

Pulling a Little Optimism Out of a Very Grim Account of Global Inequality.

A Review of The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century by Walter Scheidel (Princeton University Press, 2017)

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Introduction

The new offering from Walter Scheidel, historian of ancient Rome and long-time advocate of cross-cultural comparative history, is awe-inspiring in its scope and detailed erudition as it is disheartening in its central message. *The Great Leveler* opens with the programmatic observation that "Economic inequality may only recently have returned to great prominence in popular discourse, but its history runs deep. My book seeks to track and explain this history in the very long run (xv)." Scheidel quickly dashes any hope of finding a key to a future egalitarian utopia in history's lessons, instead outlining the various types of devastating violence that typically (perhaps inevitably?) attended periods of relative equality. A preview of the book's central theme comes early on, where Scheidel posits: "were there also other, more peaceful means of lowering inequality? If we think of leveling on a large scale, the answer must be no (8)."

In the proceeding pages, Scheidel digests massive amounts of information—combining quantitative measures of inequality with more qualitative, prosaic descriptions of social developments and major historical events—culled from nearly every corner of the globe and sweeping from our primate ancestors thousands of years ago to our genetically-enhanced nano-technologically-boostered descendants in the near-ish future.¹ The book's focus, of course, is on the recent

¹ This is no tongue-in-cheek forecasting either; there is a section at the end of the book discussing seriously and reasonably how "The creation of cybernetic organisms and genetic engineering have the potential of expanding disparities among individual persons and even their descendants well beyond their natural endowments and the extra-somatic

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past (since Industrialization) and whether—and, if so, how—societies have managed to achieve something like an equitable distribution of income and wealth, at least for short periods. Scheidel's answer is that, although most societies throughout human history have generally supported sharp distributional inequities, yes, some societies have seen this pervasive inequality, but unfortunately *only* as the result of major, devastating, violent shocks. Scheidel further offers a taxonomy of such shocks, which he dubs the 4 Horsemen: 1. Mass Mobilization Warfare; 2. Transformative Revolution; 3. State Failure/Collapse; 4. Lethal Pandemics.

These forces of devastation and death have come in varying form and scale throughout history, from the collapse of Bronze Age palace societies in the eastern Mediterranean to the Bubonic Plague of western Europe and the World Wars, but in their own way each of these violent shocks carried at least the potential side-effect of disrupting and demolishing established political hierarchies and socio-economic systems, thereby providing space for more equitable societies to emerge. Scheidel is quick to note that these forces do not always serve to reduce inequality, and even when they do this has generally been short-lived, but the thrust of this lengthy survey of global inequality is that "Across recorded history, the periodic compressions of inequality brought about by mass mobilization warfare, transformative revolution, state failure, and pandemics have invariably dwarfed any known instances of equalization by entirely peaceful means (443)." The grim summary offered to readers, then, is that violent shock has been, and seems poised to remain, the Great Leveler—in fact, the *only* mechanism capable of reducing inequality on a mass scale.

The Great Leveler

The Great Leveler checks in at a striking 456 pages, including the Appendix (and excluding Bibliography and Index), broken into 7 Parts of 1–3 chapters each.

Part I offers 3 chapters describing the long-run trends of inequality, from our hierarchical primate ancestors to the first large-scale egalitarian movement as hunter-gatherer tribes managed to curtail hierarchy in order to cooperate in their food gathering, to the return of inequalities as sedentarism took hold and resources became more partible and heritable—inequalities enshrined and exacerbated by the socio-political hierarchies of the earliest large-scale and complex states. The reader is then thrust forward in time to witness the inequalities present in the two major agrarian Empires in the ancient world, Rome and China, which Scheidel calls "the closest analogues to modern western countries (62)" for their large size, long durability, high productivity, and severe

resources they command, and they may well do so in ways that feed back into the distribution of income and wealth" (431).

hierarchy. We then get a broad survey of European history from the fall of Rome to the Industrial Revolution, a period that witnessed dramatic periods of growth—both in overall economic productivity as well as the unequal distribution of this production—along with periods of dramatic leveling, notably attended by major international wars and pandemic outbreaks. Specifically, the first half of the 20th century, which saw two World Wars and the Great Depression, was not only one of (perhaps) the most violent periods of human history, but it also (or, as Scheidel would have it, consequently) witnessed one of the largest and most widespread period of inequality reduction on record. Scheidel dubs this time the 'Great Compression'. In all, however, the general pattern outlined in these chapters is one of fairly high inequality as at least a pervasive, if not an *inherent* property of large-scale, agrarian, complex social formations—the kind that have dominated the planet since the Neolithic Revolution some 10,000 years ago.

