

แนวคิดทฤษฎีทางสังคมของโรเบิร์ต ดี พัตนัม และข้อท้าทาย ROBERT D. PUTNAM'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ITS CHALLENGES

วัลลภ สุขสวัสดิ์*

Wanlapat Suksawas*

ภาควิชารัฐศาสตร์และรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ คณะสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยนเรศวร
Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences,
Naresuan University, Thailand.

*Corresponding author, E-mail: wahlapats@hotmail.com

บทคัดย่อ

โรเบิร์ต ดี พัตนัม ถือได้ว่าเป็นนักรัฐศาสตร์ที่ทรงอิทธิพลที่สุดคนหนึ่งในโลกปัจจุบัน การศึกษาเรื่องทฤษฎีทางสังคมของพัตนัมได้ปลุกกระแสให้นักวิชาการในหลากหลายสาขาวิชาหันมาศึกษาถึง บทบาทและผลของทฤษฎีทางสังคมอย่างจริงจัง ทั้งนี้เนื่องจากพัตนัมได้เสนอว่าทฤษฎีทางสังคม ซึ่งมีองค์ประกอบที่สำคัญสามประการคือ ความไว้วางใจ การเกื้อกูลซึ่งกันและกัน และเครือข่ายทางสังคม นั้นสามารถที่จะส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมทางการเมืองและสนับสนุนให้การทำงานของภาครัฐมีประสิทธิภาพเพิ่มมากขึ้น ซึ่งปัจจัยดังกล่าวจะส่งผลดีอย่างยิ่งต่อการปกครองระบอบประชาธิปไตย อย่างไรก็ตาม บททศวรรษนี้เสนอว่างานของพัตนัมยังมีข้อจำกัดซึ่งยังต้องการคำอธิบายให้กระจ่างชัดมากกว่านี้ และที่สำคัญที่สุดคือ บททศวรรษนี้ต้องการเสนอว่าข้อเสนองานของพัตนัมนั้นไม่สามารถอธิบายปรากฏการณ์ทางการเมืองที่เกิดขึ้นได้ทั่วทุกแห่ง

คำสำคัญ: ทฤษฎีทางสังคม การมีส่วนร่วมทางการเมือง ศักยภาพของภาครัฐ

Abstract

Robert D. Putnam can be considered as one of the most important political scientists working on an issue of social capital. His concept of social capital has had a great influence on contemporary political studies. The major claim made by Putnam is that there are three core components of social capital: trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement. The combination of these three components acts to increase political participation and enhances successful democratic government and modern democracy. However, this study argues that his theory shows clear limitations, needs some further explanations and cannot be employed effectively in every context.

Keywords: Social capital, Political participation, Governance, Democracy

Introduction

This article focuses on the concept of social capital. The article is divided into four parts. Its first part presents a discussion regarding the definition of social capital. In the second part, three core components of social capital—trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement—are highlighted and discussed. The third part focuses on how social capital, as argued by Putnam, can promote political participation and enhance institutional performance. The main emphasis on the last part in this discussion argues that Putnam’s concept of social capital shows some limitations and needs to be tested in different, non-Western, political contexts.

Definitions of Social Capital

Social capital is, undoubtedly, a broad and contested term. It has been employed to describe several phenomena which relate to social interactions. There is an increasing awareness in the recent literature regarding the significance of social capital. Its significance has been accepted by various disciplines, including health [1-2], social epidemiology [3-4], economics [5-7], criminology [8], education [9-12], public services and the welfare state [13, 14], and political science [15-19]. This concept has been studied and debated for many years and there continues to be a great deal of academic interest in the topic.

Robert D. Putnam’s Concept of Social Capital

Robert D. Putnam is one of the most

distingue American scholars. His concept of social capital has had a great influence on contemporary political studies. His studies are central to a major concern in political science scholarship regarding the impacts of social context on politics. Undeniably; the growing interest in the concept of social capital has been prompted by this noted American political scientist. After Putnam’s renowned book, *Making democracy work: Civic tradition in modern Italy*, was published in 1993, the concept of social capital has generated a wave of empirical work.

