanthropy: the reinforcing legitimacy and the increasing resources of doers and not talkers, of givers and not takers*

The *mélange* of secular and religious motivations lies in the display of philanthropic activity of the elites of Boston and Philadelphia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Also, in the associative drive of all parts of society during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century observed by Tocqueville; as well as in the social movements of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, including the anti-slavery movement. And that *mélange* is there at the critical moment of the post-bellum period (after the Civil War), late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the big initiatives of American philanthropy takes place, by Carnegie, Rockefeller and so many others.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Friedman, McGarvie (2003).

By this time, this mega-philanthropy is seen by a significant part of society with mixed feelings. For its critics, as an attempt of the ‘robber barons’ of the time to clear up their names,<sup>22</sup> by means of operations which engage only a part of their fortunes, fortunes which had been gathered by doubtful means, taking advantage of a regulatory frame with many loose ends, and of the good will of politicians in need of money for their own political campaigns. On top of that, it’s charged that those philanthropists practice philanthropy with one hand, and misanthropy with the other hand. They lock out their enterprises to bend their employees to their knees, fight their right to strike, enlist scabs, black-list union activists, manipulate juries, judges, police forces, local officials. On the whole, these criticisms touch part of the public opinion and, in a relatively short time, have important institutional and political consequences. The fact is, society does not accept the elites’ philanthropy unconnected from the rest of their activities. At the same time, the elites will try to meet those criticisms, being Protestant themselves, and sensitive to those criticisms.

They can meet them because, at bottom, these philanthropists understand their two tasks, that of making money and that of spending a significant part of that money in philanthropic activities as complementary to each other. They imagine that, in the long run, markets will bring prosperity to all, at least a modicum of prosperity. At the same time, markets and other institutions (which they consider largely compatible with markets) will moralize these same masses and help them along to make good use of that prosperity.

Thus, along a complicated path and after many trials and errors, these masses will learn to support these (philanthropic) institutions which are oriented to solve immediate, pressing and fundamental needs (health and extreme dependency, for instance), as well as to foster the advance of knowledge, education, arts; that these philanthropists perceive both as a source of moral values in society, and as instruments (human or cultural capital *avant la lettre*) for social mobility and equality of opportunities for individuals to fit in a society defined by such values. In other words, implicit in that philanthropy there is a design of a good society for today, and for a future which is not too far away.

The *modus operandi* of these philanthropists is part of the message. We are dealing with people ready to act, and to take responsibility for what they do; resorting to both religious and secular justifications. I emphasize this aspect of ‘readiness to act’. The social imagery

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<sup>22</sup>Josephson (1934).

is that of a world in which we are called to cooperate with the unfolding work of the creator; in which problems are there to be solved, and things to be done. Solved by us and done by us; each one of us. Thus, there is little room for idle talk after dinner, or trying to persuade others to do what we can do ourselves; even less so to persuade our political friends to do them. This a world of busy people, busy with things to do: business men and women, used to focus their attention, to call things by their right names, easy to understand by everyone, and not by euphemisms, to make decisions and putting their own resources on the line, to implement these decisions and attend to the details of that implementation, to ask questions and answer questions, willing to give an account for what they do.

Both that social imagery and that style of behavior has been and is broadly shared by elites and society in America (with some caveats I cannot go into now). Anyway, it's clear that the philanthropy of the elites could not have been sustained in the long run were it not for the fact there're deep elective affinities between these elites and society at large. The fact is, a large part of US society sees itself as a society of doers and not of talkers, and, most importantly, as a society of givers and not of takers. This is why the elites' philanthropy can be understood, measured, appreciated by society; and why the new rich as they become philanthropists, at every new generation, don't have to be socialized by the old money into the virtues of philanthropy. Because they come already to their high positions, coming from the society of ordinary people and having similar orientations and inclinations already.

The altruistic, philanthropic activities of elites and ordinary citizens may be shaped by different comprehensive, ultimate views of a good society; but common to most of these views is a positive consideration of the institutional frame of a civil society broadly speaking, in which markets and democratic politics, and associations themselves, play the central parts. In their activities, elites and society tend to take this for granted. Thus, they consider doing the right thing includes favoring this institutional frame, and favoring the kind of education which reinforces the behavior fitting those institutions and which transmit the corresponding values. Whatever the specific problems these elites and society try to solve, it's taken for granted they'll do it in a way which is compatible with their support for a liberal, civil society.

This way, as a result of elites and society sharing similar attitudes, the legitimacy of associations' activities is reinforced while the availability of resources for them is

multiplied; thus, increasing the chances for the world of associations to survive and prosper in the long run.

