

Franco “Bifo” Berardi  
**Freedom and  
Potency**

01/10

People came to this country for either money or freedom. If you don't have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can't afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to.

– Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom: A Novel*

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and of time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.

– Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

Since the first days of the pandemic, and since the beginning of the ensuing lockdowns, public opinion has been split between those who reject any limit to their personal freedom, and those who support a more or less strict regulation of social interaction.

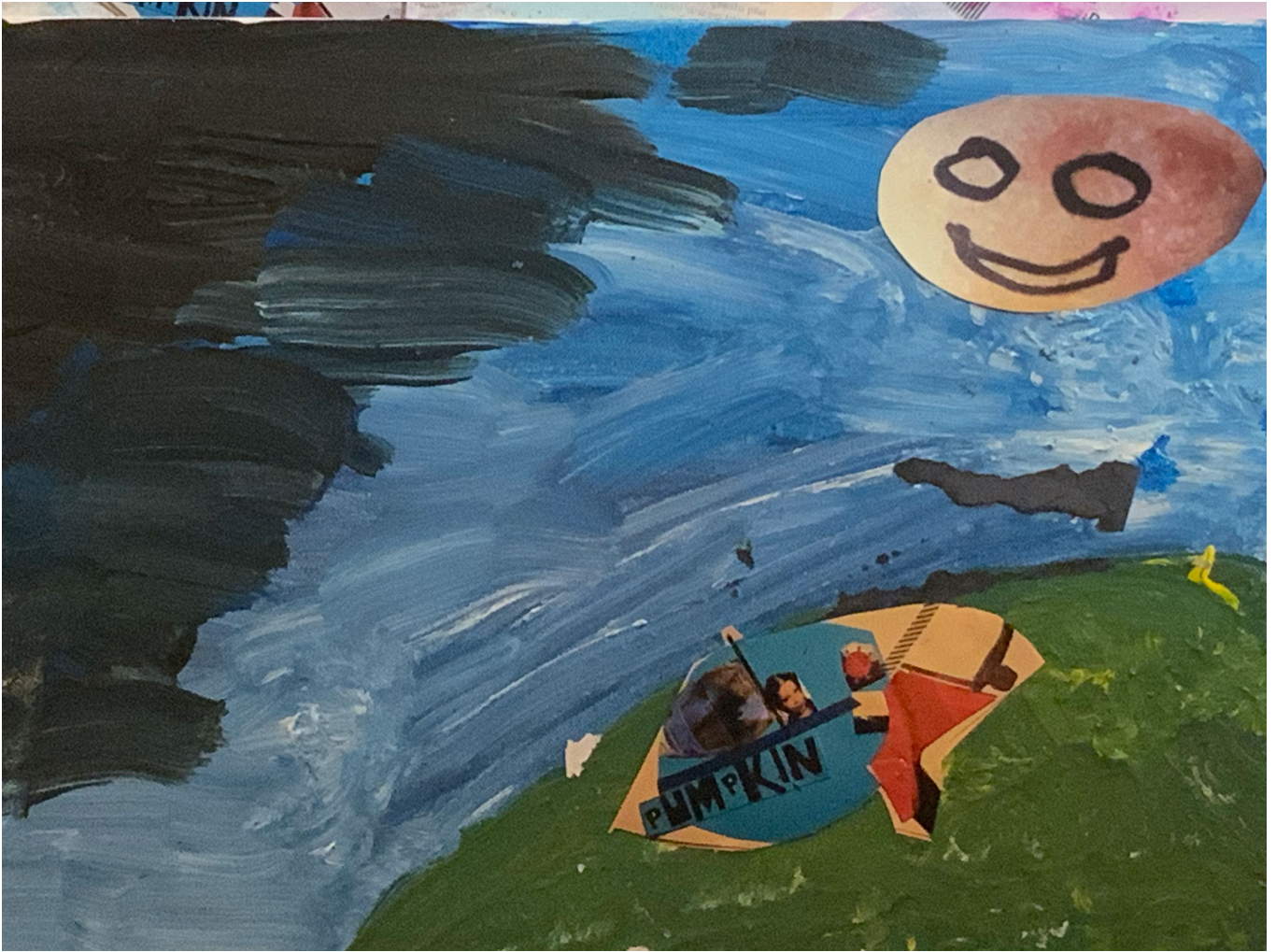
The very borders between the political fronts – the classical distinctions between right-wing and left-wing ideology – have been blurred on this point: opposition to state-enforced lockdowns and health regulations has been taken over by right-wing libertarians.