The major claim made by Putnam is that there are three core components of social capital: trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement: “social capital refers to features of social organization – such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1993, p. 167; 1994, pp. 6-7; 1995a, p.2) [20-22]. These elements are mutually dependent and are vital factors in producing, and reproducing social capital.

As identified by Putnam (1993, p. 167; 1994, pp. 6-7; 1995a, p.2), one of the core components of social capital is *trust*. Generally, trust is the belief that other people will be honest and can safely be associated with. Individuals who engage in the community seem to share norms, values and interests with others, which, in turn, can increase the level of trust in society [23]. Additionally, trust, as argued by various scholars, has many benefits: it creates a moral society, allows people to be more tolerant and opens society

to greater levels of compromise on major public issues. More importantly, trust enhances the performance of political institutions [20, 24, 25, 26, p. 1008, see also 27, p. 173, 28, p. 96].

The second core component of social capital, which Putnam highlights (1993, p. 167; 1994, pp. 6-7; 1995a, p.2) is *norms of reciprocity*. Norms of reciprocity are society's tools to "transfer the right to control an action from the actor to others" (Coleman, 1990, p. 251 cited in Putnam, 1993, p. 171). Norms of reciprocity play an essential role in formulating mutual respect and collaboration between people. More importantly, norms of reciprocity are associated strongly with levels of trust in society, which, in turn, bolsters the stability of the social system, and the effectiveness of institutions [29].

According to Putnam (1994, p. 8; 1995, p. 2), another key component of social capital is *networks of civic engagement*. In general, networks of civic engagement are links that connect people together (Putnam, 1993, p. 173). Networks of civic engagement can be created by an active association of members in society [30]. Notably, strong networks of civic engagement can play an important part in improving the performance of democratic institutions [20, 22]

How Social Capital can Promote Political Participation and Enhance Institutional Performance?

The discussion now focuses on the important issue of how social capital can promote political participation and enhance institutional performance.

Firstly, it is by now widely acknowledged that vigorous community networks have a strong impact on political participation. Voluntary associations significantly influence the feeling of political efficacy [31, p. 273]. Frequent interaction among dense, horizontal, and more cross-cutting social networks both in plural and open organizations—formal and informal, political and non-political—appears to provide their members with numerous valuable habits and behaviors. Consequently, it is widely argued that members of voluntary associations take on and become skilled in cooperative and democratic values, civic attitudes, interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity and opportunities to conduct significant public issues (Putnam, 1993, pp. 171-176).

These attitudes and behaviors are very valuable for political development, particularly in assisting harmonization and encouraging people to play a part in a variety of political affairs [32, p. 42, 33, p. 23, 34, p. 233, 35, p. 69, 36, p. 21]. Moreover, these attitudes and behaviors could be significant factors in extending people's sense of public belonging, responsibility and trust in others and political institutions [37, 38]. Thus, people in an active community seem to show higher levels of political participation.

Secondly, various scholars argue that social capital has a positive effect on enhancing the institutional performance of government. For example, Putnam strongly believes that these two variables are closely related. According to him, trust, mutual obligation, and civic engagement have a great impact on both individuals and governmental performance.

At the individual level, networks of civic engagement—as one of core components of social capital—are shown to correlate positively with an individual’s happiness because they educate individuals with the skills of collaboration, harmony and public-mindedness [26, 39]. At the governmental level, it is suggested that strong networks of civic engagements have positive effect on the institutional performance of government [20, pp. 175-176]. As Putnam clarifies, civil association contributes to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government and it encourages the establishment of a more beneficial performance of government [20, pp. 88-90, 155, 22, p. 665, 40, p. 664, 41, pp 8-9].

Putnam further argues that the strong networks of civic engagement offer three advantages which both directly and indirectly relate to government performance: they 1) promote norms of reciprocity, 2) assist coordination and communication, and 3) generate collaboration [21, pp. 9-10].