### **III. Conclusion**

*A mood of optimism despite periodic outbursts of doubt and criticism, with some caveats*

To many, US (or US type of) altruistic associations, foundations in the first place, play a role model in today's world of global associations, of global civil society, and serve as inspiration to many local associations all over. We may wonder that what does this say about the logic of current developments concerning the voices of civil societies, is that there is momentum, and that despite outbursts of self-doubt and self-criticism, the prevailing mood is one of hope, even if mixed up at times with uncertainty.

In today's world, associations of all kinds come in a package with markets and democracies. Global markets convey, or try to, a promise of wealth or prosperity for any single nation and social group on earth; the doubters are found mostly among those who are already prosperous. Liberal democracies are, or are seen, on the rise. Plural societies exhibit significant tensions of many kinds (economic, ethnic, ideological); but these tensions are expected not to take them too far into open conflicts. The implicit understanding of most observers is that the various associations which result from such pluralism<sup>23</sup> can work out their problems in a rather peaceful way, as if, in the long run, they were in for a non-zero sum game, and, gradually, everybody will come to recognize that. The kind of philanthropy of the US subscribes to those premises. It is, then rather optimistic.

In the world that comes, for the optimists, there is plenty of formal, instrumental rationality at work. However, this, by itself, offers little in terms of a good society, since formal, instrumental rationality may be used by totalitarian regimes (like in the recent past), and, of course, the new technologies of information and communication can be routinely put to sinister or trivial uses. At the same time, in terms of substantial rationality, it's true that

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<sup>23</sup> Voluntary associations being in fact a manifestation of involuntary communities underlying them. Walzer (2004).

civil society broadly understood (the social fabric of markets, democratic politics and associations) requires, to stay in working order, a minimum of ‘goodness’: mutual toleration, sensitivity to others’ needs or desires, incentives to accountability, cooperation, respect for the rules of the game and so many other virtues; and this is easy to translate to all sorts of field operations of altruistic associations.

And then, the field seems left open for a search for a ‘really good’ society as such. All sorts of experiments in living, and the corresponding comprehensive views of a good society, could then be pursued at small scale by participatory associations of all kinds, provided they don’t lose direction. These voices would be engaged in a debate on the good society, provided they don’t talk through each other, as in the tower of Babel.

*A drama open to various outcomes*

In the first part of this paper I’ve focused on a contrast between two ideal types of voices, and imageries: the individualist (‘Lockean’) imagery, on one hand, and a hybrid with a strong dose of communitarian (‘MacIntyrian’) imagery, on the other. So far, the individualist imagery seems prevalent (even if it does not dominate in full) in markets and liberal democratic politics; and it may also have an influence on the way the world of associations (civil society *strictu sensu*) work as it shapes good part of the elites’ attitudes in general. Nevertheless, it’s quite likely most ground associations, and even part of the elites’ associations, exhibit a more complex discourse, a composite of two voices.

If we put the debate in historical context perspective, as I’ve tried to do in the second part of this presentation, we end up with a complex narrative that might help us to understand better the current situation, and to see that contrast in a sequence which is open to several possibilities. We’ve seen that, as our general story unfolds, we move, at least in the West, away from an attempt to institutionalize charity and achieve a moral community in full, and we end up with a second best, in the form of a civil society broadly speaking, as an alternative to even more defective forms of society. In this case, we are in for a world of associations that leaves out the big questions, which are left to participatory associations looking into specific problems while at the same time they engage in making statements about, and, above all, in acting out their own comprehensive views of a good society.

The fact is, there are three possible outcomes. First, this may point in the direction of what I've labeled 'a gospel of modernity' (with an interrogation mark). In this respect, transition to modernity implies a drastic weakening (but not necessarily a complete loss), of this 'good society' dimension. The aim is, now, to advance a civil society (*sensu lato*) as a framework of institutions that allow people to pursue their own goods (goals and desires, however they define the goodness of them). The implicit assumption being that this means the growth of a *civitas cupiditatis*, of wealth, power and status on earth; and the imagery implies an emphasis on particular improvements, a world of conflicts of interests in all directions, the expectation of some forms of public goods arise partly as the unintended consequences of those conflicts.

Second, but even if this may be so in quite a number of cases, the fact is that many associations tend to never completely lose sight of aiming at a good society, which may be defined as such by a fair amount of social cohesion, a degree of moral community, some feelings of mutuality, an attempt to respond to a call to 'brotherhood', lastly to an ever expanding, universal brotherhood. The US experience suggests we may be in for a composite of a civil society and an ongoing search for a good society.

Third, an alternative to these rather hopeful, optimistic renderings of what's going on and in which directions it points to would be an apocalyptic view of the current process as a disorder getting bigger, darker and wilder, either in open ways or in insidious ways. If it does so in open ways, associations will face totalitarian regimes, or terrorist threats, for instance. If it does so in insidious ways, associations will have to check society's tendency to confusion and passivity vis a vis a set of oligarchical powers, and, for that purpose, they will have to resist the trend to accommodate themselves to, and be coopted by, these very powers.