How can we explain the fact that some anarchists and many other leftists are respecting health rules dictated by a “state of exception,” while fascists are the ones reclaiming their freedom to do whatever they like? There is a comedic exchange of roles, whereby fascists proclaim themselves as the “defenders of freedom” and progressives emerge as the defenders of the law. This, too, signals the dissolution of the twentieth-century political

e-flux journal #116 — march 2021 Franco “Bifo” Berardi  
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Istubalz, *Out of the Pumpkin*, 2021. Courtesy of Istubalz.



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landscape.

This reversal demonstrates that the political geography of the past century is now out of service; but it also reveals a philosophical misunderstanding that has traversed the history of modern political theory and politics through today: a misunderstanding of freedom. The concept of “freedom,” a ubiquitous and common topic of public discourse, must be reconsidered from the point of view of the complex situation of today, and the platitudes of political talk must be subjected to critical investigation.

The squads of armed American supremacists who occupied public places to protest restrictive health measures were reclaiming their freedom and celebrating the Land of the Free. What were they talking about?

Those people belong to and defend the legitimacy of a country that has the word “freedom” enshrined in its founding documents, but since its violent inception has omitted to mention that it was built on the condition of enslaving millions and brutalizing millions more.

In March 2020, during the first days of the Italian lockdown, when political authorities decided to quarantine all except those workers they deemed indispensable, and as the number of people testing positive grew every day, some commentators, among them the prominent philosopher Giorgio Agamben, rejected the lockdown’s rationale and rules. This rejection was based on reasonable motivations. Agamben criticized the restrictive rules as “techno-medical despotism,” and argued that such rules paved the way for a techno-authoritarian system of control.<sup>1</sup> This consideration was not unfounded; the widespread intellectual backlash against Agamben that followed seems to me to be a symptom of conformism.

Nevertheless, I did not join the ranks of the “libertarians,” and I did not share their specific critique of the lockdown measures, because I felt that their opposition was based on the manipulation of a concept that, even if superficially noble, does not sound philosophically grounded, and in the present conjuncture resounds as a sort of empty catchword: the concept of “freedom.”

In an ironic turning of the tables, as the fascists (Trump, Bolsonaro, and the like) launched campaigns against restrictions and spread conspiracy theories, the word “freedom” became the keyword of authoritarian action. Once upon a time romantic heroes died reclaiming freedom from tyrannical rule. Now fascist-liberal heroes shout “freedom,” by which they mean “no face masks.”

They are intimately persuaded that freedom is firstly the freedom to exploit the work time of those who only have the freedom to be exploited

or die. Thus, within the sphere of economic inequality, the word “freedom” can only mean entitlement, exploitation, and violence. But now it is crucial to rethink the rhetoric of freedom, and to disclose the conceptual aporias that this word implies.

### **The Rhetoric of Freedom Is Based on a Misunderstanding**

Here I mean to question the philosophical background of the rhetoric of freedom put forward during the modern age, the subsequent exploitation of this concept by economic libertarians who have devastated social life in the last four decades, and the political libertarians who have used this rhetoric to aggressively defend white privilege and the Western domination of the world.

I do not pretend to have fully developed this subject, but I do want to outline the philosophical genesis of the false concept of freedom and of the pragmatic paradoxes that this misunderstanding has produced in the real world. I refer to the history of this concept in the modern era and its contemporary exhaustion to illuminate the philosophical ambiguities of “freedom” and its ensuing political manipulation.

The political abuse of the word “freedom” is based on a linguistic misunderstanding: three different levels of existence are confused, and thus, three different meanings of the word are mixed, scrambled, and misidentified so that the word can be used to identify slavery as freedom.

The three different meanings of the concept are freedom in the ontological, political, and physical senses. It is because of this linguistic confusion and ideological misunderstanding that the least free and most automated regime that has ever existed on planet earth in the last three thousand years – namely, neoliberalism, which is based on the absolute rule of capital accumulation, on the massive enslavement of labor, and on the automation of semiotic relations – is proposed to be the symbol of freedom.