Putnam clearly demonstrates that frequent interactions among dense, horizontal and more cross-cutting social networks both in plural and open organizations appears to provide their members with numerous valuable political attitudes and behaviors. Examples of these attitudes and behaviors include democratic values, civic attitude, interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, skills of cooperation and a willingness to get involved in community affairs that pertain to significant public issues (Putnam, 1993, pp. 99-113, 175-176; 2000, p. 21). These attitudes and behaviors are very valuable for political development,

and possibly will assist and encourage people to play a greater part in a variety of political affairs. In short, in Putnam’s view, social capital presents itself as the main factor supporting people’s contribution in political affairs.

Secondly, Putnam strongly stresses that healthy civic society has a strong correlation with the effective performance of regional governments in the northern region in Italy [20, p. 65-120]. According to Putnam [20, 87-91], civic society is a society that is embedded with public-spirit, political equality, trust, tolerance, mutual obligation, civic engagement and integrity. The strong networks in civic society, as he emphasizes, have a positive effect on the institutional performance of government (Putnam, 1993, pp. 99-116). He clarifies that the existence of numerous civil associations contributes to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government and encourages the establishment of better governmental performance [20, pp. 88-90, 155, 22, p. 665, 40, p. 664, 41, pp 8-9].

This argument regarding the close relationship between social capital and effective institutional performance is made in a number of his writings. For instance, in his article “Social Capital and Public Affairs” (1994), he reemphasizes the important role of strong traditions of civic engagement in making people constantly participate in community activities in the northern region of Italy. As he argues, “some regions of Italy...have many active community organizations. Citizens in these regions are engaged by public issues, not by patronage...

Social and political networks are organized horizontally, not hierarchically...And here democracy works” (p. 8).

In this article Putnam states that civic engagement is evident in communities where people participate in community activities equally and consistently [21, p. 8]. He explicates that healthy civic engagement offers three advantages which can both directly and indirectly relate to governmental performance. Firstly, strong networks of civic engagement promote norms of generalized reciprocity. Secondly, networks of civic engagement not only assist coordination and communication within the community but also provide information concerning the trustworthiness of other members in society. Finally, networks of civic engagement create long-term mutual collaborations [21, pp. 9-10]. Thus, the benefits of networks of civic engagement on making better institutional performance, as argued by Putnam, are far from trivial.

In *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (2000), Putnam also emphasizes the important role of civic engagement in promoting effective government performance. As he documents [36], higher levels of performance in both national and local levels of government will be achieved in societies endowed with strong social capital where civic communities are rich. He restates that civic engagement plays a significant role in making better government. This is because democratic attitudes and behaviors (as significant outcomes of civic engagement, noted earlier) from both citizenries and incumbents, and the social infrastructure of civic communities, enable

the representative governments to work more effectively (Putnam, 2000, p. 346). Therefore, the performance of democratic government depends largely on social capital from both people and government officials.

Some Challenges for Putnam's Theory

This article argues that Putnam's theory needs some further explanations and needs to be tested in other contexts. A more detailed discussion of Putnam's arguments is now offered.

To begin with, this study argues that Putnam's theory needs additional clarifications in at least in three aspects: (1) his argument on a connection between contribution in voluntary organizations and political involvement, (2) his assumption on the association between social capital and institutional performance, and (3) his narrow understanding of the concept of democracy.

1) A connection between contribution in voluntary organizations and political involvement

According to Putnam [20, pp. 175-176], participation in vertical voluntary associations such as football clubs, bowling leagues and singing groups are preconditions for increasing political involvement [see also 42]. Even though this argument is confirmed in a number of studies (Hart, T. M. Youniss, & J. Atkins, 2007; Klesner, 2007; Krishna, 2002; Leighley, 1996; Smith, 1999; Teorell, 2003), a number of studies can be presented to challenge the validity [17, 18, 43-46] of Putnam's arguments.

First, a study by Ikeda and Richey (2005) examines the influence of participation in voluntary associations on political participation in Japanese society. In their study, three categories of voluntary associations are identified: (1) horizontal or vertical associations; (2) opened or closed associations; and (3) political or non-political associations [47]. Interestingly, on the one hand, the results of their study confirm Putnam's theory that affiliation with associations increases participation. However, in contrast, they discover that, in fact, both formal and informal 'hierarchical' social networks promote political involvement in Japanese society.