After this broad survey of the history of global inequality, Parts II–V (encompassing chapters 4 through 11) each outline one of the 4 Horsemen, providing examples of the times they have visited human society and describing their devastating—but inequality-reducing—effects. It is in these chapters particularly where Scheidel is able to display his considerable historical prowess, sweeping across time and space to offer numerous positive examples of the Great Lever in action from our shared past as well as more contemporary societies. These chapters do an admirable job of interspersing quantitative measures—calculating changes in the top income share of select countries over the course of the 20th century, approximating the mobilization rates of the European powers stretching all the way back to the 17th century, providing estimates for the daily wages of unskilled workers in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, or counting the death toll of pandemics from the Antonine Plague of the 2nd century to the Bubonic Plague of the 14th—within qualitative passages about the societies that experienced one of the violent shocks, and how inequality was affected in each case.

The chapters in these Parts comprise the bulk of the book's empirical contents. The details of each case and historical example are thoroughly researched, well presented, and generally convincing. One quibble with the work is that, all together, the sheer quantity of information deployed in the relentless service of a fairly small number of central arguments can come off as somewhat repetitive. More significantly, while *The Great Leveler* can and should be considered a work of quantitative history—and for this, Scheidel is to be commended—cliodynamicists and readers of *Cliodynamics* may hope for a more explicit laying out of hypotheses and systematic assessment of the empirical evidence both for and against than is offered. Reading the work, I sometimes felt that the force of the primary arguments would have been strengthened by

reducing the number of cases adduced, leaving room to balance these positive *exempla* with more thorough and systematic treatment of the full implications of the proposed causal mechanism—showing that it explains both cases where there was a strong correlation between violent shock and reduced inequality, but also that societies that did *not* experience reduced inequality also had not experienced such shocks and that such shocks consistently *did* lead to inequality reduction. Clearly, there are a few cases that would seem to bely this powerful correlation (some examples below). These cases would not necessarily invalidate Scheidel's model, but missing in *The Great leveler's* lengthy exposition on cause and effect is a detailed, explicit reckoning with these potentially contrasting instances. Could the model be altered slightly, perhaps adding in a mediating force, that can account for these contrasting cases while still showing the strong positive correlation between devastation and equality demonstrated here? Or are these instances sufficiently few and different from the bulk of historical cases that they can be explained away as mere outliers,² leaving the main argument intact? Unfortunately, we never get a complete answer to these questions.

In fairness, Part VI (more below) is indeed devoted to discussing possible instances of widespread leveling that were not preceded or attended by destructive violence, with Scheidel concluding that the historical record simply does not present many ready examples of this. He does acknowledge a few such cases, as in Chapter 13, for instance, when he notes that many Latin American countries were largely sheltered from the violent shocks of World War II, yet did experience temporary reductions in inequality in the post-war period; however, he stresses that these reductions were very short-lived and that inequality in Latin America generally *increased* between 1938 and 1970. This assessment is presented as further demonstration of the general tendency for complex, highly productive societies to produce high inequality in the long term. This is demonstrated empirically and seems to hold when taking a survey of a large number of Latin American countries (15) over a longer time span (1938–1970), but it cannot quite explain the (albeit temporary) leveling that was achieved in several of these countries in the 1950s and 1960s, leveling that occurred in spite of an absence of any recent 'Great Leveler' (which Scheidel acknowledges, but immediately casts aside (380)). The leveling experienced in post-war Latin America is one important example of an ostensibly contradictory case that is more dismissed than discussed. Portugal, as Scheidel points out, likewise saw

² Scheidel does remark at one point that the more developed Latin American countries, which saw reduced inequality during the first half of the 20th century, are "dubious comparanda" for the rest of the Western world, since they have significantly "institutional and ecological differences" (397); though I would argue that these differences are *precisely* why they provide a critical test of the basic relationship between exogenous shock and leveling force being asserted in these pages.

dramatic reductions in inequality during World War II, even though they were largely sheltered from the war's violent effects. This contrasting case is neither incorporated back into the model, with amendments made to the theory to accommodate such cases, nor is it explained away. Rather, this and other instances that seem to challenge the logic of the arguments Scheidel promotes throughout the book are left dangling, the only explanation offered to readers being that, as in the case of Portugal, "the reasons remain to be explained (156)."

