*Review Essay*

# THE PLEASURES OF PREDATION AND DISREPUTE

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Jack Katz. *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil.* New York: Basic Books, 1988. 367 pp. Notes, bibliography, index.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a daring book. It challenges liberal orthodoxy about materialist causes of crime, explores frequently ignored connections between race and criminal behavior, substitutes older and less favored methods of analytic induction for newer and more widely applied quantitative techniques, focuses on proximate causes of crime often assumed irrelevant or beyond measurement in the mind of the criminal, and analyzes in detailed minutia crimes often so horrific that even the most jaded reader will sometimes cringe. But most of all this book is daring, and I believe important, because it insists that we take seriously the satisfactions that disreputable and depraved acts of predation can bring to those who commit them.

So this is not an ordinary book. Jack Katz signals his extraordinary intentions by warning that our sensibilities may be threatened and that we may even feel personally victimized by the material he pursues. Yet I did not find this warning sufficient as I read his introductory discussion of the "sensual magic" and "esthetics" of "the sounds and rhythms" of American soldiers torturing Vietnamese peasants. This passage provokes more than it prepares, and while I later gained insight into the reasons for its inclusion in the book, its location as an introduction is disturbing and distracting. It has the effect of raising ideological concerns ahead of substantive considerations that in my reading are the most noteworthy contributions of this volume. Readers should not be deterred by this jarring introduction.

*Seductions of Crime* should be of wide interest because it deals with crimes that today seem especially threatening to the social fabric of American life, including deadly domestic disputes, street-gang carnage, stickups, and seemingly senseless murders of strangers. Katz more effectively captures the form and feeling of

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these crimes than any social scientific account I previously have read. He does this mostly by insightfully knitting together secondary sources, although some primary data also are introduced.

The chapter titles convey the nature and range of material considered by Katz. Chapter 1 reports on "Righteous Slaughter," the killings that derive from domestic disputes. Chapter 2 is about "Sneaky Thrills," using college students' descriptions of their shoplifting. Chapter 3, "Ways of the Badass," is about adolescent subcultures of various ethnic and class backgrounds, with special attention to black and Chicano subcultures. Chapter 4 focuses on "Street Elites," otherwise known as gangs. Chapters 5–7 are about the "Stickups" performed by armed robbers. Chapter 8 considers the "Primordial Evil" of what most often are described as senseless murders. Finally, Chapter 9 brings these dark topics together in a concluding discussion of the "Seductions and Repulsions of Crime."

The theme of the book is that individuals involved in this set of criminal activities actually are engaged in broader efforts to transcend their social environments. It is the promise of this transcendence, even when the transcendence proves to be transitory, that Katz argues is the seduction of doing evil. Sometimes the transcendence is subtle and fleeting, as in the dismissive look that distinguishes "the ways of the badass." Sometimes the transcendence is crude and everlasting, as in the thrust, shot, or blow that dispenses an estranged spouse or a tortured stranger. What these disparate events have in common is the objective of transcendence.

Katz is especially good at conveying what would otherwise seem unbelievable, namely, that such depraved and despised acts can indeed create for their agents what can be best described as a "transcendental high"; for example, in the challenge and excitement of efforts to maintain domination over events that threaten to spiral out of control in chaotic sprees of armed robbery, or in the oddly satisfying mixture of dominance and dizziness that accompanies the rages and rituals of otherwise apparently senseless killings. Katz convincingly makes his case with a dazzling mix of materials, including works that sometimes risk blurring the line between fact and fiction. Here Katz argues that "academic social scientists will either learn how to think intelligently about using the genre of nonfiction novels about murders or they will leave this part of our social life, and whatever these crimes might reveal about us more generally, to journalists, politicians and literary critics" (pp. 280–81). Useful procedures formulated and applied in the analysis of these accounts include assigning greater evidentiary value to reports of behavior rather than to imputed thoughts, to acts reported by many rather than one or a few observers, and to patterns of conduct rather than to isolated acts.

## DOING STICKUPS: AN EXAMPLE

The three chapters on armed robberies perhaps contain the most compelling material in this book. The active title of the first of these chapters, "Doing Stickups," conveys the mood and pace of the writing Katz uses to bring to life the unique lifestyles of armed robbers. I will review the content of these chapters in some detail, because by illustration they provide a background for methodological and theoretical points I develop below.