The researchers clarify this finding by stating that vertical social networks have a 'positive impact' on promoting political involvement. Individuals who contribute to voluntary associations such as resident associations, alumni, parent-teacher associations, and farmer cooperatives are more likely to participate in political activities (Ikeda & Richey, 2005, pp. 249-253; see also Ikeda et al., 2003, p. 3). As stated by their explanation, one possible reason for this circumstance is that the patron-client relationships play the most important role in shaping social relationship in Japanese society. Traditionally, the social inferiors (*meshita*) are almost exclusively influenced by the demand and judgment of the social superiors (*meue*). Consequently, the *meshita* may lack citizenship skills to deliberate and/or negotiate with the elderly (who are assumed to be wiser), thus the *meshita* will follow the *meue*'s advices or instructions to get

involved with politics (Ikeda & Richey, 2005, pp. 242-243).

Although, they are not able to offer a clear explanation why the vertical associations cannot promote political participation [42, 47], it is obvious that Putnam's theory may not be able to be applied generally across all circumstances, since contributions in vertical voluntary associations fail to be the precondition for political participation in Japan.

Furthermore, Booth and Richard (2005) consider the concept of social capital in another context—Central America. Their study focuses on an examination of the relationships between three concepts: civil society, social capital and political capital. They study civil society in terms of involvements in two types of social networks: (1) communal group activism (self-help groups and activities at the local level); and (2) formal group activism (membership in unions, civic associations, cooperatives, and professional groups) [48].

Results from the Booth and Richard's study are consistent with those presented by Ikeda and Richey. The researchers strongly deny the significance of informal social networks and communal group activism in explicitly increasing the contributions to the political affairs. They verify that political participation is formed by the involvement in 'formal group activism'. In the context of Central America, it is evident that individuals who participate in the formal social networks are more likely to get involved with politics such as in campaigning activities, and contact their public officials more regularly [48]. As a consequence, Putnam's argument seems to be debatable, since the contribution in

vertical organizations fails to promote political participation in Central America.

Additionally, a study conducted by Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005) demonstrates the same result as the two studies discussed above. They persuasively argue that not all associations positively correlate with political participation. As they argue, if the group's objectives place greater emphasis on democracy and are politically oriented, then its members can become more skilled in democratic value and tolerant of others. In contrast, if associations are regarded as "antidemocratic, disdainful of politics, and intolerant of outsiders" (p. 239), it is no coincidence that the members would pay scant attention to democracy, and they might completely ignore the politics [49]. It is certain that voluntary associations and political participation are not always positively related to each other.

Notably, the differences between Putnam's theory and the three studies presented above provide the scope for future debate on this issue. It is particularly in relation to the links between the individual's contribution to the voluntary associations and political involvement in the different national and cultural contexts.

2) The association between social capital and institutional performance

Secondly, this study now discusses

the topic regarding the connection between social capital and institutional performance. As Putnam mentions, networks of civic engagement are prerequisites for better government [36]. It seems to be the case that Putnam fails to provide a systematic test to support his argument as to *how* good quality social relations can make effective governance [48, 50, 51].

As he mentions, voluntary associations and social networks of civic engagement contribute to better governments in two ways. Firstly, voluntary associations provide several opportunities for all members to learn democratic skills. For instance, members will learn how to protect their interests and how to make their voices heard. Secondly, less formal social networks of civil society provide their members with many valuable skills, such as democratic attitudes and civic virtues, to contribution in social life [36]. However, as noted, his arguments are not supported by any systematic test. Thus, it seems that his argument is open to further clarifications.

Nevertheless, by an attempt to expand and test Putnam's theory, Knack (2002) provides a systematic test in order to show how social capital can support government performance. He measures social capital and government performance by employing several indicators¹. Results of his study make a clear argument that social capital has a

¹Knack examines social capital by employing "volunteering, census response, social trust, an index of informal socializing, attendance at club meetings, and membership in "good government" groups" as indicators. At the same time, government performance was studied by using "(the log of) per capita income, percent of adults with a high school diploma, state size (log of population), measures of social and political polarization, and interest group density and diversity" as indicators (Knack, 2002, pp. 776-777).

strongly positive impact on governmental performance. As he underlines, contribution in volunteering activities, census response, and social trust enable governments to function more effectively (Knack, 2002, pp. 782). Moreover, his study also provides many valuable suggestions including, in order to improve government, the educational system must be improved and citizen's income must be distributed equally (Knack, 2002, pp. 784). Knack's systematic test appears to make his argument stronger and more logical than that of Putnam. Therefore, in order to fill Putnam's gap, this study puts an attempt to provide a systematical test whether social capital can increase effective institutional performance of governments.