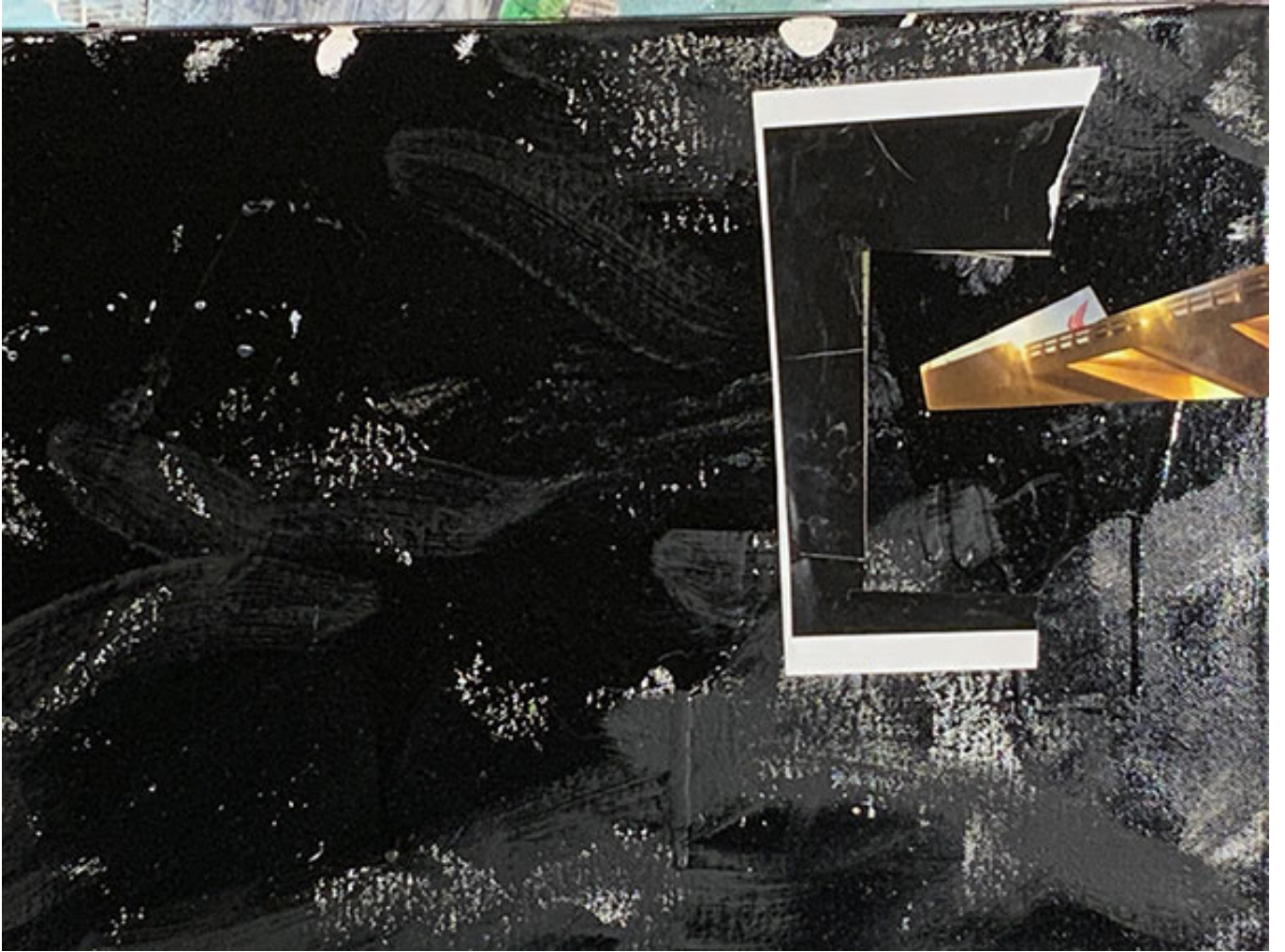
The systematic impoverishment of social life and the depletion of the planet’s resources are labelled “free enterprise.” The origin of this manipulation is based on the ambiguousness of the concept of freedom, in its modern philosophical genealogy.

### **Ontological Freedom**

The modern concept of freedom arose in the humanistic perspective as ontological freedom. Free will is conceivable when humans are freed from divine determination. In the humanistic framework, the human adventure is not the implementation of God’s universal knowledge and providence, but rather the practical

04/10

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Istubalz, *Out of the Pumpkin*, 2021. Courtesy of Istubalz.

deployment of individual and collective projects.

Even if God is the source of every entity existing in the world, even if God's knowledge contains the determination of every event occurring in the world, when God gave life to Adam he also decided not to assign any necessary destiny to the human being. Thus, in this humanistic conception, according to the will of God, human action is not predetermined by his omnipotent will. The exceptionality of the human consists essentially in the possibility to choose and to act according to free will; God wants us to be independent from his own determinations.

This ontological freedom is the condition that made it possible to conceive the effectiveness of voluntary action, and this is the condition of history as conscious creation. The movement of time takes on the character of history when voluntary action becomes the effective transformation of nature. According to Niccolò Machiavelli, human will is endowed with the potency to freely rule over random ventures and events, and therefore to submit the capricious nature of Fortuna (in Latin, the unpredictability of human events) to the intentions of power.