Katz begins the first of these chapters with a notable paradox: career armed robbers undertake lines of activity that have all the signs of the rationality and utility found in the cogent explanation by Willie Sutton of why he robbed banks (" 'cause that's where the money is"), except that most armed robbers (Willie Sutton included) spend so much of their adult lives in prison. If one's purpose is to find a "rational" way to make a living, armed robbery is a poor choice. Katz therefore asks, "What are they trying to do?"

Drawing on a characteristically thoughtful mix of qualitative and quantitative sources, Katz begins a search for answers. Initial clues are found in the juxtaposition of an autobiographical account of a felon, John Allen, and a Rand Corporation survey of 2,200 prison inmates. After fourteen years in jail, separated from his wife, depressed, crippled, and confined to a wheelchair by a police shooting, John Allen was yet again arrested for an armed robbery. The Rand survey identifies a subgroup of perhaps similarly committed "violent predators," 40 percent of whom (compared to a quarter of the full sample) agreed that "committing a crime against an armed victim is an exciting challenge." The inference is that something more than a desire for money is involved for Allen and these other predators.

To find out what, Katz looks to recurrent stages "in the practice of doing a stickup," generalized from several hundred narrative accounts previously collected in Chicago by Zimring and Zuehl (1986). Three stages are identified in these stickups: (i) a phase in which a subjective moral advantage (a secret stratagem, edge, or angle, such as the identification of a young or old victim) is established; (ii) a declaration of purpose (e.g., "this is a stickup") in which the robber clearly asserts the crime he is committing; and (iii) a "sticking beyond reason" with the robbery, regardless of the obstacles and threats to success (including injury and arrest) that may emerge (p. 168). In a reanalysis of Zimring and Zuehl's sample, Katz (p. 185) is particularly struck by the fact that many offenders, faced with resisting victims, do not simply abandon these stickups and seek alternative, more compliant targets. Katz (p. 186) reports: "When I reanalyzed the 105 robbery killings in the Chicago series on this issue, the results were that it was reasonable for the robber-killer to use fatal violence to protect himself physically or to ensure his escape in only 11 of the cases." In response

to this persistence "beyond reason," Katz begins to posit a novel commitment to "transcend rational considerations" (p. 179).

The source of this commitment, Katz asserts, is a further commitment to be a "hard man"—"a person whose will, once manifested, must prevail, regardless of practical calculations of physical self-interest" (p. 187). The explanation of this commitment begins with a depiction of the illicitly hedonistic lives of armed robbers, aptly illustrated with the report of a Willie Ransom, who "hadn't worked a day since he'd discovered divorcees and armed robbery" (p. 210). Katz emphasizes the risk and excitement of the lives of these armed robbers, crime activists who spend most of their time running among and from women, as well as the law. He reasons that "it is specifically the connections among the various forms of illicit action—the possibility of constructing a transcendent way of life around action—that sustains the motivation to do stickups" (p. 198; emphasis omitted).

Perhaps the most intriguing elements of this illicit action are the threats and realities of injury and detection and the incipient chaos that this lifestyle ultimately and characteristically produces. In making these points, Katz notes that "persistent criminals are officially linked to crimes primarily as a result of the chaos of their lives," with detective work usually playing an insignificant role in the capture of armed robbers (p. 222). The point is that the chaos itself is seductive for the committed hard man (p. 235):

> To the hardman, what is most precious in transcending reason is not the occasional admiring response or sadistic pleasure, but a more constant reward, the ability *always to know what to do*. This is what he achieves by transcending the protests of reason, whether the protests come from a victim in a stickup or from the implications of capture and punishment.

Katz illustrates this point by describing an incident in which after a messy getaway from a stickup, John Allen used the same car to pick up some prostitutes and make a drug connection. His point is that in defying the caution of reason and by responding more instinctively, "the hardman's aggressive moves carry, in their sensual vibrance—in the heavy awe and felt charge they bring to scenes—the ringing significance of their transcendent project" (p. 235). Responding instinctively is seen here as a transcendent way of "knowing what to do." Having identified this proximate, foreground motivation for the hardman and his stickups, Katz extends his explanation into the background environments that produce such individuals.