Part VI proceeds to offer, then dash, the hopes of those readers who managed to make it this far in the book still optimistic of a brighter, more egalitarian future. Chapter 12 surveys some of the potential levelers that could reduce inequality without the need to first devastate and destroy. Specifically, Scheidel cites land reform and debt relief (and state interventions into income and wealth distribution more broadly), economic crises that would annihilate wealth particularly among the rich (which at least theoretically could reduce top incomes without bloodshed), and democratization, which has been shown to help keep inequality at bay though itself "cannot be treated as an autonomous development unrelated to violent action" (365); democracies tend to develop after violent shocks, and have proven generally ineffectual at limiting violence within societies as well. All of these mechanisms are argued to fail the test, either because they typically have not reduced inequality for a large segment of the population for extended periods (i.e. state intervention into the economy), or have themselves generally been associated with one of the Horsemen (i.e. economic crises and democratization arising after a war, or major revolutions resulting in more equitable redistribution coming after a state collapse/failure, which tends to be quite violent as well, such as with the case of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia). Chapter 13 likewise offers education and economic growth as potential means of peaceable leveling, but again concludes that neither is very strongly associated with inequality reduction (education often exacerbates the problem, Scheidel notes, by producing too many skilled workers for a labour market where they are not in demand, putting downward pressure on wages, plus skilled labour does not general impact capital wealth, which in fact drives much global inequality), or only occur after some violent shock. Lastly, chapter 14 offers a few counterfactuals to assess if history *would* have produced instances of peaceful leveling had the violent shocks that in fact occurred did not. Again, the answer is a resounding 'not likely', especially for the Great Compression. In Scheidel's words, "it is hard to see how capital could ever have been destroyed and devalued on as comparable scale [as in fact occurred] in the absence of violent shocks (398);" namely, the two World Wars and the Great Depression.

The mechanisms proposed as potential peaceful means for reducing inequality are themselves largely treated as exogenous shocks, major events or policy actions that occur or can be implemented at one time and then have lingering

ramifications for income/wealth distribution. This fits the structure of the book, as these peaceful 'shocks' match the violent shocks brought about by the four Horsemen discussed throughout. Yet, one wonders if a combination of reforms—economic growth, investment in education, debt-relief and other state interventions into the economy, welfare spending, democratizing institutions, greater international oversight of corporate finance, and others—enacted and then *reinforced and maintained* over a long period could effect a stable equitable distribution of resources in a way that any single one of these, viewed as an isolated shock to the socio-political and economic system, would be able to accomplish. Indeed, these sort of reforms, in combination and sustained over long periods, have been proposed as leading to more equitable distribution of wealth, resources, and, above all, well-being (e.g. Wilkinson and Pickett 2011; Atkinson 2015; Nussbaum 2011; Stiglitz et al. 2013; Fitoussi, Sen, and Stiglitz 2009). An interesting task for future studies is to explore the interaction or feedback between these various 'peaceful' pathways to greater global equality, tracking also the relationship to the more destructive forces of leveling that Scheidel justly stresses here.

Part VII recapitulates evidence for the growing inequality that has plagued the world since the 1970s and 1980s, outlining the prospects for the future. Consistent with earlier chapters, this part is quite pessimistic, pointing out the myriad indicators that inequality is likely to rise both between and within societies in the coming years. The hope is that understanding inequality from an historical perspective will provide us with the tools to correct or avoid past mistakes. A convincing, timely, and truly essential point to get across; still, a grim conclusion, for, if *The Great Leveler* is to be believed, then we have really only one of two terrible choices facing us: we either accept and acquiesce to the reality of high (and rising) inequality, or we hope to be visited by a Horseman so that whoever manages to survive the shock may build (at least temporarily) more equitable societies. Indeed, this is the book's primary purpose:

I wrote this book to show that the forces that used to shape inequality have not in fact changed beyond recognition. If we seek to rebalance the current distribution of income and wealth in favor of greater equality, we cannot simply close our eyes to what it took to accomplish this goal in the past. We need to ask whether great inequality has ever been alleviated without great violence...and whether the future is likely to be very different—even if we may not like the answers (22).