### Potency and Freedom

In the modern political view of freedom, potency (slightly different from the way "power" is discussed in modern European thought) and free will are linked. The problem is that this link is misconceived: the rhetoric of freedom, in fact, assumes that the will is unbounded, and that potency is inscribed in the space of freedom. This is wrong and misleading.

Since action happens in the physical world, where physical forces are at play, freedom depends on our potency to overcome these forces. We are free to do what we have the potency to do. Only to the extent of our potency are we "free" to choose and act. In this framework, then, the Spinozian question "what can a body do?" is the same as the question "what is the extent of its freedom?" Voluntary action does not unfold in a space of infinite openness; the various dimensions of the real (the natural world, the decay of the body, technology, and the presence of other bodies) act as entanglements of our will.

If we downplay the relation between the limitations of the entangling context and the potency of the will, we are left with an empty freedom. Disentangling our action from the tangles that precede the existence of the will itself – this is the core of what I prefer to call "autonomy" rather than "freedom." In the modern era, from Machiavelli to Lenin, human will managed to act in a relatively autonomous way, because the potency of the entangling

context was not overwhelming, thanks to a low density of technology and a slow circulation of information. In this context, political will was effective at changing the relation between man and nature, by submitting nature to human ingenuity.

However, the potency of the will has decreased in proportion to the growing complexity and potency of the entangling *Umwelt*. In the late modern age the potency of the will came up against the omnipotence of capital; it was eroded by the penetration of economic and technical automatisms into the fabric of time. At this point, the mythology of freedom was reduced to a mere *trompe l'oeil*. We have since deluded ourselves into believing that choice is possible and that voluntary action driven by popular will can change the course of events. In reality, the scope of political action has been contained and entangled by technolinguistic automatisms resulting from the marriage of capital and technology.

In the wake of the humanistic breakthrough, freedom became a central political concept: human beings, endowed with free will, decided to become citizens, so that freedom could be the ordering principle of social life; freedom turned into independence from any established power, and took the form of democracy. Eventually, however, techno-capitalism emptied democracy of its potency, exposing the fragility of freedom as a political concept.

The pandemic-induced breakdown of liberal institutions and infrastructure exposes the impossibility of freedom under the hyper-complexity conditions of techno-capitalism.

### Freedom and Physical Laws

In the modern era, science and politics managed to reduce the complexity of the world to the regularity of physical laws and the intentionality of political laws. It is no longer so. Scientists have come to understand that physical laws are but an uncertain approximation, not exhaustive of the complexity of matter and time. And citizens have come to understand that collective political decisions become less and less relevant as the technical *Umwelt* grows more complex and automated.

Science and politics have proven unable to exhaustively master the sub-liminal and the supra-liminal spheres of evolution – the biological and neurological micro-processes, and the catastrophic planetary macro-processes, that capitalist extraction has unchained.

As we are forced to acknowledge our impotence, our inability to freely choose the context in which we live, a sense of frustration is spreading, nurturing a wave of rage, desperation, and violence.

06/10

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Istubalz, *Out of the Pumpkin*, 2021. Courtesy of Istubalz.

In *The Antiquity of Man* (1962), Günther Anders speaks of the sense of impotence that we feel after technical knowledge produces macro-forces like the nuclear bomb. We are humiliated by the effects of our own cognitive potency, and this humiliation is a large part of what fuels the neo-reactionary movements of our time: proud declarations of ignorance aim to restore the superstitions of identity.

Political will was effective (to a limited extent) when our actions sought to influence the actions of our fellow humans, and the environment of the man-made city. But in late modernity, we are more and more confronted with the macro-forces of nature – climate collapse, for example – and with the micro-forces of viral contagion that not only jeopardize our physical bodies, but also the economic, semiotic, and affective spheres.

Furthermore, we are facing irreversible trends linked to the automation of cognitive behavior and of techno-linguistic connections. Financial capitalism, in fact, is less and less the conscious projection of the political will of the dominant class, and more and more the effect of the automated connection between money and social life, between technical networks and economic decisions. The financial domination of society is the effect of the unleashing of techno-linguistic automatisms, and of the uncontrollability of the hyper-complexity and speed of financial trading.

Ironically, the extent of our knowledge is reducing the extent of our freedom: macro-trends and micro-events escape the grasp of political will, and curtail the scope of human freedom.