Here he notes that the hardmen described are overwhelmingly young black men. Katz accounts for this in three controversial ways. First, he asserts that young black males are disproportionately available to become hardmen because of the way illicit action more generally pervades ghetto life. Second, he suggests

that the cultural individualism and structural atomization of the black hardman role is an extension of the chaos of a black ghetto street life that historically has lacked the forms of the more hightly organized and controlled crime which is characteristic of other ethnic groups. Third, in what is surely the most controversial part of this account, he connects the imagery of the hardman with that of the "bad nigger" and asserts that these interrelated roles are responses intended to transcend the racial humiliation of ghetto blacks by other ghetto blacks. The essence of this argument is (pp. 263–64) that

> when asserting either in play or with malevolence that another is a "nigger," blacks enact a white role, simultaneously pressing the other to establish his moral competence with a transcendent response and asserting that for both, a personal sense of moral competence is vulnerable to respectability as defined by white society.

It is in this context that Katz concludes, "Doing a stickup itself serves a larger, more widely embraced, fascination with the achievement of a morally competent existence" (p. 272).

## ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL CRIMINOLOGY? THEORY AND METHOD

Overarching the above discussion of armed robbery is a methodological and theoretical structure that I now wish to consider, drawing on the account of armed robbery as the primary source of illustrations. The method applied and the theory developed by Katz draw heavily from the sociological school of symbolic interactionism and its modern counterparts, phenomenology and ethnomethodology. Katz consistently stresses a central tenant of symbolic interactionism: the need to comprehend the cognitive states of actors in explaining their behaviors. He regularly reminds us of the need to appreciate and understand the criminal predator's "lived experience." The value of this emphasis on cognition is to bring attention to the interpretations and thoughts that immediately accompany criminal acts. These cognitions are missing from much current criminological theory.

By bringing attention to the cognitive life of the criminal, Katz notes that he is shifting our theoretical attention from what he calls background to foreground causes of crime. While I think Katz does a great service in focusing our attention on the fouregound experiences of excitement, and indeed the feelings of transcendence so effectively evoked in his descriptive prose, this explanatory device is not in itself a major departure from the conventions of empirical reasoning employed by quantitative researchers. The background-foreground distinction is essentially the same as the exogenous-endogenous division used in causal modeling (see, e.g., the important work of Matsueda and Heimer (1987), which uses structural equation models to link the cognitive compo-

nents of Sutherland's differential association theory with background causes of crime). From this perspective the transcendental peaks in the cognitive states of active armed robbers can be seen as an endogenous variable located in close proximity to the actual outcome variable of interest, a spree of stickups. The difference is that most contemporary quantitative models of criminality lack the emphasis that *Seductions of Crime* gives to cognitive endogenous variables.

As Katz effectively argues, this kind of endogenous variable is much more strongly associated with the behaviors of interest than are the exogenous variables more often emphasized in the quantitative models. In the parlance of these models, it is often the case that the more proximate the cause, the more powerful the effect. However, the strength of such correlations can signal potential liabilities as well as benefits. In particular, one worries about conceptual overlap between independent and dependent variables. This brings us to methodological issues.

For Katz, the salient causal variable in stickups is the transcendence of reason. Katz arrives at his high estimation of this variable by applying a preferred methodology of symbolic interactionists, analytic induction. A defining feature of the method of analytic induction is the search for highly generalizable explanations; indeed, explanations that are so highly generalizable that they fail to confront negative cases.

The method of the analytic inductivist is to sift through collected cases, constantly revising the explanation until no cases contrary to the theory are found. Katz is not as strict (in the sense of seeking truly universal explanations that allow no exceptions) about this procedure as the classic practitioners of analytic induction (such as Lindesmith, Sutherland, and Cressey). In fact, I think it is a major untrumpeted innovation of Katz to mix together the results of probabilistic modes of research with the more universalistic expectations of analytic induction. For example, Katz brings probabilistic findings about gender into his discussions of street gangs and stickups, without concern that participation in these activities is gender stratified in relative rather than absolute terms. The relevance of gender to these accounts is not ignored or rejected for being nonuniversal. However, the inductivist sifting of cases can produce problems that are characteristic of the method. For example, the sifting of armed robbery cases proceeds in a somewhat circular fashion to predetermine the explanatory concept, a transcendence of reason, that is singled out for emphasis. Recall that an operational criterion for inclusion among the behaviors explained is "sticking beyond reason with the robbery." Not all armed robbers do this. In fact, most armed robbers don't. They quit, although those who do persist account for a large amount of the incidence of armed robbery. Nonetheless, Katz has conceptualized this behavior in such a fashion that only a minority of