Finally, an Appendix offers a detailed summary and analysis of the Inequality Possibility Frontier (IPF), a measure designed by economic historians Branko Milanovic, Peter Lindert, and Jeffrey Williamson (Milanovic, Lindert, and

Williamson 2011) to calculate the maximum *possible* distributional inequality given different levels of overall productivity. Scheidel highlights the limits in measures like the Gini coefficient with a maximum of perfect inequality that could never actually be reached in practice. The IPF recognizes that there is a minimum amount of total production in a society that must go to sustain the lives of the people living within it—the subsistence level. In practice, it is only a society's surplus wealth (its production beyond the subsistence level) that can be equitably or unequally distributed—an acknowledgement of realistic wealth distribution missing from Gini coefficients and most standard measures of inequality. Although Scheidel had used Gini coefficients and estimates of top share of total income or wealth as his primary measures of inequality throughout the book, he sprinkled in hints in the earlier chapters that there was a limit to the actual maximum inequality achievable at different historical epochs (this observation feeds his notable conclusion that "early societies [*vis* preindustrial agrarian societies] tended to be about as unequal as they could possibly be (448)"). The IPF, then, offers a somewhat different and more realistic index of inequality, though Scheidel spends most of the Appendix noting that this 'subsistence minimum' can be calculated in different ways (actual physiological subsistence, the minimum 'accepted' culturally or socially, and the minimum required to feed into a large, complex, modern manufacturing, trade, and service based economy). More importantly, the overriding conclusion from this discussion of the IPF is that any way inequality is measured and approached, the arguments throughout the book hold water. This Appendix as an important side-note to issues of measurement and certainly something for future scholars looking into historic inequality to consider.

Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century

The Great Leveler's subtitle tells it all—the book endeavors to document in meticulous detail and sweeping scope the empirically-undeniable correlation between violent shocks and periods of relative equality throughout the human history. Scheidel does an excellent job of drawing our attention to the critical factors at play in past episodes of inequality reduction and suggesting the importance of violent, exogenous shocks. Scheidel offers us an incredible treasure-trove of comparative historical material to further explore the nature of inequality, violence, destruction, and the means of improving global well-being. This book lays the foundation for future work seeking to uncover the precise relationship between the critical factors raised here. For those of us who follow Scheidel in seeking to find out "whether great inequality has ever been alleviated

without great violence...and whether the future is likely to be very different (11),” this deeper understanding is critical³.

Unfortunately, Scheidel offers only grim answers to this research program, concluding the main text saying:

If history is anything to go by, peaceful policy reform may well prove unequal to the growing challenges ahead. But what of the alternatives? All of us who prize greater economic equality would do well to remember that with the rarest of exceptions, it was only ever brought forth in sorrow. Be careful what you wish for (444).

Are the prospects for a more egalitarian future really this bleak? Are we simply caught between either accepting high (and likely growing) global inequality, or hoping for the next major catastrophe to strike? *The Great Leveler* certainly makes this argument forcefully and often. Happily, there is further room for optimism in the pages of *The Great Leveler*. Tucked away in the details of the Horsemen's devastating impact on human life, Scheidel introduces a contributing factor to the subsequent reductions in inequality separated (at least in part) from the devastation: *institutional reform and state intervention*. Time and again, mediating factors in the leveling process leading from violent shock to reduction of inequality are brought up. Outlining Japan's 'great compression' after World War II, for instance, Scheidel notes that the US occupying forces oversaw a major restructuring of Japan's economy, introducing labour and wage protections and a more progressive taxation system among other policies aimed at leveling income and wealth distribution (123–9). Scheidel concludes this section on post-war Japan with the observation that "The bloodiest years in Japanese history, a war that cost millions of lives and visited enormous destruction on the homeland, had produced a uniquely equalizing outcome (129)." But was it the *war* that did this, or was it the interventions, fiscal reforms, and changes to the financial system that produced this 'uniquely equalizing outcome'?