### The Virus and Singularity

What is left of free will when techno-capitalism has inscribed its priorities as an absolute necessity into every aspect of social relations? What is left of free opinion when corporate media saturate every moment of attention? Political freedom has been undermined by the widening range of technical prescription, by the insertion of technical automatisms into language.

Suddenly, however, something happened that was not predicted.

The swift and unstoppable diffusion of a sub-visible micro-entity whose mission is proliferation and whose occasional power is to jeopardize its host organism: the virus.

This biological agent has triggered a chain of hygienic transformations of daily life. It is (not so) slowly provoking disruption in the economic, the geopolitical, and last but not least, the psychological domains.

The pandemic has broken the economic automatisms of supply and demand, of

production and of distribution, provoking a collapse of the capitalist economy and the disruption of the global machine, at least in part. Simultaneously, it is creating new automatisms, not less invasive than those inscribed in the economic machine: health automatisms, techno-mediated distancing, and psychological obsessions.

The proliferation of the virus acts as a purveyor of chaos. This is due to the chaos produced by a sub-visible concretion of biological matter; thus, conscious will loses its potency, so that politics are reduced to the implementation of health rules. These rules, however, are not based on deterministic certainty, because the circulation of the sub-visible concretion of matter that we name the virus is continually varying and mutating. Meanwhile, scientists have searched for regularities in the contagion, in the hope of predicting the evolution of the pandemic and recommending means of protection and a cure.

There has been talk of a second (and third) wave of the contagion following the first wave at the beginning of 2020. But month after month, many have realized that the waves are not one or two or three; they are uncountable, like the waves of the sea. The virus did not begin one winter day in Wuhan, it has always existed. However, it only recently mutated into something dangerous for the human body, and, even if we will hopefully prevent further spread (by a vaccine or a cure), it is not going to disappear: it is going to evolve into something different that will be less dangerous, more dangerous, or not dangerous at all for the human organism.

In the physical world, there is no end: matter is becoming, decomposing, recomposing, emerging, and disappearing. Only our consciousness is something that begins somewhere and that terminates at a certain point. Only consciousness has the ability to become nothing. All other things evolve.

Consciousness is also the only thing in the universe that can conceive of nothingness. The virus is not nothing, and it is not going to become nothing; instead, it is going to evolve into something different.

Looking at the evolution of the pandemic so far, we can discern some regularity, but this is scarcely relevant from the point of view of the “contagion” event, which transpires in unpredictable ways. Even if some determinism is implied in the transmission of the malady, the contagion is continuously triggering unpredictable emergencies, because the rules of this determination escape the scope of our understanding and of our conscious will.

On the one hand, the virus is continuously changing its nature and intensity; on the other



hand, however, the endangered organism (i.e., us) is a singularity that does not correspond to a homogeneous model, and is continuously mutating in the context of the environmental, technical, economic, and sexual conditions in which it evolves.

### **The Quantum Leap of (Un)consciousness**

If matter evolves in a deterministic way, why can't we predict future configurations of the world? Is it because the infinite complexity of physical determinism cannot be processed by our limited capacity of comprehension and prognostication? Or is it because matter actually evolves in a nondeterministic way?

This dilemma, which runs through modern philosophy, from Laplace's determinism to quantic indeterminacy, takes on crucial importance when we speak of the present relation between neuroscience and psychoanalysis, and of the future evolution of the mind.

Does neurological matter act in a deterministic way on our psychological and cognitive behavior? Or is the relationship between the neurological brain and the conscious mind essentially nondeterministic? What is the quantum leap that differentiates mental activity from neurological dynamics? What is the divergence between the physical dynamics of the brain and the emergence of thought?

The eruption of the virus in the landscape of the contemporary world, and particularly in the landscape of the unconscious, intimate, foreign land that Freud named the unconscious, has revealed the fallacy and the emptiness of the pretension of freedom.

Interpreting the signs of the unconscious and translating those signs into conscious projections and choices is the pathway to freedom as a nondeterministic elaboration of the possibilities entangled in the determinism of physical and neurological matter.

In the end, freedom is the dimension that we can access by strenuously pursuing autonomy, and depends only on our potency. In fact, autonomy can be defined as the potency of imagination and of action. To paraphrase the famous phrase by philosopher and psychologist William James: the first act of free will is choosing to believe in free will.

Here we can see the gap between neuroscience and psychoanalysis, between the physical determinism of neurology and the indeterminacy of desire, even if this gap is absolutely singular in its genesis and manifestation, and cannot be reduced to the scientific exactitude of determination.

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09/10

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His critique was even discussed in the *New York Times*  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/opinion/sunday/giorgio-agamben-philosophy-coronavirus.html>.

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10/10