armed robbers are considered, and by definition their behaviors will always at least seem to involve acting beyond reason. It is a short, perhaps partly circular, step to positing a desire to transcend reason as an explanatory motive. This conceptual overlap does not make the explanation wrong, but it does raise a point of concern characteristic of related theories that are similar in their substantive content as well as in the difficulty experienced in the operationalization of key explanatory concepts. These difficulties involve both problems of measuring cognition and maintaining its operational autonomy from behaviors to be explained.

Thus there is some notable similarity between the kind of dense description and theoretical attention Katz gives to the lives of predatory criminals and the important explanatory efforts of Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti, and also of Donald Black. Wolfgang and Ferracuti's (1967) theory of the subculture of violence attends closely to the lives of predatory criminals, and Katz makes good use of Wolfgang's (1958) descriptive findings, for example, in his explanation of "righteous slaughter." Both are sensitive to the role of perceived provocation, to the desire to "put things right," and to the conflict between the predator's and the outside world's definition of ensuing behavior.

Wolfgang and Ferracuti's theory has continued to be compelling in the face of several unsuccessful survey efforts to locate a subculture of violence that is independent of the events to be explained (e.g., Erlanger, 1974). The focus of Katz on states of transcendence takes the violent dispositions that Wolfgang describes a step closer to the events to be explained, and like Wolfgang, Katz draws connections to the lives of young black ghetto males. His descriptions of "hardmen" and "bad niggers" and "badasses" among armed robbers provide particularly apt illustrations of much of what Wolfgang depicts as the subculture of violence.

However, while Wolfgang's theory is open to various kinds of disconfirmation as well as confirmation using survey measures of subcultural values, it is not so clear that survey data could provide a relevant test of the transcendent states Katz imputes to hardmen and others. This leaves us in a frustrating condition much like that described by Converse (1964: 206), who suggests that "belief systems have never surrendered easily to study or quantification. Indeed, they have often served as primary exhibits for the doctrine that what is important to study cannot be measured."

Katz's analysis also contains notable parallels with Donald Black's (1983) theory of self-help. Black argues that crime is a form of social control imposed on others in efforts at self-help. In a broad sense, all of the acts of predation described by Katz are efforts to gain control through acts of self-help that promise to transcend current threats and provocations. Both Black and Katz place great emphasis on the efforts of actors to impose control or domination on the events and situations that confront them, either

in perception or in reality. Again, however, both theories impute motivations that are difficult to identify and measure—apart from the behaviors to be explained. Instead, there is a tendency to rely on the dense description of events or the accumulation of wide-ranging examples focused on behavioral events. In these accounts, the lines between independent and dependent variables, and between description and explanation, sometimes become unclear.

Inaccessibility to quantification is not a problem when Katz considers background causes, but here other questions emerge. Katz challenges the causal nature of correlations between low socioeconomic status, or relative lack of economic opportunity, and predatory crime. He suggests (pp. 315–16):

> The issue is the causal significance of this background for deviance. A person's material background will not determine his intent to commit acquisitive crime. . . . Instead of reading into ghetto poverty an unusually strong motivation to become deviant, we may understand the concentration of robbery among ghetto residents as being due to the fact that for people in economically more promising circumstances, it would literally make no sense—it would virtually be crazy—to commit robbery.

Katz further argues that across class and age categories, similar mental processes "seduce people to deviance." He speculates, "Although the means differ, white middle-class youths may as self-destructively pursue spatial mobility, through reckless driving, as do ghetto youths in gang wars" (p. 321).