Similarly, when discussing the path that led Northern Europe from the devastation of World War II to producing some of the current world's most egalitarian countries, Scheidel explains that the relatively equitable distribution of income and wealth currently enjoyed in Scandinavia compared with the rest of the world, including other parts of Europe, owes to their relatively radical taxation and social welfare spending. These fiscal policies and the institutions supporting such state-led redistribution, in turn, are said to have resulted from the war; such policies had been advocated for years, but "[m]ass mobilization war served as the catalyst that helped turn these ideals into reality (164)." A fair

³ To his credit, Scheidel acknowledges the limitations of his study, noting that it "can be no more than a building block" for a larger project tracking the dynamical relationship between violence and inequality (11).

point, but one that again raises the question of whether *both* factors were necessary for Scandinavia's reduced inequality; and if so, should mass mobilization warfare get all the headlines, when institutional reforms⁴ were at least as responsible?

Again, while digesting the overwhelming evidence presented in *The Great Leveler* for the correlation between violent shock and inequality reduction, a key question keeps popping up: What *exactly* is the relationship between the putative cause and effect? At times reading the work, it seems that the relationship between these two potential causal factors (violence and subsequent policy reform) in fact explains the outcomes observed and documented by Scheidel, rather than the shocks alone. The nature of this interaction may account for the ostensible outliers, as well as the relative difference in equality achieved by different countries today. Indeed, Scheidel notes at one point that "the more balanced distribution of final incomes that is typical of the [modern] Eurozone and Scandinavia primarily depends on the maintenance of an expansive and expensive system of powerfully equalizing state interventions (425)." Scheidel goes on to explain that such policy is "unsustainable (426)" in the long term, although again without too much empirical documentation⁵. Nevertheless, the state interventions get pride of place in explaining the relative high equality enjoyed by northern Europe today compared to the rest of the world—but why are the conclusions focused entirely on the effects of violent shock? And if the shocks are the principal factor, why did the greater violence experienced in western and southern Europe not lead to correspondingly greater or more lasting equality there?

The interaction between these causal forces appears to be key, not only because the mediation of institutional reform after some exogenous shock adds another dimension to the resulting leveling, but because it can help to uncover the continuous relationship between the degree and scope of the factors involved. For instance, are there thresholds of devastation (loss of life or capital from war or state collapse or pandemics) or a certain percentage of the available labour force mobilized for warfare that need to be reached in order for leveling to occur? Are there temporal bounds for the effects of violent shocks? For example, at several points Scheidel notes that the Great Compression of the mid-20th century has largely eroded, as the century's latter decades saw resurgent inequality explode almost everywhere in the world, but the reason for this is largely

⁴ It is somewhat surprising that Scheidel does not engage more directly with the work of Francis Fukuyama, among others, who stresses the institutional foundations of different social outcomes, from more-to-less democratic openness, egalitarian redistribution of wealth and resources, to procedural accountability (Fukuyama 2011, 2014).

⁵ And see, e.g. (Atkinson 2015) for contrasting perspectives on the prospects of efficient and sustainable redistribution.

unexplained. Is there a shelf-life to the egalitarian reforms instituted in the 1940s and 1950s and, if so, why, exactly, are such reforms so transient? Do the systematic removal of redistributive policies during the heyday of 'liberal' economics during the 1970s and 1980s completely explain why the Great Compression of the mid 20th century has been unraveling?