3) Putnam's narrow understanding of the concept of democracy

Lastly, Putnam (1994) appears to employ the concept of 'democracy' in a rather confusing manner. He equates a quality government performance with healthy democracy. He documents that "these civic communities value solidarity, civic participation, and integrity. And here democracy works" (p. 8). But while effective governmental performance may be intimately associated with the practice of democracy, in fact, they are not the same. As Tarrow argues

(1996), "if we define democracy as effective policy performance, we run the risk of falling into an elitist definition of democracy² (p. 396)". In line with Tarrow, Post (2006) strongly argues that "it is a grave mistake to confuse democracy with particular decision-making procedures and to fail to identify the core values that democracy as a form of government seeks to instantiate" (p. 25).

Apparently, these two concepts—quality government performance and healthy democracy—are completely different. In fact, some countries are able to achieve a high standard of government performance without an appropriate employment of democracy. Singapore may possibly stand as a good example. By Western standards, Singapore may not be considered a healthy democratic country. The majority of Singaporeans pays little attention to politics and do not have a strong faith in democracy. However, interestingly, more than three quarters of Singaporeans are satisfied with the way democracy works and is practiced in their country [52]. It seems that the concept of democracy has not been fully practiced in Singapore. Thus this country may not be considered as a genuine democratic country, but the government performs with considerable efficiency especially in terms of economic development³.

²For Tarrow, (1996, p. 396) democracy is popular sovereignty and individual rights.

³See more detail on Singapore's economic growth in Singapore Department of Statistics (2007), Singapore in Figures 2007 : <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/catalogue.html>

In summary, this study argues that Putnam's theory requires further explanations. Accordingly, this study focuses on the relationships between (1) networks of civic engagement (as a component of social capital) and people's political participation, and (2) social capital and institutional performance in local government in the north of Thailand.

Social Capital Needs to be Tested in other Context

The discussion now turns to make another significant argument. It argues that Putnam's concept of social capital needs to be investigated in other contexts. As Carpenter et al. (2004) argue, "social capital...is likely to differ among places, populations and communalities" (p. 855). Moreover, Ikeda et al. (2003) confirm that "Putnamian logic of democracy could have some limit of applicability under a different cultural setting" (p. 12). Thus, Putnam's theory on social capital may not be applied effectively all places. Social capital in the West, where Putnam's concept originated, may well be different from the concept of social capital elsewhere.

To clarify, consistent with current literatures, a number of studies focus mainly on Western and some developed countries in Asia, particularly Japan [see 47, 53, 54, 55 for examples, 56]. Indeed, much of literature on social capital that has been written using developing world case studies tends to expose problems with the concept of social capital. This is mainly because it is too Western-centric and does not take account of the

economic and political realities of developing world countries. Additionally and more significantly, social capital is greatly promoted as a factor that facilitates political participation and leads to a better quality of governmental performance in some advanced countries, such as Belgium [57], Germany [58, 59], Italy [20], New Zealand [60] and the United States [22, 58, 61-65]. Hence, social capital seems to be regarded as a 'magical' concept that can solve several political problems and create numerous desirable political conditions. However, social capital may not be able to be applied effectively everywhere. In some developing countries, poverty, histories of authoritarianism and cultural backgrounds may become the main barriers decelerating the capacity of social capital to develop political contribution and enhance good governments. To support this argument, some examples are now discussed.

First of all, Mayer (2001, 2004) employs Putnam's theory to examine the significant roles of social capital in a developing country: India. Mayer investigates the relationship between civic society and institutional capacity of state government in the Indian context [see also in 16]. Mayer discovers that the least civic states in India are those where people have the poorest quality of life. In other words, the less civic are states, the worse are human development outcomes [16, pp. 248-250]. It could be interpreted that the inheritance of traditional hierarchical dominance—where egalitarianism is unimplemented—has a strong influence on weakening government performance.