#### *A few concluding remarks*

The chances for the best possible outcome in that drama, under current circumstances, hinges on the quality of the contents of the associations' voices; in turn, this quality depends on that of people's involvement in them. Ordinary people may join associations and elites may lead them, but it's not the amount of the time, energy and money they pour in which counts most in the long run, but, rather, the quality of their voices.

Let me just finish by pointing to a few problems in this regard. On the one hand, the risk of irrelevance of ordinary people would lead to a moral impoverishment of the world of associations. The odds are, many associations may be tempted not to make appeal to ordinary rank and file members. They are not needed for financial support, not at least as much they were needed in the past. Fund raising becomes a professional task, to be handed by professionals. Members' contributions become a minor part of the budget; most of the revenues come from individuals' gifts from powerful backers or ordinary people contacted through the new media, and public subsidies, and by the selling of services to the public. Besides, no need of rank and file members to make an input in the public eye. Better to go through marketing and branding professionals, use the old mass media and the new media; and lobbying the state. This frees managers and founders from the pressures of their mass supporters.<sup>24</sup> Hence the problem is a weakening of membership. It may be a problem for big organizations, blurring the classical divides between leaders and cadres and ordinary members.

There are many ways to handle this problem, and I will merely mention two of them which stress the importance of the quality of people's involvement in the associations. Thus, one way to get around this problem is by means of a sort of anarchist, or *anarchisant*, network of individual *condottieri*, able and willing to engage in different organizations on an ad hoc basis; they are the so-called monitorial citizens.<sup>25</sup> Their rewards are not money; they are issue oriented, and don't need much in terms of external rewards. But because their commitments are focused, issue oriented, they keep to themselves, so that their loyalties to the associations they belong to are limited; they don't quite 'belong' in them. Citizens of this kind are concerned with sectorial and local problems which touch on their personal experiences and domestic concerns, and make an appeal to their professional judgement and expertise; but they also follow their inclination, and respond to the appeal by acting out as good citizens of a larger polis, in the moral world of a civil religion. They are a sort of Cincinnatus of contemporary times. Taking the plough to cultivate the land in a setting of family, kin and local communities, lares and penates; and taking the shield to defend the city when there is need for it, in response to an appeal by local and Olympian gods.

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<sup>24</sup>These are the trends Skocpol refers to (2003).

<sup>25</sup>Schudson (1999).

An alternative to the *anarchisant* solution is offered by that of a close-knit kind of associations with very strong social cohesion. Just as an example, evangelical communities in the US, much criticized by secularist observers, may be seen<sup>26</sup> as promising experiments in that regard. They put together a deep religious experience in a Biblical language understood as that of a life affirming religion,<sup>27</sup> with a need for mutual help and a culture of generosity in a social network cum an engagement in the wider world, as a response to an appeal to serve others.

On the other hand, the problem with the elites' philanthropy is direction and depth, or the lack of them. The fact is, elites and foundations are strategically located to give direction to the entire field (this is what the grant-giving foundations should be all about). In fact, they may or may not provide it. When the time comes for elite philanthropists to articulate their position, we see them doing several things. They may posit an open or a civil society (*sensu lato*) as a proxy to a good society, and/or as a minimalist basis for everyone, then, trying to go after their own, comprehensive view of a good society. They may concentrate their efforts on basic, uncontroversial needs, such as illness, hunger, illiteracy, extreme poverty. They may stick to the standards of efficiency and good management, and apply its business ways to philanthropic work. Either way, just by their life style, the elites make a statement about what a good society is about, too.

But, of course, this is a criterion of general application. This suggests that a crucial part of the response to the dilemmas for both the elites' and ordinary people's associational commitments lies on whether or not are they both able to engage, first, in a debate on the good society and make a positive contribution to it, and, second, in an authentic, genuine way of life which is consistent with their explicit statements, strategies, and voices about a good society.

That response should take into account that, underlying all the solutions to those problems, there is a common need for associations not to take much too a defensive and confrontational stand vis a vis markets and democratic politics. As history has taught us, associations, markets and democratic politics belong together in a normative model that, for all its limitations, still looks as the best alternative to totalitarian, authoritarian,

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<sup>26</sup>As they are by James Ault, and rightly so (2005).

<sup>27</sup>William James (1985 [1902]).

collectivistic experiments of the past; and one which leaves itself open to ongoing reforms, if and when there is a need for them, in the search for a better, possibly even a good society. Engaging markets and democratic politics, learning from them and, in turn, learning how to influence them back may be one of the most important challenges of the world of associations in the coming future.

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