At numerous points, *The Great Leveler* appears poised to construct a multi-level causal model leading from the ultimate cause—some possibly exogenous, violent shock putting upward pressure on wages and social mobility—to the proximate—the creation and/or enshrinement of institutional structures that distribute income and wealth more equitably, encouraged as a means for the now downwardly-mobile elite to maintain some form of social cohesion. Yet, the relationship between these different potential causal forces remains only partially implied and somewhat scattered, never quite fully developed, explicitly theorized, or systematically tested. What is offered are a selection of cases illustrating various, sometimes seemingly contrasting, interactions between the various factors involved. At points, the institutional reforms and state policies are given pride of place, as, for instance, when explaining the equalizing effects of famine in the Ukraine of 1932–3, Scheidel posits that the devastation from the famine itself was not primarily responsible for the leveling, but "the program of forcible collectivization that was undertaken at the time (331)" in response to the famine. At other times, there seems to be a clear causal line drawn from violent shock to institutional reform to leveling, as in the case of the large-scale leveling that swept through Europe at the end of initial Bubonic Plague outbreak in the 14th century; here, Scheidel explains that loss of life from the disease put upward pressure on wages and downward pressure on rents, enriching poor laborers and impoverishing landowners and lords; further, the lack of destruction of infrastructure and capital (as is notably associated with warfare) let the productive economy recover quickly, leading to explosive gains in per capita income particularly benefiting the poor, thus drastically lowering inequality. Critically, however, these reductions were solidified by institutional changes. For instance many places responded to new labour market conditions by lifting restrictions on labour mobility (effectively ending serfdom in several areas) and removing, or at least failing to introduce, caps on wage levels. Scheidel highlights here that the leveling effects of plague were much more pronounced and long-lasting in areas like northwestern Europe where such reforms followed the disease than they were in places where such institutional restrictions on labour were maintained or, in some, cases, strengthened, as in Eastern Europe. This indicates that the violent shock *alone* cannot explain the historical record, for there was a significant variance in outcomes between different areas that each experienced the devastation of the plague; the proximate or secondary factor—

the institutional reforms—must be cited as a cause of the different forms and degrees of leveling we see in the historical record.

Curiously, Scheidel explicitly dismisses the sort of multi-level theorizing promoted by Jack Goldstone, Peter Turchin, Andrey Korotayev, and others who will be familiar to readers of *Clodynamics*.⁶ Scheidel is wary of this type of 'endogenizing' theory for, he argues, this can produce a false sense of explanatory parsimony—for instance, that developments within a society, such as population growth and unequal distribution of wealth and positions of political power by themselves can cause violent outbursts and even periods of greater equality—while ignoring the exogenous shocks that often are the most influential factors (393-4). Yet, one of the prime advantages of Goldstone's multi-level *Structural Demographic Theory* (SDT) is that it explicitly describes and accounts for the interconnection and feedback between multiple causal forces. In SDT, these are the ways that demographic expansion puts upward pressure on the structural forces that hold the social, political, and economic life of a society together—overpopulation leads to declining wages, which benefits landowners and owners of the means of production leading to rising inequality, which in turn leads to intralite conflict and, eventually, the system breaks down and ends in chaos (Goldstone 1991; Turchin 2003, 2016). While the theory does not directly account for exogenous shocks like Scheidel's 4 Horsemen, the structural-demographic factors within a society can, perhaps, account for the differences in the way that these exogenous shocks affect different societies. Future work is needed to establish a similar mechanistic understanding of how institutional reforms and state interventions mediate the leveling potential carried by the violent, exogenous shocks highlighted over and again in *The Great Leveler*—with any luck, this understanding can unlock the secret to achieving the reforms and leveling without the extensive violence.

Pulling Out a Little Optimism? A Possible Pathway to Peaceful Leveling

It is clear from the details of the historic instances of widespread leveling cited in *The Great Leveler* that the violent devastation delivered by the Four Horsemen *by itself* was often not enough to secure long-lasting leveling, but that attendant institutional reforms were required for any gains made towards a more equitable distribution to be realized and sustained. Curiously, although such reforms are brought up time and again throughout the work, the *sole* focus of Scheidel's arguments and conclusions about the cause of inequality reduction is on the violent shocks; state activity, fiscal policy, and other institutional factors are left hidden in the background. Yet, it is precisely in untangling the relationship

⁶ (Goldstone 2017; Turchin, Gavrillets, and Goldstone 2017; Ortman et al. 2017). See also interesting SDT models in: (Baker 2011; Bennett 2016).

between these different possible causal forces that we may find hope for a more equitable future. Even if the *ultimate* cause of mass inequality reduction is the violent shocks highlighted here, if a necessary *proximate* cause is institutional reform, then we are not left searching for some as-yet-unknown force that can mimic the leveling effects of the Horsemen, just without the devastation; instead, our project is to find a means to initiate—or, in some cases, simply return to—the institutional arrangement that has been shown to produce more equitable societies. We can only hope.

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