For that reason, Indian people in hierarchical societies are more likely to be served by poor health service deliveries and inequality in educational services from government institutions. Moreover, this poor quality of life, as shown by Mayer, is exacerbated by poor government performances. Levels of civic community strongly correlate inversely with levels of corruption. The lowest level of civic community equals to the highest level of perceived corruption [15, 16].

However, before the discussion hastily concludes that social capital is the most vital factor towards enhancing quality of life and improving government performance in India, it is important to note that “although social capital does have...[an] impact on civic community... it is weaker than... educational traditions” [15]. Mayer highlights that human capital, through people’s levels of education, is a precondition to better governmental performance and enhances human capital outcomes [15]. In Indian society, educational tradition has a strong capacity to foster civic community which can create causal links with good governance and human development.

Consequently, Mayer’s study can be used to indicate that even though social capital can make better government in northern Italy and some other advanced countries, it does not necessarily make good government elsewhere. India, where social capital has less impact than other factors on improving quality of life and making better government performance, is a case in point.

Second, a study conducted by Booth and Richard (1998) in Central America⁴ can also be used to highlight the weak capacity of social capital in developing countries. It is worth reemphasising this study once again. This is because the study does not only indicate that, as previously noted, different types of association contribution can affect political participation differently, it also clearly demonstrates that social capital does not have a strong association with democracy in these countries [48].

According to Booth and Richard, social capital is less significant than political capital in supporting democracy in the urban area of these six Central American countries (Booth & Richard, 1998, pp. 780). It needs to be noted that they measure social capital by using interpersonal trust and political knowledge as indicators, and measure political capital by an investigation into political norms, voting behaviour, contacting public officials, and participation in campaign activities [48]. As they argue, interpersonal trust and political information have a weak correlation with democracy. In contrast, political norms and political contribution clearly and directly have a positive impact on levels of democracy [48]. The main reason given is that there is no political stability within these countries. As a result, the capacity and significance of social capital can be diminished enormously [48].

The results of this study make an interesting suggestion that in the countries where violence and political disorder have

⁴These countries are Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama.

long been embedded, social capital cannot be applied effectively. It can be highlighted that historical and political backgrounds can be the main obstacles in weakening the capability of social capital. Certainly, within these hazardous atmospheres, Putnam's argument is far from indisputable.

Third, a study by Letki (2004) provides an understanding of the limitation of social capital in another part of the world-East Central Europe (ECE)⁵. Before placing an emphasis on the relationship between social capital and political participation, it needs to be underscored that the results of this study in some respects parallels that of Booth and Richard. To clarify, Letki finds that people who get involved in different types of organizations may become active in politics in very different ways. As she argues, "not all organizations are alike...their links with... political involvement-may differ as well" (p. 667). Thus the argument that not all voluntary associations enable their members to participate more in political activities is also strengthened by Letki's study.

Additionally, by investigating social capital in terms of interpersonal trust and engagement in voluntary associations, Letki finds that both variables fail to be vital predictors of political participation in these ECE countries [66]. This is primarily because there is no relationship between (1) trust and being

association members, and (2) trust and political involvement. As Letki (2004, p. 675) clarifies, individuals who have higher levels of trust are not always more active in association engagement and political participation than others. Accordingly, Letki's study makes clear that Putnam's central argument cannot be employed successfully across all circumstances. However, even though Letki does not mention about political regimes in these ECE countries, it is reasonable to argue that democracy is not always successfully implemented in these nations. Possible, under non-democratic atmosphere, social capital may be employed effectively as noted above.

In conclusion, it appears to be the case Putnam's concept of social capital shows some limitations and needs to be tested in other different contexts.

Summary

In this article, the concept of social capital is predominantly discussed. The concept of social capital provided Putnam is underlined in the first part. The second part provides that argument that Putnam's concept of social capital shows some limitations and needs to be tested in other different contexts. It is hoped that the significance of social capital will be highlighted and further developed in future research.

⁵These countries are Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Romania, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary and Bulgaria.

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