I read these passages as proposing that mental processes are important foreground causes of crime across class categories and that class conditions have form-specific effects. Katz's argument that "it would virtually be crazy" for persons with more promising prospects than ghetto residents to commit armed robberies makes sense in part because material conditions of wealth and power open doors of opportunity for fraud that do not require real or threatened force. As Wheeler and Rothman (1982: 1406; see also Clinard and Yeager, 1980) note, the corporation and access to its resources "is for white collar criminals what the gun or knife is for the common—a tool to obtain money from victims." However, there is also another side to this coin, which is that persons with access to such resources don't have the same kinds of subsistence needs as people who live in ghetto poverty. Presumably need and opportunities jointly and interactively cause class differences in predatory crime, albeit perhaps in more complicated ways than conventionally assumed. Meanwhile, what interests Katz is his perception that in much upperworld as well as underworld crime, there is an attempt to transcend present conditions, so that "there may be a fundamental similarity in the dynamics that people create to seduce themselves toward deviance" and, therefore, "we have grounds to pursue a parallel across the social hierarchy" (p.

321). This probably accounts for some of the contemporary fascination with Tom Wolfe's morally ambivalent investment banker, Sherman, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, who feels a dramatic rush many mornings crossing the threshold of the trading floor, where he seeks once again to become a "Master of the Universe." Such feelings of transcendent domination are likely a shared feature of much predatory white-collar and street crime, as well as some high-risk conforming behaviors; again, Katz does a great service in calling attention to the salience of these intervening cognitive processes in the causation of predatory crime.

However, a potential disservice comes in using these shared causes in a presentist, mentalist fashion to discount the distinctive causal influences of historical and structural conditions. This rather exclusive focus on cognitive transcendence has the unnecessary effect of discounting historical and structural impacts of material conditions. Katz's treatment of background factors should not obscure the point that there is a process of causation, intimately involving material needs and resources, that results in class being negatively related to street crimes of real or threatened violence, while class is positively related to harms caused less directly through criminal acts involving corporate resources (see also Hagan, 1989, ch. 1). The channeling effect of class-based material conditons is important; and this channeling, or specification, is a mechanism of causation.

There are elements here of an old problem in sociological criminology. It is classically articulated by Bordua (1961: 134–35), who notes that "each generation does not meet and solve anew the problems of class structured barriers to opportunity, but begins with the solution of its forbearers." The point is that new generations of individuals inherit not only past solutions but also their consequences. Katz points to these consequences when he discusses background causes of links between race and violent crime. As noted above, Katz cites the history of relatively disorganized, uncontrolled, and pervasive forms of street crime as the background conditions for black involvement in armed robbery. He understands these conditions in terms of an hypothesized intraracial conflict and search for transcendence they provoke. However, without discounting the importance of this search and its endogenous consequences, it is also important to consider the operation of the exogenous historical and structural variables that provoke such a search and condition its mediating effects.

The recent research of both William Wilson and Robert Sampson are important examples that complement rather than conflict with *Seductions'* focus on endogenous processes. Wilson (1987), in his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, is responding to critiques of orthodox liberalism that are implicit in Katz's analysis of criminological theory. One of Wilson's (1987) points is that a history of racism, dating to slavery in the United States, and mixed with

contemporary demographic and economic changes, has produced a black underclass that is increasingly concentrated in central cities. Wilson (p. 62) writes:

> Although present-day discrimination undoubtedly has contributed to the increasing social and economic woes of the ghetto underclass, I have argued that these problems have been due far more to a complex web of other factors that include shifts in the American economy—which has produced extraordinary rates of black joblessness that have exacerbated other social problems in the inner city—the historic flow of migrants, changes in the urban minority age structure, population changes in the central city, and the class transformation of the inner city.

When Katz turns to a consideration of background factors in the causation of ghetto crime, his approach is to focus on ghetto culture rather than on this mix of historical and contemporary structural change in black American ghetto life that shapes this culture.

Meanwhile, Sampson (1987) recently has demonstrated that structural factors of the precise kind Wilson emphasizes play a causal role in explaining race-specific rates of robbery and homicide in United States cities. More specifically, Sampson is able to show that black male joblessness, operating through family disruption, explains variation in robbery and homicide rates across United States cities, net of a range of variables considered in alternative explanations. These findings are important for theoretical and policy purposes because they focus attention on the very material conditions that Katz dismisses. As Sampson (p. 378) notes:

> it seem that policies designed to retool unskilled workers, job supports, and a coherent family policy aimed at addressing the severe handicaps faced by single women with children (especially those who work) are more likely to reduce family disruption and crime in the long run than are current policies aimed simply at reducing welfare and incarcerating an ever-increasing proportion of the black population.

Before we turn to the policy implications of this last reference to incarceration, two points bear repeating with regard to class-linked material conditions. First, it is probably not very useful to dismiss class differences in predatory crime by asserting that the absence of differences across classes would reflect "craziness" on the part of the advantaged. After all, a certain kind of craziness is what this book is so provocatively about. Second, the opportunities used to explain the behavior of the advantaged are actually another side of the absence of opportunities, or in other words the presence of needs, among the disadvantaged. Needs and opportunities are distinguishable, and they may join and interact in *causing* class differences in predation. But even more to the point, it is not useful or convincing to discount the influence of poverty

among inhabitants of the ghetto by pointing to opportunities among the rich. This does not discount the depth and usefulness of the emphasis that Katz gives to endogenous cognitive processes.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Sampson's reference to the issue of incarceration brings us to a final fascinating aspect of the theoretical perspective Katz proposes. In a superficial reading of this book, one might conclude that it offers encouragement for a policy of increased incarceration of just the kind that Sampson warns against and that the United States recently has been pursuing (see Lynch, 1988). After all, if there is a portion of the population that actually takes a transcendent pleasure in the predatory criminality Katz describes, the logical policy response might seem to be an increased use of selective incapacitation that we hear so much about in contemporary criminology. However, a more careful reading of Katz does not lend itself to such an easy solution.

Rather, there are novel and intriguing echoes of labeling theory that lurk as a further ominous background in *Seductions of Crime*. In fact, the threat of capture and punishment actually is a part of the "moral and sensual attractions in doing evil" referred to in the subtitle of this book. Again, this feature of the ciminals Katz studies is perhaps best conveyed in his discussion of hardmen and armed robbers. Drawing from Matza's elaboration of labeling theory (1969), Katz writes that "[c]utting across all social distinctions among these career criminals is the status of a 'regular suspect' " (p. 221). For example, Henry Hill and his friends were "always under suspicion, arrest, or indictment for one crime or another," while John Allen is said to have felt that "he was virtually haunted by the police" and that phenomenologically, if not otherwise, he was always "on escape" by the time he was in his mid-twenties. For these armed robbers, the lurking presence of the police may be a part of the chaos that reinforces their involvement in a predatory lifestyle.

Indeed, the robbers and others that Katz describes seem to enjoy living on the edge of capture and other similar events that loom in their lives; this "edge" is a part of what makes their lives of illicit action exciting—they like the excitement that their dangerous lives elicit. In this context, the criminal justice system and its looming punishments evoke some recurrent responses from the hardmen. One is a defiant attitude through which youthful offenders insist on their moral superiority to their captors and judges. Another is a capacity to see success in failure; in the face of capture and punishment, these individuals are still weighing the "got away with its" against the "got caughts." These individuals sense from experience just how unusual it is to get caught. And, finally, these individuals seem to gain a sense of superiority of abil-

ity as they witness the energy and effort expended by authorities in effecting their capture and punishment. Against this background, Katz argues, "a heavy stickup man can experience confinement in prison not as a time out from the joys of street life but as an opportunity to beat the system from within, even while it is pressing down with its most minute controls" (p. 231).

If all this is true, and I believe that Katz makes a most compelling case, then it is unlikely that imprisonment per se will deter these individuals from crime. The implication is that increased imprisonment by itself may actually increase involvement in crime, if not among the persons imprisoned, then as Sampson's findings imply, through negative effects on family formation and disruption within groups experiencing high rates of offending. Katz does not directly address the policy implications of his perspective in this book; my point is simply that the policy implications of the book are not as obvious as they first might seem.

In the end, and for all the theoretical and methodological reasons I have suggested, this book is not only daring but important. Katz successfully demonstrates why it is essential to take the thoughts and perceptions of predatory offenders seriously, and why it is useful to consider both qualitative materials in doing so.

Katz demonstrates that disreputable pleasures can be highly seductive.

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